HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS AS TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERS IN SCHOOLS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the inherent issues and challenges that heads of departments face in their daily responsibilities as transformational leaders in schools. Moreover the purpose of this research was to identify the relevant policies and strategies that heads of departments use in dealing with the issues and challenges. This study used a mixed method approach to collect qualitative and quantitative data. In order to know deeply about the issues and challenges facing by the heads of departments, interviews were carried out with five heads of departments in 5 different Chinese primary schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Quantitative method also was used to support the findings from qualitative data. Accordingly, a survey questionnaire was distributed to the sample of 100 Chinese primary school heads of departments randomly. As for the strategies used to overcome the issues and challenges of being a transformational leader, both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to answer the research questions accordingly. Findings of this research indicate that the main issues and challenges facing the heads of departments in schools are categorized as: Administration, teachers, students, and parents. The outcome of this study can be beneficial for the schools' heads of departments to overcome the issues regarding their daily responsibilities in schools.

Keyword: **Transformational leadership, Heads of departments, Issues and challenges, Education, Malaysia**

INTRODUCTION

Education is the most important element of any country's development and success. Similarly, in Malaysia for the purpose of progress and the ability of the country in dealing with the challenges of globalization, the main intention of the Ministry of Education is to ensure that the education system is transforming according to the demands of national development.

Malaysia has a centralized education system; hence, any transformation, policy making decisions and overall direction of the country's education is designated by the Ministry of Education, and schools across the country are responsible for implementing the policies that have been planned. Therefore, successful educational policy implementation depends on the effectiveness of leadership among principals and Heads of department in schools and educational institutions across the country.

The Government has taken various measures in order to improve the quality of education toward achieving the national goal of making Malaysia a centre for academic excellence in the Asian region in the 21st century. This is because quality education is the key element in human resource development of the country, specifically to achieve the dream of transforming Malaysia into a developed nation by 2020 as recommended by former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad at the Malaysian Business Council on February 28, 1991. Accordingly, announcement of the Education Development Master Plan (PIPP 2006 to 2010) by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdullah Bin Haji Ahmad Badawi in 2007 was intended to provide wide-area access, enhance equity and ensure quality education is enjoyed by all the Malaysians.

The launch of the Sixth National Key Result Area (NKRA) by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak in Putrajaya (July 27, 2009) remained the priorities in the field of quality education. Later, in October 2011, the Ministry of Education launched a comprehensive review of the education system in Malaysia in order to develop a new National Education Blueprint. In the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MoE, 2013), the Ministry of Education has identified 11 shifts that needed to be delivered as the steps to achieve the outcomes envisioned by all Malaysians. The fifth shift is to ensure high-performing school leaders in every school. One of the focused areas is to fully prepare principals, assistant principals, heads of departments and subject heads to utilize the decision-making flexibility accorded to them. This includes instructional leadership issues such as school improvement planning, curriculum and co-curricular planning, as well as administrative leadership issues such as allocation of school funds. The primary school evaluation system is also undergoing a tremendous change whereby the Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR) will be implemented fully in 2016, where Year Six students will no longer be evaluated based on their Primary School achievement Test (UPSR) results, but from their overall performance and classroom participation. All these, shows the government's effort and commitment to the education sector as the top priority for national transformation and development.

Certainly, the important role of school leadership in transforming schools into quality institutions through implementation of the new educational policies cannot be denied. According to Southworth (2008), there have been some changes in the role and responsibilities of primary schools leadership which make the heads of department as acting principal in the school. In this regard, the heads of

departments can be considered as the key person to run the school in situation when the principal is absent.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In Malaysia, the heads of departments are responsible for reporting to the headmaster about the current issues and challenges happening in the school. Moreover, they are also responsible for routine jobs in their department such as teaching, examining and operational administrative work. Overall, there are four Heads of departments in every Malaysian public primary school including; Head of Curriculum, Head of Pupils' Affairs, Head of Co-curriculum, and Afternoon Session Supervisor.

The main duties of the head of curriculum are in operating the marking policies, assessment of the students, teaching and learning strategies in the department; staff development; quality assurance; information management; coordination between subject teachers and teachers, and teaching in the class for 12 hours per week.

In contrast, the Head of Pupils' Affairs, develops, implements, and directs all pupils' services, activities and programs. He or she works with the school principal to develop and implement policies and procedures. In addition, the head of department also oversees and directs administrative support for pupils' welfare activities such as: orientation, pupils' recognition, non-academic pupils advising, pupils' satisfaction strategies and school discipline. He or she also needs to teach 12 hours in the classroom weekly.

