

A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE RURAL CONTEXT IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper focused on the review of literature particularly in relation to rural education in the Malaysian context. This exposed the scarcity of research on effective leadership practices in rural context especially in Malaysia. This awareness is an impetus for future researchers to venture into this issue and subsequently contribute to the knowledge corpus of effective leadership practices in the rural context. The paper also put forth a review of a preliminary study conducted on an award winning Head Teacher as observed in a rural primary school in Sarawak who had elevated his school to a higher stratum by clinching an international award, the Commonwealth Education Good Practice Award. Unstructured observations and informal interviews had been conducted and the data collected had been analysed using open, axial and selective coding processes. The preliminary findings had been mapped onto five main settings namely human, interactional, physical, programme and emotional. The review of this preliminary study exemplified the value of investigating leadership practices particularly in their specific rural context as different contexts might entail different leadership practices.

Keywords: *Rural education in the Malaysian context, leadership, head teacher, rural primary school, physical setting, human setting, interactional setting, programme setting, emotional setting*

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 21st Century, research on urban schools has been given focus and this clearly suggested that there is a distinct lack of research on rural perspectives, challenges and issues. Relatively few scholars have studied rural education issues (Sherwood, 2000). This was alarming as policy makers experienced difficulty in finding recommendations from rigorous research which could help them formulate proper strategies and policies to help rural schools accelerate positive changes (Arnold, 2004).

“Research that specifically examines rural education is in a word, scant” (Sherwood, 2000, p. 160; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Howley *et al.*, 2005) and yet rural education is an important issue for a number of countries like the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand including Malaysia. Thus, educational research looking at issues surrounding rural schools and rural education needs to be carried out (Holloway, 2002), otherwise pupils, teachers, and rural community which is part of rural schools will remain at a disadvantage (Arnold, 2000; Holloway, 2002; Kline, 2002).

As a matter of fact, the paucity of rural research has meant that rural research carried out in Malaysia and elsewhere, has remained relatively undeveloped and is still at the level of exploration and description, rather than as a critical analysis of the development of responsibility and self-management of schools

The Purpose of this Paper

The purpose of this paper is to put forth a review of studies on rural schools in Malaysia which highlighted various issues and factors affecting the performance of rural schools generally and students specifically. This review has revealed the gap in research on rural school pertaining to leadership. Very little attention has been paid to leadership in rural schools especially when principals there often faced additional challenges (Chalker, 1999; Starr & White, 2008). The lack of rural education leadership research has posed a problem to school leaders serving in rural schools to effect policy development, planning and decision-making to improve educational support for rural teachers and students. This gap has already been pointed out by Bajunid (2008) when he acknowledged that the knowledge corpus

in the field of Malaysian educational administration and leadership from the rural perspective remains elusive. As a result, many of the rural primary schools in Malaysia are struggling academically because of poor leadership as most of the head teachers are placed there without any knowledge of what it takes to be effective school leaders. At the later part of this paper, the preliminary study on the Head Teacher who had successfully led the case school to the top position in the district is described. The leadership practices of this award winning Head Teacher had enabled the case school to beat the odds despite being tucked in the remote rural community of Lawas in Sarawak. This subsequently establishes the fact that leadership matters especially in bringing and integrating the community and context to achieve school excellence.

RESEARCH ON RURAL SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

One of the main foci in literature related to developing countries was the rural disadvantage in educational quality. Extensive literature has focused on the school location in developing countries which had indicated lower achievement in rural schools (Mohd Burhan, 2005). In one Malaysian study, Charil (1997) explored Edmond's five-factor model of effective schools and the model included "... strong administrative leadership, focus on basic skills, high expectations for students' success, frequent monitoring of student performance and safe and orderly schools" (Dagget, 2005). The factor analysis showed that in Malaysian primary schools, the model was reduced to three factors with leadership and school climate as one factor, high expectations in acquiring basic skills as another factor, and frequent monitoring of students' performance as the third factor. In addition, the study also found two extra factors contributing to school effectiveness which were: the role of the Parent-Teacher Association and school physical resources. Parental involvement was found to be a significant factor in many school effectiveness studies conducted in the developed world subsequent to Edmonds' Five-factor model (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Statistical evidence showed that Malaysian parents, in general, encouraged their children to go to school (Ministry of Education, 2006) as Malaysian parents were aware of the importance of education as a key factor in social mobility (Mohd. Salleh, 2007). As stated in the Malaysia Education Development Plan (2013-2025), in 2011, Malaysia had achieved near universal enrolment

at the primary level at 94%, and the percentage of students who dropped out of school had been significantly reduced from 3% in 1989 to just 0.2% in 2011. Enrolment rates at the lower secondary level rose to 87% and the greatest improvement was undoubtedly at upper secondary level, where the enrolment rates almost doubled, from 45% in the 1980s, to 78% in 2011. However, what was of interest was the extent of the parents' involvement in helping to educate their children which could improve school quality as a whole (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Unfortunately, in Malaysia, parental involvement in terms of monitoring their children in doing school homework and involvement in school activities was lacking (Charil, 1997). Parents could motivate students to achieve better outcome if they were more involved in a school-home partnership (Charil, 1997; Mahony, 1998).

