



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT



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ISSN: 2226-6348

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v10-i2/9439>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v10-i2/9439

Received: 01 February 2021, **Revised:** 23 February 2021, **Accepted:** 17 March 2021

Published Online: 20 April 2021

In-Text Citation: (Rasidi et al., 2021)

To Cite this Article: Rasidi, W. F. W. M., Mydin, A.-A., & Ismail, A. (2021). Teacher Leadership: Roles and Values from The Perspectives of School Middle Leaders. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 10(2), 120–133.

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Vol. 10(2) 2021, Pg. 120 - 133

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Teacher Leadership: Roles and Values from The Perspectives of School Middle Leaders

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Abstract

This study of semi-structured focus group interview aimed at identifying the dimensions for teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is a very potential domain to be explored especially in studies related to educational leadership and management. Therefore, a literature review related to teacher leadership has been conducted which aims to find a conclusion on the current situation regarding teacher leadership. Related reading material is collected through several search engines available on the internet. Then, semi-structured interview was conducted to find out more in depth about teacher leadership among teacher leaders in Malaysia. From the readings and materials obtained, it can be concluded that the dimension of teacher leadership is very broad. However findings obtained from interview sessions showed that there are four dimensions that are found dominant with the situation of teachers in Malaysia. Those dimensions namely self-awareness, communication and change, diversity and instructional proficiency as well as organized and continuous improvement.

Keywords: Teacher Leadership, Roles, Values, Middle Leader, Malaysia Teacher

Introduction

Leadership is about influencing relationship. In a relationship between a leader and followers, the aforesaid functions as an inspirational figure that inspires others to produce greater efforts (Henman, 2017). It is an influencing process whereby the so called leaders would be exerting

power in order to control the situation so as to result in the desired goals or objectives of an organization. Theories of leadership emerge and experience evolution starting from Theory X and Theory Y which encompass the style, behaviour and situation of leaders to contingency theories which denote the task-oriented leaders or relationship-oriented leaders (Henman, 2017). The 'new' leadership theory has identified the dissemination of leadership or also known as distributed leadership theory which has become the origin of the teacher leadership (Wills, 2015). Distributed leadership theory states that organisation can perform with the absence of leaders because Gronn (2000) believes leadership is being distributed among the agents in the organisation. In an educational institution, the agents would be the teachers and these teachers portray leadership competencies. Leadership among the teachers is evidence in terms of authority, values, interests and personalities. Leadership values being distributed among the teachers will produce teachers who act as leaders in their classrooms and manage to influence the students and colleagues for better performance (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

Hence, there is a significant contribution of teacher leadership to the performance of the teachers by the positive influence it has upon students and other teachers. Teacher leaders play an important role in making the difference in student performance as well as teacher performance (Wills, 2015; Berry, Daughtrey & Wieder, 2010; Sugg, 2013). Having the values of teacher leaders in each teacher is a must for teachers to commit to their responsibility as educators. These values will determine the roles that teachers will play in the classroom and beyond in order to produce positive impact on the students and their performance likewise. Several studies have outlined the values, roles and significance of the teacher leadership to prove how they affect teacher performance. Reformation in leadership style is a must so as to ensure that changes happen from bureaucratic leadership to distributed leadership (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2011) making empowering teachers as leaders a reality (Terry, 2017). Only with teachers acting as leaders in their classrooms that teacher performance will improve and thus has a positive influence on student performance.

Concept and Definition of Teacher Leadership

York-Barr and Duke (2004) defines teacher leadership as individual empowerment of the teachers and bringing management to the teachers' level. It is reported by Berry, Daughtrey and Wieder (2010) that teachers who are granted with more authority over the school policies and exceeding degree of autonomy in their career are more prone to stay in teaching profession. This stresses on the importance of the teachers being the core functions in the realm of teaching and learning. They conclude that teacher leadership is leading the way to effective teaching; which is an exceptional teacher performance. Terry (2017) believes that the concept of teacher leadership stems from the idea of empowering teachers as leaders. He defines teacher leadership as a paradigm shift in leadership whereby significant decisions regarding teaching and learning are made by the figures who are working most closely with the students instead of anyone who is at the top of the hierarchy and they are definitely the teachers.