The Head of Co-curriculum plays a major role in the school's development, with particular responsibility for the co-curriculum. He or she gives strategic vision, direction and clarity to the full co-curricular program. This means the planning and timetabling of the co-curriculum, and the quality and monitoring of students' involvement, are paramount. The related activities are: Annual Sports Day, Weekly school co-curriculum activity and school events such as Teacher's Day and Children's Day. The Head of Co-curriculum is also required to teach 12 hours in the classroom per week.

Not every school has an Afternoon Session Supervisor; undoubtedly it depends on the school size. Normally, the duty of Afternoon Session Supervisor is a combination of the responsibilities of the Head of Curriculum and Head of Pupils' Affairs. Lastly, he or she is also needed to carry out 12 hours of lessons in the classroom every week.

Based on the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MoE, 2013), one of the highlights is to establish a peer-led culture of excellence and certification process. In school leadership, there should emerge shared leadership, increased staff support and new leadership models and structures. Therefore, middle leadership in primary schools should be marked in the transition toward this goal.

The Ministry of Education implements a comprehensive transformation program under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 for the education system such as Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR), "Standards-Based Assessment" (SBA), and so forth which will allow it to meet the new demands and the rising expectations.

There are many changes and challenges in the current Malaysian education system. The school leaders try hard and give their best efforts in order to improve the school's performance, quality and efficiency. The expectation for success is high, not only for the pupils but also for teachers, parents, and school stakeholders and local community. Thus, the school leaders need to have a clear vision and suitable strategies for the school's development (MoE, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational Leadership and its Key Role in Schools

School leaders play a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the school climate and environment. In this regard, an effective school leadership is essential to improve the efficiency and equity of schooling (Education & Training Policy Division 2008).

According to Avolio et al. (2004), transformational leadership refers to the effective leaders who are able to inspire their followers or subordinates and try to nurture their capability to achieve organizational goals. Bass (1998) described transformational leadership as occurring when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the group purposes and mission, and when they stir employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group (p. 21). In this regard, transformational leaders identify the needs of potential followers and try their best to fulfil the needs in the most beneficial ways for the followers. Besides, the leaders are also trying to identify the followers' potential motives, in order to fulfil higher needs and appoint the person to a position. The final aim of the leader is to turn the followers into leaders and moral agents (Yukl, 2010).

The hypothesis related to transformational leadership as suggested by Bass (1985) was additional effort and higher productivity that could be achieved by enhanced capacities and increased commitment. However, those who have the authority and influence are not necessarily the ones who hold official administrative positions. With the ability to inspire the others, they are able to gain shared achievements while pursuing personal and organizational goals. So, for a complex situation, a powerful person with an obligation is willing to agree as a follower under a leader, a group or an organization. It means transcending one's self-interest (Kowalski & Oates, 1993); throughout the process, the required leadership included charismatic leadership, intellectual simulation and individualized consideration (Bass, 1997).

An empirical study by House et al. (2004) shows the importance of the transformational leadership internationally. The keywords are "inspirational", "proactive", "endeavourers", "confidence builder", "dynamic", "result-oriented" and "vision". Leithwood et al. (1999) also proposed a similar idea about the seven dimensions of transformational leadership: setting school vision and goals, giving intellectual stimulation; providing individualized support; modelling the best practices and organizational values; demonstrating high performance expectation; establishing productive culture; and developing structures to encourage staff involvement in school decision making (p. 9). Because of these dimensions, transformational leadership relates to the ideas of empowerment, shared leadership, follower involvement and organizational learning (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 1999).

Similarly, in Malaysian schools, transformational leadership is essential to energize and bring dynamism to schools. School leadership has a vital role in nurturing professional growth and implementing effective leadership in the schools (Mohammad Sani et al., 2013). For school leaders, formulating a clear and appropriate vision that can invigorate teachers and motivate students is the key to success. Moreover, effective and dynamic leadership can influence the level of teacher commitment towards organizational performance (Sharifah, 2012).

Transformational Leadership Role of Departments' Heads in Schools

The departments' heads in schools are considered as ideal leaders of the curriculum due to their duties, responsibilities and roles in the school. Moreover, they are seen as the bridge to connect the head teachers and teachers; raise staff morale; organize resources; and ensure the continuity of the school curriculum development (Southworth, 2008).

However, a school department's head retains the legitimacy, reliability and personal ability to combine the features of the curriculum and the teachers involved in its implementation. The successful leaders care about the content of the syllabus as much as the people who make it work. Furthermore, an effective leadership could be seen if the subordinates could complete the tasks collegially and harmoniously (Pollard et al., 1994, p. 69).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are:

- To identify the issues and challenges facing the heads of departments in Chinese primary schools in Kuala Lumpur.

