GROOMING THE NEXT GENERATION OF EDUCATION LEADERS – A SINGAPORE SCHOOL CLUSTER’S JOURNEY

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AIM

This paper aims to present the learning points gathered by the leadership development organising committee of a cluster of schools in Singapore to develop potential school leaders through a series of cluster-based programmes, spanning over the last few years. The cluster comprises 5 primary schools, 8 secondary schools and 1 junior college.

Some connections with existing research and theories are made in the paper and some unique observations are put forward for further discussion and debate.

BACKGROUND

Two strategies are traditionally recommended in the grooming of school leadership to ease suitable candidates into the community of educational administration -- leadership mentoring and situated learning. (Greenfield, 1975; Begley and Campbell–Evans, 1992; Crow and Glascock, 1995).

Leadership Mentoring

Leadership mentoring is defined by some as the formal and informal social construction of professional performance expectations developed through purposeful interactions between aspiring and practising principals in the context of authentic practice (Parkay and Hall, 1992; Brown-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004).

Lave and Wenger (1991) used the term ‘community of practice’ to refer to a set of relations among persons, activity and the world over time. In the context of school leadership, it involves the relationship with all stakeholders and the myriad problems that can arise because of the interactions and interdependent nature of the relationships.

One of the ways through which mentees see insights into the interwoven connections is ‘talk’. Two important forms of talk are reflection and reflective storytelling (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Through these two processes, mentors and mentees engage in reflection in, on and for practice (Schön, 1983). Mentors also share stories on how they manage situations and solve problems, thus creating new insights and opportunities for developing critical relationships (Williams, 2004). Mentoring is therefore a powerful process, beyond mere training and inductions, from which aspiring school leaders learn about different aspects of leadership.
Understanding the mentor-mentee role is a critical factor in achieving the planned outcomes as well as conducting the mentoring sessions. Mentors are expected to provide help in one or more ways: visibility and exposure, advice on career goals and advancement strategies, technical and social managerial skills, opportunities to perform newly acquired skills and counseling about professional and personal problems (Lim and Low, 2004). When the parameters are clearly drawn, there is greater clarity in roles and also expectations.

**Situated Learning**

Situated learning is a social practice which places aspiring school leaders in authentic situations, under the guidance of leadership mentors, where they can apply theories, procedures and skills learned in classroom settings (Murphy, 1993; Glasman and Glasman, 1997).

Lave and Wenger (1991) believe that learning extends beyond the reception of factual knowledge or information. Instead, learning is situated and requires active participation from learners. They suggest that “learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind... It is the community, or at least those participating in the learning context, who 'learn'.” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 15) They proposed a particular conceptual model known as Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), which describes effective means for bringing mentees from the periphery to the centre of the community of leadership practice, gradually increasing in engagement and complexity, by having them work closely with mentor on site over sustained periods of time.

Lave and Wenger suggest that LPP has the following impact on the learning and growth of mentor and mentee:

a. enables the mentee to be involved in what the mentor does, how he/she talks, how he/she responds to situations, and what mentees need to do to become full practitioners; (p. 95)

b. provides an immediate ground for mentee’s self-evaluation. The non-threatening environment, lack of judgement or blame helps to give accurate and timely reflection of self before one becomes a full practitioner; (p. 111)

c. help mentors themselves to think more comprehensively about their practices and their organisations when mentee presents fresh perspectives or questions their assumptions, beliefs and practices. (p. 117)

Much of the current research focuses on leadership mentoring and situated learning within the same organisation. Our research builds on existing development programmes in individual schools to explore collaborative efforts of a cluster of schools in developing future leaders. As a school cluster, we have benefited from the synergy and cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices in the area of leadership development. However, we have not found substantial research conducted on cross-organisational collaborative leadership development and endeavour to contribute to the research literature through this paper.
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS AT A SCHOOL CLUSTER LEVEL IN SINGAPORE

Singapore Context
School leadership succession planning is critical in sustaining high quality leadership for resource-scarce Singapore. While milestone training programmes exist in the National Institute of Education for serving school leaders and middle managers, coupled with various induction programmes and regular workshops organised by the Ministry of Education, a large part of the grooming of future school leaders requires purposeful mentoring and coaching. This is done at the individual schools by the principals with suitable candidates identified from the group of middle managers (Heads of Departments, Subject Heads, Level Heads) that they are working with.

The context in which the career progression of education officers is mapped throughout one’s career has a huge impact on the way leadership development programmes are structured. Unlike many other education systems where teachers and administrators are hired on contract basis and career development is largely confined to the same school setting, there is a lot more variability in the Singapore context.

