

How Democratic Leaders Empower Teachers Job Satisfaction? The Malaysian Case

Cheah Lee
Abdul Ghani Kanesan Abdullah
Aziah Ismail
Naser Jamil Alizydeen

School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia
11800 Penang, Malaysia

Abstract

This study aims to investigate how democratic leaders work to empower teachers job satisfaction. The present follow-up study uses the naturalistic qualitative and exploratory approach. Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted on three schools, selected from the 97 school which participated in the previous study. In each school selected for the present study, individual interviews were conducted with the principals and the selection of randomly 10 teachers from each sample school. Participants were asked to describe critical incidents related to their principals' leadership and their sense of empowerment. The findings of this study revealed that there are some common attributes of principals that contribute to the successful empowerment of teachers in schools. They include amongst others: upholding participatory and collaborative management; relations-oriented and established trusting relationship; on top of that, these leaders also possess the attributes of transformational leadership, such as individualized consideration, idealized influence and intellectual stimulation.

Key words: Democratic Leadership, Empowerment, Job Satisfaction

1. Introduction

Researches on both effective school and school improvement advocated that today's school reform agenda requires a style of leadership different from the traditional top-down, hierarchical, bureaucratic and autocratic style. Due to the increased complexity in the educational system, it becomes probable that no one individual has all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that would enable him/her to accomplish all of the leadership functions. Thus a more dispersed form of leadership which encourages teachers to have greater participation in policy planning and decision making has been the subject of much recent interest (Wheatley, 1992; Day et al., 1998; Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett, 2005). It is believed that democratic leadership who emphasizes on individual participation in school leadership has the greatest power to engender loyalty and commitment (Bass, 1990).

2. Literature Review

It was suggested that, when schools operate democratically, teachers will be more likely to contribute to their development in a positive way (Sergiovanni & Starrat, 1998). Therefore, school principal is encouraged to work with teachers, empower them (Blasé & Blasé, 1994), and utilizing their expertise and initiative in a way which benefits the school as a whole (Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett, 2005) through teacher leadership (Lieberman, Saxl & Miles, 2000; Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000; Harris & Day, 2003). Likewise, DeBlois (2000) suggest that, good leaders will practice transformational leadership which consists of identifying, encouraging, and supporting others in the organization to assume positions of leadership. Whilst researchers did argue for the distinctiveness of their terminology, the terms, be they called teacher leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, or participative leadership, they are nonetheless related to each other, and could be well-linked with democratic leadership.

According to Wood (2005), democratic leadership in school means that the leader him/herself is leading the school in accordance with democratic ideas and understanding that school democracy is for all who are working in the school. Researchers such as Yahya (1999) and Mamat, (2001) noticed the roles of principals in Malaysia have been evolving, due to both globalization as well as various policies imposed by the government. The 1980s witnessed the wave of educational reforms worldwide; the Ministry of Education, Malaysia also introduced the new curriculum to replace the old ones. New Primary School Curriculum and Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools were implemented nationwide; the role of the principal evolved from that of manager, to instructional leader (Ramaiah, 1995), and school principals were expected to define the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting school climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger & McCary, 1990).

Researchers called for the de-centralization of Malaysian educational system that was overly bureaucratic (Abdullah, 1994). Such an emphasis on decentralized leadership informs the increasing focus on the role of subject leaders and classroom teachers in leading and managing schools and, in turn, raises issues about the training and development of such post holders. Empowerment then became the buzz word for the 1990s. Hamid (1999) studied the empowerment of teachers, and he commented that it was a hard attempt on the part of some Malaysian principals to empower their subordinates, for it challenged the power and authority that were traditionally held by them. Bajunid (1997) also observed that, the scarcity of principals wanting to exercise their discretionary power to lead and to delegate was attributed mainly to their lack of professionalism.

