

Leadership Competencies and Leadership Style in Aspiring Cluster Schools of Excellence

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ABSTRACT

Cluster School of Excellence (CSE), a school base administrative system was introduced to ensure autonomy to school leaders to excel schools in both academic excellence and non-academic performance. This implied leadership changes and innovative practices for educators and policy makers, as active participation was expected in academic and co-curricular excellence at state, national and international events. Yet, limited literature is available on leadership competencies, practices and style expected of school leaders in aspiring CSE, which have potential to be awarded with a CSE status through its academic and curriculum evaluation by the Malaysian Education Quality Standard. For this exploratory study, face to face interviews were conducted with four selected staff in two aspiring schools of excellence in Perak region to understand the personal aspirations, practices and challenges faced by such administrators in its pursuit for excellence. The locality was chosen to ascertain the viable leadership qualities in such schools targeted to be future CSE. The findings signify the importance of leadership qualities; leadership style; personal human values; knowledge of personal and social environment; close rapport with stakeholders; active planning and innovative practices in academic and non-

academic excellence via active community engagement sessions. Leaders voice the need for unwavering varied engagement and motivational sessions despite financial and individual challenges as the way forward in attaining the said educational excellence in both academic and non-curricular activities. It reaffirms the importance of innovative and creative leadership practices and leadership

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styles for leaders to in such aspiring schools to attain the CSE status.

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INTRODUCTION

The connotation of Cluster Schools of Excellence (CSE) essentially denotes schools that have independence in decision making and possess the capability to implement administrative decisions in educational matters such as in the academic and co-curricular programs of the school (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014). In such schools, state, district and school leaders possess greater decision-making power and autonomy over day-to-day operations to tailor interventions based on the school's context and enable greater schoolbased management (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014; Ministry of Education, 2012). Cluster schools are established to develop the full potential of schools within the cluster schools of excellence (CSE) as part of the mechanism in the 6th strategic thrust, i.e. accelerating the excellence of educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Prior to this, many schools were run by independent administrative mechanisms that befit the "one-size-fits all" model which does not justify the schools' individual performance and capabilities. Schools were not provided with autonomous decision making to implement management decisions in both academic and co-curricular

excellence (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014; Ghani, 2013; Noor & Crossley, 2013).

As such, the performances of schools were not optimized in both academic and co-curricular programs. As such, renewed efforts were set in place through specific outcomes identified in the National Educational Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2012) where all schools will be responsible for operational decision making in terms of budget allocation and curriculum implementation. The implementation of cluster schools is based on the decentralization process that involves the empowerment of schools through the provision of guided autonomy (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014). This decentralization autonomy implies the need for excellence in leadership and administrative capability of the Principal and staff of the school as well as outstanding merit in academic and co-curricular activities.

Leading universities may present a unique challenge. Because of the organizational complexity of the university, its multiple goals and its traditional values, the nature of leadership in higher education is ambiguous and contested (Petrov et al., 2007). Universities have been described as "organized anarchies" with high inertia, unclear technologies and problematic goals (Cohen & March, 1974). Leading academics has been likened to "herding cats", yet the very strength of the university system lies in the independent thought, creativity and autonomy of the people who work in them. Unilateral top-down leadership

is clearly at odds with the traditional values of academic freedom and autonomy, democratic participation and the variety of academic interests (Middlehurst, 2012).

Thus, there is a need to understand what kind of leadership and leadership development are most effective, when are decision makings made independently or that of a collective based consensus made by the university authorities? This empirical research seeks to identify and develop effective leadership styles necessary managing Cluster Schools of Excellence (CSE). In addition, at present most of the studies of leadership in higher education tend to focus on the role of the stakeholders (students, parents, educators and policy makers). The paper investigates the competencies (attitudes, knowledge and behaviors) that are needed for emerging leaders to succeed in governing Cluster Schools of Excellence (CSE). The input is aimed at creating better and much more efficient leadership styles necessary for Cluster Schools of Excellence.

Objective of Study

The objective of this research is aimed at investigating the role of the Principals and the competencies (attitudes, knowledge and behavior) that are needed for effective leadership in Cluster Schools of Excellence (CSE).

