

**Stepping Up in Harmony: Incorporating Cluster School Excellence (CSE) in Malaysian
Secondary Schools**

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Stepping Up in Harmony: Incorporating Cluster School Excellence (CSE) in Malaysian Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian Education Development Master Plan (EDMP) 2006-2010 aims to provide quality education for all children and produce quality human capital for the nation. To achieve these aims, the Ministry of Education has introduced the cluster schools of excellence (CSE) concept. Since its establishment in 2006, cluster schools are brands given to schools in Malaysia which have been identified as being excellent within their clusters in management and students excellence. Management excellence incorporates the leadership and administrative capability of the Principal and staff of the school while students' excellence embraces the outstanding merit of the students both in academic and co-curricular activities. In fact in many of such CSE schools, niche areas in certain co-curricular activities are developed. Of date, only 1 per cent of Malaysian schools have been identified as CSE. The percentage of CSE schools can be increased if more non-CSE secondary schools are groomed to meet the CSE requirements. For the purpose of this study, the researchers reviewed journal articles on cluster schools and provide an insight of some of the challenges and success stories of CSE. The paper proposes how non-CSE secondary schools should step up in harmony to be at par with CSE secondary schools. The research identified that non-CSE secondary schools have to overcome three key areas of challenges, namely, program, participation and support to achieve the CSE status.

Keywords: School-based management; cluster school of excellence; secondary school; Malaysia.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysian Education Development Master Plan (EDMP) 2006-2010 aims to provide quality education for all children and produce quality human capital for the nation (Ministry of Education, 2006). One of the core strategies in achieving the objective of EDMP is to foster a culture of excellence in educational institutions through the formation of "cluster schools of excellence" (CSE). What is CSE? The CSE is a merit system that grants high achieving educational institutions autonomy in administration and extra allocation for advancement of specific fields like academic, co-curricular and sports achievements.

The merit system offers benefits which are similar to school-based management (SBM). Essentially, SBM is an organizational decision making model that seeks to decentralize decision making to the school site (Murphy, 1997). To Yin & Ching (2007), SBM is often specified as the "important approach in improving school practices to meet the diverse expectations of stakeholders in a changing environment through autonomy and decentralization" (Yin & Ching, 2007, p.518). SBM system permits school personnel to make decisions for learning improvement, the school community to have their say and be accountable for making major decisions and to plan realistic budgets for schools, resources be redirected to support the goals of particular schools, programs be designed with creativity, morale of teachers be boosted, and new leadership be nurtured (Wohsletter, 1993; Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011). Meanwhile, another research (De Grauwe, 2004) highlighted five most repetitive benefits with the implementation of SBM. Among them are SBM run schools have more democratic, relevant and responsible decision making exercises and greater resource (i.e. funds) mobilisation than non-SBM run schools.

Of date, only 1 per cent of Malaysian schools have been identified as having CSE status (Ismail & Abdullah, 2011; Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011). Ismail & Abdullah's (2011) research findings reveal that such schools (i.e. cluster schools) are recognized through excellence in their niche areas such as students' achievement in academic, co-curricular or personality areas (i.e. confidence and leadership). The niche areas often help cluster schools distinguish themselves from each other and eventually accelerate the speed of achieving excellence in the specific fields. In order to attain the CSE status, cluster schools decide to choose the external experts as coaches, collaborate with external institutions to gain insights and inputs, provide training for teachers' professional development, and monitor the progress of CSE programs and activities (Ismail & Abdullah, 2011). Another study mentioned that CSE implementation requires a three pronged approach: learning and mental reorientation of school community, empowerment of decision making to school authorities and development of leadership skills among school principals (Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011). The above findings indicate that efforts in attaining CSE status should start with school community's readiness in implementing the SBM. This paper proposes how non-CSE secondary schools should step up in harmony to be at par with CSE secondary schools.

