

School Principals Strategic Leadership in the Implementation of 21st Century Learning

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Abstract: The ability to think and act ahead of time is an element in strategic leadership that can boost a leader's ability in making the right decisions based on current and future needs. The education world today is obscure and constantly changing in line with technological advances, thus creating the need for educational leaders to bridge the gap between new policies and the ability for implementation at the grassroots level. This concept paper aims to discuss the key elements of the strategic leadership theory and how the theory is linked to the role of the school principal in the implementation of 21st Century Learning in Malaysia. This concept paper is based on analyses of previous studies on the strategic leadership theory, models and practices, specifically in education, that examined the link between strategic leadership with the implementation of new education policies pertaining to 21st Century Learning. The findings show that the element of strategic leadership impacts the school principals' ability to transform their organisation towards excellence, enhances their ability to make informed decisions and accelerates their readiness in managing change for the execution of 21st Century Learning. This concept paper is intended to provide novice principals with information pertaining to the impact of strategic leadership practices on the management and administration of schools and to guide the Ministry of Education in planning professional development programmes for school principals.

Keywords: Educational leadership, strategic learners, 21st century learning, school leaders, principals

INTRODUCTION

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) has brought a global wave of change and has prompted Malaysia to keep up with this changing trend. According to the Soffel (2016), a student must master 16 skills to compete in the 21st century. These skills include literacy, numeracy, scientific literacy, technology literacy, financial literacy, cultural and civic literacy, critical thinking/problem solving, creativity, communication, collaboration, curiosity, initiative, perseverance, adaptability, leadership, and social and cultural awareness. Through IR 4.0, human labour may be replaced with robots, and it is predicted that many traditional jobs, specifically in the manufacturing sector, will become obsolete with millions of people expected to lose their occupations. The current economic situation in Malaysia and other ASEAN countries that are heavily dependent on low-skilled workers will increase the risk of market pressure. To address this challenge, the Government of Malaysia through the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB), has pledged to increase teachers' mastery of the 21st century pedagogy. In this situation, policy makers should focus on efforts providing leadership, policy direction and support needed to enhance the Malaysian education system in order to remain relevant and highly competitive. Strategic leadership could bring change and transform schools because strategic leaders are able to set goals, establish implementation strategies and flexibly execute actions to accommodate global changes (Pisapia, 2009).

Background

Vision 2020's aspiration for Malaysia as a high-income nation by 2020 appears stalled as the country is currently facing economic depression and is still highly dependent on low-income and low-skilled labour. To ensure the country's aspirations are back on track, the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 hoped to steer Malaysia's service delivery, which is based on output and performance, into a country that is based on deliverables and outcomes. The Strategic Thrust on Social Well-being of the policy focuses on providing access to affordable, quality healthcare and education across all levels of society, especially the B40 group, the most poor who are often economically disadvantaged and marginalised, as well as people who are facing economic transition (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). The responsibility of providing quality education does not solely fall under the Ministry of Education, the State Education Department or the District Education Office but is a daunting task that must also be borne by school leaders. The school principal or headmaster has the closest relationship with students, teachers, parents and the local community. Thus, excellent school principals should possess strategic thinking, which in turn will influence his/her leadership practices and ability to provide problem-solving solutions, as well as instil confidence in making decisions for the benefit of top management and the school institution under his/her purview.

Therefore, this concept paper is prepared to discuss the strategic leadership concept practised by school principals and the impact on school organisations in the implementation of 21st Century Learning. The study was conducted through a document analysis including journals, proceedings and books on strategic leadership in general, strategic leadership in the context of education, and the use of strategic leadership in addressing issues and challenges in implementing 21st Century Learning.

Theories/Models

Leadership Theory

Leadership is a significant catalyst in shaping and leading an organisation toward its goals. According to Yukl (2013), leadership is defined as the nature, behaviour, influence, patterns of interaction, role relationships and position within an administrative post. Leadership basically involves an individual who leads and the individuals who are the followers.