A study conducted by Othman and Muijs (2013) suggested four basic quality factors that were pertinent to improving Malaysian primary education and they were educational resources, school climate, leadership and parental involvement. The educational resources factor was characterised in this study as physical resources in school. Studies related to developing countries generally found this factor to be significant in improving academic achievement (Charil, 1997; Chiu & Khoo, 2005). Apart from that, a school as an organization needs a conducive environment that make learning and working effective. It was found that teachers' shared perceptions of school climate might be associated with their teaching and learning creativity in the classrooms (Gregory et al., 2007). Studies usually showed indirect effects of school climate on academic achievement (Cheng, 1994). Ahmad Zabidi (2005) suggested that school climate helped in improving the discipline of the school which in turn would impact academic achievement.

Research also showed that rural teachers generally received less access to teaching resources and teacher support programmes due to their geographic isolation (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005). In the Malaysian context, rural schools consistently suffer from serious teacher shortage and high demand for teacher replacements (Marwan, Sumintono & Mislán, 2012). This situation is really disturbing since studies in Malaysia found that rural teachers faced considerable obstacles in their teaching work due to lack of parental involvement, low motivation among students, lack of teaching aids and inadequate facilities (Rahman, Nor, Mokhtar & Halimi, 1993). Research also showed that 87%

of teachers in rural schools in Malaysia had less than five years of teaching experience. These inexperienced teachers were thus more vulnerable to feeling overwhelmed and losing motivation when faced with the difficult work conditions in rural schools. Principals of rural schools highlighted in a survey that teacher performance deteriorated after the third or fourth year of teaching (Rahman, Nor, Mokhtar & Halimi, 1993). When rural teachers themselves were surveyed, 56% of them indicated that they did not have adequate skills to perform their duties effectively. Teachers seemed to emphasize on the need for in-service training and one study found that 61% of the teachers indicated that in-service training and guidance was more important than pre-service training (Rahman, Nor, Mokhtar & Halimi, 1993). Unfortunately, in-service training in rural schools was extremely limited. In the same survey conducted on Malaysian rural teachers, 36% of the survey respondents reported that their last training took place in the previous year and 46% reported that they had never attended any in-service training (Rahman, Nor, Mokhtar & Halimi, 1993).

At the same time, school principals were overworked and hardly had any time to train the teachers. When Hong, Tan and Bujang (2010) conducted a cross-sectional survey in the rural areas of Kuching, Sarawak, it was found that most of the rural teachers did not feel that they received adequate feedback from their school principals. It was reported that principals on average spent 75% of their time with administrative work and thus could only designate 25% of their time on instructional duties which included a host of different responsibilities such as fostering shared beliefs and cooperation within the school community, enforcing clear structures, rules and procedures for students, teachers and staff, as well as monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Much of the research undertaken in rural schools in Malaysia did not concentrate on examining the role of the school head but rather on the quality of curricular provision, for example, in studies by Azizah and Sharifah (1992), Ratnawati and Ismail (2003), and Thiyagarajah (2003). Murdoch and Schiller (2002) argued that, “it has often been assumed that the principalship role of smaller primary schools is a ‘scaled down’ version of the full time primary principalship and that similar leadership and management approaches apply” (p. 1). This assumption prevailed in Malaysian research that running a small school was considerably easier

than running a large one (Wilson & Brundrett, 2005). The number of small primary rural schools in Malaysia, totalled 4852 out of 7762 (Retrieved from <http://www.moe.gov.my>) made rural school an important area of research to inform existing and future aspiring leaders on effective leadership practices.

Chan and Sidhu (2009) conducted a study to explore the leadership characteristics of a school principal in a Malaysian secondary school. The findings revealed that a successful leader “was identified as being reflective, caring and a highly principled person who emphasized the human dimension of the management enterprise” (p. 114). The principal involved in their study emphasized personal values and was sensitive to cultural as well as structural change of the community. Chan and Sidhu (2009) further elaborated that the principal was a “sense-maker” which might be crucial in helping the school to create a sustainable school climate to encourage teachers and student productivity. The findings of their study was motivating and more studies revealing effective leadership practices for rural primary schools would be truly rewarding.