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CHALLENGES OF SBM

In spite of efforts to attain greater autonomy in SBM, it must be pointed out that SBM is not without its challenges (De Grauwe, 2004). A series of issues preoccupy the introduction and implementation of SBM in developing countries (De Grauwe, 2004). SBM may in fact, on the contrary, lead to slow and frustrating decision making process (Wohsletter, 1993). In developing countries, for example, participatory decision-making process is not commonly practiced. In many cases, the implementation of any policy is a top-down approach which may be subject to resistance and non-support from the masses. Besides, lack of support system may also jeopardise the effectiveness of SBM implementation. Any setbacks that slow the process and impede the successful implementation of SBM may be caused by weak governments, limited communication network, lack of well-trained principals, overloaded administrative and managerial responsibilities for principals, gender-related leadership preferences, imprecise power division and accountability between school board or councils and school authority, conflicting interests among school key stakeholders, and the danger of treating education as private good instead of public good (Ismail & Abdullah, 2011).

SBM is also subject to a debate on its impact on quality. A global report reminds SBM enthusiasts that “SBM has seldom been introduced in order to improve quality of teaching and learning” (De Grauwe, 2004, p.7). Teachers at Israeli schools were found to improve their motivation and sense of commitment when they were given greater autonomy (Gaziel, 1998). Innovative programmes and practices were churned when UK and New Zealand school principals were empowered to make decisions (Williams & Portin, 1997). In addition, studies conducted in Nicaragua indicate positive correlation between student academic performance to staff selection and staff monitoring, made possible through SBM initiative with relative autonomy to schools (King & Ozler, 1998). Jimenez & Sawada (1999) provided a well-cited example of El Salvador’s community managed schools or *Education con Participacion de la Comunidad* (EDUCO) schools where improvement in students’ performance and motivation was accredited to amplified community and parental participation. Sawada & Ragatz (2003) extended Jimenez & Sawada’s (1999) study a step further and found that staff selection is a crucial determinant in student performance. The findings of these studies suggest that students’ performances are correlated to the participation of critical school stakeholders. In other words, high involvement of key stakeholders facilitates the schools to make decision in implementing SBM effectively and ensuring positive impact of SBM on school performance.

Despite the issues preoccupying the introduction, implementation and impact of SBM, the concept is still widely adopted by policy makers around the world. The implementation often materialises in various forms such as school-based governance, school self-management, and school site-management. In Malaysia, the SBM has been introduced through CSE which gives recognition of excellence for 5 main categories of educational institutions, namely, primary schools, secondary schools, special education and vocational schools, international and private schools, and matriculation colleges and teacher training institutes (Ministry of Education, 2006). The high achieving institutions in each category are branded as cluster schools. The establishment of cluster schools in Malaysia was aimed to promote a culture of excellence at educational institutions relevant to students’ needs and aspirations, and was adapted from the British concept of school diversity (Ismail & Abdullah, 2011).

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INCORPORATING SBM AT NON-CLUSTER SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

Drawing on the findings of previous studies, the implementation and evaluation of SBM are subject to some prerequisites: the identification of niche areas, the orientation of the school key stakeholders, and the identification of external supports. In essence, non-cluster secondary schools have to prepare themselves with programs and activities that match their current strengths, to educate and train the school key stakeholders (i.e. Headmasters; Head teachers and Teachers) with necessary skills, and to identify the external supports required by the schools.

PROGRAMS FOR NICHE AREAS

According to Lingard *et al.* (2002), SBM was introduced to Queensland schools in Australia in the 1980's in order to improve student outcomes. However, Lingard *et al.* (2002) mentioned that there is limited evidence to indicate the success of the decentralization system. Thus, in 2000, efforts were pooled to relook at professional concerns and school based management on teaching and learning. As such a longitudinal study, the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) was developed to study the relationship between school-based management and improved student outcomes (if any). The QSRLS worked on improving authentic pedagogy and school reform and their mediation by teachers' professional learning communities (Lingard *et al.* 2002, pg.8). Lingard *et al.* (2002)'s study indicated that for SBM to be successfully implemented, government efforts are required at all levels, i.e. from decision making policies to active implementation, policy and funding strategies and social democratic discourse are essential at all stages of discussion (Lingard *et al.* 2002). Such efforts if not synergized may result in an uphill task and continued struggle in the implementation of such a program.