Not being left behind, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) being the champion of teacher leadership, define teacher leaders as "leaders within and outside the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others to improve their teaching practice; and accept responsibility for realizing the goals of their leadership."

Abu Bakar, Basri and Fooi (2015) in their research, the Relationship between Teacher Leadership and Students' Academic Achievement, describe teacher leadership as leadership contributes by all teachers by means of teachers are all set for lifelong learning, developing the ability of teachers and willing to accept greater leadership qualities. Wills (2015) accentuates teacher leadership as the practice of leadership in three main domains namely excellence in teaching, collaboration with colleagues and participation in decision-making. She concludes that a teacher leader is "an excellent educator who collaborates with her colleagues to improve teaching and participates in the school wide decision-making process." Villiers and Pretorius (2012) have concluded teacher leadership is in existence in the Eden and Central Karoo Education District of the Western Cape Province in South Africa due to the fact that effective teacher leadership is the key aspect in achieving school improvement. Suffice to say that teacher leadership is indeed an important element in an educational institution should the teacher performance be the indicator for the school achievement.

Roles and Values of Teacher Leadership

Some perceive teacher leadership based on three roles that teacher leaders play namely leadership of students or other teachers, leadership of operational tasks and finally leadership through decision-making or partnership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). The first role usually refers to the teacher leadership performance as facilitator or coach when working with the students and mentor or trainer when undergoing courses for teacher development. The second role, leadership of operational tasks, is the role when teacher leaders are keeping the school organized and implementing activities or programmes in order to achieve the school's goals. They can be the heads of departments, committees of any task force or action researchers. The final role, leadership through decision-making or partnership, is when teachers are making decisions based on their positions such as committee members of school improvement teams (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

Mulford (2003) has stated multiple conceptions of the teacher's role such as team leader, lead teacher, teacher researcher and master teacher. Exercising these roles is indirectly expressing the teacher leadership in the teachers themselves. When teachers assume these roles, they will exercise values relevant to the roles. These values are the focus of discussion in this paper because it is believed that with the values practised by the teachers, they will automatically carry out the roles of teacher leaders and with the roles, they will definitely perform in their job as teachers.

Villiers and Pretorius (2012) in their research, A Changing Leadership Paradigm: South African Educators' Perceptions of the Dimensions of a Healthy School Culture for Teacher Leadership, state their finding that four values out of seven being tested of teacher leadership are in existence in 283 educators from the Cape Province in South Africa. One of them is developmentally focused which shows that the teachers are interested to gain new knowledge and skills in teaching. They also have the spirit of mutual respect and caring towards each other which leads to teacher recognition of contributions made by colleagues.

Teachers with leadership are also proactive and show they have autonomy in making improvements and innovations (Sumardi, Rohman & Wahyudiati, 2020). Finally, teacher leaders have the feelings that they are respected by many such as parents, students and administrators.

The research concludes that these values will guarantee teacher performance and improve school achievement (Villiers & Pretorius, 2012). While the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement in its article *Teacher Leaders: the Backbone of Sustained Improvement* published in *Newsletter* (2005), is in agreement with the concept of the teacher leaders, which has identified five values that teacher leaders demonstrate.

First is the collaborative attitude that teacher leaders portray. They are always discussing or facilitating meetings with colleagues in order to produce better teacher performance. Second, they profoundly participate in school decisions. Participating means these teacher leaders provide agenda items when issues about teaching instructions or teaching assessment or other teaching related issues are discussed. The third is teacher leaders would demonstrate expertise and are willing to share their knowledge. They are open to constructive criticism in order to improve their performance. Fourth, educators who have teacher leadership values in them would frequently perform self-reflection regarding their job and performance. This can be executed by means of study groups or professional learning communities for that matter. Finally, teacher leaders are said to become socially conscious about the complex issues surrounding the world of teaching namely culture, power, race and others. In conclusion, teachers with these values of teacher leadership are said to be the backbone of sustained school improvement when the teacher perform (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2005).