As research on rural schools is important in informing future leaders, it is the intention of this paper to contribute to that knowledge.

The Importance of Leadership in the Rural Context

It is crucial to increase research specifically in rural education leadership. Researches on leading change in rural schools emphasised the need for school leaders to be familiar with the school communities, and acted in accordance to them. Semke and Sheridan (2011) noted that, “it is becoming increasingly evident that context is a significant factor in understanding academic achievement, and the setting in which a child, family, and school is situated among the salient contexts influencing performance” (p. 3). Budge (2006) reported that a more complete understanding of a community’s values required a “willingness to be highly visible, accessible, and approachable, as well as to reach out to members of the community to provide rationale for district action” (p. 7). Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) suggested that formal and informal interactions with the community assist to create useful collaborative bonds that helped in achieving the school’s mission. Theobald (1997) acknowledged that leading change in rural schools was a process that would take time but it

could be done when the administrators, teachers, and community members work together. School leaders needed “to accept the challenge of leading schools by building on the assets that are available within the school and the community” (Surface & Theobald, 2014, p. 15).

The work of Hallinger (2003) affirmed the notion of context-responsive leadership as he pointed out that “it is virtually meaningless to study principal leadership without reference to the school context” (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, p. 346). For them, a school’s context “is a source of constraints, resources, and opportunities that the principal must understand and address in order to lead” (p. 346) so that the school “can be a source of hope and possibility for sustaining and improving life in rural communities” (Surface & Theobald, 2014, p. 15). According to Hallinger (1996), the most critical variables to principals included “the students’ background, community type, organizational structure, school culture, teacher experience and competence, fiscal resources, school size, and bureaucratic and labour organization” (p. 346). Given the different and complex school environments school leaders found themselves in, it was critical that they had an understanding of effective leadership practices and the pragmatic wisdom to adapt these practices to their immediate contexts. Their approaches must be enacted in concert with their school’s unique contexts. An important conclusion reached in all the research was that context mattered (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003) for leaders to manage their organisations effectively.

In view of this void, more studies are crucial in filling the gap that is represented in topics related to rural education, leadership practices and community context. Such studies are needed to create an understanding of the essential nature of rural schools as well as to identify new and emerging understanding of rural school leadership as it is now becoming clear that “the qualities, characteristics, and skills required in a leader are determined to a large extent by the demands of the situation in which he is to function as a leader” (Bass, 1981, p. 65).

Preliminary Study Conducted on an Award Winning Head Teacher of a Rural Primary School in Sarawak

A preliminary study on a Ba' Kelalan primary school which is located at a remote area in Sarawak was conducted. The school perpetually ranked among the lowest performing schools in the state of Sarawak. This preliminary study exemplified the qualities possessed by the Head Teacher in turning the context he was in into opportunities and subsequently turning this case school around from a low performing school to a high performing school.

Ninety-nine percent of the pupils at this primary school are Christians and of the LunBawang ethnicity. At present there are only about 40,000 LunBawang worldwide and are concentrated in the northern part of Sarawak, East Malaysia. The pupils come from one of nine villages surrounding the school which collectively make up Ba' Kelalan, tucked in the interior highlands of Borneo. The pupils' families live quite simply with limited electricity and water supply. A large majority of their parents are farmers who are not educated beyond Form 3 (age 15). The people of Ba' Kelalan are largely isolated from the outside world due to rough geographical setting with virtually non-existent computer use and internet access. Getting to Lawas, the nearest town, requires either a five-hour trip by 4WD truck or a costly plane ride; neither of these options are totally reliable.

The Head Teacher's Profile

The Head Teacher, born in Long Rusu, Ba' Kelalan received his primary education in the case school of this preliminary study from 1963-1968. Thereafter, in 1969-1970, he continued his lower secondary education in SMK Lawas and completed his Form 4 and Form 5 at SMK Limbang in 1971-1972. In 1974, he attended *Maktab Perguruan Batu Lintang* (Batu Lintang Teachers' Training College) in Kuching and graduated with a Teaching Certificate. His professional record saw him serving in six schools. He taught in SMK Limbang from 1977 to 1978 after which he returned to Ba' Kelalan and taught in this case school as a teacher from 1979-1982. In 1982 he was promoted to be the head teacher of SK Merambut, Limbang for a year before he was, transferred as the head teacher at SK Long Luping. In 1984 till 1999 he headed SK Long Sukang, Lawas and in 2000,