Research into collaborative and democratic leadership has identified problems such as ‘contrived collegiality’ (Hargreaves, 1991), when teachers can feel manipulated and powerless as a result of being required to participate in whole school planning and decision making with no guarantee that their ideas will be acted on (Barth (2000)). On the other hand, Riley and Mac-Beath (2003) indicated that though a number of principals have developed collective practice through forward planning, self-development and staff development, some principals use key individuals among the staff to promote their own agenda. Greenfield (cited in Blasé et al., 1995) on the other hand revealed, there were a number of recurring challenges for leaders to lead democratically; a major frustration encountered was the increased time that was required to involve teachers in decisions, coupled with the difficulty of arranging the daily schedule so that teachers who were participating in shared governance and school leadership activities could be released from classroom responsibilities to work together with the principals on a routine basis.

3. Methodology

This study undertook to add to the understanding of principals’ leadership practice in Malaysia, by conducting semi-structured interviews, to look into teachers’ perspective on the performance of democratic school leaders who bring about greater teachers’ job satisfaction, to see how they work to empower their teachers.

1.3. Data Collection and Sampling

The present study is part of a larger research project on the impact of principal’s transformational democratic leadership style in teachers’ job satisfaction. The present follow-up study uses the naturalistic qualitative and exploratory approach. Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted on three schools, selected from the 97 school which participated in the previous study. In order to select three schools, a purposeful sampling of extreme cases was carried out. First, the individual responses of teachers on the quantitative survey were aggregated for each school, which resulted in one score on each study variable per school. Second, based on this analysis, all the 97 school were ranked, and the three schools with highest score of practicing democratic leadership and job satisfaction were selected for the follow-up interviews. Data was obtained to show how successful democratic leadership empowers teachers and effected great teachers’ job satisfaction. Participants were asked to describe critical incidents related to their principals’ leadership and their sense of empowerment. Teachers were asked to describe a story about their experience as a way to elicit more detail and as a way to reveal their “meaning-making” strategies. The researcher also conducted interviews with the three principals (namely Micheal, Sarah and Thomas), and the topic was concentrated on how they practice democratic leadership to empower teachers and effected great teachers’ job satisfaction. The triangulation of perceptual viewpoint between principal and teacher helped to validate the responses of the different people.

2.3. Data analysis

In order to analyze the data obtained from the interviews (3 principals and 30 teachers) were taped and systematically transcribed verbatim and a coding scheme was developed. Variations and similarities of attitudes, perceptions, expectations and other elements found in the data were identified and coded. These coded data were then examined and grouped according to categories. The responses were first compared within categories, to determine if any pattern or contradictions would emerge. Next, comparisons were made of the relationship between categories. This led to the identification of themes from the data, which were then interpreted with relation to the existing literature to answer the research question. The contents of the field notes which were a supplement to that obtained during the interviews were also analyzed in relation to the themes that emerged.

4. Findings

The data shows that though the three principals (Thomas for School A, Michael for School B, and Sarah for School C) in the case studies do practice democratic leadership, there are similarities and variations in their practice of school leadership, as what they believed and shared and as those observed and felt by their teachers.

Another noticeable feature gleaned from the data is that while each of the principals was committed to many of the same ideals of democratic leadership and empowered their teachers, how they went about and achieved that was distinctly different from each other. The principal's practice and talk about school leadership do reflect much of what has been written of the transformational and democratic leader attributes, but there were also some visible differences in term of the teachers' perception of democratic practice and empowerment. In this section, the findings drawn from the data are compared and thematically analyzed across the three principals under the following sub-topics: (a) Principals' personality and leadership style, and (b) How democratic leaders work to empower teachers?

1.4. The Principals' Personality and Leadership Styles

Each of the three principals though practiced democratic leadership had very distinctive background, personalities and leadership styles that were reflected in their schools. The striking similarities for the three principals are that all of them showed high trust and confidence in their teachers, they all held open door policy, and they could give considerable time to their teachers, and students. Being friendly, caring, considerate, empowering, collegial and communicable were also their common attributes. They showed no power distance between themselves and teachers. All of them involved their administrative team members in decision making process, but the degree of their empowerment varied, and this would be discussed in the later part of the section. During the time of the study, both Michael and Sarah had served as principal for four years but Thomas was in School A for only a year. Thomas though a principal for only a year seemed much more relaxed in his position compared to the other two principals. His status as an ex-District Officer granted him a level of credibility. Thomas was trying to steer 'the sinking ship' into calmer water, which he called the effective school together with his administrative team. Though Thomas had yet to make a noticeable change in the school, teachers generally believed he could do a good job for the school, provided he could stay on for a longer period of time. The general consensus is that Thomas's leadership style was thoughtful and composed.