- To identify the strategies to overcome the issues and challenges facing the heads of departments in Chinese primary schools in Kuala Lumpur.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this research, mixed method approach including qualitative and quantitative methodology was used to collect and analyze the data. To answer research question 1, the researchers used qualitative methodology to identify the issues and challenges faced by the schools' heads of departments. Accordingly, interview protocol was used to collect in-depth information on the current issues and challenges. Besides, interview approach was also helpful to find the strategies to overcome the issues and challenges. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative research design is used by researchers to gain in-depth knowledge in a study. Marshall and Rosman (2006) also supported this statement by saying that qualitative is an ethnographic research design in collecting data. Creswell

(2012) described ethnographic design as qualitative research procedures to describe analysis and interpret a culture sharing of a group in shared patterns of behaviour, beliefs and language that develop over time. Therefore, by using in-depth interviews the researchers were able to explore the opinion of the heads of departments.

To answer research question 2 both qualitative and quantitative analyses were used to identify the strategies to overcome the issues and challenges faced by the departments' heads. Therefore, questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data and interviews were used to provide qualitative insights from the data collected. The questionnaires were used by researchers to identify the strategies to overcome the issues and challenges. Quantitative method involved analysis using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistic is quantitative discipline that describes the main features of collected data (Creswell, 2012).

Population and Sampling

The target population of this study was all heads of departments in Chinese primary schools in Kuala Lumpur. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed randomly to heads of department in all primary schools in Kuala Lumpur as the sample for the quantitative part of the study. For the qualitative part, data were collected through interviews with 5 heads of departments from five different Chinese primary schools in Kuala Lumpur. The rationale for the interviews was to assess their transformational leadership strategies to overcome the issues and challenges. The 5 respondents were chosen by using purposive sampling method. Two of the interviewees were the heads of department of curriculum from 2 different schools, which one of them was from a cluster school. The other one was the head of Pupils' Affairs from another school. And the other two interviewees were the heads of department of co-curriculum from different schools.

Instrument

To identify the issues and challenges faced by heads of departments in schools, 10 questions were designed as the interview protocol to be asked from the participants through the interview sessions. The questions also identified the strategies to overcome the issues and challenges that they are facing. For the quantitative part, the questionnaire consists of 40 items. It was distributed and respondents were asked to indicate their responses to the extent which they agree with the statement using a Likert Scale that ranging from 1 to 4, where 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 =Agree; 4 = Strongly Agree. Respondents had opportunity to express their views on strategies to overcome the issues and challenges that happened in their school.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

In this research, data were collected by using repertory grid technique through interview method. Kerkhof (2002) described repertory grid technique as a semi-structured interview by phone, face to face or computerized. The advantage is that the respondents are confronted with a triad of elements and then asked to specify some important way. Data in this research were collected by procedures. First, researchers made appointment to the participants on a convenient date and at a convenient time. Each interview session lasted 40-60 minutes.

After collecting data, researchers had to analyze the data. One of the techniques was content analysis, which aimed at analyzing similar data on a topic and commenting on it (Mayring, 2000). Another technique was the constant comparative approach. Accordingly, each set of the data collected (interview transcripts) was reviewed in search of key issues, recurrent events or activities in the data that became categories of focus (Glaser, 1992). In this research, the 5 respondents were coded as interviewee 1 to interviewee 5. The data collected from the respondents was listened to repeatedly and transcribed. Then, the researchers reviewed the data multiple times to organize into categories for addressing the research question.

The data collected from questionnaires was tested by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. Researchers tested the frequency of the data collected to identify the strategies to overcome the issues and challenges that the heads of departments faced.

FINDINGS

Issues and Challenges Facing School's Heads of Departments as Transformational Leaders

The result of the interviews with the 5 heads of departments from different Chinese schools in Kuala Lumpur revealed that the educational field nowadays is full of challenges and they are facing many issues and challenges in schools. As the middle leaders in school, they are trying very hard to transform their school into a better one. The research shows that all the heads of departments have the same vision which is achieving the goal of "High Performance School" in the near future. One of the interviewees emphasized that:

> *"The goal of our school is to become a "High Performance School". High performance doesn't only mean good result, what we emphasize more is the morality of the students. I hope that all students will implement the learning outcomes of "di zi gui" (a set of moral values derived from Chinese culture).*

Similarly, another interviewee who is the head of department of curriculum of a cluster school clarified that their management is well established but she hopes to keep the existing performance up and even go beyond from what they have achieved. Another one who is the head of department of Co-curriculum hopes to "*produce the next generation of students who are not only good in academic studies but also excellent in co-curriculum.*"

