

Resilient Capacity Of Malaysian Schools' Headteachers In Adversity: A Review

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Abstract

Educational leaders faced twin challenges of responding to unprecedented community needs while managing radical changes within their own organizations and across the ministry of education plan and action. Within a few weeks in March 2020, education in Malaysia changed with unimaginable speed and scope, paralleling earlier experiences across the world. The pandemic amplified the urgency of action taken in education sector. Face to face learning is at stake, curriculum has been simplified and public examination for primary school was postponed. Somehow school leaders especially primary schools need to manage the school effectively. Multiple decisions needed to be made, communicated, implemented, and managed which need resilience capacity. In this article, we describe some key resilient elements identified and lessons from experiences as primary school headteachers during this time and within the future to foresee. We draw some experienced from the six high-performing primary school headteachers in Malaysia and two from the expertise. There were broad criteria of resilient leaders in primary schools. The criteria fall into categories of leadership whereby resilience capacity within the school leaders towards the school organization, parents, community and stakeholders have to be considered. The consequences of these responses resulted in a renewed recognition for school leaders to be resilient and ingenuity of teachers and primary school students. We provide examples of these lessons, themes and make recommendations for how to manage the school in the "new normal" of living with COVID-19 and global challenges to be prepared with the unprecedented incident which might happens in modern times.

Keywords:

School leaders, Resilience Capacity, Emotional Intelligent, High-Performing, Unprecedented Incident.

1. Introduction

Managing school is stressful especially in the uncertainty and challenging situations of the COVID-19. School managers call for physical, emotional and intellectual energy. (Harris 20017; West-Burnham 2009; Allen 2009). Flinham (2003a, 22) identifies the need for school managers to have 'high levels of emotional resilience'. Definitions of resilience include references to persisting in the face of difficulty; maintaining hope against the odds; being optimistic; being courageous; having inner resourcefulness; showing the capacity to recover quickly from setbacks; having moral purpose.

Patterson and Kelleher (2005) refer to term resilience as being 'a convenient label to describe things that bounce back and defines it as 'using your energy productively to emerge from adversity stronger than ever. Barret (2010, 399) describes resilience as 'the ability of an entity to withstand and bounce back from shocks that test its ability for continuous profitable functioning' adding that 'it is essential to invest in resilience'. Resilient leader is connected to the emotional intelligence competencies by author Daniel Goleman. They involve self-awareness, managing oneself, awareness of others and managing relationships. In his new book, *Social Intelligence*, Goleman takes us more deeply into underlying cognitive functioning and broadens the context to include society which is very crucial for school manager to apply in managing the school. It is these EQ competencies that help us make behavioral changes that strengthen our resilience and agility, bridge "know-do" gaps and sustain change, challenging situations and value over time. However, a range of recent empirical research confirms that there is no short cut to achieve success being a school leader.

A vast array of leadership style must be learn which current policy focus upon instructional leadership, or leadership for learning (Hallinger, 2010), accompanied by an equally strong focus provided by 'transformational leadership' theory (eg Leithwood et al,2006) upon the quality of the teaching and learning environment, whole-school vision, setting direction, redesigning organizational structures, and developing and sustaining the capacities of teachers to teach to their best through comprehensive and differentiated professional learning and development opportunities in order to be resilient school manager. All those skills appeared to support the ability of resilience in school leadership. In order to gain deeper understanding of elements that contribute to resilient capacity for headteachers, this review focused on understanding the capacity of school leaders to build personal resilient leaders in the face of volatile, uncertainty, challenges and adversity in the world of education.

2. Problem Statement

In October 2011, Malaysian Ministry of Education launched a comprehensive review of education system in order to develop a new National Education Blueprint preparing Malaysia's children to cater the global needs of the 21st century, and increased public and parental expectations of education policy. There are eleven shifts to transform the system. It is therefore the fifth shift which is to ensure high-performing school leaders in every school, which is the quality of school leaders, second biggest school-based factor in determining student outcomes, after teacher quality.

International research on school leadership shows that an outstanding principal is one who focused on instructional and not administrative leadership can raise student outcomes by as much as 20% (*Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2015, Executive Summary*). What really matters is people need school leaders to provide clear direction and know that positive change in their schools is up to them. A quality headteachers have clarity about who they are, what they do, and how others perceive them. However, the comprehensive plan is not achieved if the school leaders could not overcome adversity, setbacks, challenging situations at the same time outcome of the school plays important point to show the quality of the school leaders. Furthermore, the Malaysian government is in the process of implementing its ambitious plan of revamping the Malaysian education system in order to transform it into a regional hub of education and it focus to the crucial role of school leaders in improving the quality of education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012).