he successfully got his transfer to go back and served as the head teacher in this case school for 13 years until he retired in September 2013. Within three years, the Head Teacher successfully led this case school to the top position in the district. This school also clinched the 2003 *National Hopeful School Award for the Interior Schools Category* in the country. In 2007, this school received the Education Ministry's *Excellent School and Quality Award*. Incredibly, the school's project on '*Community Participation in Achieving Quality Education in Difficult Circumstances*' bagged the prestigious 2009 *Commonwealth Education Good Practice Gold Award*. In recognition of his service and contributions, the Head Teacher received the *Pingat Perkhidmatan Setia* from the state government in 2004 and in 2008, he was bestowed with the *Pingat Ahli Bintang Kenyalang (ABK)*. From the Ministry of Education, he received the *Excellent Service Award* and the *New Deal Incentive* in 2010. In the same year, he was promoted as the *Excellent Head Teacher* of the school from grade DG34 to grade DG38.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To accomplish this preliminary study, the researcher conducted a basically unstructured peripheral investigation and observations. The unstructured nature of the investigation enabled the researcher to broaden her scope in observing while experiencing the daily routine at the school. Observation is commonly employed as the means to understand "live" situations by looking at and reflecting on them to provide holistic descriptions (Lin, 2015) of all activities at a research site. Apart from that, the researcher also conducted informal interviews on the Head Teacher, and other participants consisting of teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and community members who had personal experience of their Head Teacher's leadership and practical efficiency. The unstructured interviews were conducted as informal discussions after observations of the leadership practices so questions raised at the interviews were often impromptu, generated by the flow of friendly conversations between the participants and the researcher.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data collected through this preliminary study was following the three stages of analysis popularised by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The first stage of coding is the “open coding” where the data is broken down or taken apart into discrete parts to be compared between each other. The next stage of data analysis is “axial coding” which aims to form webs of relationship between categories and subcategories. The third stage is reassembling and arraying of analysis of data which is also known as the “selective coding” where core categories are sought and the story line delineated.

FINDINGS

The outcome of the data analysis process was truly eye-opening. Through the processes of coding and sorting, the findings fell into four main settings: human, interactional, physical, and programme settings. These settings are important multi-dimensional ways of investigating the role of environment (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.305) in relation to the leadership practices of the award winning Head Teacher of this case school in Sarawak.

Human

When the Head Teacher took up the post to lead the primary school at the beginning of the year 2000, the attitude of the villagers, the pupils, and even the staff was dispiriting and the prospect of academic excellence for them was beyond reach. But there was a plus point in relation to the community there. The entire school community, other than a few Malay members of the staff, was of LunBawang ethnicity and belonged to the same denomination of evangelical Christians. When the school administration planned events or service projects, they knew without question that the villagers, most of whom did not have packed schedules like town'sfolk, would come and participate. Locals said their strong religious convictions were paramount not only in unifying the community to serve the needs of the school but also in instilling obedience and proper values in their children. Discipline problems and bullying were rare. Apart from that, the Head Teacher had a core group of committed teachers and staff who shared the

belief that academic excellence was attainable. Another comforting fact was that the pupils there enjoyed learning and were outstanding in various fields.

Interactional

Because of the remoteness and relative backwardness of Ba' Kelalan, the children were not exposed to those harmful elements of society present in urban areas. Television, movies, and videogames were not available time-wasters. The pupils could read or play outside for entertainment instead. With pristine tropical rainforest lying just beyond the schoolyard gate, the pupils naturally took an interest in environmental science. The Parent Teacher Association of the school was quite robust and pitched in on books and financial assistance. Overall, the staff took full advantage of their 24-hour access to the pupils by planning a multitude of extra opportunities for them to learn beyond the daily class schedule.

Physical

The school compound had the basic necessities and was in acceptable condition, but nothing made it a special place where children would thrive. The classroom environments were plain, lacking physical and visual embellishment for the stimulation of learning and creativity. The school was in no way a reflection of the unique cultural traits of the LunBawang people. There was little to be proud of. Nevertheless, this primary school had certain advantages, for example, there were few enough pupils in each class that the desks could be arranged in a U-shape, leaving an open space in the center. This facilitated better interaction between the teachers and pupils and among the pupils themselves. Teachers often invited the pupils to sit with them on the floor and approach learning more informally. Recognizing that these pupils were away from their parents for much of the year and yearning to go home, teachers tried to relate to them more like parents so that they would feel more comfortable and make the school and classroom as homely as possible. In this way, the teachers believe that the pupils would stay in school without coercion.

