

## STUDY OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN MALAYSIAN CHANGING EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT: A CASE OF HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined the practice of transformational and transactional leadership among schools' head masters from the perspectives of teachers in the four selected public high performing schools in country. This study sought to determine the extent to which transformational and transactional leadership styles were practiced by leaders in such school. The study was quantitative in nature and used a survey to collect data. There were 285 teachers involved as respondents. The study found that both leadership styles were practiced by the school leaders but at different degrees. The results showed that the headmaster leadership were high on transformational and moderate on transactional.*

**Keywords** leadership, transformational, transactional, high performing school

### **INTRODUCTION**

Fechter and Horowitz (1991) aptly stated that change is uneasy but inevitable. The changes in major aspects of human life in the past 30 years have forced changes and reforms in education systems in many developed countries (Abu-Tineh, Khasawneh, & Al-Qamari, 2008), and, the Malaysian public education system is no exception. The process of transformation in public education, which began after Malaysian Independence Day in 1957, has resulted in greater access, quality, and equity. However, challenges persist as change is inevitable, constant, and at par with the rapid progress of the nation.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education identified numerous challenges in the public education system. These challenges included low participation and achievement among students, untrained teachers in subjects such as mathematics and science, ineffective school leaders, lack of empowerment in schools and teachers, ineffective teaching approaches, a disintegrated information system, which results in redundancy in task management, academic achievements fell behind the international standard, poor infrastructures and facilities in rural schools, overcrowded classrooms, and poor working conditions that affect teachers' commitment (Education Ministry of Malaysia, 2006).

In an effort to respond to the challenges, the Education Ministry of Malaysia (2006) introduced the education development master plan (EDMP) for 2006 to 2010, which described the main focus and strategies for the public education system for the present and future. The EDMP had two fundamental goals: to enhance the effectiveness of educational programs and to strengthen human capital development in preparing competitive human resources to face an escalating competitive global environment (Education Ministry of Malaysia, 2006). As a result, the EDMP brought transformation and changes in public schools involving the curriculum, teaching, learning, cocurricular activities, and school management.

Abu-Tineh et al. (2008) asserted that the most critical element for the success of school reform lies in the school leadership. On a similar note, Fullan (1992) reiterated that, in school reform efforts, the leaders become the key players for providing guidance and solutions to improve students' learning and developing teachers' professionalism. The problem of this

study was to what extent the headmasters in High Performing Schools (HPS) practiced transformational and transactional leadership in changing education environment with the implementation of EDMP and sustaining the HPS status.

## **MALAYSIAN CHANGING EDUCATION SYSTEM**

As a progressively developing nation, Malaysia aspired to become a developed nation by 2020. Based on the current global challenges, the Malaysian government introduced the implementation of a framework viewed as a national mission for the purpose of achieving that status (Education Ministry of Malaysia, 2006). The national mission advocated the development of human capital that boasted a first class mentality and capacity building as the main approach applied toward achieving the developed nation status.

The Malaysian government acknowledged the important role of education in order to execute the national mission successfully. Therefore, the Education Ministry of Malaysia took the initiative to prepare a comprehensive EDMP describing the main focus, strategies, and execution plans in current circumstances and for the future of public education. As stated earlier, the EDMP had two fundamental goals. In realizing these goals, the EDMP outlines the focus of the national education system based on the following grounds: (a) access to education, (b) equity in education, (c) quality in education, and (d) efficiency and effectiveness of education management (Education Ministry of Malaysia, 2006).

The EDMP brought about some major transformations into the schools. This outcome is exemplified in the introduction of new subjects and cocurricular activities, improvement of assessment and evaluation, the strengthening of discipline programs, improvement of teaching and learning methods, expansion of information communication and technology in management along with teaching and learning, the upgrading of physical and nonphysical facilities, and the efforts made in improving teaching skills and teachers' well-being.

The EDMP identified the roles of school leaders as a prime generator for this transformation at the school level. The success of the EDMP depends on the efficiency and effectiveness of the school's leadership (Education Ministry of Malaysia, 2006).

