Case Study

Informal Leadership Learning on the Journey to Headship: A Case Study of National Professional Qualification for Headship Participants in Malaysia

Gurcharan Singh Bishen Singh

Cluster of Education and Social Sciences, Open University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The current focus on school leader preparation around the world is based on the belief that school leaders make a difference in both effectiveness and efficiency of schooling. This study is part of an evaluative case study on the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) programme in Malaysia. It seeks to investigate the perceptions of ten incumbent secondary school principals who are graduates of the NPQH programme on the informal leadership learning they acquired from the time they graduated to the roles they played as principals. The study investigated informal leadership learning in the professional setting at school, professional setting outside school as well as leadership learning outside the professional setting. The findings of this qualitative inquiry point towards a great deal of informal leadership learning in the professional setting at school. Whilst informal leadership learning in the professional setting outside of school was reportedly derived from the active role played by the respondents themselves, very little leadership learning was acquired outside the professional setting. The implication of this study for the preparation of school heads in Malaysia is discussed and proposals made towards optimising the benefits of informal leadership learning for aspiring heads.

Keywords: Headship Preparatory Training, Informal leadership learning, Leadership learning, School leadership

INTRODUCTION

Around the world today, much emphasis is being given to leadership development programmes as an element to enhance school effectiveness and improve educational

systems. The current focus on school leader preparation around the world is based upon the belief that effective school leadership positively influences student learning and school improvement (Day et al., 2011; Young et al., 2013). There are formal programmes for headship preparation involving formal learning. Professional development courses are also offered to school leaders to enhance their knowledge and skills through formal and structured learning. Formal learning is generally characterized by an organized learning event or a prescribed learning framework which eventually earns the learner a qualification or credit of some sort (Eraut, 2000). Formal learning is usually planned and structured (Choi & Jacobs, 2011). Informal learning, on the other hand, is predominantly unstructured, experiential and non-institutional (Marsick & Volpe, 1999).

In Malaysia, since 1999, a one-year fulltime headship preparatory training programme called National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) programme was organised by the Ministry of Education through its educational management and leadership institute, IAB (Institut Aminuddin Baki). This study is part of a larger doctoral study which evaluated the effectiveness of NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship) training programme on headship practices (Singh, 2010). The NPQH programme is now known as the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) has a duration of 5 months. The

first batch of participants from the NPQH programme graduated in 2000 and the subsequent batches every year thereon. Aspiring head teachers who graduate from the programme do not necessarily assume the headship post immediately; some waiting for a few months while others a few years.

The NPQH programme aims to create effective school leaders (Institut Aminuddin Baki [IAB], 2004). Upon completing the one-year NPQH programme participants are re-posted to schools to continue their career with the aspiration of becoming heads at some point. The period of completing the NPQH programme and assuming office as school head dependent on seniority and job performance. It is therefore argued that leadership learning may have occurred for the participants in various settings from the time they complete the programme to their assuming of the headship post. The NPQH programme, however, does not gauge this learning as it is not part of the formal structure of the course. The period of leadership learning, albeit beyond the formal NPQH programme, could contribute to leadership development of aspiring heads.

Since aspiring heads are appointed to office at different time intervals this study aims to investigate informal leadership learning on the route to headship. Informal leadership learning could have occurred at the professional level in school and outside of school as well as at the non-professional level. This study looks at the informal leadership learning of the NPQH graduates

from the period of their graduation to their appointment as school principals. This paper is based on the following research question:

What are the principals' perceptions of informal leadership learning that has taken place between their graduation from NPQH and their headship, in the following contexts?

(i)   Professional learning in school;

(ii)   Professional learning outside of school;

(iii) Learning outside of the professional context.

The respondents of this study were 10 secondary school principals who graduated from the NPQH programme. The gap between them completing the programme and appointment as head teacher varied from less than 1 year and 7 years.

Leadership Learning

Kolb's Cycle of Learning (Kolb, 1984) suggests that effective learning occurs when one is able to involve fully and openly in all the four stages of the learning cycle – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. This well-known theory implies that learners must have some concrete experience by involving themselves experientially in some kind of activity, and some reflective observation by reflecting on the experience. The two stages should be followed by a phase of integrating their observation or building generalization. The final phase is active experimentation,

a stage where they can test their theories and use them in making decisions and solving problems. This theory is applicable in leadership development of aspiring principals as they learn in their formal training and gain some learning beyond the intervention as they move towards headship.

