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Self-Determination in Malaysian Education: Making Decisions and Taking Action in this Era of Challenge and Opportunity

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ABSTRACT

Advances in any culture depend on the ability of its people to develop an infrastructure in which governmental decision-making and action-taking are both systematic and systemic. That has been both the challenge and opportunity faced by the Malaysian people since the nation's independence in 1957, to develop systematic governmental processes that are ongoing and cumulative in their positive effect on the country's institutions. The goal is to make those processes so much a force of habit that they become enmeshed with the existing culture, creating an institutional memory that accepts them as a kind of Malaysian way.

Challenges to Achieving Self-Determination

The intense competition in modern and fast paced societies around the world and the globalization of media means that Malaysia has had to form its own culture much more rapidly than countries like the United States. Malaysia has been forced to create its own way of doing things in about 50 years, whereas a country like the United States has had over 200 years to make its systems work. Among the challenges faced by Malaysian leaders have been issues associated with multiple languages, dialects, cultural beliefs, economic stability, and the development of an educational system that serves both the new country's needs and the

aspirations of its citizens. In other words, any kind of *Malaysian Way* requires a multi-faceted approach to achieve the kind of social efficacy to which the country aspires. While none of those challenges is more important than another, we believe that much depends on a solid, well organized and managed public school system.

In 1957, Malaya, which in 1963 joined Sarawak and Sabah to become Malaysia and composed of Bumiputras and large populations of Chinese and Indians, won independence from Great Britain. Together, those disparate groups began the adventure of nation building. Each group had its own history to contend with, particularly the Chinese and the Indians, many of whom were brought to the region by local rulers and the British to work in the mining and rubber industries.

To help the different cultures form a common national identity, the Malaysian government has created something called the *K Economy*, with the K meaning “knowledge.” That means the country is being placed on a track to move away from its near total dependence on agriculture and mining which involves much manual labor, extensive use of land, and the depletion of natural resources. The new *K Economy* goals are the realization of full literacy, access to basic education, and the building of a renewed physical infrastructure. In the 1990s that social and industrial revolution was well under way, with science, technology, education, and the adoption of innovative thinking in the forefront. The *K Economy* initiative also features manufacturing, distribution processes, and improved public utilities.

One good example of actions taken by the government is that Malaysian workers were sent to Japan to learn how to build automobiles. [An author of this paper witnessed Malaysians learning about automotive manufacturing at an automobile factory in Japan.] Today, Malaysia’s car company, Proton, is a viable automobile company that makes many models now seen on the nation’s roads. Other examples of Malaysia’s successes can be found in its efforts to build a recycling industry, synthesize knowledge from all sources, and upgrade information services. Malaysia is creating technological expertise to benefit its people and institutions, and for exporting to other countries. Kuala Lumpur, the economic capital of Malaysia, promotes the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project that is Malaysia’s answer to Silicon Valley in the United States. MSC, as a technology center, exports intellectual property and technological innovations to other regions and countries. The new international airport near Kuala Lumpur is a showpiece and an important contribution to sustain a developing nation.

With regard to education, schools are at the heart of maintaining sound economic and political policies over time. To accomplish this task, Malaysia uses a multi-pronged approach. According to Paul Hamm and Jennifer Ho, in *Correcting for Vision 2020*, that approach includes decentralization of school management, privatization and training through the use of “Smart Schools,” and the encouragement of higher order thinking skills (HOTS) in the classrooms. [An author of this paper was involved in the Smart Schools project as a foreign consultant.]

Both countries have dealt with the issues concerning language and national identity. In Malaysia, the former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad declared in 2003 that all maths and science in secondary schools would be taught in English. This decision has not been without controversy.

In U.S., one of the authors of this paper recently worked in a Southern California public high school district where students speak 52 different languages and dialects. This situation shows that both Malaysia and the United States struggle with language and cultural issues. Therefore, it is imperative that solutions are found in both countries that provide for good quality communication, essential in any education program, without diminishing the values held by distinct cultural groups.

Achieving Self-Determination in Education

A school or school district will solve issues discussed in this article through the “Smart School” process, described earlier as using the principle of *decentralization of school management*. While that idea sounds good in theory, actually creating an academic leadership structure that includes the perspectives of many different people is challenging. There are essentially two kinds of challenges: (1) making decisions that are clear and focused, and (2) taking actions based on those decisions. Anyone who has served on committees or councils understands why those two challenges are difficult to meet. Collective decision-making and action-taking can be so complex that many human organizations, including nations, have allowed more centralized authority to emerge just to break the logjam and actually get something done. Strong political and educational leaders can emerge from the confusion, thereby destroying the idea of *decentralization*.