Transformational leadership has been recognized as one of the best leadership styles to be adopted for managing challenges in restructuring schools (Barnett, McCormick, & Corners, 2001). The effective leadership is significant for developing excellent organizations and individuals. To reaffirm this view, Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) expressed similar views because they promoted transformational leadership as having a constructive outcome on the followers. Similarly, Walumbwa, Lawler, Avolio, Wang, and Shi (2005) asserted that, based on 20 years of leadership studies, transformational leaders manage to increase organization excellent.

## **THE STUDY CONTEXT**

This study examined the practiced of transformational and transactional leadership in Malaysia context. Little research had been done in a Malaysian context related to transformational leadership at the primary school level. Most of the researchers selected secondary schools as their subjects of study, and the leadership of principals was examined. Bass (1997) pointed out that transformational leadership is highly appropriate in various organizations, settings, and cultures. However, Yu, Leithwood, and Jantzi (2002) argued that a contextual element had almost been left out in many transformational leadership studies.

This study examined transformational and transactional leadership from the teachers' perspectives, which is considered a new approach to leadership research. Tomlinson, Gunter, and Smith (1999) stated that many studies of effective leadership have been done from the

perspectives of head teachers and not from people from the other strata of the school society. Writers such as Lambert and Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, and Beresford (as cited in Harris, Day, & Hadfield, 2003) advocated the new perspectives on school leadership by viewing it from the standpoint of teachers. The significance of this study was concluded based on Bass' (1999) review of 20 years of research and development in transformational leadership, in which he asserted, "Much has been done but more still needs to be done before we can fully understand and confidently make use of the full range of transactional and transformational leadership" (p. 10).

This study chose High Performing Schools (HPS) as a subject. HPS is defined as schools with ethos, character and a unique identity which enable the schools to excel in all aspects of education. These schools have strong and excellent work cultures and dynamic national human capital for holistic and continuous development in addition to being able to compete in the international arena, hence becoming the school of choice (Unit Pengurusan Prestasi dan Pelaksanaan, 2010). HPS intends to set the benchmark of academic and non-academic achievement excellence for all schools types in Malaysia to strive towards. HPS is not a new set of schools but is a recognition/status for the attainment of the benchmark. HPS are selected through a composite score derived from Standard Kualiti Pendidikan Malaysia (SKPM) and school average GPS score, where a minimum of 92% marks are required and annexes/instruments that comprises areas such as establishing international linkages, creating towering personalities, benchmarking to international standards and national and international benchmarks. The outcome indicators for HPS include school and student academic performance, improvement, stakeholder satisfaction survey (including parents, teachers and students) and achievements in the annexes items.

HPS's operations is largely hinged on obtaining greater levels of autonomy which empowers the schools' principal and headmasters to make decisions spanning across the major operational activities within the school which covers areas like curriculum provision and delivery, flexibility in co-curriculum, financial management, teacher and student selection, school maintenance and other administrative functions. The principal/headmaster will be supported by academic and non-academic / professional staff in helping to achieve the desired outcomes. According to Malaysian Education Ministry, the ministry accredited 25 more HPSs, bringing the total from 2010 till December 31 2012.

## **THEORIES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Bass and Avolio (1994) stated that, in recent years, transformational leadership as a new management theory has received ample attention for discussion and investigation from management scholars. Avolio, Bass, and Jung (1995) found more than 100 theses and dissertations investigating the concept of transformational leadership during the 5-year period of 1990 to 1995 alone.

Burns (1978) defined leadership as the act of leaders encouraging followers to act toward attaining specific goals that represent the wants, needs, and aspirations of both parties. Leadership is built based on the followers' needs and goals. Therefore, Burns believed that the fundamental relationship between leaders and followers lies in the interaction of both parties at different levels of motivation in pursuing a common goal.

