(REVIEW ARTICLE)

Teachers' leadership in inclusive education in Johor Bahru, Malaysia

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Abstract

A strong foundation of teacher leadership is crucial in determining the effectiveness of inclusion practice in schools. The recent implementation of inclusive education in the educational settings has garnered a widespread attention by countries all over the world including Malaysia in 2010. The embracement of inclusive education concept is one of the effort in ensuring the equality and equity of education for all students. It gives students with special educational needs students' equal opportunities to advance academically and socially like students from regular classes. This study aimed to explore the challenges in teachers' leadership practices faced by Malaysian teachers in inclusive education settings and to study the strategy of teachers' leadership in inclusive education. This study addressed the challenges based on the Katzenmeyer and Moller's Teacher Leadership Model (2001). The study employed a qualitative method with case study design through face to face interviews with six (6) experienced teachers from two (2) public secondary schools. The instrument with semi-structured interview questions was used as an interview guide along with observation. The respondents of this study has been selected through non probability purposive sampling. The findings of the research had explored strategies and challenges of teacher leadership practice in depth and hopefully, the finding can be used as a reference to the teachers in inclusive education settings in Malaysia.

Keywords: Teacher Leadership; Inclusive education; School; Practice; Leaders

1. Introduction

The concept of teachers' leadership often offers insightful views towards the development of education system around the globe. The practice of teacher leadership functions as a vital feature in classroom management practice improvement especially surrounding teachers who are involved in teaching special needs students with learning disabilities (Ngang, 2012). In recent years, inclusive educations for students with learning disabilities have been gaining a widespread attention by countries all around the world. The inclusion of special needs students in the mainstream gave equal education opportunities for every child in Malaysia regardless of their learning difficulties or disabilities.

The adaptation on the policies of inclusive education grows rapidly in both developed and developing countries. Following the steps to ensure the equality and equity of education for all students, Malaysia began to embrace the concept of inclusive education in the mainstream classroom in 2010. The implementations of inclusive education demand a professional collaboration between general and special education pedagogues. Based on a study conducted on the challenges of co-teaching in the context of inclusive education in 2016, it was discovered that the educators, regardless of the field that they are involved, they need to possess a strong self-concept in implementing inclusive education. Rather than emphasising on their skills and knowledge in the subject, they had to place students' needs on the highest note. (Anuar & Rahim, 2016). Through a comprehensive understanding of teacher leadership, the teachers will be able to embed the appropriate approach in meeting the inclusive students' needs and achieve effective co-teaching methods.

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In 2001, Katzenmeyer and Moller had published a book titled *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders* which covered the discussion on the purpose of teacher as leaders and strengthening the relationship of teachers in school. In the book, Katzenmeyer had produced a survey named Teacher Leadership School Survey which assessed and brace the concept of teacher leadership as a role on the basis of seven dimensions. Based on their research towards on more than 5,000 teachers involved as teachers' leaders, they defined that teacher leadership is maintained by *developmental focus, recognition, autonomy, collegiality, participation, open communication* and *positive environment.* The development of these seven teacher leadership dimension reflects the result of study by Katzenmeyer and Moller where it portrays that teacher leaders hold the elements of possible teacher leaders in terms of capability, reliability and accessibility

According to a study by Smith in 2010, she discovered three major extensive strategies which were believed to encourage the teachers who partook in the practice of teacher leadership to be able to retain the multiplicity of their current role with the responsibility as teacher leaders, recognizes the opinions and needs of practicing teachers and constant support towards the process of teachers' inclination to blend with different circles. The first strategy indicated the act of viewing every teachers as possessing leadership traits regardless the differences in the aspects of age, gender, capabilities, race, culture and spoken languages. Second strategy highlighted the significance of acknowledging teachers' passion, observing the teachers from different perspective and encouraging the teachers to take up the role as teacher leaders (Smith, 2010). The third strategy encompasses the aspect of encouraging teachers to socialize with several different circles (Smith, 2010). Through this, the teachers will be able to influence the teacher-peers on their capabilities as teacher leaders hence gaining the support needed from them.

A study which compares teacher leadership in special needs school between China and Malaysia suggested that when the concept of teacher leadership is nurtured, it will eventually improve sharing of knowledge and skills between teachers which leads to increase in understandings on their roles. Hence, it will strengthen the schools' foundations (Ngang, 2012). Teachers can be considered as the primary leaders in ensuring the effectiveness of inclusion program in each school as they are the frontline for any new education policy implementations.

The newly refined curriculum system in Malaysia was officially introduces by Malaysia former Educational Minister, Datuk Muhyiddin Yassin in 2010 under the plan of 'transformational new scheme of education system'. As defined in the Blueprint that in order for the transformation of Malaysian education structure to be effectual and viable, every individual need to genuinely grasp the importance of it. Studies on teacher leadership practices in inclusive education represents a growing field as it shows a continuing concern in the development of Malaysia inclusive education system. Align with the government implementation of this system in 2010, understanding the complexity of challenges embed in the process of implementing teacher leadership practices in inclusive education is vitally important in determining the effectiveness of the system. Through this study, the government will be able to establish a new perspective in this and help in constructing a plan to improve teacher leadership practices specifically in inclusive education settings in Malaysia.