One of the earliest works on leadership theory was introduced by Lewin et al. (1939) who conducted experiments on several groups by applying three styles of leadership. From the study, three styles of leadership, namely autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire, were identified as suitable for school leaders based on the relevant circumstances and time needed for decision making. The theories of leadership have evolved over time with the emergence of new theories such as transactional leadership theory, instructional leadership, distributive leadership, transformational leadership, ethical leadership, technology leadership and sustainable leadership.

Each leadership theory has its own characteristics. Burns (1978) stated that transformational leadership refers to the leaders' actions that can influence their followers, and in turn, causing these followers to admire and respect their leaders. This subsequently helps to cultivate the followers' trust towards the leaders. Meanwhile, sustainable leadership, founded by Hargreaves and Fink (2003), focuses on improving quality and productivity specifically to the school's organisational environment. Gordon (2005) has designed distributive leadership based on mission sharing, vision and goals, cultural improvement, sharing of responsibility, and leadership practices. The distributive leadership theory allocates multiple sources of leadership based on expertise and available resources to improve organisational performance, including in schools. Focusing on teaching and learning, Billmeyer (2012) stated that teachers are the leaders in the classroom while students are the followers. Therefore, in the context of a school organisation, the principal or headmaster is the leader or head of the organisation to teachers, support staff and students in the school.

Leadership skills are a huge responsibility carried by the leader of an organisation. According to Hellriegel and Slocum (1992), five leadership skills are vital for the leader of an organisation, namely empowerment, intuition, self-understanding, vision and value congruence. In summary, the five leadership skills proposed by Hellriegel and Slocum (1992) looks into a leader's: (i) readiness to share organisational power and control with his followers; (ii) capability to understand, anticipate and take risks in an environmental situation that will impact and change the organisation; (iii) understanding on his own strengths and weaknesses; (iv) possession of a clear vision over the organisational goals; and (v) awareness of organisational principles and their subordinates' values. A leader must master all five skills to ensure their organisational excellence.

Strategic Leadership

Strategic Concept

Strategy is a term derived from a combination of two classical Greek words, “stratos” and “egy” (Adair, 2010): “stratos” meaning a group of people (military) while “egy” means to lead or lead. Strategy denotes the aim to lead a group of people. This meaning has evolved over time and is widely used in management and administration such as strategic planning, strategic plan and strategic leadership. According to Cannella and Monroe (1997), many earlier studies on leadership have focused on the perspectives of supervisors or middle managers in an organisation, while newer studies have focused on the strategic leadership of the organisation’s top management. This is supported by Yukl (2013), who further explained that a shift in interest on the study of strategic leadership occurs with the need to transform organisations in preparation for globalisation and increasing international competition, as well as rapid technological and social changes.

The Concept of Strategic Leadership

According to Schoemaker et al. (2013), strategic leadership skills refer to a leader’s ability to anticipate, challenge, interpret, decide, align and learn about different situations in managing an organisation. The strategic leadership model dictates that being a strategic leader means the leader must possess the ability to successfully identify the weaknesses in each of the six elements. Furthermore, it was stipulated that strategic leaders are able to recognise ambiguous threats and related opportunities, which are often overlooked by other leaders. Strategic leaders are always vigilant, constantly working to enhance their capabilities, able to predict or anticipate threats and opportunities, by examining the signs of change in their current environment. Based on these points, the Strategic Aptitude Assessment was developed to measure the extent to which an individual possesses strategic leadership skills.

Strategic leadership is also regarded as the pillar to the thinking process in an organisation, the basis for taking the right actions, and the power to drive individuals and teams to take advantage of emerging competition opportunities (Hughes & Beatty, 2005). According to Cheng (2000), strategic leadership steers the direction of an organisation to reach specific goals. An organisation that possess organisational leaders with the ability to think strategically is the key to achieving higher levels of performance. Extensive knowledge and work experience are the perfect ingredients in developing strategic thinking skills (Goldman, 2012).