Literature Review

With Vision 2020, there is a need for liberalization of educational policies leading to the democratization, privatization

and decentralization of the Malaysian educational system (Lee, 1999). As such, Cluster Schools of Excellence (CSE) as part of the government's national policy toward such measures aim to empower and provide autonomy to school platforms over academic and non-academic programs. In the process of such administrative changes, schools aspiring to attain the said status react differently and experience different levels of concerns and challenges (Harris & Jones, 2015; Noor & Symaco, 2017; Verspoor, 2008).

For some schools the transition to that of a CSE status experienced seemingly hassle-free transition, while for other schools administrators, staff groups and students, the transition implied otherwise. Berger et al. (2005) stated that moving teacher research out of individual classrooms and into the entire school posed to be astonishingly difficult filled with sometimes impossible demands and seemingly impossible expectations. This implied that higher expectations were demanded of the teaching staff which now was not only focused in individual class performances but among the entire classes in both academic and non-academic programs.

Attaining the CSE status meant that the whole school was required to change in accepting accelerated and visible upward performance in both academic and non-academic programs in the school. For such changes to occur, many apparent needs were yet to be fulfilled in attaining the said status. Berger et al. (2005) implied that all teachers, staff and students alike, needed

to be ready for the change as a result of decentralization of authority to the school level. There is a call for shared responsibility and immediate ownership (Leonard, 2013; Pawan & Ortloff, 2011).

Reynolds (2001) stated that in instilling a transformation across the school environment, the importance of certain fundamental elements like “transformational leadership in the leadership team, mind-shift on teaching and learning commitment, staff enhancement development, decision making, teamwork, time and resources for reflection and research both within staff groups and with stakeholders (teachers, pupils, parents) are considered fundamental for change process and transitions to occur. However, the question we pose is how ready are the administrators, staff groups and stakeholders with such changes?”

In relation to the CSE status, it has been noted that there is currently only 1 per cent of the Malaysian schools have been identified as having the CSE status (Loke & Hoon, 2011; Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011). Hamidah (2013) reported that 263 schools had been accredited the CSE status while 60 schools had attained the High Achiever or High Performing School status. There are indeed lots more effort required to increase the number of CSE schools. It is envisioned that the Ministry targets to create 300 of such schools by 2015 (BERNAMA, 2011; Noor & Crossley, 2013). Efforts to learn more of CSE schools proves a challenge as there is limited literature available to understand the notion on required leadership competencies and management necessary

to increase the CSE status in the Malaysian performing school context.

In the creation of CSE schools, there arises the issue of empowerment and decentralization of authority to relevant school authorities. With such empowerment, come undoubted pressure, accountability, expectations and demands expected of school administrators like Principals and Headmasters’ who are required to lead such aspiring CSE schools.

In this respect, the success of attaining the cluster school of excellence status requires a change in the mindset of the decision makers where greater autonomy is provided to school principals, staff and students to independently plan and execute detailed academic and non-academic programs in the beginning of each academic calendar to ensure that there is ample planning, preparation, practice, participation as well as monitoring of student participation in niche programs identified for the said school. Chan and Kaur (2009) mentioned that excellent principals were sense makers of schools who helped create a sustainable school climate that would enhance students’ and teachers’ productivity.

Aspiring CSE schools denote schools which have the academic and co-curricular potential to be ranked as a CSE school. This implies that the school principal’s job is more complex where school leadership and dependency can no longer reside on one person only (Ballek et al., 2005). Leadership tasks and roles need to be cultivated and nurtured where school staff needs to be accountable in executing and expediting

the execution of various academic and non-academic programs set in the schools (Ahmad et al., 2013; Kin et al., 2017; Scutt, 2004).

Hence, Principals in the pursuit of excellence, need to be consciously aware that in the pursuit of attaining an intended goal, the leadership capabilities and competencies, model values and practices consistent with that of the school's niche areas (Sergiovanni, 1995; Spendlove, 2007). In nurturing an instructional program and creating a school culture conducive to learning and professional growth, effective instructional and administrative leadership is required to implement change processes (Hoy & Miskell, 2008).