It is crucial for educational leaders in official positions who holds authorities to maintain their responsibilities in constructing and enhancing the leadership skills amongst teachers who needs to collaborate in teaching inclusive education students.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology with a case study design. The selected samples has been be made up of the following respondents; experienced teachers in mainstream and special education classroom who were involved in inclusive education settings– six secondary school special education teachers in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. This study has been conducted at two public secondary school and had been selected based on the availability of inclusive education programme. Data was collected through interviews and observations. The semi structured interview questions were primarily based on the adaptation of a study by Katzenmeyer & Moller in 2001, Teacher Leadership School Survey by Katzenmeyer & Moller in 2001. The respondents of the study had undergone the interview session individually with a sufficient amount of information obtained in each individual interview (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Through observations, teachers' behaviours, teaching methods and actions had been closely viewed. All interviews data were collected by tape recording with the consent of all participants, and then analyzed through several stages of coding, categorization, cross-analysis and interpretation using N-VIVO12.

3. Findings

The findings of the study presented and discussed in the following sub-sections are based on themes that emerge from the interviews conducted. This part of the study condenses the themes found in the participants' interviews and corroborated by the observations in the classroom and the school compound. Various strategies were found used by teachers for practicing the seven elements of Teacher leadership suggested by Katzenmeyer & Moller, (2001). Each of the components had three to five strategies found across the data sources, one-on- one interviews, and observation. According to Katzenmeyer & Moller, (2001), the teacher leadership is maintained by seven dimensions, such as developmental focus, recognition, autonomy, collegiality, participation, open communication and positive environment. The findings of the study showed a total of 26 strategies were found in the interviews findings and corroborated by observations. Teacher leadership in an inclusive education setting plays a very important role in creating a supportive learning environment for all students, including those with diverse learning needs.

3.1. Developmental Focus

The first dimension *developmental focus* emphasizes nurturing the leadership potential of educators and supporting their growth as leaders within the educational context. It involves providing opportunities, resources, and guidance for teachers to enhance their leadership skills and make a positive impact on their schools, colleagues, and students. There are five (5) strategies of teacher leadership with a developmental focus dimension: *leadership training and workshops, mentorship program, implement collaborative culture, Action Research and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).*

3.2. Recognition

The second dimension of teacher leadership, *recognition* states teachers receive recognition for their influences and roles on students, teachers' colleagues and the school institute. By being recognized by teachers and other leaders shows the significance and appreciation towards their capabilities, knowledge and their contributions (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). There are three (3) strategies used in the study for the dimension of recognition, such as *public acknowledgment, peer recognition and provide tokens of appreciation.*

3.3. Autonomy

An *autonomy* is the third dimension of Teacher Leadership which portrays the acknowledgement of teachers on their effort of becoming dynamic partakers in establishing outlooks for the school system (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). The autonomy dimension of teacher leadership highlights the recognition and acknowledgment of teachers' efforts and contributions to the development and improvement of the school system. From the finding, there are four (4) strategies for promoting the autonomy dimension in teacher leadership in the inclusive schools, *Teacher Led Decision Making, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and Flexible Classroom Practices*.

3.4. Collegiality

The fourth dimension is promoting *collegiality* among teachers, which is vital for effective teacher leadership. From the finding, it shown four (4) important strategies focused specifically on the collegiality dimension for teacher leadership. The themes that emerged in the interviews include conducting *Teacher-Led Action Research, create a peer collaboration, organise professional development workshops and implement collaborative culture.*

3.5. Participation

Participation is the fifth dimension of Teacher Leadership which focuses on the activeness of teachers' involvement in school towards process of decision making. The teachers are seen to be handling significant matters in school whilst the leaders search for different viewpoints from the teachers to come out with the best decision (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). From the finding, it shown three (3) important strategies focused specifically on participation for teacher leadership. The themes emerged in teachers' responses concerning *teacher-led focus groups, brainstorming and problem-solving session and collaborative decision-making workshops*.

3.6. Open Communication

The sixth dimension is *open communication* of teacher leadership which emphasizes the importance of transparent and effective communication among teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders within a school community. This dimension focuses on fostering an environment where information is shared, ideas are exchanged freely, and feedback is encouraged. The interview questions aimed to obtain the strategies used when the teacher leaders implement an open communication. From the study, the common four (4) themes in the participants' responses included *open and*

transparent communication channels, regular meetings, a think tank or a collaborative decision-making teams and feedback from teachers.

3.7. Positive Environment

Creating a *positive environment* in teacher leadership is the last dimension which is essential for fostering collaboration, enhancing professional growth, and improving student outcomes. A positive environment helps teachers feel valued, supported, and motivated to contribute their best to the school community. From the findings, there are common themes in the participants' responses on three (3) important strategies to promote a positive environment in teacher leadership included *a clear expectations and roles, supportive professional development and effective communication.*

Based on the research findings from the interviews and observations that have been made among the participants of this case study, some sub-themes related to the challenges faced by inclusive education teachers in the practice of teacher leadership, such as *lack of training and professional development, lack of resources and support, large class size, negative attitude of colleagues, parents and students and lack of cooperation from administrators, special education teachers, therapists and other professionals.*

4. Conclusion

The study's result has made a significant contribution to various stakeholders, particularly the teachers and schools in Johor Bahru. This study's result and findings could also be a vital source of reference to the school in Malaysia to strengthen teachers' teacher leadership behavior and its application in classroom setting. Furthermore, as this study is not generalized to other public or private schools in Johor or other states in Malaysia. The researcher expects the finding of the study can be considered by the teachers that wish to upgrade teachers' performance in leading other teachers in schools, especially the inclusive school. Consequently, it is hoped that the study's findings will be a part of the body of knowledge related to the Teacher Leadership and provide benefits to the school teachers, headmasters, principals, and the officers who work in educational sectors.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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