In the Singapore system, where deployment and development of education officers are managed by a central Personnel Division in the Ministry of Education, officers are generally expected to be rotated from school to school, sometimes even across different education levels, once every few years. Hence, the orientation of education officers in Singapore is such that they are expected to function across different school contexts. The school cluster system in Singapore has also evolved from the early years of homogeneous clusters to the current state of mixed-level clusters to encourage cross-level understanding and alignment. Such a system affords us the opportunity to provide leadership development programmes where an officer is given a comprehensive macro view of educational leadership and policy making and made to understand the rationale and intent of leadership development beyond their working environment, in preparation for their future postings.

The case central to the observations and analyses presented in this paper is a series of work developed by a cluster of schools in Singapore to explore viable ways to develop potential school leaders through a cluster-based approach, beyond the leadership grooming efforts of individual schools.

Cluster-based Leadership Development Programmes
The Principal Mentoring programme, conceptualised and implemented in 2009, is one where senior middle managers with the potential of becoming school leaders are each matched with a principal from another cluster school to be his/her mentor. Over a period of 6 months, these middle managers engage in learning and conversations with their mentors to uncover leadership principles beyond what they have learnt from their own school principals. In the process, the participants reflect on their own leadership philosophies and in some cases, become stronger in their conviction to develop themselves along the leadership path.

The KP Mentoring programme is a new developmental programme launched in 2011 in response to requests from principals in cluster schools on the need to provide their
younger key personnel\(^1\) with guidance as they step into the leadership role. Experienced Key Personnel (KP) selected from various schools are matched with younger KP from other schools to provide such mentoring.

In the *School Attachment/Project Development (SAPD)* programme, put in place since 2009, dynamic middle managers with strong expertise in their area of work are selected and matched with hosting schools who are interested to review their work processes in the same area. These middle managers would enter these schools periodically over a six-month period where they share their expertise, provide critique and lend alternative perspectives to the hosting school’s review team. The challenge here is for these middle managers to act as “change agents” to another school, where they need to develop and hone strong advocacy and environment sensing skills very quickly.

These programmes typically run from February to July in each yearly cycle. Participants are required to consolidate and present their learning to each other and to the school principals in the cluster during assigned presentation sessions.

For the purpose of our research, detailed notes of observation during the participants’ presentations, participants’ reflections, notes from working sessions amongst the committee members, notes from our participation as mentors and our discussion of learning points with our own KP participating in the various programmes, were used to distil important learning points.

In the 3 programmes outlined above, participants are brought out of the comfort zone of their schools and placed in different school contexts to expand their worldview of education. At the beginning, participants are placed at the periphery of their host schools. In the case of the two mentoring programmes, participants interact with their mentors at the periphery but work on more complex tasks within their own school contexts. For the SAPD programme, the participants go one step further to advocate and influence change and innovation in the host school, taking into consideration a new context and culture. However, in all the programmes, there were no opportunities for the participants to be directly involved in the central functioning of the school.

**FINDINGS**

**Initial Discomfort of Participants**
One important feature of the cluster’s leadership development programmes is the placement of participants in an unfamiliar environment and requiring them to learn and perform certain functions within the new environment.

Many participants faced initial discomfort in having to adjust and perform in a new environment. In particular, the KP Mentoring Programme was designed to enable KP to learn from another KP from a different school. Participants of this programme had initial doubts and apprehension and were uncertain how to proceed.

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\(^1\) In Singapore and this paper, *key personnel* is used synonymously with *middle managers*. 
“Although the KP mentoring journey was in a way unnatural, I believe it is meant to stretch the two parties. It allowed us to grow as we deal with unfamiliar situations.” (KP Mentor, 2011)

The unfamiliarity between mentor and mentee made it necessary for both to spend time understanding each other’s context, strengths and areas of growth.

“As the alignment in matching the mentor and mentee is not totally perfect, some time was needed to find a common point of learning.” (KP Mentee, 2011)

Through this period of initial adjustment and exploration, some mentees were able to grow and develop and be inspired and energised by it, and then take full advantage of the situation to maximise their learning. Others, however, continued to lament that the unfamiliar context had impeded their learning and saw that as an obstacle to their learning. We believe that participants’ reaction towards such uncertainty is a strong indication of their ability to handle ambiguities and therefore suggests certain leadership traits.

Connections with LPP
In the analyses of our data, we have identified similar impact on learning and growth of both mentors and mentees, even though our programmes have significant departures from those discussed in the LPP context.