Similarly, Burns (1978) explained that the interaction of leaders and followers exists in two basic forms, transactional and transformational, in which both are separate from each other. In transactional leadership, "one person takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of valued things" (Burns, 1978, p. 19). In this model, the relationship that exists between leaders and followers is only temporary and not for pursuing a higher purpose. Burns pointed out that transformational leadership "occurs when one or more

persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 20). The relationship between leaders and followers, therefore, is seen to lie on mutual support for a higher common goal.

Bass (1985) further segregated the concept in terms of the relationship between leaders and followers into three properties: (a) recognizing what leaders and followers want from their work, (b) exchanging benefit and work between two parties, and (c) exchanging processes that fulfill the short-term interest of both parties. Bass, in his view of the relationship between leaders and followers in terms of effects, distinguished two forms of leadership: transactional and transformational.

Summarizing his views on transformational leadership, Bass (1985) stated, “The transformational leader motivates us to do more than we originally expected to do” (p. 20). The attainment of superior performance is based on the belief and confidence that the designated performance can be achieved. Bass proposed three interrelated things that could be performed by leaders for such transformation: (a) elevating followers’ awareness of the importance of chosen outcomes and ways of attaining them, (b) sacrificing personal interests for the benefit of organization, and (c) expanding followers’ needs and wants to a higher level. Bass also concluded that, for leaders to succeed in motivating and elevating followers, they require “a leader with vision, self-confidence, and inner strength to argue successfully for what he sees is right or good, not for what is popular or is acceptable according to the established wisdom of the time” (p. 17).

Bass (1985) admitted that his opinions differed from those of Burns in three respects: (a) The expansion of the followers’ needs and wants are not solely in upward mode but also in downward mode along Maslow’s motivation hierarchy; (b) transformational leadership is not only beneficial to the society, but sometimes it will endanger society as well; and (c) transformational leadership is not the opposite end of transactional leadership, but they are a complement to one another. In precise words, Bass (1985) concluded, “Most leaders do both but in different amounts” (p. 22). He clarified how these two styles work harmoniously with each other, raising the point that a transactional leader builds confidence among followers and clarifies the required performance and benefit as an exchange for accomplishing it. In relation to this, transformational leaders will further increase followers’ confidence by encouraging the followers to value the designated outcomes, and the way of achieving it is by looking at the benefits they can bring to the team and organization.

Bass and Avolio (1994) pointed out that transformational leaders encourage followers to perform beyond what they possibly think. The leaders set higher expectations and encourage followers to work harder in order to attain it. In doing this, the leaders employ one or more of the following approaches:

1. Idealized influence. Leaders give attention to followers’ needs and try to fulfill them. The leaders become role models who are admired, respected, and trusted. In return, followers recognize leaders and want to be like them.

2. Inspirational motivation. Leaders motivate and inspire followers by providing challenges in their work. The leaders provide vision and clearly communicate the importance of achieving such vision for the benefit of the organization.

3. Intellectual stimulation. Leaders encourage followers to be more innovative and creative in their work. The followers are encouraged to find a new solution when facing problems at work and view a problem as an opportunity.

4. Individualized consideration. Leaders pay attention to followers’ individual potential and develop it to a higher level. The leader acts as a mentor or coach.

On the other hand, Bass and Avolio (1994) highlighted the fact that transactional leadership “occurs when the leader rewards or disciplines the followers depending on the adequacy of the follower’s performance” (p. 4). At this juncture, leaders depend on three

approaches:

1. Contingent reward. Leaders provide rewards to followers as an exchange for completing a task, and the end result is deemed satisfactory.

2. Management by exception–active. Leaders monitor followers’ work closely and take remedial action as soon as mistakes are discovered.

3. Management by exception–passive. Leaders do not monitor followers’ work closely and take remedial action only when mistakes have occurred.

Bass (1998) explained that transformational leadership is a concept expanded from transactional leadership, and the former sees more of the subordinates’ efforts. He stated that transactional leadership is important for maintenance of the present outcomes, but transformational leadership gives a leeway for innovation and creativity. Transformational leadership “motivates others to do more than they originally intended and often even more than they thought possible” (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 3).

