

WOMEN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: ROLES IN CONSTRUCTING LEADERS' IDENTITY IN TEACHERS

Pengetua Wanita: Peranan dalam Pembinaan Identiti Kepimpinan dalam Kalangan Guru

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Abstract

This study explores the notion of leadership identity construction as portrayed by women principals in exercising school leadership. The study examines how the leadership of women principals impacted the construction of leaders' identity among teachers whilst they, at the same time, strive to achieve the twofold excellence at schools in terms of academic and non-academic matters. The study draws on data from a qualitative method that examines key priorities that determine the leadership of women principals. It further examines the values that the women principals uphold in constructing leadership identity among teachers at four selected secondary schools in Malaysia. The analysis suggests that the construction of leaders' identity in teachers by the four women principals shared some similarities and differences through the three themes emerged which are excellence, togetherness and spirituality. The study concludes that in order to perform the roles of constructing leaders' identity in teachers, the women principals' leadership is driven by their spiritual nature and culture that involve values of caring and sharing to lead in ways that are collective, reciprocal and inclusive. This study contributes towards the discovery of leadership identity construction among teachers in secondary school in Malaysia particularly but may also be applicable to other similar contexts

worldwide. The study also suggests some implications for future research.

Keywords: Leadership identity, academic and non-academic excellence, togetherness, spirituality.

Abstrak

Kajian ini meneroka idea pembinaan identiti kepimpinan sepertimana digambarkan oleh pengetua wanita dalam mempraktikkan kepimpinan sekolah. Kajian ini melihat bagaimana kepimpinan pengetua wanita memberi impak kepada pembinaan identiti kepimpinan dalam kalangan guru serta pada masa yang sama, pengetua wanita berusaha untuk mencapai dua bentuk kecemerlangan di sekolah iaitu akademik dan bukan akademik. Kajian ini memperoleh data daripada kaedah kualitatif yang memeriksa nilai kunci utama yang menentukan kepimpinan pengetua wanita. Kajian ini juga meneliti nilai utama yang dipegang oleh pengetua wanita dalam pembinaan identiti kepimpinan dalam kalangan guru di empat sekolah menengah terpilih di Malaysia. Analisa kajian mencadangkan pembinaan identiti kepimpinan dalam kalangan guru oleh empat orang pengetua wanita mempunyai persamaan dan perbezaan melalui tiga tema yang didapati daripada kajian, iaitu kecemerlangan, kebersamaan dan spiritualiti. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa, dalam usaha untuk membina identiti kepimpinan dalam kalangan guru, kepimpinan pengetua wanita dipacu oleh keadaan spiritual dan budaya yang merangkumi nilai keprihatinan dan perkongsian untuk mengetuai dengan cara kolektif, bertimbang balik dan inklusif. Kajian ini menyumbang ke arah penemuan pembentukan identiti kepimpinan dalam kalangan guru di sekolah menengah di Malaysia khususnya tetapi juga dapat diaplikasi dalam konteks yang seumpamanya di seluruh dunia. Kajian juga mencadangkan beberapa implikasi untuk kajian pada masa hadapan.

Kata kunci: Identiti kepimpinan, kecemerlangan akademik dan bukan akademik,, kebersamaan, spirtuliti.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst school principals and administrators have been considered the primary 'leaders' in schools throughout most of the 20th century, the role of teachers has also gained increasing attention in recent years. Teachers are being increasingly recognised as a catalyst for change and critical element to sustain curriculum reform efforts. Despite the growing body of research on the influence and relation of school principals and teachers (Carver, 2010; Ghamrawi, 2011), as well as factors that influence leadership growth and construction of leadership identities (Howe & Stubbs, 2003; Lewthwaite, 2006; and Kenreich, 2002), there is a dearth of literature on role of school principals in constructing leaders' identity in teachers.

This study is situated within this gap in literature by investigating how women school principals construct leaders' identity in teachers. The overarching questions guiding this study are: *What are the values that the women principals uphold in constructing leadership identity among teachers?* and *How does the leadership of women principals portray leaders' identity in teachers?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the important roles of a leader is the role as a coach. The role which is initially to recruit, train and motivate volunteers, nonetheless, is often neglected in an Islamic organisation (Beekun & Badawi, 1998). The literature also indicates that different leadership roles are needed at different stages of the developing partnership process. For example, in the early stages, leaders need to act as animators (Bass, 2000) whilst the later stages require leaders to act as mentors and as agitators for continued change (Kilpatrick, et al., 2002).