1. Periphery Engagement
Mentee is involved in what the mentor does, how he/she talks, how he/she responds to situations, and what mentees need to do to become full practitioners.

In the Principal Mentoring programme, the participating mentees had varying extent of observing their mentors in action. Those with the opportunity to watch and listen to their mentors put their leadership theories into practice and reflected on the richness and depth of learning through such periphery observations.

“I strongly believe that one of the ways in which a leader can grow a person is through role-modelling. Through actions, leaders set examples on what they believe in. During the five sessions of the Leadership Studies in AIPS, I was able to observe the way my Principal mentor worked and saw how she actualised the vision that she has set for her school through her interactions with staff and pupils. The learning gleaned from the Leadership Studies was able to help me shaped my leadership beliefs and contributed to my growth as a more effective Key Personnel.” (P Mentee 2009)

Our participants’ reflections suggest that their periphery experiences included observing leaders thinking aloud and talking about their leadership theories. Mentees were often engaged in deep reflection and discussions on the Mentor’s leadership beliefs and practices, leading to consolidation of the mentee’s own theories and practices. This periphery experience often involves thinking and metacognition.

“The greatest benefit of the programme is the opportunity for deep conversation with an experienced school leader who is nurturing, insightful and thought-provoking. There is only such so much we can learn from books
and theory, and nothing beats the interaction and exchange of opinions through honest and at times, fiery dialogue, with the school leader as well as with the other participants in the programme.” (P Mentee 2009)

2. Reflection
The non-threatening environment, lack of judgement or blame helps to give accurate and timely reflection of self before one becomes a full practitioner.

One common feature of the 3 cluster development programmes is that participants are placed far removed from the usual contexts in which they are working in, and learn as much as possible through their interactions with leaders from another school setting. Those who are involved as consultants and mentors are not directly held accountable for any outcomes resulting from the process. The dissociation with their present school context allowed all parties involved to understand and build rapport with each other. As such, once the participants get over the initial discomfort of being in a new setting, the learning environment is one that is congruent to the non-threatening one in the LPP context. In the cluster KP Mentoring programme, the pairing of 2 middle managers from different schools provided the natural impetus for both mentors and mentees to pause and seek to understand each other and themselves better.

“It has also helped me recollect my personal leadership philosophies and re-sharpen my skills in organizational and people management.” (KP Mentor 2011)

“The programme allows me to clarify some of my beliefs in running a school and managing staff. It gives me an opportunity to hear from principal’s point-of-view. By doing so, I would be able to appreciate better of my school principal’s approaches.” (P Mentee 2011)

The newly formed relationships between the mentors and mentees over a 6-month period provided the participating mentees with a reflective environment to examine and review their leadership practices alongside their mentors.

“The programme helped me to crystallise thought-processes of my leadership philosophies and provide me with guidance and a “sounding board” for my ideas and thinking.” (KP Mentee 2011)

“Through working with other leaders, I have also set time aside for personal reflection to seek personal clarity within myself and the direction I am leading my organization.” (KP Mentor 2011)

3. Influence on Mentors
Mentors themselves think more comprehensively about their practices and their organisations when mentees gives fresh perspectives or questions their assumptions, beliefs and practices.
In our 2 mentoring programmes, the mentors had to review their beliefs and practices before they engaged their mentees in their learning.

“This mentoring experience also affirmed the need for me to identify and have a strong conviction in my personal mission so as to help others think of their personal mission.” (KP Mentor 2011)

“In the course of the programme, I reflected on the essential qualities of a good leader.” (KP Mentor 2011)

“While discussing with my mentee, Kenneth, about the strategies of servant leaderships and skilful people management, I was also mentally practising my skills and revisiting my philosophy again.” (KP Mentor 2011)

The learning and growth of the mentors in the KP Mentoring Programme was uneven. Some demonstrated deeper thinking through their presentation and reflections. Others were shallow and could only present known theories from “gurus” or other superficial learning.

On the whole, the participants’ reflections have provided some suggestion that our development programmes involving middle managers learning with other schools’ middle managers and principals had created learning conditions that would facilitate learning in a periphery context based on the descriptions by Lave & Wenger.

Leadership Growth of Participants
Our programmes are deliberately designed to create learning conditions that place participants in unfamiliar environments so as to open their minds to new possibilities. It is also intentional in our programmes to focus participants’ learning on strategic and visionary thinking at the levels of school leaders. While participants might already be seasoned practitioners in leading and managing teams of people and processes within their own school, many are still novices at perceiving and thinking at a higher level, a skill required of school leaders.

