

# Leadership, Career Growth and Socialization Paths of Malaysian Public School Managers

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to understand the nature of learning for school managers in government schools as they learn and make decisions at different stages of the socialization stages from accession to retirement. A phenomenological approach was utilized and participants were selected from excellent and successful school managers through elite sampling. The data collection methods employed to achieve the purpose of the study were mainly in-depth interviews with the participants. The thematic findings which emerged from this data included four socialization stages namely: (1) Entry into Headship; (2) Identity Formation; (3) Making a Difference; and (4) Reformulation of Personal Values. The study concluded that the findings of this study provided a helpful guide for understanding school managers' learning in the socialization process towards achieving better leadership and decision making. Implications for relevant training and appropriate support for leadership preparation and learning are suggested.

**Keywords** Career growth, learning stages, school managers, socialization process

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been some literature or description concerning the career growth and development of school managers. However, they have either not been critical or they have been limited in scope. The studies in Malaysia focused mainly on leadership roles (Omar, Khuan, Kamaruzaman, Marinah, Jamal, 2011; Ali and Azam, 2007), leadership effectiveness (Lee, 2007) and leadership challenges (Khuan, Omar and Sharil, 2012; Omar, Khuan, Marinah and Jamal, 2011). Concerns about career growth of school managers are not limited to Malaysia and are studied in other countries such as USA (Farley-Ripple, Raffel and Welch, 2012; MacBeath, 2009), Australia (MacPherson, 2009),

and UK (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). Most of the studies in these countries delineated recruitment and retention issues such as shortages of qualified and effective school administrators, early retirement and exit, and lack of desire of qualified candidates to move into leadership positions (Creasey, West-Burnham and Barnes, 2004). While they have some similarities, they also differ with the case in Malaysia where the concerns of an aging profession and lack of desire after assuming leadership positions are more acute. Therefore, it is important that researchers and managers research on the career growth process as they still lack understanding of how school managers learn in their working lives. It is when the essential process of socialization is established for school managers that strategies can be formulated to provide them with the necessary training and education (Omar, Khuan, Kamaruzaman, Marinah, Yusof, Jamal and Yunus, 2011; Amer and Khuan (2004); Omar and Khuan (2001). The purpose of this study was to research the characteristics of learning in the various stages of socialization from accession to headship to refocusing of their values from the perspective of the school managers in Malaysia.

## **CAREER PATH OF PUBLIC SCHOOL MANAGERS IN MALAYSIA**

In Malaysia, individuals start their career as teachers. Following a number of years as teachers, they become subject head of departments in schools and work with their schools' senior management team. If they wished to pursue leadership positions, they would continue up the career ladder by assuming positions as senior assistants or deputy heads of the schools. With an average of at least three years' experience as a senior assistant, they could apply to the State Education Department for the headship position. If there is vacancy, the suitable candidate would be appointed as headteachers, usually in a small (and/or) rural school.

Before the year 2000, there was no requirement for a headship qualification or national certification. Unlike in USA where most of school headteachers are trained in formal preparation programs at colleges and universities (Nelson, de la Colina and Boone, 2008). Majority of the Malaysian teachers became headteachers by means of short courses and on-the job training as an apprentice to the headteachers where they are serving. Having been appointed to the position of headteacher, the beginning head teachers were selected by their own State Education Department to attend the School Leadership and Management Course in Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), Ministry of Education. Historically, the preparation of aspiring and incumbent educational leadership has been provided by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

In 2000, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) was introduced on a voluntary basis where primary and secondary school teachers and deputy headteachers applied to be evaluated and the successful candidates attend a six month course and another six month attachment programme to a school of their own choice. NPQH was introduced to provide training to aspiring and incumbent school administrators before assuming the

headship position. In the UK, it has been mandatory since 2004 for all first time headteacher applicants to secure a place on the NPQH program prior to their first permanent substantive headship (Wildy, Pepper and Luo, 2011). In Malaysia, it is only in recent years, the NPQH was revised into National Professional Qualification for Leadership Leadership (NPQEL) and was made compulsory for applicants to complete the programme before applying for the headship position. In 2014, candidates who hold the NPQEL qualification would also need to be evaluated and also attend an interview.

## THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS OF SCHOOL MANAGERS

Merton's (1963) socialization theory can be utilized to understand the school leadership process. The two-way interaction delineates that the new headteacher interacts with the school situation where each try to influence and change the other. In this view of socialization, Weindling and Dimmock (2006) describes two main overlapping phases of socialization:

1. Professional socialization, which involves learning of the headteacher prior to taking up the position, from personal experience of schooling and teaching and from formal courses; and
2. Organizational socialization, which involves learning the knowledge, values and behaviours required to perform a specific role in a particular organization (Schein, 1968) after being appointed to the position.