In attaining the CSE status, there arises a range of feelings, challenges and uncertainties associated with the possibility of creating change in school systems (Gronn & Lacey, 2004). School leaders who embark on implementing such school face high levels of pressure to demonstrate such improvement in student achievement (Mette & Scribner, 2014). How do Principals overcome such challenges and mounting pressure in pursuit of excellence? The investigation is necessary to aid the global concern on principal attrition and retention with the high rate of teacher retirement (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hamzah et al., 2011). Left unchecked, the attainment of aspiring leaders to lead cluster schools of excellence as stipulated in the Education Blueprint may not be met (Azman et al., 2016; Yim, 2015).

Essentially, a shared vision among all stakeholders, transparency on the school's academic and non-academic planning, competences, outcome oriented strategy, academic time usage consistency, including some high-quality teaching, teacher-student interaction, compassionate and caring teachers and low noise levels as well as lots of work-related movement and positive feedback from teachers are measures toward success (Reynolds, 2001).

Greater autonomy among and decision-making policies and practices are required for school administrators. Autonomy and decentralization are the main features of CSE schools (Loke & Hoon, 2011; Tan & Ng, 2007; Yin & Ching, 2007). With autonomy and decentralization, leadership qualities and competencies of the Principal and staff administrators are crucial in creating that transformation among the staff and students alike (Arokiasamy, 2017; Kean et al., 2017).

Although this was a relatively small study, the research highlights the need for a more proactive approach to identifying leadership competencies and developing leadership throughout Cluster Schools of Excellence (CSE) in the higher education institution.

Research Questions

What leadership competencies (attitudes, knowledge and behavior) are necessary in managing Cluster Schools of Excellence?

What leadership styles are necessary in managing Cluster Schools of Excellence?

METHOD

For this purpose, being an exploratory study, two Principals and two Senior Administrative Staff such as Head of Student Affairs and Student Disciplinary Head were chosen as respondents for the study. The respondents represented Senior Management and Leadership authorities of two aspiring cluster schools in the Perak region of Malaysia. The said schools were chosen as it met all the requirements necessary as aspiring cluster schools of excellence in the Perak region. The researchers obtained the necessary demographics of the stipulated schools from the list of names of schools provided by the Perak Education Department. The input may not be exhaustive but provides researchers the initial insight on the said phenomenon. The researcher has selected the state of Perak as it marks one of the educational hubs envisioned in the National educational Blueprint. The research site was also selected in view of the lack of study conducted on aspiring cluster schools of excellence leadership management styles, aspirations, challenges and competencies of leaders in less explored schools.

Principals and Senior Administrative Staff were selected as they would be able to share the administrative perspective. Senior Unit Heads were selected as they were not involved in the teaching of examination classes of the school. As such they were available to provide feedback without interruption to the normal school process and schedule. These respondents were considered appropriate as it mirrored the

sentiments stipulated by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, where there was no interruption to the examination process of the said schools.

Thus, the names of Senior Administrative staff were based on the Principal's recommendations and who held administrative positions in the school. The Senior Administrative Staff were pivotal in providing information on cluster school of excellence in view of their years of experience and seniority in the school administration. All respondents involved in the study had served for more than 10 years in the schools and were thus familiar and well-versed with the CSE programs in their schools. The respondents were able to provide feedback on their experiences in both academic and co-curricular programs. It is for this reason that the said staff was selected as respondents as they fitted the criteria of the research study.

In terms of ethical sanction, formal written permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Preliminary visits were conducted with the intended schools. The researcher provided the School Principal with the official letter of permission from the Ministry of Education and explained the objective of the study. Once sanction was obtained from the Principal, the researcher was directed to the Senior Administrative Staff who were similarly informed of the research purpose and objective of the study.

Sampling Technique

For the purpose of this paper, findings

from 4 School authorities (2 Principals and 2 Senior Administrative Staff) of both schools were selected. In the case of names of the Senior Administrative staff, names were provided by the Principal. The researcher provided the autonomy of decision making to the Principal. The Principal and Senior Administrative staff chosen were administrators and were also subject teachers from the Science, Information Technology or Non-Technical (STEM) stream of non-examination classes.

Research Design

Prior to the face-to-face interview, the Principal and staff were briefed on the research objective of the study. All had the right to opt out of the discussion if they decide to do so. Thus, Principals and staff had the independence to decide to participate or withdraw from the interview session if they so choose to. Should the respondents feel the need to opt out of any questions, they were free to do so. The interview session utilized the elicitation technique where respondents were encouraged to provide their feedback. In this case, respondents were eager and receptive toward enriching the researcher on the various types of programs, practices and challenges faced as well as the aspiration to excel in attaining the said status for all programs set in the school.