In all our leadership development programmes, participants would co-participate in generative thinking during their periphery experiences, and all would eventually practise their new learning in enhanced strategic and visionary thinking when they return to their own schools.

“Leaders are learners too. I believe as leaders, we must constantly look out for opportunities to grow and seek improvement. Even though I am the mentor in this journey, my mentee’s candid sharing has allowed me to learn from her too. Through the dialogue sessions with my mentee, I am enlightened on some of the good practices in her school and I have also learned more about myself as a leader through the eyes of a Key Personnel from another school.” (KP Mentor 2011)

The participants have indicated in their reflections that they have developed new insights, especially in the area of leadership vision and people management. These insights have been derived from the mentor’s experiences, thoughts and opinions.
“All the leaders I have observed in the leadership programmes showed me that effective leaders are able to excite people about their vision, able to walk the talk, be consistent in the way they lead and are innovative in solving problems.” (P Mentee, 2009)

Another participant indicated that the mentoring session has helped her become more sensitive to her people’s (her team members at her school) needs.

“I have learnt to be more sensitive to their morale and motivational level and thereby providing appropriate care, concern and support towards them”. (P Mentee 2011)

In one particular case, the participant reflected on the changes in her understanding of what people management is all about as school leaders:

“I understood as a result of that attachment that as a leader, we have to put in a lot of hard work at building relationships and building a caring culture so that the people whom you are leading will want to work hard for the organisation.” (SAPD 2009)

“Effective leadership cannot just focus on building good relationships with people. President Harry Truman was quoted as saying, ‘A leader is a person who has the ability to get others to do what they don’t want to do and like it.’ To me, having good relationships with people will enable us to get others to do the job but being able to motivate them and get them to like what they don’t want to do is challenging.” (KP Mentor 2011)

Within the context of mentor and mentee, the participation in that context and the evaluation of it is rather intellectual and the focus becomes the level of reflective and analytical thinking on the part of the mentee. One mentee highlighted the nature of the discussion as

“the greatest benefit of the programme is the opportunity for deep conversation with an experienced school leader who is nurturing, insightful and thought provoking.” (P Mentee 2009)

Another participant reflected that

“the programme has also helped me to recollect my personal leadership philosophies and re-sharpen my skills in organisational and people management”. (KP Mentor 2011)

These accounts indicate that participants were involved in deep discussions that inspired them to reflect on their personal beliefs, searching and understanding their values and purpose in the journey of leadership. There seems to be a strong desire to have a deeper understanding of their own thoughts, beliefs and attitudes.

During the programme, the KP mentors were able to design their own mentoring process to engage their mentees. Those who participated in previous Principal
Mentoring programmes applied what they themselves had observed and experienced as a mentee.

“The Leadership Studies experience at AIPS has definitely helped me in the way I approached and designed the programme for my mentee. I was able to model after what my Principal mentor did during the five-day attachment stint in her school with my mentee so as to value add to my mentee’s learning experience.” (P Mentee 2009, KP Mentor 2011)

They sought to build strong rapport with their mentees, understand their personal life mission and seek alignment to organisational goals.

“KP Mentoring allowed me to grow in my capacity to develop others (EPMS competency: Developing Others). This is because my mentee is from another school and is also a primary school. It allowed me to transfer my learning in Generative Conversation so as to facilitate his learning and build his confidence in Staff Resource Planning and to take up the appointment of SSD. Given the difference in context (organisation, setting and practices), I had to listen deeply to his concerns, inquire to understand him better and advocate to clarify my views.” (KP Mentor 2011)

Readiness to Lead In A Different School Context
Through our programmes, we have observed that our participants have indicated that they are now more ready to function in a different school context and system.

“A leader must be responsive to the changing needs of the educational landscape so that he could inspire his staff to innovate and/or adopt new practices that would better prepare their students for their future workplace. In addition, this adaptable leadership philosophy would remind me that I must always be prepared to leave my comfort zone and continue to function effectively as a middle manager in any school. I must be able to adapt to my new environment quickly and tap on the collective wisdom of my colleagues and partners to meet the needs of the students and staff.” (SAPD, 2010, KP Mentor 2011)

Participants also had to exercise advocacy in an unfamiliar environment, where their attention to details were heightened and their sensitivity to organisational culture was sharpened. This is especially evident in the SAPD programme.