Some American educators have been studying the problem, and one author of this article did considerable research in the 1980s and 1990s on how to modify decision-making and action-taking structures in American

public schools. Historically, American schools and school districts tended to emulate the military/industrial model of decision-making. Although elected local boards of education are responsible for developing basic policies, it is the administrative staff that is responsible for implementing them. That means there is a superintendent who oversees building principals. The principals oversee teachers and other educators in their buildings, and students are accountable to meet teacher directives. The process is called line and staff, often referred to in the United States as top-down management.

It was also determined that such a leadership process in schools is dysfunctional because it does not separate *managerial* concerns from *academic* interests. In other words, a typical principal will spend much of a workday dealing with logistical problems associated with schedules, facilities, student discipline, clerical issues, budgets, public relations, preparing governmental reports, managing personnel, and overseeing the use of resources. So much of the day is devoted to those tasks that principals and other administrators find it difficult to lead with regard to curriculum, instruction, and conditions that ensure student learning. Yet, one might ask, what are schools really for? How can we create conditions where academic imperatives are discussed and acted on more frequently than managerial problems?

Self-determination that works in schools must be based on systems clearly related to policy, which ultimately becomes a cultural habit among all stakeholders. It is the same logic used in democratic nations, that their residents create a constitution and body of laws that regulate decision-making and action-taking. Eventually, if the nation or institution can be made stable under those rules of consensus-building, they create cultural belief systems based on the “way things are done here.”

The organization that does much work with American school districts in assisting them achieve such a system is the *Curriculum Leadership Institute*. It is a non-profit consultant group that helps districts change the way they do things in administering, implementing and conducting the academic program (curriculum, instruction, student learning, assessment of learning). The model it uses features the creation of a new policy for academic decision-making and action-taking in the school or district, one that clearly separates managerial and professional responsibilities.

Curriculum Leadership Institute

The Curriculum Leadership Institute (CLI) has attempted to deal with the manager vs. academician problem in a unique way: it helps schools and districts modify approaches to the development, management, implementation and evaluation of curriculum, instruction and assessment of student learning through organizational patterns that emphasize *teacher leadership*. In some ways it uses strategies – albeit somewhat more elaborate – that administrators have long used to bring teachers into the decision-making and action-taking loop.

Soon after starting research and development activities in the 1980s, those associated with the Curriculum Leadership Institute concluded that the most critical academic leadership issue was really an academic *governance* problem. That conclusion was based on these findings: (1) that academic leadership is too often a temporary condition based on the personalities and skills of certain individuals who may or may not remain in the school or district over time, (2) that academic leadership is not a *systemic* feature of public schools as the essence of an organization's culture and institutional memory, (3) that teachers – who are usually the longest tenured of school employees – are rarely accepted as professional and academic leaders in any official sense, and (4) that the school or district's industrial/military pattern for organizational development and maintenance placed teachers at the bottom of the decision-making chain. It was also concluded that current governance structures worked against good communication in a district, which in turn caused serious problems with curricular coordination and the appropriate monitoring of student progress.

The CLI developed a model for school district improvement that causes *teachers to become academic leaders on a par with all other professional educators* in the organization. The easiest way to describe the CLI's governance model is that it is a kind of constitutional process that works from a collaboratively written and approved policy, a policy that places academic decision-making and action-taking in the hands of key professional stakeholders in a district. Councils and committees described in the policy include a mix of teachers, board members, administrators, professional support persons, and others who should be included in discussions, deliberations and decision-making. To avoid confusion, this process is not in any way associated with teacher *empowerment* or *buy-in* schemes, as it is a means through which teachers become real professional and academic leader-partners within a very inclusive culture.

The CLI governance model requires participants to think in terms of an organizational dichotomy, with one line of authority focusing on *managerial* needs and a second line of authority responsible for *professional/academic* needs. In other words, there must be acceptance of the idea there are two distinct domains in school districts and buildings that must be considered separately for day-to-day operations, but work together to meet particular organizational goals. The best existing model for that way of functioning can be found in the way most American hospitals are managed.