In school, one way of understanding how women school principal as a leader play their role is by understanding the way they exercise leadership and how do they portray the leaders' identity to their subordinates – teachers in particular- in order to play their role in constructing leaders' identity. The following

section will be an explanation of how the leadership of women principals impacted the construction of leaders' identity among teachers through two aspects; spirituality and togetherness whilst they, at the same time, strive to achieve twofold excellence--academically and non-academically.

Leadership and Spirituality

Spirituality is a significant theme in women's leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). In understanding spirituality, some women related spirituality with their religious beliefs. However, for some people, spirituality looks more towards raising consciousness (Ngunjiri, 2010a). In Islam, leadership attributes should be derived from the internalisation of Islamic spiritual values, wherein a Muslim leader, for example, accept leadership as a position of trust which comes with responsibilities that should be carried out without any privileges (Hamzah *et al.*, 2016). Hamzah *et al.* further added, in addition, a leader should exemplify among all good moral character, effective communication skills, self-sufficiency and self-reliance, as well as respect for different viewpoints.

Speaking of the impact of spirituality, Reeve (2005) mentioned that other than affecting leaders in the way they choose to lead and conduct themselves, spirituality also acts as a great source of motivation for the followers. Leaders who emphasise spirituality in their leadership would be able to foster the motivation of their followers which in turn strengthen their satisfaction and productivity at work.

In Kenya, a study on women leaders by Ngunjiri (2010b) found that incorporating spiritual identity in leadership enabled women leaders to become more authentic leaders as they lead from within. To illustrate the findings, Ngunjiri identified four spiritual values; beneficence, hope, courage, and *ubuntu*/humanness that contributed towards more authentic women leaders. Between the school principals who engage with spirituality and those who do not, the principals who were more spiritual were calmer as they put their faith and trust in God.

Hamzah *et al.* (2016) asserted that the impact of Islamic values on the leadership styles of Muslim women academics in Malaysia shows that women academics had exemplary moral character, strong convictions, were strong at multi-tasking and

were tolerant of criticism, all with the aim of helping others to excel. The study proved that the way those women academics enacted leadership was influenced by Islamic teaching.

Togetherness as Catalyst for Collaborative Leadership

While transformational leadership in general is about leaders transforming followers to bring about positive and better change in an organisation, it could be argued that involving more people in leadership could make it more effective. DeWitt (2017), for instance, attested that it is difficult for school principals to be confident in all areas of leadership. To help principals meet the challenging demands of their role, DeWitt strongly suggested that there is a need for a collaborative leadership. Rather than putting the responsibilities more on the principals alone as leaders, the collaborative leadership suggested by DeWitt involves a collaboration of several people or groups. Mullford (2003) on the same ideas stated, leaders who form effective management teams have a more prevalent influence than those who rely on their own personal efforts.

Meanwhile, Lawrence (2017) connected collaborative leadership with the responsibility of sharing leadership amongst others rather than belonging to an individual. In view of his study, Lawrence suggested that the collaborative leadership process aids members in the organisation by promoting certain characteristics such as social justice, shared vision and values, shared responsibility, mutual respect, and empathy. He further mentioned that collaborative leadership is deeply rooted in the collectivist cultures. Lawrence believed that in collaborative leadership, everyone has the potential of becoming leaders and followers due to different levels of expertise that require different people to emerge as leaders. Collaborative leadership is therefore not only the territory of a few experts but opens an opportunity for more leaders through shared leadership. When leadership is shared it creates a more democratic and just society. It is arguable that the characteristic of collaborative leadership is crucial as a platform for teachers to become leaders, as power is co-owned and not the sole property of the principals. 'The idea that leadership in organisations resides in the work groups and team is not new' (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 65). A principal should provide

opportunities for teachers to experience leadership in some different contexts, such as taking responsibility for an event, activity, or curriculum area as this is a good chance for the teachers to engage in dialogue and collaborate with others. Being supportive school leaders could also be seen in the school principals' recognition of teachers' development. Thus, the school principals need to ensure that sufficient support is provided for teachers before they embark on leadership roles. In addition to providing support, it is crucial for the school principals to pair the support with ongoing observations and discussions, which can be done formally and informally.