Hitt, Haynes and Serpa (2010) summarised a study by Hitt, Keats and DeMarie (1998) as well as the research by Ireland and Hitt (1999) on strategic leadership skills and posited that the elements of strategic leadership outlined earlier remain relevant in the 21st century. In their latest publication, Hitt et al. (2010) mentioned that strategic leaders are those who are able to cultivate and revive an organisation’s vision, build dynamic core competencies, prioritise human capital development, invest in new technologies, engage in high value strategies, build and maintain an effective organisational culture, exercise balanced control and practise ethics.

In the context of educational leadership in Malaysia, most studies have focused on leadership practices among school principals or headmasters. These studies were conducted in accordance to the government’s commitment embodied in the Malaysian Education Development Blueprint 2013–2025 (Preschool to Secondary Education) under the Fifth Shift: Ensure High-performing School Leaders in Every School. Under this shift, the government, through the Ministry of Education, is committed to providing high quality educational leadership to drive overall school performance by ensuring that every school, regardless of its location and performance, are led by highly skilled and competent principals or headmasters with high quality administrative support staff. This is because educational leadership is the most important agent of change to boost school excellence, in line with the present and future technological advancements as well as economic progress.

Strategic Leadership Model

Being a school leader is one the most difficult positions in the education system, and the ability to implement external change within a school’s organisation is a key requirement for school leaders (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & McCary, 1990). Despite the abundant studies on educational leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 1999), there are still only a few studies that have been conducted on strategic leadership in Malaysia or internationally (Mohd Ali et al., 2017). Studies on strategic leadership in the field of education have only been pioneered by a few scholars, such as Davies (2004), Davies and Davies (2009) and Pisapia et al. (2009).

According to the Strategic Leadership Model by Davies and Davies (2004), as depicted in Figure 1, strategic leadership focuses on two aspects, specifically organisational ability and personal characteristics. Aspects of organisational ability include elements determining strategic orientations, translating strategies

into action, aligning, determining intervention competencies, developing strategic competencies while personal characteristics include anxiety, acceptability, adaptability, and wisdom.

Figure 1. Davies & Davies Strategic Leadership Model (2004)



However, Ahmad Masrizal (2013) modified the Davies and Davies (2004) strategic leadership model through his research on strategic leadership among principals of full residential schools in Malaysia. He categorised organisational management capabilities into strategic orientation, translating plans towards strategy, leading staff to achieve the vision, creating change and developing competencies; he also introduced another dimension, which is the current status of the organisation. Under the individual character category, the components are translated as dissatisfaction with the status quo, acceptance of change, adaptability and being proactive.

Similarly, Mohd Ali (2012) also based on Davies and Davies (2004) to identify strategic leadership characteristics among participants of the Malaysian Quality National Primary School Leader (QNPSL) course as part of the Quality School Improvement Program (QSIP) initiative. Another study by Mohd Ali et al. (2017) has successfully developed and measured the psychometric value of the Malaysian Educational Strategic Leadership Practice Inventory (MESLPI) by combining and adapting instruments developed by Davies and Davies (2009) and Pisapia et al. (2009).

21st Century Learning Model

To equip students with 21st century skills, the Ministry of Education has introduced 21st century learning. Twenty-first century learning refers to student-centred learning processes based on five key elements namely communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and the application of ethics and moral values. To ensure that the curriculum developed can accommodate the need to produce holistic individuals capable of mastering 21st century skills, the National Curriculum and the National Education Assessment System were revised.

Principals or headmasters, school administrators and teachers play significant roles in the planning process of implementing 21st Century Learning. As leaders of the organisation, principals and headmasters are responsible for disseminating accurate information through curriculum meetings, ensuring subject heads or departments have a high level of understanding on PAK 21, conducting interventions for subject heads and department heads who have yet to master DKSP, and most importantly, becoming role models in the use of 21st century learning in the teaching and facilitating process (PdPc).

