

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Teacher learning in Malaysia: Problems and possibilities of reform,**  
by Suseela Malakolunthu, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2007

Teacher learning and continuous teacher professional development have become important topics in educational research in view of the ongoing pressure for change in education. It is all the more important because educational reforms require both changes in teachers' ways of thinking about student learning and changes in their teaching practices. (Meirink, J.A., Imants, J., Meijer P.C. & Verloop, N., 2010).

The effective schools research has also cited strong leadership focusing on instruction as a contributing towards good schools, thus underscoring the need for heads exhibiting purposeful leadership focusing on instruction (Fullen, 1991)

This book is an attempt to understand fundamental issues of any educational reform: the importance of the reform implementation process under the instructional leadership of the Principal and the significant impact of a supportive climate of continuous learning for practicing teachers and the importance of the practitioners in the forefront of any reform agenda. It unpacks the dilemmas and problems that face principals and teachers in their attempts to implement reforms in individual secondary schools.

The qualitative research method leaning towards a case study model; and its strategies of data collection: interviews, participant and non-participant observation, school and policy documents were employed to flesh out the problem.

The study investigates whether the Principals in two selected secondary schools consider part of their job to be creating a supportive work climate for improving teachers' instructional practice and how the teachers perceive their principals' support towards teacher learning.

The book is a revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation on the above subject and follows the typical format of a research exercise. As such it also serves as a good example as to how carry out a piece of qualitative research for beginning researchers. It is divided into seven main chapters: Chapter One identifies the research problem, sets the scene, so to speak, and all the steps associated with it. Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature on the subject to situate this study within the context of an international perspective and concern. Chapter Three outlines the methods of data collection. Chapters Four and Five are concerned with data analysis and interpretation of the two case study schools. Chapter Six provides an interesting comparative analysis of the two schools. Chapter Seven provides an overall conclusion and draws down implications for policy making.

The author sees the role of the Principals as of equal importance to improved teacher professional development in the push for educational reforms and sees transformational heads as vital in providing enlightened leadership for change in schools. Heads and teachers are a loosely coupled system in the school and should be pulling in the same direction if educational reforms are to bear fruit.

Schools have to become centres for teaching creative and critical thinking skills, the inculcation of moral values across the curriculum and unless teachers buy into the ideas

and are given the leeway and support to implement these reforms, the initiatives for change may not be successful. The one person who could help the teacher to adopt, adapt and change is the Principal if he/she provides that transformational leadership.

In this case study, the Principals exhibit very shallow views of work culture and professional development for teachers. They seem to be hung up on the human relations and the bureaucratic approaches of leadership to the exclusion of other models that offer better insights to managing schools with well-trained, highly skilled professionals. The emphasis was on “homey”, family-like environment promoting congeniality rather than collegiality in their interaction with teachers. The heads clearly lacked instructional leadership and management skills.

This is an indictment on the effectiveness of the role of the Educational management and Leadership courses in the Institutes/Faculties of Education in public universities of the country. There has been inadequate training given to the heads in managing large educational institutions in the country. The heads seem to respond to what the higher authorities want! The author sees this as “systemic shortcomings”. Change must come from the top, meaning, knowledgeable educationists/civil servants should be in charge of overseeing schools.

While the author talks about the role of the principal and how his/her instructional leadership skills and qualities matter immensely in the matrix of implementing educational reforms and refers to the principal as the building principal providing transformational leadership formulating a vision, proving a shared social influence and living leadership, the bottom line is basically the entire system has to be overhauled to bring about successful implementation of educational reforms.

While this study provides a deeper understanding of the characteristics of the two sample schools, their teachers and principals in fostering educational reforms, nevertheless, this research is suggestive of what may be the case in broadly typical secondary schools across the country because appointments and promotion of staff to headships are generally centrally controlled and decided upon based on some set criteria. As such, this study and its findings bear on national policy issues of training of Principals and professional development of the teachers.

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