Hospitals are administered differently from schools. While their tables of organization vary depending on the wishes of a sponsoring entity, they typically split managerial and professional roles in definite ways. A hospital's chief executive officer is rarely a licensed medical doctor or registered nurse. CEOs are ordinarily prepared at the graduate level as hospital administrators, or hold advanced degrees in business such as an MBA. While such business-oriented managers certainly have more than a passing acquaintance with the health care field, virtually none of them would claim real expertise in the conduct of patient care.

Responsibility for leading the hospital's medical doctors, nurses, and other professional health care personnel in providing *patient care* is usually given to a medically trained chief of staff. Such a person and the hospital administrator have a close working relationship in managing the facility and its services. There might also be administrators of other professional personnel, such as the heads of nursing and more specialized departments.

Larger school districts do something that *looks* similar to the hospital model, with a cadre of associate or assistant superintendents, directors, coordinators, and facilitators. However, the chain of authority is still unilateral because it is understood that all day-to-day decision-making somehow flows through that one managerial conduit. Depending on the size of a school, principals do the same thing with regard to assistant or associate principals, department and grade level chairs, and program directors. Very large high schools commonly have multiple associate or assistant principals, as well as numerous department or grade level chairs. If a school is large enough to have many leaders subordinate to the principal, then the principal can function as a managerial CEO while subordinates take care of academic (professional) leadership needs.

The difference between the hospital and the large district or high school arrangement is found in the word "subordinate." It is doubtful that medical chiefs of staff in large hospitals view their roles as being

subordinate to that of hospital administrators. In fact, most hospitals have the two functions clearly spelled out in their corporate procedures, with processes stipulated as to how actions are taken and conflicts resolved.

Also, most schools and districts usually have much smaller and less formally developed *chains of command*. However, the key consideration even in those less formal organizations is that teachers and professional support persons are subordinate to the superintendent or principal. While that might work, as in the case of an administrator who genuinely uses collaborative decision making and action taking strategies, it can also have serious drawbacks, especially when the administrator is a poor academic leader.

Schools and districts that use the CLI model usually focus on district management formats instead of organizational structures in individual buildings. They do not tinker with job titles that might confuse state licensing boards, but create a decision-making and action-taking culture that separates managerial considerations from matters having to do with curriculum, instruction and assessment of student learning. Typically, academic policy statements (which are included in more general board policies), indicate that the administrative team (licensed administrators) work with day-to-day managerial issues, while a curriculum or academic council handles all matters that directly affect student learning. A district's policy statement stipulates that a representative number of licensed administrators serve on a curriculum or academic council, along with board members, teachers, professional support persons, and others identified in the policy document. Frequently, a teacher is selected to be both chair of the council and the executive assigned to implement decisions of that body.

Academic policy statements in CLI districts emphasize procedures more than distinctions between managerial and academic leadership. However, because of the policy statement and the day to day processes it regulates, it increasingly becomes clear how decisions should be made. There is one very important caveat with regard to the policy statement: it only works in districts that have superintendents and principals who are confident in their ability to share decision-making and action-taking authority, and who trust their teaching associates to fully participate in the making of good academic decisions.

They also need to know, through a well written policy, the mechanisms through which collaborative action will take place. One example is that academic leaders who experience serious problems with particular teachers in developing or implementing agreed-upon curriculum, instruction or assessment processes, will certainly need to work closely

with administrative leaders in resolving those situations. The policy statement should make those and all other processes very understandable and practical.

Summary

Malaysia is well on her way to achieving the goals set out by her former Prime Minister Mahathir's 2020 plan. The reforms he set out for the nation in the areas of academic reform have lead and will continue to lead her to meet the needs of a nation of the 21st Century. Her successes deserve worldwide acclaim. She has made a strong effort to import educational expertise and develop her own set of native professions in many areas. Malaysia has leap-frogged over many countries and has achieved nothing short of a miracle. She has sent her students to various countries with the proviso that they return home to teach others. Cross-cultural experts are invited and observers have been invited to observe, report and to give workshops and lectures. The attention shown not only to the economic system but the educational system has paid dividends. The efforts have been both systematic and systemic. The *Malaysian Way* of self-determination will be enhanced with the CLI model where professional educators work together within an inclusive culture to meet managerial and professional/academic needs.

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