The implementation of 21st Century Learning is not without challenges, and one of the main concerns of its implementation is teacher readiness. According to Arbaa et al. (2017), challenges in transforming classroom practices must be addressed if teachers are to acquire specific techniques in implementing PdPc that are appropriate with students' capabilities and preferences. Three main approaches are proposed, namely cooperative learning, democratic classroom and motivation, that should be utilised by teachers to instil 21st Century Learning in students. Teachers must integrate 21st Century Learning with high level skills to guide students in developing higher order thinking skills (Aziz & Andin, 2018).

FINDINGS

The rapid development of IR 4.0 worldwide, paired with technological advances and sophisticated machinery, requires capable leaders who are ready to face changes. Managers of organisations must equip themselves with knowledge on the latest technological developments, advances in computing, hardware, software, the Internet and email to cope with the drastic changes of responsibilities and duties.

In Malaysia, many studies on technology leadership and transformational leadership have been conducted to examine the leadership aspect relating to technology and principals' interpersonal skills. According to a study by Juraime and Mohd (2017), the high level of technology leadership practice among principals at secondary normal day schools has no significant relationship with the schools' performance. Thus, the study shows that the practice of technology leadership among these principals is not dependent on the leadership qualities of the principals themselves but is influenced by other factors.

Most studies on principals' transformational leadership are closely linked to the interpersonal relationships as well as the personal values of leaders who are able to increase the moral values and motivations of followers (especially teachers) to the extent that they are voluntarily motivated in contributing to the organisation.

Strategic leadership is seen as a much-needed leadership skill in the 21st century. Having a strategic leader is indeed a bonus to an organisation because a strategic leader has a clear vision, is highly capable of managing financial or human resources, possesses a high spirit in executing tasks and has excellent emotional intelligence. From the previous studies conducted, it can be summarised that strategic leadership by school leaders has a positive relationship with the increase in schools' excellence and effectiveness, making better decisions, and managing changes in the increasingly challenging world of education that must fulfil the demands of 21st Century Learning to prepare students for IR 4.0.

School Excellence and Effectiveness

Studies on school effectiveness and excellence have consistently emphasised the importance of leadership for organisational change, development, improvement, motivation, and the quality of teaching (Harris, 2004). This is supported by Eacott (2008) who stated that strategic leadership is especially relevant for school leaders to meet the current needs of the education world. In Malaysia, previous studies have shown that school excellence and effectiveness are largely dependent on the principal's strategic leadership. According to Ibrahim et al. (2019), strategic elements in leadership requires principals or headmasters to provide their thoughts or ideas to determine short-term goals as well as the long-term goals of the school. These school leaders should also set the stage and develop practical strategies that can be implemented by the schools' communities.

As stated by Schoemaker et al. (2013) in the Harvard Business Review, strategic leaders should be able to anticipate challenges and opportunities. In line with the intention of the Ministry of Education's emphasis towards the implementation of school-based assessments, developing higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), implementing 21st Century Learning, and making Malaysia one of the top ranked nations in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), school leaders play a very important role in guiding teachers and the organisation. Changes are inevitable and require strategic leaders with vision and purpose. Effective school leaders are visionary leaders who have the ability to create logical expectations for the school's organisation. These leaders will be inclined to prepare an organisational environment that is in line with the changing needs of teaching and learning, including 21st Century Learning (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

High strategic leadership practices have an impact on teachers' self-efficacy and directly affect the performance of leaders and schools (Mohd Ali & Ali, 2015). Mohamad & Ismail (2018) examined the strategic leadership and teaching quality of teachers in the Kelantan Islamic Foundation. The study found that strategic leadership was at a moderate level with a significant and positive relationship with the quality of teaching. This finding supports issues and challenges related to teacher readiness in implementing 21st Century Learning.

The study by Ahmad Masrizal et al. (2012) and Ahmad Masrizal (2013) found that the principals of fully residential schools practised highly strategic leadership, but there is still room for improvement to increase their organisational management capabilities as well as their personal characteristics. The study also found that there is a link between strategic leadership practices and academic sustainability of fully residential schools as they demonstrated continuous excellence in SPM examinations between 2008 and 2010.