DeWitt (2017) found that collaborative leadership is highly valuable as sometimes the idea of how to implement specific work comes when the leaders collaborate with others. It is similar when someone witnesses others doing the work, in that they learn from others' ways of working. Therefore, the outcomes of working alone and working together with others are claimed to be different both in the implementation aspects as well as in the outcome. DeWitt further encouraged leaders to exercise collaborative leadership as it can strengthen relationships with stakeholders. DeWitt added that leaders should surround themselves with followers that are able to assist them in facing challenges without feeling that they should do things alone and know all the answers just because they are leaders. Regardless of individual differences, Lawrence (2017) affirmed that, when collaborative leadership is practised, the contribution of everyone is more valued and diversity is strengthened. In collaborative leadership, everyone is open to more opportunities of becoming leaders and followers, as different levels of expertise will call for different people to emerge in those roles. Demonstrably some principals perceived that as leaders, they must perform their job alone. This perception limits the participation of others, such as teachers, in their road to becoming future principals. It is therefore suggested by DeWitt (2017) that there is a need to have principals that not only work in collaboration with others but who believe that working with others will lead to better solutions and results.

With regard to women in educational leadership, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) highlight that woman often prioritise students' learning. While they acknowledge that the schools must be well-

managed, women principals' passions inclined more towards the development of students. Court (2005), in her study of principals in New Zealand, two women principals went against the authorities' instructions by focusing on the progress of teaching and learning of the students, rather than on the maintenance of the top-down hierarchical approach. On a related note to the prioritising learning highlighted by Court, Bush (2011) said that instructional leadership placed the priority on managing teaching and learning as the main activity of educational institutions. As such, it could be claimed that women in educational leadership whose passion was inclined more towards students' learning are instructional leaders. Geoff (2004), in explaining instructional leaders' influence, mentions three main strategies which are: modelling, in which instructional leaders are role models; monitoring, including visiting classroom and monitoring teachers; and dialogue, which is about giving teachers opportunities to communicate with colleagues on teaching and learning.

Due to increased pressure for accountability and demand for academic excellence, Jones and Harris (2014) asserted that improving school performance should not be the responsibility of the principal alone. In this situation, providing support for the school principals is deemed essential. This situation of the school principals giving support and getting support from the teachers indeed, paves the way for the school principals to construct leaders' identity in teachers, and teachers at the same time have the opportunity to put leaders' identity into practice.

Leading for Excellence

In performing the role of a leader, school principals at the same time, strive to achieve excellence – academically and non-academically. In the 21st century, for visionary educational leaders, the way excellence is assessed is even broader – through both school and, success in achieving their goal in life outside of the school (Bencivenga & Elias, 2003). Goddard, Skrla and Salloum (2017) supported the idea of Bencivenga and Elias (2003) that leaders in the 21st century emphasise not only test scores but also character building. This is argued that the way modern leaders view academic performance and good manners as having the

importance in developing students' potential has become an additional role of the school principals.

With the growing demands of educational excellence as a target, the responsibility towards improving school performance should not lie with the principals alone (Jones & Harris, 2014), even though it is admitted by principals that they are responsible for empowering others to change (Jones *et al.*, 2015). Harris and Manning (2014) agreed that the school lies on its people. Wang *et al.* (2016) in their study emphasised that the school does not belong to the principals alone, but it is co-owned by the school community. As such, the notion of leading for excellence does not only evolve round adopting proper behaviours, but also emphasises the shared responsibilities between leaders or principals and staff especially teachers.

The literature on this subtopic 'Leading for Excellence', indicates that a complex range of factors shape and influence the way school principals should lead a school towards excellence. Given the concept that leadership as being in relationship with others (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011), to achieve excellence – academically and non-academically, is deemed a good opportunity for the principal to construct leaders' identity in teachers through exercising their leadership.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data from a PhD study, evaluating the leadership of four women principals in four selected secondary schools in Malaysia. The evaluation comprised a qualitative-method approach involving interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted with the four excellent women principals and people who work with them such as senior leadership teams, teachers, administrative staff, students, parents and officers from the district/state education offices/departments.

Observations were also conducted in order to contribute towards the richness of the data and the objectives of triangulating the data. The observations were mainly done towards all four women principals as well as people who work with them. The selected events of the observations were found to allow more 'natural' actions and interactions of the women principals. To comply with the requirement of this study with regards to theory

building, the observations at all schools in this study were not planned to be conducted at any specific time or at specific events. As such, there are no lists of the observations made except for observations in the usual manner such as the things that the researcher noticed while in the schools. Notes on any events that occurred at any of the schools which were related to the research questions were jotted down at the time by the researcher – for instance, various aspects of school life being observed such as the principals welcoming students in the morning, principals doing daily rounds, school assemblies, and the principals conducting staff meeting. The observation was done based on the availability of the researcher and the participants, aside from the time utilised for conducting interviews. Observations also took place in some parts of the schools’ surroundings, such as looking at the walls and notice board which displayed photo and information about school achievements, as a way of triangulating the data.