In the organizational socialization process, Parkay and Hall (1992) and Parkay et al. (1992) established a five-stage model of socialization stages for school managers. The stages include survival, control, stability, educational leadership and professional actualization. Each stage is characterized by a predominant theme or pattern that characterizes the school manager's actions. At Stage One, *survival*, the school manager enters the school environment in the new role and experiences "shock" of beginning leadership. The school manager may feel overwhelmed. At Stage Two, *control*, the school manager's survival concerns have become less intense. The primary focus now is on setting priorities and seeking new ways to manage the school. At Stage Three, *stability*, previous frustrations have become routine, and the school manager is able to manage school management effectively and efficiently. The first three stages are defensive in character and compel the leader to respond to threats of leadership by struggling, controlling, or developing compromising strategies. Stage Four, *educational leadership*, is the stage at which strong vision becomes important. The leader takes steps to promote career growth and advancement. At Stage Five, *professional actualization*, the leader manifests respect for the vision and realization of it. The leader coordinates, motivates and empowers the staff to collegially improve the school.

Hart (1993) studied the stages of headship transition and identified three characteristic periods of leader socialization through which leaders commonly passed through. He found that in stage one, the new leader in the school

must engage in considerable learning as he or she encounters the staff and the organization. Stage two involves the task and effort of attempting to fit in. New leaders must be able to feel comfortable with their work role, the staff and the organizational culture. They may also receive resistance from the senior and established members of the school. When they reached stage three, they have already settled into the school. Ribbins (2003) suggested two ideal pathways or routes to and through headship:

1. Formation, accession, incumbency (initiation, development, autonomy, disenchantment), moving on (divestiture);
2. Formation, accession, incumbency (initiation, development, autonomy, enchantment), moving on (reinvention).

Weindling (1999) mapped out the stages of transition through headship as a six stage model. The stages include entry and encounter (first months), taking hold (three to 12 months), reshaping (second year), refinement (years three to four), consolidation (years five to seven) and plateau (years eight and onwards). The model was developed from the findings of the National Foundation for Educational Research study among UK headteachers (Weindling and Earley, 1987 in Weindling and Dimmock, 2006) and other authors.

## **THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH**

A phenomenological research paradigm is used in this study. The main focus of phenomenological research is on describing the “essence” or structure of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it (Meriam, 2002). It is by entering into their field of perception that the researcher sought to understand learning as school managers saw it. This study selected nine participants based on a set of criteria that included: (1) school managers who had gone through the experience; (2) school managers who others considered to be learned, capable, respected, effective and well-liked; (3) participants had served as school managers for at least one school year prior to the beginning of the study, and to have held other significant leadership responsibilities within the state such as assistant school managers, curriculum partners, or leadership of significant initiatives within the teachers’ federation; (4) they were also available and willing to candidly discuss the issue of professional development. The data collection employed to achieve the purpose of the study were mainly in-depth interviews with the participants. Each interview lasted between one hour to about two hours, were taped recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVIVO, a qualitative software program. In addition, non-participant observation at the work place of the participants and examination of official documents that were made accessible to the researcher, were also carried out.

## **FINDINGS**

Findings are from nine Malaysian school managers in primary and secondary schools from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Malay, Chinese and Indian were interviewed. Five of the school managers are male and the rest are female. The participants' ages ranged from 45 to 57 years old with an average age of 51. The educational level of the participants varied from diploma to Master's degree completion. For two of nine school managers interviewed, they were experiencing only the first headship meaning that they had stayed in the first same school for several years. The other seven participants were experiencing their second or third headship.

The socialization process for school managers was viewed as stages on a continuum from entry in headship, identity formation, making a difference to reformulation of personal values. In Stage One, the newly arriving school managers engaged in considerable learning as they encountered the staff, the organization and the community at large. They faced resistance from established school members. Stage Two involved the task of adapting to the school. They tried to accommodate with the new work role, the people and the culture of the school. They looked for role clarity, tried to establish a new identity and to integrate it into the school. In Stage Three, stable patterns had begun to emerge where the heads consolidated all efforts to realize their vision for the school. In Stage Four, the school managers were generally confident and competent, had already achieved their vision, worthwhile school achievements, mastered the demands of headship, and were ready to move on or leave headship due to retirement.