Research Instrument

For the purpose of this study, semi-structured and open-ended questions were used to facilitate spontaneous responses from two selected Principals and two senior

administrative staff. A semi-structured interview is less rigid with a combination of “standardized and open-ended questions to elicit more qualitative information” while an unstructured interview, on the other hand, “is a purely qualitative interviewing strategy where questions and follow-up probes are generated during the interview (Clarke & Dawson, 1999). The respondents were all provided with the “Consent to Interview Form” and made to understand that sessions were audio-taped for transcription purposes. In addition, the official mail of sanction as provided by the Ministry of Education was also provided to the selected respondents to indicate compliance to the Ministry of Education ethical processes for school-based research studies. In relation to the qualitative analysis, NVivo 11 (www.qsrinternational.com) was used to code the data as the researcher was familiar with the said qualitative data analysis software program.

Face-To-Face Interview

The interview session utilized the face-to-face interview technique (Pals & Atchison, 2014). The technique incorporated the interaction of the interviewer and the respondent. Interviews of such nature allow researchers to probe more fully into why people might feel the way they do, and the broader belief system that makes those attitudes make sense. Interviews are an excellent choice for more exploratory studies that are not well understood, and often contribute to knowledge that allows for the creation of better surveys. Face-to-

face interviews allows greater likelihood of developing rapport and create generally less feeling of anonymity between the researcher and the respondent. Interview sessions generally lasted for an hour and fifteen minutes with all of the Principals and Senior Administrative staff who were interviewed individually.

Principals and Senior Administrative staff who responded in the face-to face interviews were asked to comment on their involvements in the academic and co-curricular programs, student potential, personal and social environment of CSE schools, staff support, administrative management, leadership qualities, leadership competencies and challenges experienced by the school authorities in the implementation of CSE programs. They were also welcome to provide feasible suggestions for the sustenance of such programs. In addition, the Principals and staff were encouraged to share their uppermost concern in ensuring the success of CSE programs in aspiring schools. The researcher encouraged all Principals and staff to provide their feedback for all questions. In addition, Principals and

staff were also provided with the option to add any further comments if they wished to do so.

Qualitative Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using the six-step coding process as prescribed by Creswell (2003). Creswell’s (2003) generic process of qualitative data includes steps such as “a) organizing the data, b) preparing the data, b) reading the data, c) coding, d) narrating descriptions and forming themes, and e) interpreting the data” (Creswell, 2003, 2008) as indicated in Figure 1.

This form of qualitative data analysis was similarly conducted in other qualitative data studies (Buetow, 2010; Liu, 2016). The said interview technique provided all an opportunity to express their concerns and gave allowance to further comments that might not have been captured on the onset of the interview session. At the completion of the interview session, all respondents were provided with a token of appreciation by the researcher.

Initial read through data	Identify specific segments of information	Label the segments of information to create categories	Reduce overlap and redundancy of categories	Collapse categories into themes
Many pages of text	Many segments of text	30-40 codes	20 codes	5-7 codes/themes

Figure 1. Coding process of qualitative data (Creswell, 2008)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section elaborates on the themes derived from the interviews conducted with the said respondents. The themes were derived as a result of the qualitative data analysis employed via the use of Creswell's (2003, 2008) generic process. Interview texts are transcribed verbatim and the six-step coding process is utilized to derive the themes deemed crucial to the respondents. By the use of the coding process, various themes were elicited from the qualitative data as provided by the respondents.

Among the themes derived include emphasis on Leadership Competencies; Democratic and Collaborative Leadership Style; Realistic Goal and Aspiration; Tolerance and Personal Determination; Knowledge of Personal and Social Environment; Engagement and Rapport with Community and Visual Communication of Encouragement and Sustaining Commitment as critical areas of importance for effective leadership and management of cluster schools of excellence.

Theme 1: Leadership Competencies

Among the essential concern expressed by Principal A is the need to for leaders to demonstrate particular leadership competencies which marks leadership excellence including change management, research and teaching, communication, strategy and shared values, leadership, departmental culture, rewards and staffing. Such values are similarly echoed in other

studies (Corcoran, 2016; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Spendlove, 2007).