Burns (1978) believed that transformational leadership is separated from transactional leadership. On the other hand, Bass (1985) asserted that transformational and transactional leaderships are related, and he raised the fact that both styles “are likely to be displayed by the same individuals in different amounts and intensities” (p. 26).

## **TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL CONTEXTS**

Parrish (as cited in Abu-Tineh et al., 2008) asserted that research on educational reform recognizes the greater role of leadership in contributing to the excellence of schools. Fullan (1992) suggested that leadership is the most important element in successful school reform because it offers an excellent solution for students’ learning improvement and teachers’ professional growth. Heck and Hallinger (1999) pointed out that, based on their examination of 10 years of educational research conducted by notable scholars in the field, there has been an obvious movement in the depth of understanding about school leadership and its outcome. In the era of school restructuring and school accountability, leadership has been identified as the main focus for such reform. Furthermore, with the growing demand from the community, it is vital for school leaders to prepare themselves with knowledge and skills in order to be effective and capable heads of the school.

According to educational literature, initially the rise of transformational leadership in the 1980s was a result of the pressure felt by schools to improve substandard and poor academic performance among students, and it was also based on the awareness of the relationship between leadership and school effectiveness (Stewart, 2006). According to Hallinger (2003), the emergence of transformational leadership in the school reform process is appropriate because the leadership style focuses on teachers’ empowerment, participative leadership, and organizational improvement through learning. Hallinger indicated that the transformational leadership approach is crucial in ascertaining the success of the learning process in school.

Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbench (1999) indicated that transformational leadership is highly appropriate for school reforms because it has provided an opportunity for teachers to develop and grow professionally in response to the increasing demand coming from the school environment. Transformational leadership is viewed to be receptive for school reforms because it promotes the development of the organization and its members, provides a vision, encourages participative leadership, and cultivates a positive culture in school as well.

Barnett et al. (2001) asserted that both the transformational and transactional leadership models advocated by Bass make a significant contribution to the present development in education. Bass (1997) pointed out that both styles of leadership generate trust, respect, and teamwork for common goals. This contributes to the transformational leader working effectively within the present environment, but also working to change it. Responding to this,

it is argued that transformational leadership is more receptive to education change and, thus, able to contribute toward the improvement and effectiveness of schools.

Stewart (2006) suggested that Leithwood was the person responsible for bringing transformational leadership theory into the educational administration field. The Leithwood transformational leadership model has been examined widely. The conceptual model originated from Bass' two-factor theory, which insisted that both leadership styles are interrelated and complementary to one another (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Bass raised a point that transactional characteristics are referred to as managerial components, which are important for the continuity and stability of the organization. Therefore, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) introduced four management dimensions to the original model that represent transactional characteristics: staffing, instructional support, monitoring school activities, and community focus. The Leithwood model suggests that the principal and teachers have shared rights in leadership based on mutual support, intellectual stimulation, and common vision.

Originating from the work of Leithwood, Ogawa, and Bossert, Hallinger and Heck (1998) suggested four school climates in which leaders have an opportunity to strengthen their influence: in purposes, structure, people, and organizational culture. In realizing that leadership is constituted by many sources, Hallinger (2003) suggested that transformational models view leadership as interrelated activities of people in an organization rather than a single task that is performed by an individual. Leithwood et al. (1999) conducted 21 studies of the effects of transformational leadership in schools. In general, five themes of leadership effects can be concluded in the studies: effects on students, effects on leaders' perceptions, effects on followers' behaviors, effects on followers' psychological states, and effects at the level of the organization.

Leithwood (1994), through his studies on the effects of transformational leadership, pointed out that this leadership style contributes to teachers' initiatives and positive feelings toward their students' success. Nevertheless, this contribution is interceded by other factors such as teachers' commitment, job satisfaction, instructional practice, or school culture (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Research studies have suggested that the school culture operates mainly through the leadership conduct of school principals (Barnett et al., 2001).