### **Entry into Headship**

In this learning stage, the school manager is beginning to take on formal leadership role in a new school or within the system. They started headship believing that they were expected to govern, expand, and develop the school, the students and the teachers. However, it is an initiation or induction period. Participants could find life unpredictable and shocking although initially they experienced a sense of elation or anxiety at having been given the particular school. It is a time to become familiar with the place and workplace norms, its community and of the roles they are expected to play and fulfill. They need to control the situation and often viewed it as exhaustive and demanding.

For most of the school managers, they had some problems when they first arrived at the school because they were not accepted by the staff and one even by the community. It was an upsetting time for those school managers who were not accepted by the staff. For instance, when Aion first went there, she faced a difficult and demanding time in the school. Aion recalled, "It was a real ordeal when I first came to this school because I was not accepted. I was not accepted by the management team, senior assistants and others. They are older than me. I am the younger one. They said, why bring an outsider in? Are we not capable? Are we not eligible? They want to be the headmistress."

However, some of the school managers were fortunate enough to be welcomed by the staff or had minimal problems. They did not face any crisis but still lack confidence and harbor self-doubt. Although Rajoo inherited a good, prominent and elite school, it caused him anxiety in the beginning. He remembered: "I was a bit apprehensive because my school is in a prominent place in the city, not only historically but also the parents and their connections, and because of the past achievements of this school.... could I hold on there and not let the school down".

For the first year all of the school managers did not make any or had minimal change. They set out with a low profile and downplayed their abilities as they felt people did not like changes. They just maintained the routine of day-to-day operations of running the school. All the school managers said that when they first went to the new school, they did environmental scanning, did their homework and tried to learn the ropes. They learned as much as they could about the school, policies and procedures, budget, background of personnel, and reviewed written reports. They had to cope with a wide range of tasks and finding out the daily routine or day-to-day operations of the school. Salmiah remarked, "If you are a new head, when you first go to the school, you need to have a helicopter view. Study the school before you introduce any change. Sometimes you just need to continue, you don't have to change everything to suit you. You just continue whatever that is good, what brings good results."

Some of the school managers felt that they should undergo some sort of management skills training before assuming the position as they were in constant worry for fear of becoming ineffective. Siva was concerned with acquiring new skills or technical know-how to manage the daily operation of the school. "To be an administrator you must have the knowledge. Like me, I went there without the knowledge of administration so there were many difficulties in doing my job. If possible, we should undergo some courses especially administrative courses." In response to the fear in the initial entry to the school, the school manager relied more on the power that came along with the position of school manager than on the demonstrated expertise and referent power of the leader. Siva continued, "With a certificate, when we enter a school, it is much better. Otherwise we will encounter problems."

In order to learn the job, all the school managers mentioned that they had to be proactive in asking and learning from their staff. Timah remarked, "...if you are not proactive, nobody is going to come and dish it out to us and say 'look, this is how you do it'. Tan learnt from his staff and colleagues in the same school, "I learnt from the Senior Team. I asked. I had to be thick-skinned." He also consulted the previous school manager, "My predecessor gave me very invaluable information." In addition, he called up friends who had the similar calling. He also learned from experienced male and female school managers who were well verse in things and had long serving years, as teachers as well as school managers. Although Lee had to ask his teachers regarding the school, he was watchful and careful of the information that he was receiving and also giving out, "Sometimes you also don't know who to trust because if certain

things get out to the staff, they won't be happy, twisted and so on. You are a bit cautious about saying certain things."

Most of the school managers felt that they had to give attention to maintaining and adapting to the existing culture and school practices. To avoid any problems, they followed closely to the procedures and tried to practice safely by reading and adhering to existing management manuals. It could have been their sense of playing by the rules of the existing system to succeed. Most of the school managers equate following rules as being competent and systematic. They viewed that by following the basic rules, they would likely to succeed in solving problems. Tan remarked, "I have to read the Management Manual. I try to know the system and the school environment as soon as possible." He adhered to the standards set by the system of the previous school manager for instance, procedures like writing a record book. In this safe practice, the school managers tried to be competent in their work. They gained confidence by following the current rules and regulations. Amin used 'following rules' as an instrument to deter actions that appear to challenge the status quo of things in school.

### Identity Formation

Identity formation consists of two major parts, namely establishing and integrating one's identity through interpersonal connections and skills; and being comfortable as a school manager. In this stage, the school manager attempted to fit in. They needed to get to know the staff at the same time looking for role clarity to establish their identity with the school. The school managers needed to adjust to the school and the system. They might face resistance, difficulties and rejection of the members of the school.