As leadership learning continues after training, it has been argued that some of the most powerful learning occurs while on the job – both incidentally and in structured ways ((Rainbird, Fuller & Munro, 2004; Raelin, 2008; Woodall & Winstanley, 1998). Woodall and Winstanley (1998) categorise workplace learning into three: learning from another person, learning from tasks, and learning with others. This follows an earlier assertion by Bandura (1977) that people can learn by observing the behaviour of others as well as the outcomes of those behaviours. Southworth (2002) reported that head teachers learned most and developed their leadership practices by doing the job. In the same vein, Rhodes and Brundrett (2006) argue that if effective professional development is characterised by on-the-job learning, then leadership training relying only on content-driven courses may be less effective in developing leadership talent compared to engagement by the learners in their own professional context. This follows the assertion by Earley and Evans (2004, p.330) that 'the most significant experiences were frequently on the job – workplace rather than workshop.' Even though leadership learning seems to be attributed to the workplace, it has been reported that learning by school leaders

in the professional context is not only confined to the place they work in. Earley and Weindling (2004) synthesized more than 20 years of their headship and leadership development work in the UK and reported that school heads believed the most valuable 'on-the-job' learning activity came from s working with others, especially effective head teachers. At the same time, the heads perceived that the most useful 'off-the-job' learning activities were attending courses, visiting other schools, networking with other head teachers, working on specialist tasks and having meetings or contacts with non-educationalists.

Similarly, Earley and Bubb (2004, p.174) attributed 'working with an effective head teacher, and everyday work experience' as two main on-the-job activities that assisted in leadership learning. Learning from head teachers as influential leadership learning was highlighted by Zhang and Brundrett (2010) when some school leaders in their study were reportedly enlightened by the influence of their previous head teachers. The school leaders felt that such role models were essential and their attitude and experiences were highly regarded.

The claims and assertions made by these authors are relevantly related to the NPQH graduates in the presumption that they acquired some learning between the periods of graduation from the NPQH programme to their assuming headship position. The literature also points towards different settings for leadership learning – in the professional as well as outside the professional setting. It is the aim of this study to capture some insight into the extent of leadership learning acquired by NPQH graduates.

In this study, professional learning in school constitutes the learning while respondents undertook their own roles and job functions at school. Professional learning outside school involves activities that the respondents took outside of their own formal role in school. This includes their involvement in outside school meetings, professional associations, and even the Parent Teacher Association. Learning outside of the professional context means leadership learning that might occur in everyday life which is not related to their professional role.

Whilst this study intended to capture perceptions on the extent of leadership learning by the NPQH graduates it does not provide detail examples of leadership lessons learned in the period.

METHOD

The data gathered in this study is the perceptions and views of the sample, the principals, which will constitute the reality, interpreted by the researcher. The interpretations are then structured in themes, leading to judgments about the leadership learning of the NPQH graduates in Malaysia.

This study adopts the qualitative method. Patton (2002) proposes using the open-ended response approach in qualitative evaluation study to capture the understandings of the respondents. This study uses the open-ended responses approach through the semi-structured interview to understand

respondents' perceptions regarding their leadership learning.

The semi-structured interviews in this study were conducted face to face with individual respondents and carried out at the schools where the respondents were principals. The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and then transcribed and translated for analysis.

This study utilized purposive sampling as a non-probability form of sampling. Bryman (2008) informs that the goal of purposive sampling is to sample participants in a strategic way so that those sampled are relevant to the questions being posed. The participants of this study were assured of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. Hence, their real names are not used and were assigned an alpha-numeric reference each, i.e. from P1 (Principal 1) to P10 (Principal 10).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study are presented in the following three different sub-sections with the relevant quotations from the responses.

Informal Leadership Learning in the Professional Setting in School

Asked about the leadership learning in professional setting at school, all 10 heads admitted that they learned a great deal. The emergent theme is leadership learning from heads. Some learned by emulating what their leaders were doing while others learned from the negative examples they observed

and experienced in their leaders. Three of the principals said that their learning was by observing the negatives in their leaders. This constitutes learning as the respondents reflected on the negatives and tried avoiding it in their own leadership as heads. A typical response from a female head, who was herself working under a female head before she became a principal, is as follows:

> "I did learn from her [principal], whether in a positive way or a negative way. She had an autocratic style which was alright at some times but was not too good at other times. I learned that using a particular style, in this case the autocratic style, was not effective in all situations and I avoided this style in my own practice as a head now." (H3)

One principal shared his experience of learning from two of his heads and he compared them in the following response:

> "I was a senior assistant to two different heads in two different schools. The first one taught me so much about how to handle the staff and create a good rapport with them. The second headteacher was one who just bulldozed through whatever needed doing in the school. It was so mechanistic and lacking the humanistic touch." (H6)

He went on to say about his own practice as a head, "I am mindful of my own leadership...I avoid doing what I observed as ineffective and detrimental" (H6).