The Roles of Teacher Leaders

In the book entitled *The Power of Teacher Leaders* (2015), ten items have been acknowledged as the roles of teacher leaders. They act as professional developers. They also function as mentors to other teachers. In special education, teacher leaders are expected to act as servant leaders to special students. They need to portray themselves as promoting curriculum reform. Teacher leaders are expected to be in the capacity of school reformers. They are actively involved in providing strong first-year teacher preparation programme besides being team players in the educational institutions. When they declare themselves as part of the National Board Certified Teachers, they are definitely playing the role of teacher leaders in order to extend the impact teacher leaders would have on other teachers. They are teacher leaders internationally when they go global. They are also expected to be cooperative leaders. These aforesaid roles have been accepted as the guidelines for teachers who want to practise teacher leadership which leads to effective teacher performance (Bond, 2015).

Talking about developing high quality teacher leadership, Jay Helbert (2015) has shared several attributes associated with teacher leadership. The attributes are the values that are illustrated by the teacher leaders. One with teacher leadership values will show ability to develop a plan or can be considered as a strategic thinker. Teacher leaders also have the ability to obey rules, follow instructions and adapt themselves to meet the needs of the organizations so as to make reflection form time to time. They also possess the ability to motivate and influence other teachers. Other than that, they are team players because they involve and include others when discussing plans for school improvement and teacher performance. Teacher leaders act as mentors or coaches or advisors to other teachers when necessary. Helbert (2015) continues with the next attribute of teacher leaders being systems thinkers whereby they align problems and solutions to see the whole picture of the organization. In other words, they share the

responsibility of sustaining the school improvement. Teacher leaders also develop others. This is to say they are not selfish to share with others. Finally, Helbert (2015) describes teacher leaders as researchers who would continuously improve themselves and others as well.

Harun et al (2016) have conducted a research to identify whether teacher leadership is in existence or not among the teachers of secondary schools in the east zone of Peninsular Malaysia. They found that the practice of teacher leadership is eminent among the teachers of the designated schools. The teachers show the characteristics of teacher leadership in performing their everyday work whereby these characteristics fall into the seven dimensions of teacher leaders by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001). By portraying these characteristics, the teachers are actually carrying out their roles as teacher leaders. Based on the research by Azhar Harun et. al. (2016), the dimensions of teacher leaders, according to the level of intensity they are portrayed, are the positive environment, autonomy, open communication, collegiality, developmental focus, recognition and participation. This is to say that teachers who are leaders would seek to make their working environment a positive one. The existence of a positive environment would then lead to situations where teachers feel that they are respected and viewed as educational professionals and thus earned the respect of schools' community (Davignon, 2016). Mydin et al. (2020) found that a positive work environment can further enhance leadership as well as productivity within the organization.

The value of autonomy brings the teacher leaders to a level where they take the initiatives to be a part of the decision makers in anything related to the future of the school (Davignon, 2016). Open communication is a good value being practised due to the fact that these teacher leaders interact with each other candidly which results in smooth problem-solving situations (Davignon, 2016). Teacher leaders collaborate in increasing their performance which is termed as collegiality and this has been a valuable role of teacher leaders (Davignon, 2016). Harun et. al. (2016) also find that teachers who assume themselves as leaders would focus on developing themselves. They engage themselves in learning sessions as well as encourage others to be in the same boat (Davignon, 2016). Another value of teacher leaders is the sense of recognition. Their work is recognized and vice versa. Finally, teacher leaders are said to be participative, which means they are actively involved in schools programmes and anything that has the needs for decision-making (Davignon, 2016).