In establishing their identities, the school managers stressed the importance of establishing good relationships. They focused on a task and regarded it as important as the relationships with the people doing the task. Salmiah mentioned, "When I first came to this school, I tried to look at the human relations between the staff and me. Well, I manage to win over their hearts. You need to be pleasant. To be successful, you need to be someone who is approachable. That means when the teachers come to see you, you are there." Salmiah wanted to avoid any conflict with newly encountered colleagues. She was cautious not to confront. Salmiah was careful with her words and language. She chose to ask the staff for help instead of ordering them to complete their tasks. As she put it:

*You must touch the hearts of others and you mustn't hurt the person. If I want to say anything to them, I'll try to say the best way I can so that the message is put across but they are not hurt by it. I always put myself in my staff's shoes. Normally I don't ask them to do this and that. I always say, can you help me? They will always say 'can' because they never say 'cannot'. That's how I get them to work for me and work for the school.*

The school managers said that it was important for the heads to first understand their teachers before expecting them to show understanding towards the head. Understanding builds trust. When the teachers felt understood by the head, then they would work for them. As Aion put it, "The head will have to understand the people around her first, not for her to be understood to get them to work for her." They were responsive to the needs of the people and took time and patience to build a supportive work environment. They created work settings characterized by warmth, understanding, listening empathy, and mutual trust. As a result, the school managers tend to spend a lot of time talking and having meetings formally or informally with the teachers such as weekly sessions. Amin said, "I introduce *Sesi Mingguan* (Weekly Sessions). Whatever that crops up we discuss them there or I impart whatever that I want them to know, to inform them and also to do housekeeping. Things that are not up to the expectation have to be forever on the stove, forever burning." The school managers communicated systematically and frequently about their plans for the school, expectations and about the changes to be implemented through formal weekly sessions with the staff. Here the school managers created opportunities for frequent deliberations and consultations among the staff. Amin focused on the involvement of all the staff. He believed that this practice would lead to changes that would benefit everyone as teachers have a channel to voice out and to share ideas with others. However, one of the school managers disagreed that teachers like meetings. Since the teachers do not like meetings, Lee had his meetings only when it was necessary to do so and to kept his meetings short.

Besides formal meetings, the school managers also used informal communication channels to reach out to their teachers. Siva preferred to talk to his teachers informally although he too liked to have formal meetings. Amin also communicated the changes he would like to see implemented during informal conversations. He saw his role as a mentor and to simply 'be there' for the teachers and the students; a person whom others feel that they could talk to. The school managers also liked to take small breaks and spent time socializing with their staff and team members as a way of building community. Salmiah used this approach to reach out to her staff, "Every Saturday, without fail when I come to school, I'll buy food and ask the support staff to share them with me. We'll sit around a table, all of us and some of us will prepare drinks. I will sit down with them to take our breakfast. Then I will get feedbacks from them. That is how I get all the information from them." School managers often asked for feedback from the staff to motivate them as well as for quality management. By sharing their problems, they not only build rapport but also arouse sympathy. It was also an effort on a school manager's part to understand the staff's pain and alleviate it. At the same time information about the school could be obtained. Interaction was viewed as being professional in one's role as a school manager.

## Making a Difference

In this stage, the school managers had established themselves and the situation was stable. They were in control and had mastered the job fairly well. They were ready to put their ideas into action. This stage is characterized by enthusiasm, development and growth. They would also have made progress in developing a wide range of capacities and competencies required for the job. Having developed confidence in managing the school, they carried out their vision for the school and set to implement it through educational leadership. To effectively carry out their goals for the organization, they recognized the importance of understanding the context and the players involved. Different players require different strokes of learning and leading. This is also the learning stage where heads recalled as the period of progress in their careers in which they were most effective.

All the school managers' visions were to achieve academic excellence. Their focus was clear and their main concern was on instructional leadership, teaching-learning and students' achievement. For instance, Salmiah's main concern for the school was teaching and learning, "The school is very famous for its academic performance. They do very well in all their exams. Even in their co-curricular activities. I told myself I can really help the school achieve higher performance and to work towards excellence." The school managers' focus was on achieving good academic results. However, they all claimed that excellent academic results were not sufficient; rather they should help students to achieve their best. As Rajoo put it:

*My vision is academic excellence. The school system in this country concentrates on academic though this is not a good thing. When you are focused on the right thing, other things will fall into place. This is a very academically focused school. We had 94 straight As for PMR (public examination), 32 straight As for SPM (public examination) with 100 % passes. Academic doesn't mean getting As only. Academic means your best. That's why I am very happy with the Kemahiran Hidup (Living Skills) syllabus for the kerja kursus (course work) because we are able to monitor them. And if they do not do well, we are able to tell them to do it again. If they do not do well enough, we are able to say, do it again, again and again till they get there, their best. Sometimes, their best is a B, sometimes it's a C.*

In order to carry out their vision and mission, all the school managers having established themselves in the school, planned for long term objectives and changes of performance to provide the direction. As in the case of Salmiah, "A successful school manager must be able to plan short and long term objectives to change the school, to bring better changes for the teachers, for the students, especially for the students and also for the community." Besides focusing on student academic achievement, all the school managers recognized that focusing on the academics is not enough. There is a need for character or ethical building in students that they want to see achieved. As postulated by Amin:

*.... in all aspects to achieve the best but I think what is more important are the students, the building up of human beings. If I can really motivate the students, build the character of the student besides pushing towards academic excellence, I think that is successful. That's what I believe in. I don't believe in having good results only, no, I think everything should be together, wholesome.*

More importantly, the school managers believed that the welfare of the child is at the core of education. Administrators should not just busy themselves with programs but should take time to care for the person, the child. John reminded, "I think that I've always reminded myself and the teachers that students are our clients. They come first." Rajoo wanted to instill a love and connection for the school in his students. He took time to listen and understand his students. Rajoo said:

*Students are willing to listen to you... the failure of people to hear a cry, to hear a cry when the child is in trouble....young people are different these days. I think every generation will say that. I'm sure our parents say during our time that young people couldn't behave the way they did. All young people, what they need are for someone to listen to them. No one is listening. Everyone is preaching down to them. No one is going down to their level. I had many students in my room, telling me all kinds of troubled stories....*

All the school managers saw that their greatest experience in their career was as a teacher first, then only as an administrator. For instance, Siva did not define his job as being separated from the teaching and leading process. He was already a very experienced teacher at the time of his first appointment. His teaching background was important to the leadership he provided. Siva remarked: "One should be a good teacher. They always look up to you as a teacher first. As a leader, you have to teach. As a leader if you don't teach, then you are going to be a bad example ... I am a leader, yes but when it comes to the job, I'm also a teacher. I always tell the teachers that I know the difficulty of teaching so they understand. We shouldn't just be a leader and sit in the office." John too did not stop teaching even though he has now assumed the position as a school manager. He perceived his main role as a pedagogic leader. He interpreted 'pedagogic leader as a school manager whose management style which involved professional and systematic teaching and training. "I like the idea of planning things for the students, for their development...of leadership. I am very much in favour of training leaders from the good students. I think in all my years, even till now as a head, I still allocate a certain percentage of my time to training and teaching... I don't want to lose my teaching skills." The school managers mentioned that one should be single-minded in running the school and not use the school as a stepping block to further their promotions. Rajoo's main concern and goal is the school that he is running making it his main task and priority. He regarded it as his destination and the head should be in school for the people. He reminded, "The school manager shouldn't be too ambitious to move up, the school is the goal, your destination. Don't use

the school as a stepping-stone. I think many people do that. That's why you compromise. You are not there for the school."

The school manager needed to understand the school's culture and differentiate one school culture and norms from another when implementing changes. The school managers also had to learn and understand their teachers' social-economic-cultural background in order to be more understanding towards them. According to Amin:

*In my previous school, the work culture there is different. It is more of motivating teachers to go on with their work. When I was transferred to a new school I have to start everything anew and over there I played the role of a decision maker to decide what to do. I have to set the path of the school. But coming here to this school, it is totally different. Some things are already there but only just a few things lacking.*

In addition, the school managers also had to learn and adjust to the historical-socio-economic makeup of the community which might be diversified and would affect the running of the school. Ainin realized that what she had experienced in her former school was different from her current school due to environmental factors. This required different and situational strategies in managing the school. "It may be different when I was in my former school. What I'm able to do here, I can't do over there in my former school because of the environment. It is situational. It is not the same. For instance in the former school, the pupils are from farmer backgrounds. Only a few government servants... the environment, it's more friendly. It's more helpful. It's not as demanding as being here in town. You can't expect cooperation like *kampung* (village) people because here, all parents, they are busy. You call them to help to even discuss their children's performance, their learning is difficult. That's why we try to find holidays to do it, then the attitude of some parents... self-centered and so on, no doubt a few are helpful. I see that here is more stressful."