According to Principal A, the cohesive efforts of all are required and the need for such transformation relies on the effectiveness of the Principal in providing the lead, direction and guidance to the staff and students.

It is collective effort of all but such transformation may not materialize if the leader is unclear and unsure...so leader needs to create the direction, only then others can add to the transformation in either the academic or non-academic programs...we must be clear of what can be achieved by the staff and students and provide the right direction.

Thus, the need for a competent leader is essential in aspiring to attain the said status (Perera, 2015; Sirat et al., 2014).

Theme 2: Democratic and Collaborative Leadership Style

For Principal B, it is not only about the leader's direction but more importantly, the aspiration to attain the said status is also dependent on the leadership style of the Principal. In this light, Principals nearing retirement must prepare to pass the torch of leadership to those who come after them (Weller & Weller, 2002). Principals need to exercise democratic leadership style and ensure that staff is given the autonomy and freedom to make decisions in the classroom.

To Principal B, there is no doubt on the need for a good leader to provide directions, but the responsibility can be equally entrusted to the teachers to provide equal leadership opportunities and decision-making opportunities. There is a need for equal representation of both sexes in leadership positions (Harper, 2010; Sperandio, & Kagoda, 2008, 2010). This way, equal opportunities are provided to all teachers to be nurtured as future leaders for school management. Inadvertently, such collaborative leadership style creates a positive environment in the school (Ismail, 2012; Pounder & Coleman, 2002).

For Principal B, the importance of “grooming the staff with leadership responsibilities is necessary to ensure that there is a level of sustenance of succession” and “provides opportunities for the young staff to lead”. This accentuates the emphasis placed by Principal B on the importance of leadership qualities necessary for effective management. Principal B expresses the importance that opportunities are accorded for all staff to acquire leadership qualities in academic or non-academic niche areas.

Theme 3: Realistic Goal and Aspiration

Principal A mentioned that the school had to be realistic with the intended aspirations according to the academic ability of the students. For Principal A mentioned that the school had intended originally to attain higher academic status in 2 years but after 4 years this aspiration did not reach the intended target of improvement academically. This means that leaders in

such aspiring schools of excellence must be realistic in achieving the goals and aspirations set forth for the school. There is a need for school leaders to revisit and relook at the goal and aspiration in accordance to the academic status of the students. It does not imply that a leader places a lower goal but realistically provides a longer duration for a goal to be realistically achieved. The duration in attaining a specific goal is extended. For this, the leadership style is one of a flexible and realistic approach.

Thus, according to Principal A, the aspiration must also be realistic in line with the students’ capability as evidenced in the following statement.

We have to be realistic in our aspirations within the capabilities of the students. We may aspire to achieve high status in our program planning, but realistically we have to adjust according to the potential of our students. These are our ... “clients” who enter our school. There are many Form Five students who are still struggling with their basics. So, to me, I am even happy with a 1% increase in academic excellence. That to me is an achievement.

Thus, to the Principal, an institution can aspire to excel at all levels in both academic and non-academic programs, but realistically, the aspirations need to be in accordance to the academic potential of the students as well as ability for students to perform in such programs.

According to Principal A, the school has to ascertain that the goals set in place and planned for the school are attainable and achievable in accordance to the students' academic ability. This is necessarily so in the said school, as the school population comprises mainly of lesser academic performing students. According to Principal A, many of the students' background include "children from broken homes and divorced parents where there is minimal role model in the families". Thus, the academic expectation and aspiration had to be realistic. This however, does not deter the morale of the Principal and staff as various academic and non-academic programs over and above the normal syllabus requirement are set planned in the yearly academic calendar at the beginning of the academic year.

This view seconds Reynolds (2001) where there needs to be a balance between plans, manpower, and communication among all stakeholders on the aspiration of the school. There is a need to streamline academic and non-academic programs to students' realistic performance. This view was also mentioned in studies (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014) which indicated the need for effective leadership and management in line with the school's vision and mission to attain the CSE status. The need for effective leadership practices and management as crucial fundamentals to manage and lead schools is acknowledged in other studies (Jones et al., 2015; Kin et al., 2017).