In the process of pursuing these goals, all the heads of departments play their role as transformational leaders. However, the issues and challenges which happen during their daily management are beyond their control. Therefore, they have to think of multiple solutions to solve them. Appropriate strategies are needed to be used to change or improve the situation. This study found that the issues and challenges facing heads of departments in Chinese primary schools can be divided in five main categories as shown in the following Figure 1.
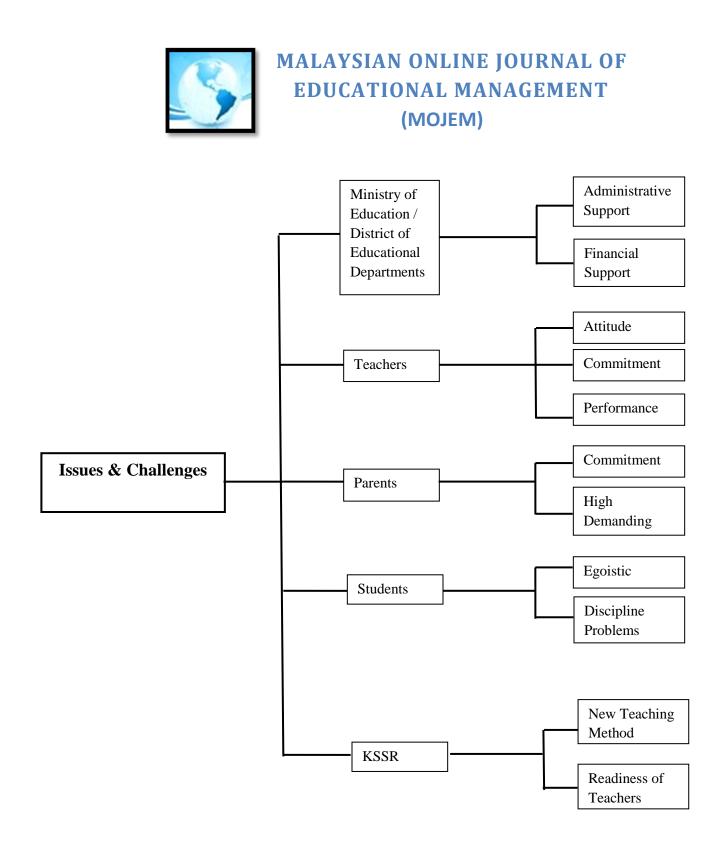
Figure 1. Issues and challenges faced by heads of departments as transformational leaders

Ministry of Education / District Education Departments

Schools should follow the instruction from the Ministry of Education and the district education departments. The heads of departments always try their best to meet the requirement of the Ministry of Education or the district education departments. However, lack of administrative support from these departments brings issues and challenges to the school management. It affects the smoothness of the school management and the school performance. One of the interviewees who is an experienced head of department said:

> *"We expect good coordination between school and district education departments. I understand the daily tasks of district education departments are challenging but from the school's perspective, we need more administrative support from them. For example, sometimes we only get to know a few hours before that we have to attend a meeting; and furthermore, we need to hand in some reports. So, the related head of department or teachers have to rush it out. Sometimes, due to time constraint, we couldn't meet the requirement".*

She added:

> *"Another issue is, sometimes teachers are asked to attend courses during holidays but we didn't get to know earlier. As a result, the correct person may have gone back to their hometown and we can only send whoever is available. This decision could have serious consequences where the skills or knowledge might not be conveyed correctly. School performance will be affected".*

In addition, she emphasized:

> *"As a head of department in curriculum, I face problems when the district education department is slow in sending us teachers. Teachers may ask for transfer to teach in another school every year. New teachers will come to our school. We face problems because we will only get to know who are actually coming to our school when the new semester is almost going to commence. My task of arranging the timetable for all teachers and students couldn't be delayed….. and when new teachers come, I don't know their strength and may assign them the wrong tasks. I understand that placing teachers is a complicated and challenging task for Ministry of education, so I always seek for alternative ways to solve it temporarily so that my management task can be carried out smoothly".*

Besides the above mentioned issues and challenges faced by the heads of departments, the Ministry of Education or the district education departments sometimes assigns teachers with plenty of paperwork. The paperwork such as writing reports of all kinds of activities has burdened the teachers whereas the real implementation of the teaching activities is not emphasized. As a result, teachers allocate more time to doing paperwork than preparing teaching aids. In the long run, it affects the learning process of students.

"Reports….reports….paperwork! … Teachers are trained to teach not to do paperwork. I keep receiving complaint from teachers. Teachers are not specialized in writing reports, they don't have such skill, therefore reports written are not standardized and not of good quality".