Informal Leadership Learning in the Professional Setting Outside of School

The question on informal leadership learning in a professional setting outside the school received responses from eight principals which raised the theme of learning through involvement with various bodies or associations. Three principals related that they learned a great deal from their involvement in the Senior Assistants association, which is an association of school senior assistants both at the state level as well as the national level. One of the three heads stated:

> "I was also involved in the Senior Assistants association in my state. I had a leadership role to play there and learned a lot on how to lead colleagues on the same level. This role helped to shape me for my eventual role as a head where I was able to lead my subordinates and deal with different situations." (H7)

Another principal shared his experience of learning through his involvement in the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) and he related it as following:

> "I learned a lot from my involvement in the school PTA. As a Senior Assistant in my previous school, I had a lot of support from the PTA and they often look up for me to discuss programmes with them and suggest ways for the parents to get involved." (H2)

He further claims that the experience helped him in his headship post as he had gained "maturity in dealing with staff in the school as well as others outside".

Informal Leadership Learning Outside of Professional Setting

Apart from investigating informal leadership learning acquired by the respondents in professional setting in the school and outside of school, question was also posed to them about informal leadership learning outside of their professional setting.

The question on leadership learning outside of professional setting attracted responses from seven out of 10 principals in this study. Three of them were involved with youth organisations (H3, H4 and H8), three others in local housing and neighbourhood associations (H10, H1 and H5), and one was involved with non-government organisation (NGO). However, all but one of them admitted that their involvement outside the professional setting was limited by the fact that they were already busy with their professional work and could not devote any more time than they already had. Two such responses are quoted below:

> "Outside of the professional context, I joined the local housing association. I am not so active in the association though for I am already active in school and other professional bodies." (H5)

> "Yes, to a certain extent but we are so busy in school that we cannot spend

much time in these associations outside of the profession." (H1)

The one exception to the group was a principal who was actively involved in a non-government association, and she shared her experience in the following:

> "I was actively involved in an NGO and assumed the role of a leader. I learned a lot in my capacity as a leader in that NGO as I had to lead people from all walks of society." (H7)

The research question probed the respondents on the perceptions of their informal leadership learning between their graduation and their appointment into headship. The contexts of the informal leadership learning were divided into professional setting and outside of professional setting. The professional setting was further divided into professional learning at school and professional learning outside of school. This was followed by the leadership learning outside of the professional setting.

In the professional setting at school, all 10 respondents perceived that they learned a great deal about leadership. Informal leadership learning primarily occurred through their experiencing and reflecting on the leadership of their superiors. However learning here does not denote only positive learning as some respondents learned through their observation and reflection on styles of leadership demonstrated by their superiors. Therefore, the informal leadership learning that occurred in the

respondents was based on a set of leadership theories that they learned formally in the NPQH programme and observed in action at schools. In other words, the espoused theories were measured against the observation and reflection of the theories in use at the material time. Some respondents (n=5) even had the opportunity to compare and contrast more than one head teacher and could mentally classify the different styles of these leaders into positive and negative styles. In spite of this, both the situations constituted leadership learning. The findings of this study indicate that informal learning in the school is an important aspect in the development of a future leader. However, there is also an indication that learning to lead did not necessarily happen by emulating the practices of superiors, i.e. the school heads, but followed the judgment of the respondents who reflected against the repertoire of knowledge they had about effective leadership.

Informal leadership learning in the professional setting outside the school seems to be derived by respondents experiencing a more active role in professional bodies such as the Senior Assistants association and other associations such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Active involvement in professional bodies as well as associations gave them the opportunity to lead and learn directly from their own experiences. The opportunity to act out leadership roles allowed them to demonstrate their preferred leadership styles. The study also found that respondents did not acquire much leadership learning outside the professional

setting. This was mainly because they were reportedly not actively involved in many associations outside of their professional due to lack of time.