In comparison to Lingard *et al.* (2002)'s study, an earlier study by Gamage *et al.* (1996), however, mentioned that the success of SBM implementation in Victoria, Australia was dependent on the involvement of school councils for changes to occur in the general education policy of the school (Gamage *et al.* 1996, pg.26). The study reinstated the crucial involvement and participation of school councils to implement greater autonomy toward school and members of the school staff and community.

In addition, the success of SBM implementation is evidenced in a recent study conducted by Bandur in Indonesia (2011). To Bandur, the implementation of SBM can lead to the improvement in teaching-learning environments and students achievements (Bandur, 2011, pg 845). Bandur made mention how the decentralization of autonomy to school level can create partnership in participatory school decision making in terms of goal, mission, vision, budget, textbook allocation, school curriculum, school buildings and even students' discipline policies (Bandur, 2011, pg.845).

In order to strive for successful SBM implementation, there is a need to achieve excellence in both academic and co-curricular programs. Typical programs comprise objectives, activities and assessment. The programs have to represent schools' niche areas (i.e. academic and co-curricular achievements). Before programs can be planned, non-CSE secondary schools need to identify the niche areas that they would like to excel in. Specifically, they have to audit the school current

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strengths. The audit will indicate whether the schools should focus on academic performance, co-curricular activities or character development areas (confidence and leadership areas).

In terms of academic performance, non CSE schools have to identify the students' outstanding academic performance at all levels in both examination and non-examination classes. Academic excellence is measured by the students' outstanding and excellent academic performance to be one of the best members of the school (Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011). Students in CSE schools are driven by the school's culture of excellence to continuously perform their best academically. This culture of excellence is marked by the students need to excel and compete amongst themselves to emerge as top students and contribute toward high academic performance yearly. CSE schools have slogans like "*Aim high and reach the stars*" and "*be the best and beat the rest*" to create motivation among students (Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011, p.1489). Academic performance remains one of the most important niche areas in attaining CSE status.

At the same time, students' performance in co-curricular activities is also enlisted as one of the factors to be part of the cluster school. School management are required to provide the space and opportunity for students to plan, manage and control the events and activities either at the school, national and international levels (Ismail & Abdullah, 2011). Students participate, compete and excel in various types of co-curricular activities at both national and international levels. Students' participation in various activities such as choral speaking and brass band competitions at national and international level are a few examples to showcase students' co-curricular performance.

Students' niche area can also be showcased by the mastery of languages such as fluency in a foreign language like Arabic (Malaklolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011). Ismail & Abdullah (2011) on the other hand cites participation in rugby as one of the niche areas in co-curricular performance. Niche areas must be carefully selected to befit the profile of students' co-curricular abilities and potential. In addition, different schools may have potential in different areas. For some it maybe sports, while for others it may involve participation in various societies, clubs or uniform bodies. School management must ensure that niche areas are based on the students' abilities and potential drawn from the schools' outstanding achievement i.e record of students' performance in competitions at national and international levels.

At the same time, CSE schools are factored by students' development and excellence in leadership and management activities. Leadership and management activities include in students' independent participation and management of school-based activities. In other words, students are given the tasks to "plan, manage and control the events and activities either at school, national and international level" (Ismail & Abdullah, 2011, pg.6). Ismail & Abdullah (ibid) cites the example of students' independent management and organization of a school summit with international participation. In other words, teachers need only to provide guidance to the students but students' organized the whole event. Such activities enable the students' to develop, nurture and improve students' confidence and leadership capacity. School management should indicate niche areas in leadership and management areas and provide students' the viable opportunity to participate and develop such character building skills.

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However, it is important to note that successful implementation can only occur if there are clear SBM guidelines among the school, staff and community (Pomuti, 2008). Pomuti mentioned that although governmental support was evident among several Namibian primary schools, reluctance in sharing resources and greater autonomy to schools was met with resilience. As such school authorities faced difficulties in implementing the policy among the selected primary schools. The study concluded that teaching supervision in isolation could not be linked to CSE. However, efforts are required to provide clearer CSE guidelines on teaching and learning among students, teachers and community in the said schools (Pomuti, 2008, pg.iii).