Nonetheless, there are some teachers who refuse to accept the roles as teacher leaders (Muncey & Conley, 1999). Some principals do not involve their teachers in decision making and do not encourage collaboration (Fon, 2016). There are even some negative perceptions of teacher leaders by the novice teachers (Nolan & Palazzolo, 2011). All these come into view due to several barriers obstructing teachers from executing their roles as teacher leaders such as lack of time, poor relationship with peers and/or administration, climate and structural factor and personal characteristics (Wenner & Campbell, 2016). It can be deduced that these findings show refusal towards practising teacher leadership. Thus, this research intends to explore the values of teacher leadership that matter in making teachers perform better in the context of Malaysia education.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method with a semi-structured interview design approach. The researchers had agreed to conduct interviews in a focused group consisting of middle leaders. The semi-structured interview approach was chosen because some of the main factors that are determined in this study:

- i) To gain an in-depth understanding of teacher leadership
- ii) To understand teacher leadership experience in Malaysia
- iii) To explore the role of teacher leaders apart from carrying out their core duties as educators

The semi-structured interview protocol is built with the aim of exploring in more depth the themes related to teacher leadership in the context of education in Malaysia. To ensure that the theme generated is relevant to the topic of study, then the selection of respondents must meet certain criteria (Adams, 2015) including individual quality, ability to meet the questions asked and experienced as a teacher leader in the school.

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interview involves several questions formed based on the topics listed in the interview protocol (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers have developed the semi-structured interview protocol to obtain information in this study. The interview protocol was constructed based on a literature review conducted and validated by two panel of expert evaluators. The interview sessions were recorded using a voice recorder and replayed to obtain a transcript for analysis. The interview data is then analyzed manually to form specific codes which in turn produce the desired theme.

Thematic analysis was adapted in this study to analyze the interview data. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is a commonly used method to identify themes or patterns formed from interview data (Creswell, 2009). The following table shows examples of semi-structured interview protocols used in this study.

Table 1
Semi-structured interview protocols

Research construct	Interview protocol	Follow up probing scheme
Teacher leadership roles	Can you explain your views on teachers as leaders?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your practice towards your subordinates? 2. How you convey current information? 3. Which action is more important? 4. What is your preference?
Teacher leadership value	What is your opinion about the characteristics of leadership in the context of teaching profession?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why do you think so? 2. Are there other alternatives that might be appropriate? 3. Don't you feel the action is outdated? 4. How do you act as a leader to solve an issue?

Participants

Interviews were conducted on 10 selected respondents. The implementation of the interview sessions was conducted in private in the form of focused groups. Focused group interviews will produce research data that are more targeted and relevant to the objectives of the study. The interview questions are related to teacher leadership based on the literature review that has been done in advance. All 10 participants are teachers who hold special positions in the school. Out of a total of 10 teachers selected by purposive sampling, 6 is a high school teacher while 4 people were primary school teachers. The characteristics of the participants have been determined in advance and are able to provide the information needed by researchers related to teacher leadership. Their profiles are shown in the Table 2 below.

Table 2
Information of study participants

Pseudonym	Interviewee code	Age	Gender	Post Held	Working experience
Ahmad	T1	45 years old	Male	Head of Mathematics Committee	20 years
Raymond	T2	39 years old	Male	Head of Language Department	15 years
Suzy	T3	33 years old	Female	Excellent Teacher of History	12 years
Rozy	T4	30 years old	Female	Head of English Committee	6 years
Usman	T5	50 years old	Male	Senior Teacher of Geography	28 years
Mona	T6	45 years old	Female	Senior Teacher of English	22 years
Jameel	T7	56 years old	Male	Senior Teacher of Science	35 years
Linda	T8	29 years old	Female	Literacy Coordinator	5 years
Sherry	T9	52 years old	Female	Head of Malay Language	30 years
Jeffry	T10	37 years old	Male	Year 6 Coordinator	10 years

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Focus grouped semi-structured interview was done in Q1 and Q2 of the school calendar year 2020. The study is conducted by researchers consisting of an Associate Professor, a senior lecturer and a post graduate student. Research proposal is first submitted to the School of Educational Studies to obtain research ethics approval. This research has also been approved by the State Education Office and the District Education Office to enable the study to be carried out in the state of Kedah, Malaysia.