The findings in this study show that informal learning mainly occurred in the professional setting, be it inside the school or outside. The findings seem to confirm the notion that some of the most powerful leadership learning occurs on the job (Earley and Evans, 2004; Rainbird et al., 2004; Raelin, 2008; Woodall and Winstanley, 1998). It also shows agreement with Woodall and Winstanley (1998) who have included learning from another person and learning with others at the workplace as contributors to leadership learning. The findings also signify a similarity with the synthesis of work done on headship and leadership development in UK by Earley and Weindling (2004) where the most valuable 'on-the-job' learning activity was working with others, especially effective head-teachers. In the case of this study, the respondents reported learning a great deal from their head-teachers. The respondents were mainly in their senior management posts, as senior assistants, when they perceived learning from their superiors. These findings seem to agree with Earley and Bubb (2004) who attributed working with an effective headteacher as one of the two main activities that assisted in leadership learning. The other main activity they recognised as assisting leadership learning is the everyday work experience of learners. This study shows aspiring heads

also acquired leadership learning from their own leadership roles which occurred through their everyday work experience.

The 'on-the-job' context by these researchers is similar to professional setting at school in this study. However, learning in this study was not only derived from the perceived positive styles of effective head-teachers but also from the negative styles of other head-teachers. This concurs with Bandura (1977) who suggested that people can learn by observing the behaviour of others. The 'off-the-job' learning in the study of Earley and Weindling (2004) is similar to the professional setting outside the school in this study. The heads in England perceived learning from networking with other head-teachers whilst the respondents in this study learned from their involvement with other senior assistants The English heads also perceived learning through meetings and contacts with non-educationalists, such as in PTAs.

The ability to observe the leadership styles of their superiors and placing them into positive and negative styles from their formal NPQH course. Learning derived from the formal course and the acting out of the role lends itself to the concrete experience in Kolb's learning theory (1984). The learners then reflected on the experience and built some generalisations when they were able to determine the appropriate leadership styles. The cycle is completed when the learners themselves are going through active experimentation as they assumed the role of heads in schools.

CONCLUSION

This study found that informal leadership learning continued after training when NPQH graduates assumed senior management roles in schools before they took up the headship post. As informal leadership learning at school was based on observation and reflection on the leadership of their superiors, leadership learning outside school seems to have stemmed from their own leadership practice. The opportunity of being in a position to reflect and judge leadership styles of superiors and practice their own preferred leadership style seems to have provided a good balance in selecting the best. This was perhaps possible because the NPQH graduates were given the opportunity to hold the senior assistant post and their active involvement in activities that provided them leadership roles. However, this was not planned nor monitored in the NPQH programme as it is beyond the scope of the course itself. This study recommends that the preparatory initiative for aspiring principals be extended beyond the formal course, to include the phase after the graduation. This is deemed imperative given that the intended final product of the NPQH course itself is an effective principal.

It could be inferred from this study that giving graduates an opportunity to hold a senior management post before their headship can provide a good opportunity for leadership learning. The benefit of informal leadership learning in the senior post is further complemented by active involvement in leadership roles in work-based activities. The implication of these findings for Malaysia indicates the importance of appointing graduates into senior management posts in schools to allow them to continue their leadership learning in a practical setting. It is therefore a recommendation of this study that NPQH graduates be given a senior management post before taking up headship in general.

This study proposes formalising informal leadership learning to provide opportunities to senior assistants on their journey to head ship. Insofar as preparatory training in Malaysia is concerned, it is proposed that aspiring heads should maintain a leadership learning log to document their informal learning derived from observation as well as reflection. The leadership learning log could also be used as a tool in performance appraisal for appointment into headship position.

This study also recommends that the NPQH course should incorporate learning from the formal course as well as learning on the job at the participants' workplace. This means the duration of the course should include some mode of delivery that enables the participants to learn while being on their post. Having a blended learning approach that involves formal classroom training and workplace learning through usage of ICT could be a way forward. This view is supported by Rhodes and Brundrett (2006) who argue that leadership training relying only on content-driven courses may be less effective in developing leadership talent compared to engagement by the learners in their own professional context.

In view of emerging knowledge and research in the leadership learning of school leaders, future empirical investigation is suggested to focus on the leadership learning of aspiring heads in the formal course as well as in the informal setting back at their workplace. The leadership learning derived from the experience of aspiring head teachers on the route to headship should not be left to chance but utilised to strengthen and enhance the quality of the NPQH course.

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