Decision Making Capability

Leaders can influence organisational performance in a variety of ways, including through decision making on the development of competitive strategies, human resource management, programme management and organisational structure (Yukl, 2013). Decision making is a very important task as a leader of an organisation because it can determine the direction of an organisation and actions taken in any given task. The ability to make the right decisions in a variety of situations will reflect the credibility of a leader. According to Mintzberg (1994), strategic thinking in decision making constantly changes over time.

Hellriegel and Slocum (1992) argued that decision making in an organisation can be classified into three situations, namely routine decisions, adaptive decisions and innovative decisions. Each classification is characterised by a combination of problems involved and the types of solutions to be considered. Snowden and Boone (2007) have developed a Cynefin framework for leaders who define decision making based on four contexts that are simple, complex, complicated, and chaotic. Every situation requires careful judgment and exact decision making to avoid turning a simple context into a critical one.

As posited by Schoemaker et al. (2013), the decision-making capability is one of the key elements for an individual to become a strategic leader. Although there are no specific studies on the relationship between strategic leadership and decision-making ability among school leaders in Malaysia, Yusof (2004) found that school leaders must demonstrate emotional intelligence and be inclined to take risks in making decisions. In his study, Mohamad et al. (2008) found that factors in headmasters' decision-making ability were influenced by pressure and time. Jasmi et al. (2010) stated that principals and administrators who were bold and firm in their decision making were among the vital factors determining school excellence. Saad & Sankaran (2017) found that teachers gave higher commitments when they were involved in the decision-making process. Therefore, principals with good a decision-making ability is important in successfully implementing the 21st Century Learning initiatives as they are endowed with the power and role as stipulated in 21st Century Learning guideline to ensure teachers have high levels of understanding.

Managing Change

The 21st century requires leaders who are capable of planning and making flexible decisions in light of the changing circumstances (Hitt et al., 2010). In the world of education, any action taken or changes made will have an enormous impact on countries, educational organisations, students, parents and communities. Principals are the leaders with the closest relationships at the grassroots level of the education system, yet they are often bombarded with a plethora of tasks (Mansor & Baki, 2007). Thus, school management activities become unsystematic and less organised, particularly if the principals lack the necessary competencies in the aspect of personal qualities and knowledge (Alias et al., 2010).

Effective strategic leadership capabilities are essential for organisations to remain competitive and relevant in the 21st century. Hitt et al. (2010) summarised that strategic leaders must develop and revive their organisational vision, build basic and dynamic competencies, prioritise human capital development, invest in new technologies, engage in high value strategies, build and maintain an effective organisational culture, exercise balanced control and practise ethics.

The implementation of transformational learning in schools that is based on 21st Century Learning is achievable when schools are led by educational leaders who possess strategic, systematic, dynamic and futuristic elements. To manage changes in today's world of education, the appropriate actions taken are the most important element to signify how a leader dynamically responds to situations and requirements (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

The results of this document analysis regarding strategic leadership indicated that elements of strategic leadership play an important role in addressing the issues and challenges of implementing 21st Century Learning. In this context, the Malaysian education policy makers should focus on providing the leadership, policy direction and support needed to enhance the quality of the Malaysian education system in order to remain relevant and competitive. The policy makers and education policies at the Ministry of Education have extensive room to foster strategic leadership features by providing professional development courses for current and future principals. The stakeholders that are involved in implementing leadership professional development programmes, such as the Aminudin Baki Institute (IAB), should adopt these findings in designing new training programmes or to add value to existing training programmes.

Based on the analysis of past studies, there are still avenues and opportunities to intensify research on strategic leadership practices among school leaders in Malaysia. Therefore, further studies on strategic leadership should be undertaken to complement and extend the existing research. In conclusion, school leaders

who practice strategic leadership will have a clearer vision of the goals and direction of the school and be able to respond and act in tandem with the evolving world of education. These school leaders will also be capable of bridging the gap between the aspirations of new policies, such as 21st Century Learning, with the actual implementation in schools.

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