School leaders are responsible, above all, for establishing the expectations, aspirations and practices of all those in the school. They need to model academic optimism, hope, trust and moral purpose at all times and in all circumstances and this requires resilience as it is a long journey. Since 2016 Malaysian Ministry of education faced

a few cases in banner protest school principals in a few states. There are also a few cases of abusing power by the school leaders. A study needs to be done on these cases occurred in a few schools in Malaysia. These cases involve personal values which those principal lack of.

Previous research shows that most school leaders' work involves "getting things done through people" via participation, communication, team building, and motivation (Friedkin & Slater, 1994; Krug, Ayadi, & Scotland, 1991, p. 242; Leithwood, Jantzi, Ryan, & Steinbach, 1997). To do so successfully requires personal capacity that they know their staff well so that they can build their capacities for resilience in ways that are appropriate to each individual and the needs of students. The needs confronting school leaders are compelling, and the demands that they must meet are most of the time in urgent. By their nature, schools are places for givers and willing to make extraordinary commitments. During the interviews we heard many experiences that went far above and beyond what anyone can expect. But it effects school leaders' continuous energy expenditure which leaves them stressed, burn-out, depressed, and unable to perform effectively. Therefore, further research on resilience capacity among school leaders is crucial to develop the quality leadership in facing the new normal during the pandemic, the adversity, the changes in education norms and opportunities in future.

3. Literature Review Resilient Capacity

According to Cicchetti & Blender (2006), resilience founded in the field of medicine and continued to evolve in behavioral sciences around 1970. More research about resilient focus on psychopathy and this progressively developed into the study of biology with consideration of potential protective factors that support resilience. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) identifies 'resilience and emotional maturity' as competencies essential for effective headship (NCSL, 2012, 31) but there is a little guidance concerning what might get in the way of its development. Crisis-generated adversity usually produces a more immediate shock and challenge to a leader's resilient capacity because it hits with incredible force and intensity according to Patterson & Kelleher (2005). Death and violence are two extreme cases of crisis adversity. A dramatic crisis, such as a global pandemic resulted rapid decision making for the ministry and school leaders. According to Sull and Houlder (2005), crisis sometimes force you to make choices.

The loss of a family within staff and parents or an unexpected change in school procedure of operations, denial of promotion, for example, can be the catalyst for exploring what are the resilient capacity for school leaders. Crisis can also urge the school leaders to reexamine their commitments. A saddening news of student's death during a school trip in Machang, Kelantan in 2018 had put the headteacher in a great pressure. Large or small, chronic or crisis, adversity happens. According to Patterson and Kelleher (2005), resilience capacity is determined by life's accumulated experiences. It is how the school leaders respond and their resilient capacity expanding through strengthened personal values, efficacy and energy. Consistent with the resilience research cited earlier in the field of positive psychology, is on a strength perspective, not a weakness perspective. According to Masten (2001) asserts that resilience theory places an emphasizes on strengths rather than deficits. It considers the facilitators of healthy development and positive outcomes in response to adversity. From this view, resilience could belong to the positive psychology paradigm which pledges a commitment to focus on strengths of a situation (Selekman & Todd, 1995). Patterson and Kelleher (2005) concluded that resilience capacity to tackle adversity depends on the personal values that we have, personal efficacy we possess, and the personal energy available. These three criteria define resilience capacity to move ahead and develop one-self. It is also the sum of the dynamic interaction within the dimension.

3.1 Personal Values

Personal values are the source of strength that guide leaders through adversity and bounce back stronger than before. Headteacher need to have clear mission and vision which provide clear direction anchored in clearly understood values. Past studies provide a framework for understanding the belief, goals, attitude, ethics, self-concept, behavior, and other elements of the individual system; additionally, they also help to evaluate the dynamics of the organizational culture (Bernthal 1962). Normally headteachers themselves aren't clear about mission, vision and values during challenging situations, they need headteacher with clear direction in clearly understood values. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) provide a hierarchy that portrays what matters most in personal values (see Figure 1).