This study found that the job scope of teachers is not specific enough. Additional posts can be created ad hoc. In fact, teachers do not specialize in all fields. The heads of departments face difficulties in arranging teachers' tasks when there are not enough teachers to teach certain subjects. The department of human resource development in the Ministry of Education and the district education departments have to take this issue into consideration in order to train sufficient teachers in certain fields or subjects lacking in teachers. This is important because when teachers keep doing the job which is not related to teaching or not related to their subjects, they would lose interest in teaching. One of the interviewees mentioned:

"There are some created posts like Multimedia Teacher, Asset Management Teacher which are not directly related to teaching. We are also facing problem regarding the lack of specialized subject teachers. A teacher who is specialized in teaching Mathematic may have to teach Physical Education due to a shortage of PE teachers in school".

In-depth analysis revealed that financial issue is another challenging part of Chinese primary schools. Most of the Chinese primary schools need to organize fund-raising campaigns in order to upgrade their buildings or school facilities such as computer software. Central government allocation of funding is available but most of the time it is still insufficient for the school. As one of the interviewees said:

"We would be very grateful if we could get more allocation of money from the government as this could help to solve our school financial problem. We don't need to organize fund-raising dinner almost every year just to collect money from the parents. Fund-raising campaign is very tiring and it takes time and effort to organize. It makes us exhausted".

Teachers

Teachers play an important role in the educational system. They are the key persons to carry out the teaching and develop the young generation. Therefore, the teachers' attitude, commitment and performance are the main concern in school. According to the interviews, the heads of department are satisfied with their teachers' performance overall but each school has a few problematic teachers who always take leave, are late to school or try to shirk their responsibilities. These bad attitudes create an unhealthy working environment and affect the students' learning process. This is a big challenge to the department heads because changing teachers' attitude is not easy. It takes time to influence them and change their mind set. One of the interviewees voiced out that these teachers take things for granted because they know that the head of department is not empowered to punish them. She said: *"……we as*

the school management are not given autonomy to fire the related teachers. What we can do is only to write a report or give warnings."

Poor interpersonal relation between teachers is another challenge for the heads of departments. Dealing with people is not easy; nor is creating collegiality among colleagues. A harmonious working environment needs the collaboration among teachers and this is what some of the schools are lacking. Without collaboration, collective learning would not happen and therefore building a professional learning community is impossible. The opinion from one of the interviewees shows the existence of this issue in the school:

> *"As a head of department in curriculum, the most challenging part for me is to deal with the interpersonal relation between teachers. If teachers are able to work collaboratively, a harmonious working environment can be created".*

Teacher commitment is the key to successful school performance and student learning. However, some of the teachers refuse to work overtime or bring students out for competitions during weekends. This is also another challenge for the heads of department to allocate the human resource wisely. The issue of teacher burnout is derived from this situation where it needs to be considered by the department heads.

The results of this study show that the heads of departments are also facing the challenge of teachers' performance. The policy of changing the syllabus in primary school from *KBSR (Integrated Curriculum for Primary School)* to *KSSR (Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools)* requires teachers to teach creatively in order to inspire the thinking of students. Thus, teachers need to change so that they are able to perform well in their class. It becomes an issue because some of the senior teachers refuse to change and they are still using the old methods to teach. Therefore, their performance does not meet the requirement of the head of department. This is a new challenge in primary schools where one of the interviewees said:

> *"The teachers must be aware of the direction that they are heading. The old teachers and the senior teachers use the old techniques in teaching. We try to let them know that they have to change especially in the KSSR which is different from KBSR. They have to improve their teaching skills by using the new methods".*

Teachers form the most important group in building up education for the next generation and yet the issues and challenges also come from teachers. Therefore, the heads of department should exercise their transformational leadership skills to overcome all these issues and challenges.

Parents

Parents are the important stakeholders in school. Schools need cooperation from parents to ensure smooth management. Lack of commitment from parents to support the school activities is one of the reasons for ineffective school performance. One of the interviewees mentioned: *"Sometimes, we have campaign of basketball and may require students to stay two to three days in school, parents are not supportive."*

This study found that some parents always complain to the school over little things and sometimes over matters unrelated to school. The sometimes unreasonable demands from parents disturb the smooth management of the school. As mentioned by one of the interviewees:

> *"The parents are high demanding and like to compare their children with other children. They come to school to complain about even some inconsequential things and want the school to help them up".*

The workload of a head of department is very heavy. They are not only doing the management tasks, they are also teaching. They need to teach and mark exercises of students as well. Solving problems coming from parents is another challenge for them; however they have no choice but to entertain the parents.