From their numerous studies, Leithwood et al. (1999) concluded that, even though the outcomes of some studies are varied, they were convinced enough to acknowledge that transformational leadership has a significant relationship to teachers' extra effort in changing their classroom conduct or manners. Three areas have been found to have significant relationships to transformational leadership: organizational learning, organizational effectiveness, and organizational culture. Leithwood et al. also revealed that school leadership research has highlighted the significant effects of the transformational leadership approach on teachers. The authors argued that leaders who advocate transformational leadership develop their followers' potential through inspiring their needs, and desires are the key for enhancing their commitment.

In summary, Leithwood et al. (1999) concluded that there are many reasons, including a solid theoretical framework, for promoting transformational leadership in schools. However, there is still more work to be done in explaining the effects of such style on students. The authors also suggested that further studies needed to give more focus to the relationship between transformational leadership and students' learning outcomes through the interceding variables of school culture, teachers' job satisfaction, and teachers' extent commitment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Question**

What do teachers identify as the leadership style being practiced by the school headmasters in the study schools?

### **Participants**

The population of this study included teachers from four high performing primary schools in a Malaysian suburb. The total accessible population was 400 teachers. Based on a formula suggested by Krejcie and Morgan (as cited in Gay & Airasian, 2003), for the population size of 400, the appropriate sample size would be 196. However, for the purpose of validity and involvement of as many respondents as possible, the sample size for this study involved 400 teachers.

For the purpose of selecting respondents, convenience-sampling techniques were utilized. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), convenience sampling is the “process of including whoever happens to be available at the time” (p. 134). Apart from the reason for involving as many teachers as possible in this study, convenience sampling was chosen in order to address the issues of volunteering among respondents as they had the right to participate or not in this study. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2010), the voluntarily issues have made almost all educational studies conducted with a volunteer sample, and this type of sample is called convenience sampling. For the purpose of doing convenience-sampling techniques, all teachers from the four target schools, 400 in estimation, were listed as potential respondents.

### **Instruments**

For the purpose of collecting data, The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire: Form 5X-Short (MLQ-5X-S) was used. The MLQ-5X-S is the most recent version of the multifactor leadership questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 2004). For the purpose of this study, this instrument utilized eight leadership dimensions with 32 items related to transformational and transactional leadership methods.

### **Research Design**

The study was quantitative in nature and descriptive in terms of its design. A survey was used in collecting of data. In particular, this study examined the extent to which transformational and transactional leadership have been practiced.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

**Statistical tools.** Based on the purpose of this study, which was to examine the leadership styles of headmasters, the data were analyzed using the following statistical tools:

1. Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, means, standard deviations, and percentages) were used to describe respondents' characteristics such as gender, age, education level, and teaching experience.
2. Descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations) were used to describe headmasters' leadership styles, based on teachers' responses.

## Description of Respondents' Characteristics

There were 285 surveys returned of 400 copies that were distributed. The rate of return was 71%. The summary of the data in regard to the respondents' characteristics section is as follows.

**Gender.** The total number of respondents was 285. Fifty-four male participants (18.9%) and 231 female participants (81.1%) responded to the survey. The breakdown of gender in the school's survey reflected that female teachers formed the majority compared to male teachers.

**Age.** The largest group of participants was between 30 and 40 years old (53.7%). The second large group was between 41 and 50 years old (27.4%). The third was below 30 years old (12.3%), and the smallest was over 51 years old (6.7%). Therefore, most of the teachers were between 30 and 50 years old (81.2%).

**Education level.** The largest group of participants (55.1%) had graduated from university as first-degree holders. The second largest group of participants (37.5%) had graduated from teaching college as diploma holders. The smallest group of participants (7.4%) had postgraduate degree. Therefore most of the teachers were university graduates (62.5%).