Programme

Above and beyond the standard curriculum, the school led by the Head Teacher initiated and maintained twelve programs designed to develop the pupils' abilities in the three main subjects by which the Malaysian government assesses schools: academics, sports, and student welfare. *Musang* and COMIC were the two major programmes.

Musang, meaning "teamwork" is a LunBawang tradition whereby an individual or a family appeals to the surrounding community for assistance in completing a complex task. Under the *Musang* program, the school administration led by the Head Teacher outlined projects designed to build up and beautify the school compound. They then solicited help from the community to implement the projects and encouraged the volunteers to carry it out their own way, allowing for a great deal of originality. Each of the component villages was assigned to a different area of the schoolyard and asked to improve it. The volunteers cleaned up their areas, planted new flowers and trees, and even erected wooden huts to serve as quiet, shaded places for pupils to read.

The Communities in the Classroom project, or COMIC, followed the *Musang* concept, but volunteers worked inside the classrooms rather than on the school grounds. Each village was assigned a classroom and asked to beautify it in a way appropriate for whichever age of pupils occupying that room. The volunteers built mini 'self-access huts' at the back of each classroom which were packed with pictures, posters, and reading materials. The design of the huts reflected the unique architectural craftsmanship of men from the various villages and provided a one-of-a-kind physical enhancement to each of the classrooms.

For both *Musang* and COMIC, representatives of each village were expected to come periodically for maintenance and improvement of their designated areas. New structures have sprung up on the campus and the classrooms have been filled with decoration. Recognizing that their community has unified to work on their behalf, the pupils are more motivated to do their part – to come to class every day and try their best.

As for the remaining ten programmes, they were focused around the issues of improving the overall UPSR results, mastering the language and mathematical skills, and motivating the pupils to be more independent and responsible individuals in carrying out their daily chores in life.

One incidental outcome of the data collected through this preliminary study was the establishment of another setting – the *emotional setting* of the Head Teacher. Through the findings, the Head Teacher held a belief that a complete paradigm shift was necessary and that the school harnessed the potential to rise and defy all expectations. The Head Teacher would always dwell on any opportunity or good community asset available to build up the school and community, for instance the willingness of the community to volunteer their time and skills. The school could benefit from free voluntary service to help overcome its deficiencies in human and material resources to build up the school and upgrading the educational standard of the school. He held strongly onto the fact that for the LunBawang community to have a bright future, education was the only way. So he set his mind on convincing others to come on board. He rewrote the school's vision and mission statements, and he set very specific and ambitious goals for the Year 6 pupils' performance on the standardized year-end exam.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In conjunction with the 15th Conference of the Commonwealth Education Ministers, this school was announced the winner of the *2009 Commonwealth Good Practice Awards* judged by the Pan-Commonwealth Adjudication Panel. This school had also managed to haul itself out of the very poor outcome in the Primary School Achievement Test (*Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah, UPSR*) to consistently surpass the 95% passing rate.

These positive leadership attributes and success of this Head Teacher in Sarawak were relatively undocumented despite the international recognition that had been bestowed upon the success of this Head Teacher. With a paucity of local research being carried out to study how the Head Teacher had positively impacted the student achievement and culture of his school, this initial exploration of the context of this school had confirmed the value of such research. The impetus of this preliminary study was truly pragmatic and realistic for the researcher to further investigate the issue.

Through the analysis conducted, the findings mapped under the five settings namely human, interactional, physical, programme as well as emotional settings have their respective potential to support the school forward. Nevertheless, how the interrelationship of all these findings under these settings led by the Head Teacher contributed to the success of the school generally in the international arena has left much to be desired.

It would be extremely beneficial that more in-depth investigation involving living the life and experiencing the context of the case could be conducted. This may help to ascertain the trustworthiness of the data and quality of the research which is focussing on the effective leadership practices of the Head Teacher at a rural primary school and subsequently establish the connectivity and interrelationship of all the data collected. This would surely create more credible point of reference for the consumption of the readers particularly individuals who are closely associated to leadership and management of rural primary schools. The findings from this preliminary study has clearly illustrated the Head Teacher's commitment in ensuring effective management of the school, it would be truly constructive to extract the case further on the attributes behind all the activities behind his leadership practices. These attributes may serve as useful guidelines especially for novice head teachers to consider when managing their schools particularly those located in the rural area.

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