Students

Nurturing students is a sacred job. However, the issues and challenges brought up by students are troublesome to the heads of departments. One of the interviewees said:

> *"Our kids are not easy to deal with. Most of them are egoistic because they are pampered by their parents. Children nowadays don't know how to get along with others. They sometimes create discipline problems due to poor communication skills".*

Every student has his or her own characteristics and should be dealt with in different ways. The heads of departments need to allocate more time to solve the students' problems.

Implication of Syllabus Change in Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR)

The Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR) has been implemented since 2011. This curriculum requires creative teaching rather than using the old method of "chalk and talk". It is an important issue where many teachers are still not ready to change their way of teaching. Therefore, heads of departments have to think of the solutions. This issue even happens in the Cluster school where their head of department said:

> *"Most of the old teachers and the senior teachers are still using the old techniques in teaching. We make them know that they have to change especially in teaching the KSSR as it is different from KBSR. They have to improve their teaching skill by using the new methods. However, these teachers just refuse to learn new things".*

The other head of department argued that the information technology system is not yet ready to support the online system. As a result, the online system has been changed to offline system and it will start being implemented in 2014. This situation creates confusion among teachers and the school

management where the task of evaluating students comes in two different ways. She added:

> *"Nowadays, the syllabus has changed to KSSR which requires new method of teaching to inspire students. This kind of change is good but again it requires a lot of paperwork. Student performance is school based and teachers have to jot down the grade of evaluation in order to key-in in the online system. The IT system is not ready to support, therefore it will be changed to offline system again in 2014".*

STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Teachers

Dealing with adults is different from dealing with children. To change the attitudes and gain commitment from teachers is definitely not an easy job. According to one of the interviewees, positive thinking and providing social support are the useful ways to win the teachers' heart. She said:

> *"I think positively even though I know that my job is not an easy task… I try to listen to teachers…..I try to understand their problems. They respect me and change their attitude slowly".*

Moreover, the interviewees emphasized that if the attitude of the teachers turns good, they will give more commitment in their teaching and doing the school tasks.

Dealing with the interpersonal relation between teachers is very complicated. However, the heads of departments have to think of the solutions to improve collegiality among colleagues. Use of different ways to deal with teachers, respecting each other and sharing decision making are the strategies of one of the interviewees, as she said:

> *"The effectiveness and efficiency of management is very much dependent on the cooperation of teachers. I use different ways to deal with the teachers, talk and share opinion, decision making with them, inspire them to be leaders as well".*

This study found that teachers' performance is always the main concern of the school, pupils and parents. So, the head of department is the key person to transform the teachers to be excellent in teaching. The heads of departments play an important role in encouraging teachers to upgrade themselves. Many strategies have been implemented to improve teachers' performance. Providing in house training and overseas training in Taiwan and China is one of the appropriate strategies for improving teachers' performance. It is useful to inspire teachers' thinking. This program is well planned in some of the schools. Some interviewees mentioned:

"For this part, our school has been doing it all the time. We always arrange courses like in-house training for teachers. Besides, we are trying very hard to enhance teachers' professional growth by bringing them out of school to visit other schools. For example, we brought all the teachers to Nanyang Primary School in Singapore last year. This is an eye-opening trip for teachers. Teachers can learn something good from the advanced school".

Another interviewee stated that :

"We have a lot of programs like in-house training, service training or overseas training for teachers. Sometimes we send them to Taiwan or China to improve their teaching skills. The teachers will also choose the subjects they are interested in and try to join the related courses to upgrade themselves. As for the school part, we will try to help them   and we are very happy to see those teachers who are willing to improve".

As from the perspective of co-curriculum, one of the interviewees had a different point of view. He encourages teachers to attend training and learn new things whenever teachers are given the opportunity to interact with others. He said:

"I send the related teachers to attend training so that they know the competitions' rules clearly…I encourage teachers to learn anything which is new and helpful. I ask them to observe and learn from other school when they bring students out to participate in any competitions".

Besides encouraging teachers to learn something new from people to upgrade, the head of department acts as the role model to learn as well. They attended courses whenever there is opportunity. Two interviewees shared the same opinions as follow:

"I grab the chance whenever there is an opportunity for me to visit other schools especially in Taiwan or China. From there, I learn new things and apply them in my management...Walking out of the school to interact with people is very important".

"We also visit schools in Taiwan and China. One of the primary schools in Hangzhou, China is our "sister school". Through this program, we learn new techniques of management and technology skills, we exchange ideas as well. We try to bring back what we have learnt and apply it in our school".