DATA ANALYSIS

To ensure that data were transcribed and organised efficiently, the researcher used NVivo software to transcribe all the data collected from the interviews. The NVivo software was used only for transcribing and not for the analysis, as the researcher believed that manual analysis would give more opportunity to immerse in the data. In a study with an attempt of theorisation, the researcher doing his or her own coding works better as it can ‘constantly stimulate conceptual ideas’ (Holton, 2007, p. 275). NVivo was however also used to make sure that the data were organised systematically and easily accessible for further action.

The thematic coding approach used in the data analysis was influenced by Strauss and Corbin (1990), explained as follows:

Open Coding

Open coding is when the data is broken down, examined, compared, conceptualised and categorised (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). In this stage, the transcribed data from the interviews were read and re-read in order for the researcher to immerse herself in the data. From the first day of the data collection process the researcher started to listen to the recorded interviews to uncover categories and their relationships to each other through a

comparative and inductive process. Coding for interviews as well as the observation were mostly done paragraph by paragraph. Coding for observation was carried out to triangulate the coding in the interviews. As this study attempted theory building and no pre-determined items were listed, related interactions of the participants that occurred during the observation were jotted down based on the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Axial Coding

Axial coding is when the researcher can increase the theoretical sensitivity by making connection between categories and sub-categories. In this study, axial coding has only been partly engaged due to; first, the themes had already been identified through repeatedly listening to the recorded interviews and second, the study involved large amount of data, relating all codes to each other, and making connections between them would realistically take a lot more time.

Selective Coding

Selective coding is the process of selecting the category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, filling in categories that need further refinement and development (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Selective coding begins after the researcher identified the potential core variable. At this stage, the new data collection and coding is limited to that which is relevant to the emerging conceptual framework. By only focusing on the core and other related categories, new data collection can be done very quickly. In this way, the researcher can saturate the selected categories that form the basis of the emerging theory without collecting a lot of additional material that has no relevance to the development of theory. This selective data collection and analysis continues until the researcher has sufficiently elaborated and integrated the core variables, its properties, and its theoretical connections to other relevant categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Several themes have been identified from the interviews and observations. The themes are discussed in the following subsections:

Nothing Can Go Wrong with Strong Faith

From the interviews, it is found that, one way of constructing leadership identity in teachers is through instilling Islamic values. All four women principals for instance, have made congregational prayers compulsory to be performed, not only for the students but also for the teachers during the school time. The women principals believe, prayers determine the overall characteristics of a person and become the basis to create changes from within an individual. The women principals opined, the time after performing prayers is the best time for them as leaders to remind their teachers about doing good deeds or anything about moral character. The women principals mentioned that, to correct the teachers' misconduct is their responsibility as leaders, and as such, the time that they have after prayer is among the best time to do it. The women principals also believe, changes that come from within will last longer.

Apart from that, most of the women principals also believe, a good relationship with God which is attained through performing prayers also determines a good relationship with their fellow human beings and this will finally make them feel good and easily find the motivation in themselves.

From several observations, it is found that teachers at all schools involved in this study will perform congregational prayers either with their fellow colleagues, or with the students when it is time to perform prayers.

United We Stand

Another way of women principals instilling Islamic values is to associate work with the concept of worship according to Islamic teaching. The women principals make their teachers understood the importance of performing work as an act of worship and responsibility. The interviews with the teachers have shown that they are committed to perform their tasks as they understand that tasks are a part of their worship that will be rewarded in the Hereafter. Due to that, performing the task is not only for the worldly matters but more importantly for the rewards in the Hereafter. As such, performing tasks should be from the heart and not because of leaders or anyone else.

According to the women principals, when the teachers really understand the concept of worship in performing their tasks, it will be easy for them to instil the spirit of team building as it is a good foundation to involve all teachers in every aspect of school success. To explain the involvement of all teachers, the women principals create a work culture of senior teachers as facilitators to the new ones. The underlying reason of the women principals doing this is because, it leads the teachers to work together as a team.

From observations too, it is found that the concept of '*Ubudiyah*' is written clearly in the school Principles and Work Practice in all schools under the leadership of four women principals in this study.