Michael's friendliness and softness were popular among the teachers. It might have stemmed from Michael's status as a newcomer to the field having come straight into the principalship from an ordinary teacher position, without any other administration experience; and the fact that School B was an all-girls school, and majority of the teachers were lady. Michael was a firm believer of 'majority rules'; and he would accept teachers' views so long as they were in the majority and abdicated his own ideas. A critical evaluation of Michael's extreme level of collegiality was offered by many teachers. Whilst the majority was appreciative of his democratic style, the Senior Assistants declared openly their confusion and frustration. The Senior Assistants were more accustomed to work with more task-oriented leaders. Sarah was the most dynamic of the principals in terms of energy and decisiveness. She had a self-possessed strength and demonstrated an ability to make decisions that came as second nature to her. Being the ex-student of School C, Sarah had a special affection toward the school and initiated a number of changes to the school within a short span of time. She invited her administrative team to involve in important school decision, like that of changing the school from double sessions to single session. Her communicative virtue and collaborative nature made teachers feel that they were respected. Though working in different school contexts, all these principals have gained high regards from their respective teachers. Being 'very friendly and practical' was an adjective used by teachers to describe Thomas; being 'friendly and approachable' was a descriptor for Michael; and 'very dynamic and persuasive' was attributed to Sarah.

Thomas's exposure to a wide range of leadership styles during his service as the District officer made him aware that he must not be pushy with teachers who work in a challenging environment like School A. He shows great understanding towards the teachers' working condition, and his friendliness and sensibility have gained him much of his teachers' approval. As for Michael, his friendliness and amicable attitudes are his most noticeable characteristics. Except for the two senior assistants who have problems adjusting to Michael's leadership styles, most teachers interviewed felt a great relieve to have Michael replacing the ex-principal who practiced a more autocratic and task-oriented leadership. The teachers interviewed described Thomas's leadership by using expressions such as empowering, no power distance, fair, listening to us. And teachers' comment for Michael was democratic, open, win-win, great autonomy to teachers. Sarah was the only lady principal in this study; and teachers' remarks on her leadership style including participatory, skilful persuader, rational and allowing disagreement. In general, all the three principals were perceived as being very collegial and collaborative, and were consensus builders. As consensus builders, they upheld shared governance, and they made important school decisions through their administrative meetings that were held either weekly or fortnightly.

2.4. How Democratic Leaders Work to Empower Teachers

In order to see how these principals worked to empower their teachers to bring about greater teachers' job satisfaction and commitment, the characteristic of their leadership practice were analyzed.

These attributes are discussed under the following five core themes: (1) participatory and collaborative management style; (2) relation-oriented and trusting relationship; (3) individualized consideration; (4) intellectual stimulation; and (5) idealized influence. It must be stated at the outset that the core themes presented here are by no means exhaustive or exclusive, rather these themes are somewhat inter-related and no strict demarcation lines should be drawn between the themes.

2.4.1 Participatory and Collaborative Management Style

Consistent with the literature about democratic leadership, where principals in this era of change need to embrace a more distributing and participative leadership at the school site (Day et al., 2000; Sergiovanni & Starrat, 1998; Wheatley, 1992, Sergiovanni, 2001a), the principals in the study all upheld participatory and collaborative management style. They invited their Senior Assistants and teachers to join them in the school administration. They facilitated authentic participation by asking for input of those affected by the decisions, and treating teachers as capable professionals whose insights are valuable (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). They allowed disagreements, and valued dissenting views. As Sergiovanni (2001b) put it, the key to school improvement was through allowing and encouraging staff to develop their skills as individuals, giving them the scope to bring new ideas and initiatives into the school, enabling staff to take a lead in specific areas of school life and to value these contributions in an atmosphere of openness, support and no blame. Teachers interviewed generally felt that their principals' friendliness, openness, and sincerity were the few encouraging factors that facilitated their participation in school management. These principals also practiced the 'power with' (Blaze & Blaze, 1994) and 'power to' (Sergiovanni, 2001a) model of leadership, empowered their administrators to expect democratic participation as a right, rather than to view it as a privilege at the discretion of principals. Their action affirmed Blaze, Anderson and Dungun's (1995) observation of the phenomenon when there was 'increased professionalization of teaching'.