Theme 4: Tolerance and Personal Determination

For Principal A, the saying, "when the going gets tough, the tough gets going" held true for the administrative staff and teachers in the school when faced with challenging students who possessed low academic performance at the onset. However, the Principal was of the notion that her team of staff and administrators were fully supportive and motivated despite the said circumstances. For this reason, Principal A stated that personal determination was crucial to overcome struggles in basic provision of amenities, infrastructure or even state-of-the-art technology in such aspiring schools. As mentioned in the study (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014), for aspiring CSE to be successful, such amenities are considered fundamental. However, realistically, this may not be the case.

This was the case for School A, where limited funding was available. However, this did not deter the spirit and morale of the Principal and staff of the school. Instead, the Principal rallied on the assistance of the State Education department, staff and students as well as that of the surrounding community. Repeated emails and correspondences were a norm. The perseverance of the Senior Unit Heads and staff eventually paid off when funds were received to create a better maintained school with proper gates and fencing surrounding the school grounds. Bus sheds propped up and a religious house of worship was made available to the students of the Muslim faith. These achievements were relentlessly pursued

by the School Principal and staff to create a better environment for all the students. Principal A clearly mentioned,

My teachers worked hard. We conduct various types of programs to provide constant motivation to the students. We are well aware that the students are from broken homes with minimal guidance and lack of academic motivation...thus to me...their excellence may not be defined as being a doctor, but just as responsible family person is excellent...despite all these trials and tribulations, I will not give up as I wish to uplift the name of the school. This is my vision. I have all the respect for all the teachers here as they are really tolerant, and this has resulted in students' co-curricular achievements at national level competition.

The Principal preserves to ensure that all students and staff strive for the betterment of the students. Tolerance and personal determination are indeed valued principles required of effective leaders in order to lead aspiring schools to attaining CSE status (Leithwood et al., 2008; Walker & Ko, 2011).

Leaders such as Principals and staff of the school need to listen and understand the struggles of the students. This is evidenced from the findings shared by the said Principal who is well aware of the potential of students from such backgrounds who require constant motivation to overcome the turmoil in the students' personal life. Thus,

tolerance and personal determination are apt values required in such challenging personal and social background.

Head of Student Affairs (referred to as Senior Admin B) mentioned that "issues cannot be solved by mere punishment; instead all of the teachers use a lot of empathy in handling the children's issues". In terms of issues related to attendance, the teachers take an extra initiative to conduct personal checks in the classes at random school hours to ensure that students are present in the classroom. Thus, for such CSE programs to leapfrog, school staff need to provide emotional support for students' from such background.

Theme 5: Knowledge of Personal and Social Environment

Feedback from the Head of Student Affairs (referred to as Senior Admin B) resonated shared views of Principal A. According to Senior Admin B, the majority of students are from problematic homes and thus lack the motivation to study. Senior Admin B shared,

In terms of students' personal and social background, based on our survey, the main problem stems from the socio-economic status of the parents. Fathers are not working, the mothers have to go out and work, so what do these students do...they mimic behaviors from problem homes, they get into fights, arguments as this is their only knowledge to a solution. Although we try and have seen improvements...The next issue of

concern is the social background... these children come from villages where there is lack of education emphasis in homes. However, there are also bright students who try their best in this school...we provide all sorts of motivational programs for all the students in the school. At the end, ultimately, the problem students may estrange themselves from such programs, but the rest may participate.

The challenge to create a positive learning environment is indeed challenged when students are faced with various personal and social environments. However, such staff knowledge of students' background propels the teaching staff to plan programs to instill various motivational programs and continuously provide positive encouragement to the students. This feedback on the need for a supportive and conducive environment concurs with McGee (2004).

The importance of conducive environment is similarly expressed in other studies (Blankstein, 2004; Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011). With the awareness of the personal and social standing of the students, the school teachers are willing to make a personal sacrifice of a yearly salary contribution of RM100.00. The school also takes the stand to ensure commitment from the students by encouraging a yearly donation of RM10.00 from each student. Through such measures, the school authorities address the financial hardships of the family. This sends the message that

school authorities are aware of the personal and social background of the student. By providing the financial support, it is envisaged that a positive and supportive environment is created for the students' full participation in CSE.