“Through the SAPD programme, I was given the opportunity to tackle a concern in another school with officers I have worked for the first time. This required me to move out of a familiar territory into uncharted ‘practice field’ where I had to assess the situation with extra sensitivity and accuracy so that I could address the surfaced concern with effectiveness and efficiency. This calls for decision making, sometimes in a blink. This, by no means, indicates any degree of haphazardness but requires the dexterity in blending past experiences with present reflection on the issue.” (SAPD 2010)
CHALLENGES

*Raising the levels of perspective of the participants from the level of Middle Manager to that of the School Leaders*

In the participants’ reflections, many still focused their attention on the specifics of their current job scope and were unable to see the greater, more generic and important learning of leadership principles offered in the programmes. Some participants from the KP Mentoring Programme lamented that their mentors were not of the same discipline as themselves and therefore they were not able to learn “practical” strategies of managing a department from them.

Such fixation on the specifics and concrete, with less attention on the more important, but yet abstract ideas of leadership principles has been a consistent observation that the organising committee has made about the participants over the last few years, across all leadership development programmes. This observation has been made despite specific reminders on numerous occasions to participants to focus on personal learning points on leadership principles. Herein lie the inertia and great challenge for school leadership development.

Participants, while they were being mentored for a larger portfolio and role, were still holding positions of middle managers which may not allow for them to practise broader, deeper thinking at the level of school leaders. It must also be acknowledged that the practice of deeper thinking and involvement at school level would take a longer time period and it would go beyond the scope of the mentoring programmes and SAPD.

*Fixation on the limitations and not on the possibilities*

Participants were fixed at event level observations and thinking. They seemed more excited about the programmes in the hosting school rather than critical issues like ‘what is the rationale behind this programme’ and ‘how does this serve the school’s strategic plan’. Their mindset operated at the event level and focused on the possibilities of a school programme being implemented back in their own school. The purpose of actions seemed quite remote as compared to the action itself. One might also think that the participants did not ask critical questions because some of them felt that they should receive information from their mentors rather than “question” them.

*“Becoming” more than “Belonging”*

Another challenge that the team faces is the issue of transfer of learning. While participants have indicated that they have learnt how important it is to have a clear leadership purpose and vision, they have not been able to describe how this new knowledge is having an effect in their community. Thus, their learning in transforming their community does not come through as clearly as transforming themselves. While “becoming” seems to have taken place, the “belonging” to a community, the understanding of the culture of the community and trying to shape it by being an agent of change seems to be lacking.
LIMITATIONS

While collection of reflection journals is a feasible way through which leadership growth could be identified through self-reporting, objective observation of concrete manifestation of real leadership change remains elusive to the organising committee.

Reflections from participants indicate that there were opportunities for participants to interact with their mentors and discuss key issues pertaining to leadership. However, it is not known if the whole process had improved the participants’ thinking skills. Conversations with the mentors could have indicated a high level of engagement but whether this engagement has been transferred back to the participants’ own schools cannot be verified. The quality of thinking and critical questioning during the conversations are some measures used but they may not be conclusive to suggest that there has been an improvement in participants’ thinking skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Grooming of school leadership is a long term process that goes beyond any development programme. Our analysis has suggested that important leadership traits and behaviours cannot be imbued within the short timeframe of our development programmes and need constant cultivation spanning over many years. As a follow up to this project, we would be recommending that member schools within the cluster provide more structured platforms for high potential middle managers to further develop their leadership theories and philosophies. This should be done with lots of guidance from the principals who need to invest time for conversations and guidance to raise the sophistication of these middle managers. School leaders should also assign them with developmental projects in order to allow them to put their leadership theories and philosophies into practice.

CONCLUSION

“We are committed to discovering talents and strengths among our educators, help each develop, and create opportunities for learning and growth. We continue to invest in our people, and to believe that everyone is capable of learning and of reaching his potential, in the different roles and ways that educators can contribute.”

- Mrs Tan Ching Yee, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education, 2011

In today’s highly connected global landscape, education continues to be the prime engine through which the individuals are well-developed to move societies and communities forward. To ensure that schools continue to serve the social function of developing the potential of each child to his fullest so that he can face the challenges of the future, school leadership is critical.

2 More specific frameworks would need to be researched and devised to facilitate meaningful implementations.
As school principals, grooming the next generation of school leaders remains central to our commitment to the education service. Tapping on the support structure of the school cluster system, the development of our high potential middle managers to take on the future challenge of school leadership needs to be made more deliberate and meaningful so that the continuous improvement of our education system can be sustained from one generation of school leaders to the next.

References


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