### **Reformulation of Personal Values**

This is the advanced stage of leadership and at the peak of the school managers' learning and development. The school managers have moved through all the other stages and are now highly confident, experienced and proficient in their roles. A combination of experience and survival has resulted in them a sense of control and the knowledge that they have largely mastered and weathered the demands of headship. They had garnered a rich resource of knowledge, skills and experience. This is also the professional actualization stage as well as having achieved autonomy. Some believe that in this stage, they are even more effective leaders. Their day to day school operations are relatively much easier than it was as now they can delegate responsibilities to other teachers and set up management teams. It is mainly a transitional time for those who have served many years in headship and highly experienced heads. They seem to be at the peak of their power and authority but it is at just such a time that they begin an inner search for meaning in their work life.

The participant school managers looked for meaningful directions in their jobs as well as in their lives. Once they had established themselves in the school, they had put all their efforts into achieving their school goals. Responsible and committed, in the inner experience of mastery and satisfaction, they are increasingly discovering value and meaning in what they are doing and whom they are relating to. Further experience of pleasure at what they had accomplished and well-being in their career, they could allow themselves to be authentic and have a deeper sense of experience for themselves. They began to find dramatic changes in their mind-set and their behavior towards relationships.

All the school managers were proud that they had become independent persons who didn't depend on authorities and others for assistance. Rajoo said that he was not working for himself or the authorities or the money. Rajoo said, "I don't deal much with the authorities; I don't have to. The main reason why we have to deal with authorities, is for financial help. That's why we try to raise our own money." Aion also had the same opinion. She wanted quality work and she was not looking for glamour or popularity. She was willing and prepared to be unpopular in order to achieve quality work. "To me, I'm not for glamour. I'm not looking for popularity. I want quality. In pursuing quality, you can't put it together with popularity at the same time because to have the quality, you have to sometimes be unpopular." For Tan, he would continue to carry out his duty diligently although it might not be well-accepted as long as his conscience was clear. Tan mentioned, "I don't mind anything. They say I am fierce or they say I am firm, it's OK or nasty or nice. I don't mind because you cannot stop what they say so it doesn't affect me. As long as I know what I'm doing is right according to my conscience."

As she matured and grew older, Salmiah felt that she had become a better person, "I do not shout and scream at people and students for no reason. I'm a better person, as I age also. I do not show my temper. Some lady *Pengetua* (headteacher), the staff has to find out from the office, Can we see the *Pengetua*? Is she in a good mood or not? If the clerk says she's in a bad mood, nobody is supposed to see her that day. We have that kind of lady heads. I hope I would not be like that." Previously, Timah adopted a coercive management style and never gave in. However, in later years she indicated a change in managerial perspective. She became calmer and more sensitive towards people, less confrontational and coercive. She's not as hasty in saying things but she would try to lessen the 'sting' of her words with her smile or other mannerism. Timah recalled:

*I have been very vocal wherever I go – that's part of my attraction, I suppose and that's part of what people get irritated the moment they see me, they'll put their barriers up. Wah! This lady is here – better put up all my defenses... the gentle touch is better than the confrontational method. I remember to smile all the time. Nowadays before I say something I smile first. It takes the sting out of what I'm going to say because I'm not a very diplomatic person. I am very vocal and I say the first thing that comes to my mind. I do not edit my word. I'm not diplomatic... whatever I want to say, I'll say it straight out. If I want to say you're a fool, I will.*

John too had learnt not to be too hasty in saying or doing things. "In the past I'll just rush to do something, now I find that, I'll wait. Wait a minute. I'll make the decision slower than being more impulsive so I think that I have to be cautious, more intuitive in making decisions."

The school managers learned that the school manager job is a painstaking job because school managers could also be victimized and still had to take the blame. They were made scapegoats and considered as blacksheep of the organization. Despite this, they had to learn to forgive others. Rajoo had to take the blame, felt victimized himself but he learned from it. He refused to accept further suffering and victimization by his staff but he forgave the staff. Rajoo added that being strong comes with experience but also with a price. He reminded:

*Being strong comes with experience. I am not sure whether I will be able to do this when I first started. ...in the case of teachers who were angry and scolded me, I suffered much inside. As a school manager, one shouldn't take things too seriously especially when you face opposition and don't allow sadness to overwhelm one's life. Accept people who do not understand you. Accept people who return a bad turn for your good deeds. It may not be because of you.... sometimes it's because of what they have suffered. They need to blame someone for the tragedies of their own lives.*

One of the school managers believed that things are transitory and unpleasant occurrences would stay for a short time only, then they would pass on. A school manager should see things in the entire perspective. Rajoo remarked:

*Once when I was going through a very bad patch, another school manager spoke up and just said one sentence, 'Things will pass'. I always remember that things are here for a short time... especially when you lose students, when they die. This is the bitter and sad part in my career. I lost a few students. Sometimes you are very caught up with every day things, the exam is around the corner, the inspectorate is coming, the teachers are going off for maternity leave, there is no one, there's a discipline problem ... you need to see life in its entire perspective. The students who create so much trouble for you today may not be there tomorrow or that teacher for that matter.*

Most of the school managers felt that they had not done enough for their schools or even their families but they had to accept that fact and learned to see life as a whole. Rajoo admitted that the feeling will always be there but school managers should not live with regrets of not doing enough.

As Timah struggled with the process of reaching toward the highest potential, the redirection in her later years as a leader becomes a vehicle to identify more of one's authentic self. She began to realize who she was and she wanted change. Now, Timah tries to practice '*muhasabah diri*', a religious term to mean self awareness of one's obligation towards others' unique needs. She was a centralist, aggressive and dominant. However, with time and experience, she adopted new attitudes towards relationships with others. She had become more patient and tolerant towards others' needs and desires. Timah advised:

*As you get along in life, your perspectives change. At that point of time, when you're young, you just don't care about other people, you just think of satisfying your passion by scolding others but now I tend to look at it this way. What is the point? If people make a mistake, the mistake has already been done, you scold them, to what avail. You scold them is one thing, from being remorseful, they become rebellious. They're not remorseful at all just because you scolded them, they do not respect you.*

Timah changed her perspective on leading through trial and error, and experiencing it. It was through her observation of other leaders and the manner they got things done through a gentler and less aggressive approach. She changed her perspective after realizing that she could get things done the same way by taking into consideration other people's opinion and way of working. She still had the same authority, not weaker but she used it differently. She indicated that she was happier with her change in her leadership style of authoritarian to a more democratic style as she felt that it made her more effective. She's more confident as a leader with her new style.

With experience also, the school managers were more willing to accept criticism. Timah is more receptive to other people's criticism of her management style. Because of her confidence and her learning of who she is, she's less defensive but more open to opinions of others towards her. She was able to analyze reflectively, realistically and constructively of what others were saying. Timah added:

*Before, I used to think that critiques are something very distasteful. Now you say that you listen to people criticizing you, you look at it, you dissect it a little bit and see whether it's true or not. Nowadays, I don't really bother all that much what people say about me because everyone has got an opinion. No matter how much you try to correct their opinion, if that's their opinion, they will not budge unless there's something you can do to show it to them. Then only will they change their opinion.*

Rajoo too was willing to take criticism and viewed them with positive thinking. He evaluated the reality of the criticism. "Willing to take criticism means being willing to hear what people say and to evaluate it..."

## DISCUSSION

The data in this study shows similarity and differences to the study by Parkay and Hall (1992), Hart (1993), Ribbins (2003), and Weindling (2006) in the following areas:

The entry stage into headship was a traumatic experience for the school managers where they experienced culture shock in their new schools. It was more traumatic for the school managers. For some, a leadership position is not immediately perceived by others to be legitimate (Hogue, Yoder and Ludwig, 2002). They not only had to deal with the existing and immediate problems of the school but also many a time they were not accepted by the senior staff, sometimes even by the community. They were made to feel like outsiders

and they had to learn the ropes as quickly as possible. School managers often had to struggle to have their authority accepted once appointed to their position (Chisholm, 2001). Invariably this revolved around a challenge to their competence and ability to exercise leadership. It was a time of self-doubt and lacking in confidence. Similar to Ribbins's (2003) study, they generally felt ill-prepared and uncertain about what was expected of them. Consequently, many school managers did not make any change to the school policies and practices but make extra effort to be proactive in asking, learning, and seeking for information. They tried to be visible to the staff by walking about and the community by staying back late at school. However, there are also differences to the Parkay and Hall (1992), Hart (1993, Ribbins (2003), and Weindling (2006) in the *entry stage of headship*, where the school managers adhere strictly to rules and procedures to avoid any problems. By following existing rules, the school managers used it as a tool to deter actions that appear to challenge the status quo of things in school. They also used rules as a platform to build up their competence; to solve any occurring problems; and as a yardstick in setting the standard of the school work.