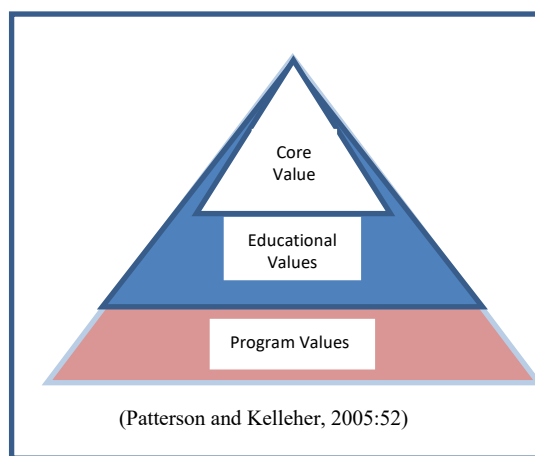


Figure1. Personal Values Hierarchy

The highest-order of personal values is about core ethical values which reflect a set of universal principles that transcend the mission, vision, and values of the school. Fullan (2002) refers to this concept as “moral purpose,” the social responsibility to others and the environment. It comes with themes such as trustworthiness, responsibility, integrity, and caring. It is the maxim that is found in most religious and culture. The belief in the Golden Rule or principle of religions faith.

The second-order of personal values consist of individualized values that define the character of a headteacher in school. Educational values is about maximized students and teachers’ learning and talents, are regarded as hugely vital. In the adversity such as pandemic COVID-19 the headteacher with educational values worked relentlessly to stay focused professionally on what matters most for school children and for teachers to guide them instructionally. The third level in the values hierarchy consist of program values that give meaning and direction to specific initiatives in schools.

For example, what are the values headteacher have for specific educational initiatives occurring during the Movement Control Order (MCO) which is online classes and online learning to consider regarding shared decision making, parent involvement, and equitable learning opportunities irrespective of race, gender, class, and other conditions. Personal Values help label and understand the distinction among the three levels of values. Badaracco (1997) refers to this as defining moments for leaders, conditions where leaders are caught in a conflict between right and right.

Resolving the defining moment’s conflicts requires skills not listed on job descriptions. Some people would argue that educators do not put lives on the line in the same way that doctors and front-liners do. But then, educators put our students’ educational lives and their educational future on the line every day.

3.2 Personal Efficacy

Desire to control the environment, to exercise personal agency, is old as humankind. Over the centuries, philosophers and theologians have debated our desires for dominion and the extent of human capability through discussion of free will and determinism. In the last 30 years, current understanding of personal efficacy as a psychological concept evolved from social cognitive theory. Among its principles is the assumption that your sense of self and the social context in which you work are reciprocal influences. According Patterson and Kelleher (2005), personal efficacy refers to belief about own capability to accomplish challenging goals. Psychological research also offers powerful evidence that the level and strength of self-efficacy affects the quality and success of performance (Bandura, 1997, p. 72).

Belief of own capability or confidence level play main role for headteacher. Belief about what can accomplish determine what choose to do in facing adversity and how long and how much persevere in the difficult situations (Maddox, 200, p.285). Ability of healthy self-confidence should be maintained to get job done and be able to recognize or aware of other factors that not be able to control successfully. It is powerful personal attribute and as a filter for all experiences.

It is powerful that the psychologist believes that all “processes of psychological and behavioral change operate through the alteration” of sense of personal mastery (Maddox, 1995, p. 7). According to Bharwaney (2005), self-worth depends on the ratio between expectation and success. It is driven by inner voice that tells us whether we are good enough in relation to how much value own self, in turn how others value us. In order to overcome this, a choice to be made on thoughts, behavior and reaction carefully so that a healthy choice could be made to accomplish challenging goals.

Personal efficacy, however, an ability which varies the type of challenges faced and its context. It is how the headteacher successfully steering the adversity or challenges into success stories and strengthens personal efficacy. Table 1 gives the idea of the level for personal efficacy and the interactions to environment.

Table 1. Efficacy-Environment Interaction

	Responsive Environment	Non-responsive Environment
Strong Efficacy	Productive engagement, aspiration, and personal satisfaction	Protest, grievance, social activism, or “milieu change”
Weak Efficacy	Devaluation, despondency	Resignation, apathy, burnout

Source: Adapted from Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control, p. 20, by A. Bandura, 1997, New York: W. H. Freeman

Philosophers and psychologist both suggest that the importance of personal efficacy covered not only in work performance but also in happiness. Awareness and sense of control over the situations, behavior, and thoughts essential to feelings of well-being. Maintaining personal efficacy helps prevent health problems. Lacking control over what happens, vulnerable to infections and other diseases. It is vital to take care of physical health as as emotional health to sustain self-confidence and high levels of competence. Hence, adversity and challenges does not happen isolation.