The actual action to encourage and motivate teachers to improve their professional growth is to give financial and resources support. One of the interviewees mentioned that as the head of department, she supports the professional growth of teachers by helping them to ask for subsidies from the Parents Teachers Association. This is the effort of a head of department who always tries to improve teachers' performance. She added:

"We always encourage teachers to upgrade themselves by joining courses outside. As long as the courses are useful in the current practices, we will surely support and encourage. The school management will try to ask subsidies from the Parents Teachers Association".

One of the interviewees has another strategy to motivate teachers. In her opinion, proposing teachers in getting incentive from the government is an effective way to motivate them to work harder. In addition, teachers can also be motivated by offering them overseas trips. She said:

"To motivate them, we will propose a few teachers to get the Anugerah Perkhidmatan Cemerlang *(The Excellent Service Award) offered by the Ministry of Education. The school sometimes offers overseas trip to teachers to motivate them so that they are close to school, close to each other between colleagues and staff".*

Apart from providing subsidies and proposing teachers to get incentives, one interviewee has the opinion that working together with teacher as a team is the most effective way of motivating teachers. She mentioned that, *"I think, working together with teachers as a team is the best way to motivate them".*

Regarding the issues and challenges that some of the old and senior teachers are still using the old method to teach, observation is carried out by the heads of department to understand the problems of the teacher and suggestion is also given where the related teachers are suggested to observe the high performance teachers as they teach. This is another way to improve teachers' teaching skills and cultivate the learning environment in school. One of the interviewees said:

"If we are not satisfied with the teachers' performance, we will talk to them; encourage them to observe the senior teachers or the guru cemerlang (high performance teacher)".

Collective learning is essential for improving teacher performance. The heads of department have the responsibility to cultivate the culture of learning together. When learning among teachers has become a culture, all the issues and challenges regarding teaching will be dissolved. The following are the strategies used by one of the interviewees to overcome the issues and challenges of teachers' performance.

"In order to ensure teachers having a supportive learning environment, we provide a conducive room for them to discuss teaching activities together. We want to cultivate the culture of learning together between teachers."

This study found that building a Professional Learning Community for teachers is a key strategy to improve teachers' skills and knowledge in all fields.

Students and Parents

The strategy used to deal with the high demanding parents is to talk and discuss sincerely with them. Communication skill is very important to make parents understand the stand of the school. One of the interviewees said: *"Usually, we talk and explain to parents. If the problem is regarding the school, we will try to help but if it's out of the range, we will just not interfere".*

When parents are convinced, the issues are solved. Furthermore, the head of department may gain respect from parents. When this happens, they will be willing to give commitment to school. It is about the same way of dealing with the issues and challenges of the students where the head of department has the opinion that communicating well and understanding the root of the problems are important. Counselling does provide help but it depends on the situation. One interviewee said:

> *"Regarding the challenges from students, we will look at their problems seriously. After knowing the root of the problems, we will try to advise them. If there is necessity, we will send them for counselling".*

School is a place to nurture students. Therefore, the heads of departments are willing to design and teach the Moral class once a week. The main purpose of the class is to transform the students from bad to good. This is proved whereby one of the Interviewees mentioned:

> *"Our school has started Moral Classes on every Friday for students and parents. The purpose of this class is to nurture students to change their bad attitudes. The principal and all the heads of departments are the masters in these classes".*

Being dedicated and understanding the students are the best way to overcome the issues and challenges of children.

Besides using the qualitative method, quantitative method is also used to see the appropriate strategies to overcome the issues and challenges faced by heads of department. Table 1 gives the result of the quantitative research; it shows the frequency of the strategies used by the head of departments.

Table 1

Frequency of Questions Showing Strategies Used by Heads of Departments

	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q9	Q11	Q12	Q15	Q16	Q18	Q20	Q21	Q22
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
Disagree	4	4	5	9	3	5	5	5	6	2	5	4	4
Agree	21	35	25	25	23	12	22	31	25	23	19	30	32
Strongly Agree	25	11	20	16	24	32	23	14	15	25	26	16	14
Total	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50

Strategies used by the head of department to overcome the issues and challenges:

Q2: I help others with their self-development.
Q3: I help others to understand my visions through the use of images, stories, models.
Q4: I ensure others get recognition and/or rewards when they reach their goals.
Q5: I let others work in the manner that they want.
Q9: I use simple words to convey to others what we should or could be doing.
Q11: I give direction or guidance to others.
Q12: I consistently provide coaching and feedback so that my team members know how they are doing.
Q15: I help others with new ways of looking at new and complex ideas or concepts.
Q16: I ensure poor performers get unpunished
Q18: I closely monitor all projects that I am in charge of.
Q20: I always encourage teachers to express their ideas and opinions.
Q21: I set a vision and future direction for teachers.
Q22: I give personal attention to teachers who look neglected, are lonely and keep away from others.