In the *identity formations* stage, trying to establish and integrate one's identity with the new role and responsibility is consistent stage two of Hart's study (1993) and incumbency in Ribbins's (2003) study but the degree and manner of the efforts differ. Here, the school managers tried to establish their identity as school manager by mainly establishing interpersonal skills and relationships. Using support, care and nurture, the school managers tried to build communication channel; listened to their teachers' problems; acted as coaches; practiced collective power (Herrity and Morales, 2004); demonstrated a people-centred approach; networked with parents; celebrated success with their teachers; and encouraged teacher self-development. Weindling's (2006) study also differs in which new heads merely develop a deeper understanding of the school situation and "take hold" of the school by challenging the "taken for granted" nature of the school staff. The heads would introduce new organizational changes but did not form an identity with the new role.

The next stage, *making a difference*, confirms stage four of Parkay and Hall's (1992) study, stage three of Hart's (1993), autonomy stage of Ribbins's (2003) study and stage three of Weindling's (2006) study. In this stage, the school manager is already settled into the school. This phase is characterized by enthusiasm and growth. The school manager had already learned a wide range of capacities and competencies as well as the confidence that she requires (Ribbins, 2003). They had already developed an excellent working knowledge (McLarney and Rhyno, 1999) of the school and mastered the 'craft' of strategising. They tried to practice instructional leadership where strong vision becomes important. The leader takes steps to promote career growth and advancement. They tried to increase student academic performance and build student character. Welfare of the child is at the core of her concerns. There would be short and long term strategies, school projects, expansion of school physical building and continuous improvement of the school. Similar

to Weindling's (2006) study, the school managers focused on the students and the curriculum issues as a prominent and essential requirement for success in their roles as school managers. They spoke about improving the lives of children. Many stated that their own success in their position was closely related to the outcomes of the children. In Weindling's (2006) study, a number of refinements to the school curriculum and innovations are made after which the heads consolidate and strengthen the changes.

In the final stage, *reformulation of personal values*, is consistent with Ribbins's (2003) last stage of *enchantment/disenchantment* and *moving on* but differs from Parkay and Hall's findings (1992), Hart's (1993) and Weindling's (2006) findings. According to Ribbins (2003), school managers either continue to become more committed and enchanted with headship while others become discouraged, felt stagnation and loss of enthusiasm. This is the point where heads reassess their life goals. In this study, all the school managers at this stage still appear more confident and optimistic about what is possible and can be done rather than feelings of frustration and discouragement. They still see their work as focusing on children and their achievements and they still speak with a passionate commitment about the profession of teaching and of the life of the school manager. They are fulfilled and have learnt to retreat to regain strength, exercise forgiveness towards others and themselves, stop turning anger inward, recognize that strength comes from within and they also practiced '*muhasabah diri*', a kind of wisdom developed over time through reflective attention to the meaning of experiences. The development of practical wisdom involves character and vision (Gibson, 2008). In Weindling's (2006) study, the heads experienced a plateau where there is little variation in further changes made. Weindling (2006) argued that a plateau is less likely if the heads move to a second headship in another school. Those in the second headship would move back to Stage one or the entry stage and through some of the subsequent stages in their second headship.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The research concluded that school managers' learning in the socialization stages moved from a dependent, submissive, one of receiving knowledge to one of more independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness in efforts to achieve higher status. The learning processes by which the individuals have developed, moves from the ability to listen and receive, to an increasingly better ability to evaluate knowledge and to justify as well as defend it. The later stages of learning are built on the earlier ones. Each stage represents a more complex and effective form of justification of knowledge. However, individuals may progress at different rates of ability. As a result of varied experiences that they go through, they develop different forms of learning in an invariant sequence. The knowledge acquired moves from a stage full of uncertainty and ill-structured problems to a stage of certainty and correctness. Progression from uncertainty to certainty finally happens when the decision making as

well as the contextual learning becomes intuitive rather than analytic. Such progression requires significantly more experience. A person moves from learning right from wrong (dualistic), to considering diversity of opinion and multiple perspectives to many ways to answer questions. The move is from dependency and trust in external authorities to carving out one's territory of personal freedom. A person then moves on to an evaluative approach to knowledge and grasp the concept that truth is relative and relates to the context in which an event occurs and to her own framework of learning. At this point the person constructs knowledge which is contextual and not fixed.

Although the findings of this study have contributed to the understanding and knowledge of school managers' career growth, there is still a need to conduct further research on this intriguing area to improve understanding and appreciation of the challenges faced by school managers. Thus, it is recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted such as ethnographic studies as the development of the school manager career requires an expanded research base. Not only would this help in enhanced definition of the concept but would also help in designing more effective training programs through the identification of learning strategies that encourage career growth and leadership.

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