Understanding personal efficacy into resilient behavior most probably includes social context. According to Bandura. (1997, p. 101), the primary way that can gain self-efficacy is through “persuasive experiences” when others could convince doing better, trying harder, persevering and performing at best. Relationships with people outside the workplace are also essential to maintain and strengthen personal efficacy. The relationship outside basically refer to the ninth shift in the Malaysian Education Plan 2013 to 2023. The school leaders need to partner with parents, community, and private sector. Every parent is needed to be active partner in children’s school activities and expected to work more closely. Those relationship will help and sustain the school strength and indirectly will sustain the headteacher’s personal efficacy overtime.

3.3 Personal Energy

Energy is having self-motivation, attention and attitude all aligned. Feeling focused on what to do and positive drive to do all things well (Bharwaney, 2005). It provides the fuel that enable to weather the storm effectively and to bounce back resiliently. Personal values and sense of personal efficacy may be complete as resilient leaders. However, it depends also on energy capacity, energy expenditure and recovery patterns. Energy affects motivation and need to produce high quality work for high performing headteachers. The need of energy is crucial, which to be more determined and perseverance when the storm hit unexpectedly.

A lot of encouragement needed to get difficult things to be done, energy depleted and more likely to give up or burn out in the face of challenging situations. Tierney and Baumeister (2011) discovered that a person only has a certain amount of energy for exerting self-control and will power. When reaching the limit of giving out mental energy exhaustion and lose of willpower and self-control to decide. Daniel Goleman (2013) in his book *Focus, The hidden Driver of Excellence* stated that today we are overwhelmed with a lot of distractions we have, at most simple level such as looking at smart phone, checking emails, Facebook, news feed, responding to WhatsApp, listening to music, YouTube and so on. It is surprisingly and reality happening nowadays at work.

Lack of focus and engagement on task at work are very low and these will also cause chronic decision fatigue especially headteachers who need to solve and overcome everyday issues at work. Loehr and Schwartz (2003)) argue that managing energy, no time, is to high performance and personal renewal. When energy depleted or fatigue or when distracted and unable to focus the energy on task at hand, performance will be at risk.

On the other hand, the more capacity to manage the energy or able to enhance the quality and quantity of energy, the higher quality of productivity, healthier, and happier will be. To be fully engaged, leaders need to be effectively maximized four key types of energy: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003, p. 9) and each of energy type influences one another.

To be high performing headteacher, energy capacity must be developed and could be the defense against the debilitating effects of ceaseless energy spend without adequate recovery periods. Physical energy is the fuel for all types of energy mentioned before. In the interviews with high performing school leader, we discovered that they use a range of energy to take care of themselves and find support necessary to replenish energy stock. This effort will stimulate positive vibrate to the organization's energy, full focus and engagement. Energy capacity put full potential on developing the emotional and energy capacity of students, teachers, parents and community. Performance of school will depend on the collective capacity. As personal resilience capacity affected however by the resilience of the organization that they are leading. Micheal Fullan (2001) reminded, "The individualistic solution to becoming more resilient is only half of the solution.

The other half of the solution is trying to change the organization side, the organization culture. Leaders need to understand the sociology of organization to lead the organization to be resilient. The sociology of organizations includes an emphasizes on culture of organizations. According. To Fullan (2002), re-culturing is the name of the game. Transforming culture, changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it, leads to lasting change" (p. 8).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, by doing this review researcher will proceed with the empirical study by collecting the data from headteacher throughout peninsular Malaysia. This data will be analyzed using appropriate themes; leadership, team-work and emotional resilience capacity to find out what are the major determinants of high performing headteachers and its impacts toward schools' performance. The study will also investigate the challenges situation strike the school and how personal resilience and collective resilience of those inside the organization and the support buddies helps determine whether the organization plateaus after the challenging situation whether at the dysfunctional, survival, recovery, or growth level of functioning. By collecting data from high performing headteachers, researcher to understand completely the adversity experienced by primary school head teachers and be able to interpret how they influence their coping mechanisms with their resilience capacity among high performing headteachers. The findings of this study provide evidence that clarity purposes with the team, resilient in organization, nurture trust, understand workload, encourage autonomy, encourage team cohesion and resilient leadership capacity contribute resilient teachers' capacity should be considered as a vital part to develop unshakeable foundation upon with to build personal and organizational success (Mohd Ikhwan et al, 2019 and Ahmad Azrin, 2012). However, many countries around the world have experienced an ageing population, which brings the problems towards health issues, economic challenges, and longevity risk, the matter of appropriate retirement system should also become a critical agenda of each countries (Ghazali et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2017a, 2017b, 2012a, 2012b and 2012c). Moreover, Azhar et al. (2017) have asserted that this could be a serious threaten for those who lack of financial preparation towards retirement age. As these will support the resilient capacity of headteachers in managing their personal life and school organization successfully.

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