**Tenure with current headmasters.** The largest group of participants (64.9%) had been working with current headmasters for less than 2 years. The second largest group of participants (17.5%) had worked with current headmasters from between 5 to 6 years. The third group (10.9%) had worked with current headmasters for more than 7 years. There were 6.7% who had worked with current headmasters from between 3 to 4 years.

**Tenure of teaching experience.** The largest group of participants (40.7%) had a teaching experience of between 6 to 15 years. The second largest group of participants (28.1%) had 16 to 25 years of teaching experience. The third group (21.1%) had less than 5 years of teaching experience. There were 10.2% who had a teaching experience of more than 26 years.

## Description of Headmasters' Leadership Styles

The mean score was used to analyze the leadership styles of the headmasters. The mean score of transformational leadership was 2.8544 ( $SD = .60183$ ), which was considered high compared to the mean score of transactional leadership 2.0939 ( $SD = .41050$ ), which was considered moderate.

Based on the statistical analyses above, which utilized descriptive statistics (i.e., mean and standard deviation), the conclusion is as follows: The leadership style of headmasters was high on transformational leadership ( $M = 2.8544$ ) and moderate on transactional leadership ( $M = 2.0939$ ).

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Based on the conclusions above, the headmasters displayed both leadership styles at different levels. They had high scores for transformational leadership but scored moderately for transactional leadership.

## Relationship of the Findings to the Literature

The research literature provides support for the findings of the study. The first conclusion stated that both leadership styles were practiced by the headmasters but at different levels, as they had high scores for transformational leadership and moderate scores for transactional



leadership. In supporting this finding, Bass (1985) asserted that most leaders performed both but in different amount.

Bass (1998) explained that transformational leadership is a concept expanded from transactional leadership because the former sees more of the subordinates' efforts. The author stated further that transactional leadership is important for maintenance of the present outcomes, but transformational leadership gives a leeway for innovation and creativity. Transformational leadership "motivates others to do more than they originally intended and often even more than they thought possible" (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 3).

Bass (1985) asserted that transformational and transactional leadership styles are related because he noted that both styles "are likely to be displayed by the same individuals in different amounts and intensities" (p. 26). Similarly, he argued that, in general, leaders could be both transformational and transactional. According to Bass and Avolio (1990), transformational leadership expands transactional leadership through meeting followers' purposes, which are in line with organizational goals and values.

Bass (1998) further stated that, to a certain extent, leaders are both transformational and transactional. Effective leaders tend to display an approach that is more transformational compared to transactional in their conduct. Transformational leadership is built on transactional leadership, as leaders transcend followers' needs beyond a simple exchange toward a higher purpose (Bass, 1985). In relation, Bass and Avolio (1993) advocated that, in order to be effective, leaders need both styles of transactional and transformational leadership. Transformational leadership seems to be ineffective if it is without support from transactional leadership (Bass, 1985).

It has been argued that transactional leaders work well within present organizations' procedures and norms, whereas transformational leaders place more emphasis on organizations' vision and future. Consequently, transactional leadership is sufficient in getting reasonable responses from followers, but transformational leadership will generate greater responses from followers (Bass, 1985). Transactional leadership is adequate enough to fulfill the basic requirements of the organization, but transformational leadership is crucial in bringing in changes in an organization and in enhancing employees' commitment (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) added that Bass believed the two styles could be complementary.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

Based on the findings of this research, the following suggestions could be considered, particularly in headmaster leadership practice and training in changing education environment.

1. It is important for headmasters to embrace the transformational leadership style, as it was proven to influence the schools performance in such environment.

2. Because transformational leadership is built on transactional leadership, headmasters also need to embrace transactional leadership, particularly for contingent reward, as it was proven that this factor influenced teachers' commitment significantly.

3. Training on transformational leadership and transactional leadership must be provided to headmasters as both styles seem compliment to one another.

**SUMMARY**

This study demonstrated that transformational and transactional leadership of head masters play a significant role in changing and dynamic education environment. Even though the degree was not equal but the both were important as serve for different purpose. Taking into account the diversity of issues related to the changing school environment, the both styles are important and essential.

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