Theme 6: Engagement and Rapport with Community

In ensuring sustenance of any intended program, Senior Admin C (a Student Disciplinarian Head) stated that the engagement and support of the community and members of the public living around the area was pivotal to create the sense of shared vision and aspiration in achieving CSE status. To Senior Admin C, the success of many of the academic and non-academic programs was dependent on parents' encouragement and motivation to create that push factor for student participation. One such example was the materialization of house of worship in School A which garnered the support of community Heads from various villages as well as contribution from the public.

Through the committed efforts and shared vision of enhancing religious values to the students, the goal to build a house of worship was materialized when funds amounting to RM250,000.00 were successfully raised. Free architecture consultation was also provided by the former student of the school. For Senior Admin C, efforts were placed to provide financial support to needy students. In this instance, financial aid was also received from state religious institutions amounting

to RM75,000.00 Financial support was dispersed to the needy students of the school based on family financial income and standing. The school authorities utilized such aid for deduction of the students' annual school fees. Senior Admin C added,

This financial assistance from the religious authorities help to ease the financial constrain to the student and parents. Parents are very appreciative of such aids which are a motivating factor to encourage participation amongst needy students. In addition, the school delivers talks at community halls to brief the community of the current programs and initiatives of the school. Brochures are similarly distributed to reach the masses on the progress of the students. This enables the community to have a better understanding of the activities carried out for the students. Religious programs are also conducted to instill religious values among the students. Informative and Motivational programs are also conducted with members of the Police force and Naval Office for lesser achieving students.

This finding concurs with studies on aspiring schools which reaffirm the need for continuous engagement with members of the community (Reynolds, 2001). Schools have to work together hand-in-hand with parents and students and be open to the performance abilities of the students. Thus, for students

to achieve success, it is impertinent that community engagement is present to create a shared vision and goal.

Theme 7: Visual Communication of Encouragement and Sustaining Commitment

The success of CSE for such aspiring schools is dependent on instilling encouragement and creating a sustained commitment among the school community. For this purpose, Principal D mentions that knowing the students' personal and social environment, the staff goes an extra mile by providing encouragement through visual communication and print placed around notice boards in the school. Thus, according to Principal D,

Should a student achieve a particular success, banners and photographs are placed at the notice boards. This is to encourage other less aspiring students to pursue and aim higher. Many notices have been placed...too many in fact, so we have to display current achievements. This we hope will motivate the students to excel in academic and non-academic programs. By God's grace, there have been steady progress in students' state and national level participation in co-curricular competitions such as the Traditional Martial Arts and others. Students' efforts are appreciated when announcements on their achievements are made every subsequent week during the school assembly.

The findings indicate that school authorities attempt various means to ensure that students in such aspiring schools are kept motivated to excel. Motivation and encouragement through visual communication and continued commitment from all staff is essential to attain such CSE status. As mentioned by Duke et al. (2007), the conditions necessary for attaining success are reliant on student achievement and behavior; school programs and organization; staffing; school system concerns, and parents and community. The above findings indicate similar concerns shared by Duke et al. (2007).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings indicate that in an effort to attain the CSE status, Principals, school administrators, staff, parents and the community need to firstly understand the background knowledge of the students' personal and social background and academic and non-academic performance to be able to plan and administer various CSE programs. In addition, leadership competencies, leadership style coupled with knowledge of the social environment and rapport with the parents/guardians and community around the vicinity of the school is essential for decision making purposes in aspiring to achieve CSE status. Plans and initiatives maybe set forth but may not be achievable in practice sue to such challenges. Reality differs from practice as we need to be as one before we can achieve a shared desire and goal, in this case, the CSE status

for aspiring schools. To do so, principals, school staff and community may have to make changes according to the ability and pace of the students. In doing so, much leadership style, leadership competencies, empathy, sacrifices, engagement, planning, communication is required and expected of the educators to materialize the said vision. The importance of good leadership, competencies as well as positive human values supersedes all forms of trials and tribulations, should educators aspire in attaining educational excellence in both academic and non-curricular activities. In such aspiring schools, the challenges and tribulations in attaining the said status is the combined effort of leadership, commitment, competencies and support from all levels, i.e. Principals, staff, students and community to overcome challenges and aspire to attain excellence in academic and non-academic programs.

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