The interview session began by introducing the researcher to the study participants and explaining the purpose of the interview. The lead researcher assured the study participants that their identities and information would not be disclosed in any relevant form of reporting. Questions are asked openly based on the interview protocol that has been developed. However, since the interviews were conducted in a focused group, the researchers have determined that each study participant should respond to the questions asked. The session started with the most

senior study participants in a round robin until the end of all study participants. Questions are asked to the most senior participants first because they are more experienced and will inspire other more junior participants.

The recording of interview data was made using a voice recorder. To ensure that the data obtained is authentic, a total of 3 voice recorders are used. The second and third researchers also made a note of every feedback obtained. The information obtained is recorded in the field notes. After the interview session, all researchers had a discussion to determine the data analysis process.

As a guide, Braun and Clarke (2006) model was adapted to process the semi-structured interview data obtained in this study. The following processes were carried out:

- i) Read the transcript as a whole to identify patterns in general.
- ii) Generate basic codes based on initial findings from interview transcripts.
- iii) The codes listed are then classified to form specific themes.
- iv) Improve, refine and combine themes that carry the same meaning.
- v) Make comparisons between themes to identify relationships and connections that aim to produce more systematic findings and meet respondents' perspectives.
- vi) The final theme is decided which gives an overview of the interview narrative. The next step is to perform data analysis of the interview.

Findings

As a result of the analysis of the interviews that have been done, it was found that there are four main themes related to teacher leadership in Malaysia. The themes that have been identified are (1) self-awareness, (2) communication and change, (3) diversity and instructional proficiency, and (4) organized and continuous improvement. Further details on the themes formed as a result of the interview analysis are described in the next subtopic known as "Teacher Leadership in Malaysian Setting"

Teacher Leadership in Malaysian Setting

In Malaysian setting, there are four dimensions relevant to teacher leadership and these dimensions represent the significant values that teachers as leaders need to have. The first dimension is self-awareness. This refers to a teacher having a definite and concrete picture of him or herself as an educator. Being able to identify personal strengths and values in order to function as effective teachers is a proven value for teachers in acting out the role of teacher leaders (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). With the strengths and values, come the philosophy and proper behaviours mandatory for effective teacher leaders. Participants in this study admitted that they should have the awareness to further enhance their skills and knowledge

"...That's right, we as the Head of the Committee...we need to set a good example to other fellow teachers..."

(T1/ Male/ Head of Mathematics Committee)

"...We are all aware of the need to help schools...we need to activate organizational activities as required by the ministry..."

(T4/ Female/ Head of English Committee)

Self-awareness will also bring about understanding of how the teacher's values and emotions regulate his or her behaviour, judgement and self-belief (Helbert, 2015). This, in the end, will help teachers evaluate how they are doing as leaders and which areas they need to improve. Thus, the value of self-awareness is definitely an imperative and necessary value for teachers to be effective in their performance. The findings of the interviews prove that teachers are aware of their role as leaders. Two study participants clearly stated that they should be responsible for the tasks assigned to them

"...For me, all teachers are leaders. At least a leader to his or her students..."

(T7/ Male/ Senior Teacher of Science)

"...All teachers are appointed to hold professional positions ... each of us is a leader...leaders need to have awareness to help their subordinates..."

(T10/ Male/ Year 6 Coordinator)

The second dimension involves communication and change. This dimension stresses on the skill of communication that teachers could not do without. The finding of this project paper has proven that teachers, in their effort to perform better will have to improve their communicational skills so that when they listen, they will listen effectively, when they converse, they will relate effectively, when they present, their presentation is sound, and when they puts words on paper, the effect is dramatic.

"...I think communication is very important if you misinterpret instructions all is over what we ask the teacher to do ... they will do other things ..."