2.4.2 Relations-oriented and Trusting Relationship

Maintaining relationship and connection with others also characterized the leadership of these democratic principals (Bass, 1990). Principals in the study all appeared to be soft spoken, holding open door policy, and good listeners. They were described by their teachers as sincere, fair, and supportive. Teachers could come and share their problems, be it related to work or personal problems. They cared deeply for their teachers, and that made the teachers feel happy working in the schools. There were, however, some differences in how they built relationships with their teachers. Sarah found a variety of ways to work directly with teachers, whereas Thomas more often worked on behalf of the teachers' well being, by improving their working condition. Michael provided his teachers great autonomy to deal with matters they took charge, and most of his teachers appreciated that they were given free hands to do whatever they deemed fit for the school and the students. As for Thomas, his relation-oriented manner was reflected in his belief to 'work with' teachers rather than to 'work on' them. Thomas wanted the teachers to work for the school, instead of working for him. His sincerity and middle line approach touched his teachers. He trusted his teachers who did the actual work were always in better position to know the problem and reflected on it, so he often invited the teachers to diagnose the problems at school and come up with proposal for solutions.

All the three principals valued communication, and they believed that people are essentially good and they are by nature motivated. It was the principals' duties to get them organized to achieve the shared goals of the schools. Teachers knew that all the principals had done were for the good of the school. Two-way communication in a climate of high trust in the case studies reduced teachers' sense of vulnerability and that made the teachers felt safe to voice out their opinions. West-Burnham (2003) also spoke of the value of interpersonal intelligence in communicating honestly, sharing responsibility and interdependency, such intelligence is said to encourage tolerance, respect for others, self-esteem and understanding and was seen as a strong motivating factor for empowerment. In the cases under studied, the principals were seen managed their relationship with teachers through sincere communication. These leaders empowered teachers to become free-thinking, independent individuals capable of exercising leadership (Harris, 2001).

2.4.3 Individualized Consideration

As one of the subscales of transformational leadership, individualized consideration was also apparent in each of the democratic leader. The principals in this study showed their sensitivity towards their subordinates' need for recognition, support and professional growth (Bass & Avolio, 1991). They also recognized the differences and needs of each individual teacher. They sounded passionate about the welfare of the students and process of teaching and learning. The principals however demonstrated their care and consideration to the students and teachers in their own different ways. For Sarah, she displayed her support for her staff by consistent visibility in school and at school functions and activities. She recognized the teachers' contributions and effort. In the event students did win a competition, the reward would go to the students and teacher adviser, and they were to decide how much money (if the reward was in cash) they wanted to donate to the school.

Thomas's values system was defined and named by him as 'Making it Happen'. The essence of his leadership and decision making were guided by this belief. While his caring towards the students was prominent, he knew that it is the teachers in the classroom who would ultimately make the difference. He gave them visualized mission as well as ample time to accomplish it. Although it was not his style to use excessive phrase to express his care and appreciation to teachers, through his actions and demeanor, teachers felt his sincerity and consideration. Michael always gave the students and teachers his listening ears. Teachers were happy working with him, for he always showed his understanding. For teachers, the most considerate part of Michael was his full trust on them. Michael gave teachers great autonomy to carry out their respective tasks, he could be very compromising and teachers felt a great sense of responsibility and meaningfulness. For the teachers, jobs not only take on a special significance but also provide them with feelings of intrinsic satisfaction. To teachers, the greatest gift of consideration one can give them is the trust and support.

According to Sergiovanni (2001a), most teachers want responsibility, because responsibility upgrades the importance and significance of teachers' work and provides them a basis for recognition of their success. And accountability which is related to empowerment also provides teachers a healthy measure of excitement, challenge and importance. In addition to that, these principals also recognized the differences and needs of each individual teachers. They respected each individual teacher as a whole person rather than just an employee (Bass & Avolio, 1991), and ensured a secure environment for teachers' full and conscious engagement in school leadership. All the three principals tried to foster bonds of connections in their schools, through giving everyone that minute of their time to talk to them and voice their opinions, be it related to work or personal problems.