The data from Table 1 shows that most of the respondents choose agree and strongly agree for the statements. They used all the strategies stated to overcome the issues and challenges in school. Q11 has the highest frequency among the strategies. This statement shows the highest mean. As transformational leaders, the heads of departments should give direction or guidance to teachers, staff members or students in school. If a teacher is unclear about her school tasks, the head of department should explain to the teacher so that the teacher knows the problem and is able to solve it immediately. Besides, the heads of departments should clarify the vision to all the members of the school. Then, heads of departments should guide everyone to achieve the school vision.

From this finding, the differences between the outcomes of quantitative and qualitative methods can be seen. Quantitative research is more rigid where all answers are being set but comparison can be made between answers through frequency, percentage, mean, and crosstabs to see which strategy is the most popular. This is the advantage of using quantitative method whereby qualitative method could not get the same outcome because it has fewer respondents. Nevertheless, qualitative method is useful to know the perception of each respondent such as *what are the issues and challenges faced by the head of department.* Every respondent may face different issues and challenges. Therefore, mixed method was more appropriate to use in this research.

DISCUSSION

According to Cranston, Tromans, and Reugebrink (2004), the challenges faced by the head of department are feeling strain to apply the new policies; problematic students with undesirable attitude, demanding parents with varied complaints; the new principal takes office consequently triggering change and disturbance; work scope has been expanded; staffing issues such as low performance teachers affecting team efficiency; changes in the school enrolments and teacher numbers interrupt the school planning.

The respondents express they are undergoing high pressure in their role, and their working hours had been increased recently. However, they are still satisfied as being heads of department. The satisfaction presence is related to the consensus emerged among the teachers and the administration team members. Thus, the heads of departments agree to implement these strategies like with good leaders' characters are recognized to have strong interpersonal skills, motivating and visioning change, allocation and empowerment against the challenges they faced.

The research mentioned above has similar scope of discussion with our research. However, our research did not mention the issues of working hours and new principal's behavior. From the perspective of an educator, these two issues are very important and deserve deep discussion.

Research done by Balyer (2012) focuses on the transformational leadership of principals. Principals are always busy with paper work because of the central body of the national educational system. The principal is a good role model. The principal will deal with teachers to solve the problem even when they are busy. The principal demonstrates idealized influence behaviors highly in school. Teachers trust principals and believe that they are able to move forward. Principals encourage teachers to attend courses to improve knowledge. Principals also motivate and communicate effectively with teachers.

This research is focusing on the behavior of principals. Although our research is focusing on the issues and challenges faced by the heads of departments and the strategies used by them, our findings show that the strategies used to overcome the issues and challenges are similar to the behavior of the principals. According to Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleegers (2010), transformational leadership positively associated with schools' innovative climate. This type of leadership motivates followers do more than what they expected to achieve greater productivity. Transformational leaders motivate followers to transcend their self-interests for a collective purpose, vision and mission. Leaders must create a vision and induce their followers to pursue the vision.

The behavior of the transformational leaders discussed above such as setting vision and motivating followers are the same as what we have mentioned in our research. These strategies are important for the heads of department in transforming teachers.

CONCLUSION

The 21st century is a challenging era. Everything changes in a short period. Similarly, the educational field is experiencing changes all the time. Heads of departments as the middle leaders in schools bear the responsibility of leading together with the principal in bringing the children, teacher and school toward a better and brighter future. Apart from leading, what is more important is transforming. In order to achieve the school vision, the head of department plays the role of transforming the whole school to be the model of what is set. Therefore, the head of department is someone who loves to learn, is brave to change and of course having the courage to face issues and challenges. As a transformational leader, he or she is able to foresee the future. The heads of department must be resourceful, influential and have a clear mindset of how to apply the appropriate strategies to transform the existing situation into a better one. Chinese primary schools usually have high expectations from parents and the community. Therefore, heads of departments should be credited with the high performance of their school. This research is useful to school heads of departments as a reference in dealing with their management tasks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We would like to make the following recommendations:

1) Since more administrative support is needed from Ministry of Education and district of educational departments, the future research could focus on the transformational leadership of the educational officers.

2) Since this study was related to the current issues and challenges facing by the head of departments in the Chinese primary schools in Kuala Lumpur, hence, future research could be conducted in other states so that the comparison can be done to see the difference.

3) Transformational leadership is practiced in most of the schools in Kuala Lumpur. The performance of rural schools should not be neglected. Therefore, future research should investigate the practices of transformational leadership in rural Malaysian schools.

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