Two Heads are Better than One

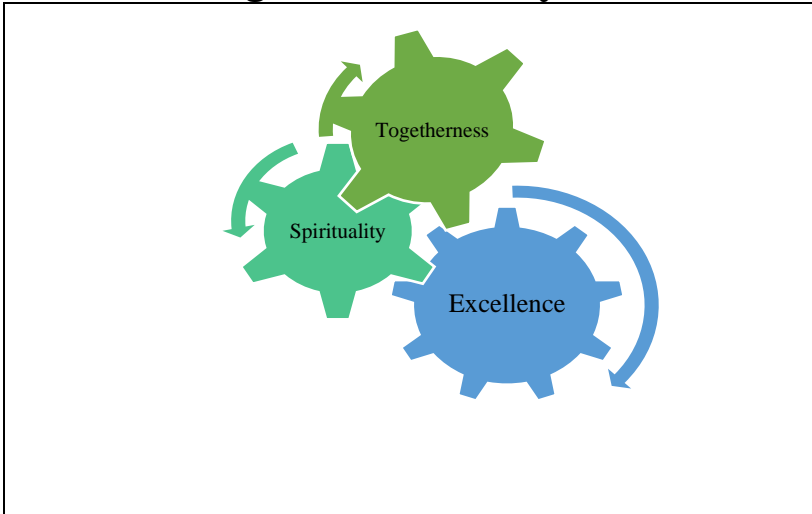
From the interview, it is shown that the leadership is shared between teachers and the women principals. For instance, in managing students' discipline, the women principals involve teachers rather than simply making their own decision on students' discipline related matters. The women principals believe, it is crucial to discuss the matters with teachers as the impact is more pronounced. Beyond that, for any decision made, women principals believe that it should be done collectively. The women principals also believe that working in isolation does not promote teamwork and collegiality amongst staff. While to involve teachers in more aspects of leadership could be seen as example of overbearing control, the teachers themselves confirm during the interview that it is an effort of the women principals to promote teamwork.

From the researcher's observation, it is found that during the staff meeting, the women principals always give the teachers the opportunity to share their opinions and decisions regarding students' discipline or other matters.

The themes identified with regards to the roles played by the women principals in constructing leadership identity in teachers is related to the achievement of academic and non-academic excellence at their respective schools. Some of the challenges are in line with the roles played by the principals/women principals in other countries while some are quite unique to this study. Figure

1 below illustrates the attempt to theorise how women principals construct the leaders' identity in teachers:

Figure 1: Proposed Theory on Women Principals' Role in Constructing Leaders' Identity in Teachers.



Of the three components shown in the diagram, excellence is the ultimate priority that women principals in this study have to attain. For the excellence – academic and non-academic - to be achieved, the presence of the other two key priorities, which are spirituality and togetherness, is a must.

Spirituality is found to affect the attainment of excellence in a significant way as it serves as the foundation for the presence of togetherness and the attainment of excellence. At the same time, spirituality is also the source of strength for the other two values; togetherness and excellence. If spirituality is strongly established, it will lead towards a compelling sense of togetherness and finally determine the attainment of excellence. In this study, spirituality is not only about building relationships but it leads to the process of unity among women principals and teachers as well as others in the school.

Togetherness is about being with others in performing school related tasks, aimed towards the attainment of excellence. In other words, leadership does not work one way, but it is a reciprocal process that requires everyone to get involved in the school system

to stay together and work together towards achieving the goal of excellence.

The inclusion of the three components of excellence, spirituality and togetherness corroborates with the importance of every component. These components are complimentary, interdependent and interrelated, and as such, there is no component that overshadows the role of another. Hence, giving the same emphasis on every component is pertinent towards the leadership of women principals as shown in this study.

Other than the equal importance of spirituality and togetherness, there is a subtle difference between how both components are placed and functioned. While the presence of spirituality is from within oneself and driving towards excellence, the presence of togetherness is regarded as more holistic and lingering across the whole process of leadership. Spirituality represents sustainability, while togetherness represents collectiveness towards excellence. This depicts an accurate picture of leadership as experienced and practised by women principals in this study. Realising on the importance of preparing future leaders, this leadership process is treated by the women principals as a medium for them in exercising the role to construct leaders' identity in teachers.

CONCLUSION

The study provides the explanation of the three priorities which are excellence, spirituality, and togetherness in the women principals' role in constructing leaders' identity in teachers. Spirituality is important in creating togetherness and as such, spirituality is seen as a means and not an end in itself. Whilst the function of spirituality is to provide a strong foundation for togetherness, the function of the togetherness instead, is to maintain the interaction and supports towards women principals' leadership in achieving excellence.

Even though this study includes only four women principals' multi case studies, it is hoped that the proposed theory would be applicable and present the practice of leadership by women principals in other similar contexts worldwide.

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