2.4.4 Intellectual Stimulations

Principals in the study all recognized that school improvement that meant to realize significant gains need to extend beyond the principal alone (Sergiovanni, 2000) and they invited teachers to join them to find solutions to old problems, and creative problem solving was encouraged. By questioning assumptions, and reframing problems, Sarah successfully transformed the school from double sessions to single session with the help of teachers; and through the process, teachers witnessed her courage to take risk, and to shoulder responsibility; together they learned. Basically through the participative model of leadership, the interaction of leadership was not simply top-down but ran in several directions, creating opportunities for influence (Johnson, 1996) and a professional community was formed. While the principals in the studies created "the conditions, opportunities and experiences for collaboration and mutual learning" (Harris, 2001, p.262) for teachers; the teachers also learned to assume responsibility for school leadership, they learned to redefine their norms, and reinterpreted their perception of their roles, and they became committed teacher leaders, rather than dutiful followers (Harris, 2001). The intellectual stimulation that these principals offered to their teachers produced them of the same caliber as the leaders. Campbell and Southworth (1992) stated that a culture of collaboration can be presented when individuals were valued as people, for their contribution to others and as part of a team.

2.4.5 Idealized Influence

All the three principals were perceived as role models for their teachers. They showed significant idealized influence on their teachers (Bass & Avolio, 1991). They were admired, respected and trusted, though for their different attributes, as leaders in schools. Teachers regarded them as good people; they were consistent rather than arbitrary and demonstrated high standard and ethical conduct. All the three principals were admired and respected for their equanimity and composure. Thomas gained the trust of his teachers through his supportive manners towards the teachers. He always backed the teachers up for whatever actions they took after they have been duly empowered to carry out their tasks. While Sarah's charismatic influence on teachers was her communicative virtue and professionalism; Thomas's leadership impact on teachers was his friendliness and ability to listen to others. Being the admired principals that they were, these three principals all felt that they should also function as teachers embracing whatever roles these purpose required. They were just members amongst equals when they were sitting in meetings, and teachers respected them for their being fair and they were teachers' role models.

5. Implications of the Study

On the level of specific operations, this study has implications for planners at the Ministry of Education to provide more support for teacher leaders. As the findings revealed that teachers were more unprepared than principals for the status adaptation in joint decision making process, trainings for the teacher leaders is just as important as training for the principals. The development and implementation of ongoing staff development programs focuses on democratic leadership shall lead to a deeper understanding of the dispersing leadership in schools to meet the challenges in the era of change, and help principals and teachers to work collaboratively to enhance educational outcomes. The Ministry of Education should take note of the amount and nature of professional experiences the school leaders have.

There should not be cause to only promote them within four or five years of their retirement as token gestures. Promoting school teacher to principalship in his or her late 40s and early 50s limits the number of years principal is able to hold the job before retirement, and hinders his or her opportunities to guide teachers to teacher leadership in the school democratic process. This study did not investigate the perceptions of students regarding the leadership qualities deemed most desirable or effective in principals. While some studies have looked at teachers' perceptions of principal leadership, future research should focus on the type of principal leadership deemed having the most, if any, positive impact on the teaching and learning process. Another avenue for research would be to compare the impacts both autocratic leaders and democratic leaders have on teachers; it would be interesting to pursue further and greater depth the emotional side of teachers caused by the two different leadership, so that those preparing for the principalship could be better informed about the best practice.

6. Conclusion

The importance or consensus around transformational democratic leader attributes is underscored by the research of Bass (1990), Blaze and Blaze (1994), and Wood (2005). These authors described how the inspirational and motivating leadership works to empower teachers and advances organizational improvement efforts. As the present study demonstrates, the democratic principals upheld participatory and collaborative management, they were very much relations-oriented and established trusting relationship with their teachers; on top of that, they also showed transformational leadership attributes of individualized consideration, idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. They had trust and confidence in teachers, and they were sincere, fair and trustworthy. Through their communicative virtue and ability to shed their status and back away from power hierarchies, they were able to empower their teachers and forged a more dispersed and democratic form of leadership in schools. The findings seem to counter the claims of Hamid (1999).

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