(T2/ Male/ Head of Language Department)

"...No problem for me to give my friends a phonecall to inform them about an assignment or urgent matters for me, it is important in completing the task..."

(T3/ Female/ Excellent Teacher of History)

Teachers need this to lead change in educational organizations. Since change is the only constant thing in this world, teachers are advised to equip themselves with effective strategies in order to facilitate positive change. This is in line with the findings obtained from the interview when one of the study participants shared how he communicated effectively.

"...I always convey important information through short memos ... or messages in whatsapp group...because if only verbally, sometimes confusion can arise..."

(T5/ Male/ Senior Teacher of Geography)

Diversity and instructional proficiency is the third dimension identified by this study. Teachers need to be diverse. They need to demonstrate respect for differences among people specifically their students and colleagues. With that in mind, they could respond to differences in a more productive and compelling manner.

"...As teachers, we need to learn various teaching techniques and pedagogical knowledge...so that students do not get too bored..."

(T6/ Female/ Senior Teacher of English)

"...In my opinion...teachers who become leaders need to mix with various backgrounds of society... then the mind will be more open..."

(T8/ Female/ Literacy Coordinator)

Instructional proficiency signifies teachers having professional knowledge and skills in delivering the most productive studying sessions for students. They agreed on the need to improve the skills of professional learning in delivering lessons.

"...We need to keep abreast of current developments in the latest techniques, source materials and trends otherwise, we will be left behind..."

(T9/ Female/ Head of Malay Language)

"...For me, teachers' pedagogical skills need to keep pace with the changing times...teachers need to be more versatile..."

(T2/ Male/ Head of Language Department)

Finally, the result of the study of literature review reveals the last dimension for teacher leadership which is organized and continuous improvement. This finding proves that teachers need to be organized by enacting course of actions and execute the plan in order to achieve the desired results. This has to be an on-going process with teachers showing a high level of commitment to improve their performance as well as the student performance.

"...All work done needs to be organized and there is always improvement ... not only work related to teaching but also including how we improve ourselves..."

(T6/ Female/ Senior Teacher of English)

"...I always make sure students improve their work including the performance of each examination and assessment marks..."

(T1/ Male/ Head of Mathematics Committee)

"...To ensure that I remain relevant in the world of education ... it is important for me to constantly improve my skills and knowledge..."

(T5/ Male/ Senior Teacher of Geography)

Discussion and Conclusion

The interviews that have been conducted give a broader picture of the characteristics of teacher leadership, especially in the context of education in Malaysia. The first dimension is self-awareness. This refers to how a teacher describes himself as an educator. Those who can identify their strengths and believe in their potential are capable of being leaders. Next is the importance of teachers adapting to effective communication. Effective communication will have an impact on change in every action to be taken. The third dimension is diversity and instructional proficiency. Teachers need to be versatile in performing their tasks and at the same time need to strive to improve the level of proficiency in instructional skills. This will produce an excellent teacher leader who is able to compete globally. Last but not least is organized and continuous improvement. The results of the study found that teachers need to organize their work well and plan for continuous improvement to prove the nature of teacher leadership that is constantly moving forward.

In conclusion, this study is executed with the aim of identifying the dimensions of teacher leadership by conducting a literature review. These dimensions could be illustrated as values which are relevant and important to teachers specifically in Malaysia. This finding can be used by other researchers in building a sound teacher leadership model in order to produce more teacher leaders as well as designing programmes to develop teacher leadership skills based on these dimensions.

We hope that future research can help in achieving the goal of building evidence-based teacher leadership that will further explain the role of middle leaders in achieving the school's mission and vision. But, Berry et al. (2010) stress that we still have a long way to go before reaching these desired states. Next to theoretical implications, we hope that this review supports policy and practice. The study summarises the roles and values of teacher leadership from the middle leaders perspective. This study shows that the school's middle leader has great potential to support current management hierarchy. However, to ensure that new paradigm of leadership can be implemented on a larger scale, a well thought-out policy is required for dealing with both school's management and technical challenges.

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