Thus, it is paramount that once programs and activities of such criteria have been identified, state education department and the Ministry of Education have to specify how they are going to monitor the progress and impact of the said activities in the schools. It is pertinent that school authorities deliberate the niche areas and provide the space and opportunity to develop such areas of excellence. School authorities have to ensure that programs are developed and participation is sustained with the commitment of the school stakeholders (i.e. Headmaster, Head Teacher and teachers). Efforts need to set in place by school authorities and shared with the stakeholders of the school such as staff, students, community and other relevant shareholders involved in the performance of the school. In other words, school authorities must ensure that there is transparency among stakeholders on niche areas targeted for the school.

ORIENTATION OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS

One of the key stakeholders of SBM refers to school staff. Collectively, school staff such as Principals or Head teachers, Subject Head teachers, teachers and non-teachers is responsible for the success or failure of SBM implementation. Successful implementation often requires optimum participation of the school staff. Similar to any organization, schools adopting SBM should emulate how business entities are being managed. Schools should embrace the four management functions namely, planning, organizing, leading and coordinating (POLC). Depending on the managerial levels, the managerial staff focuses on the POLC with varying frequency (Mahoney *et al.* 1965).

In Malaysian school contexts, the school principals and subject head teachers are the managerial employees, whilst teachers and non-teachers are the non-managerial employees. The school principals represent the top managers of the school whilst the subject head teachers are the first-line managers. Mahoney *et al.* (1965)'s findings suggest that top managers (i.e. the principals) perform the planning and organizing functions more often than the lower level managers (i.e. the subject head teachers). The findings also indicate that the low level managers are employing leading function more frequently than the high level managers. In contrast, the controlling function is less frequently employed by the low level managers than the high level managers.

The simple organizational structure suggests that school principals or head teachers, and subject head teachers should possess some basic managerial skills, namely conceptual (i.e. ability to analyze and diagnose complex situation), interpersonal (i.e. ability to work well with others at individual and group levels), technical (i.e. knowledge and techniques to perform relevant tasks) and political (i.e. ability to build power base and establish the right connections) skills (Robbins *et al.* 2011). In school

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context, as educators, the managerial staff are experts in teaching and learning, and as teachers, they are managers of their colleagues. In other words, they possess the necessary technical skills to perform teaching-and-learning related tasks, and some of the essential interpersonal skills such as active listening and effective feedback while dealing with others. However, being at managerial levels, they are also expected to possess a complete set of interpersonal skills, namely, empowerment skills, and the other two managerial skills (i.e. conceptual and political skills) to be effective.

For educators, two of the managerial skills (i.e. interpersonal and political skills) may have been acquired through experience on a trial and error basis, but they may not be effective to facilitate the implementation of SBM. For example, most educators have good interpersonal skills suitable while dealing with learners, but not necessarily with adults. They may not be aware that their communication affects the effectiveness of their feedback and the outcome of their empowerment to teachers and non-teachers. Similarly, communication also influences the process of developing power base and right connections with others. In essence, communication skills influence other related skills such as effective feedback, empowerment and networking skills. These skills are often associated with leadership skills.

Leadership is defined as “ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate changes that will create a viable future for the organization” (Ireland & Hitt, 2005, p. 63). In SBM context, school principals and subject head teachers have to develop their leadership skills through which they “influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010, p. 3). Among of the desirable characteristics of leaders are being honest, forward thinking, inspiring, and competent (Daft, 2005). Besides, managerial staff at schools needs to be transformational leaders practicing four elements, namely, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and idealized influence (or charisma) on their subordinates (Avolio *et al.* 1991). The four elements would help them to maintain flexibility and synergy with others at the school in their effort to achieve excellence. These elements often help them to be effective mentors to other school staff, to stimulate school staff’s thinking and be stimulated by them, to generate excitement and confidence, and to develop personal power and influence over school staff. In other words, managerial staff can introduce and implement SBM initiatives effectively if they can successfully lead and mobilize others to do so.

Incorporating SBM represents managing change in a school from a bureaucratic administration into a democratic structure (Gamage *et al.* 1996). Such change often involves either Lewin’s (1951) three-step change process involving unfreezing the status quo, changing to a new state and freezing the new change to make it permanent (Robbins *et al.* 2011). However, any change poses resistance among followers. In SBM contexts, resistance is likely to come from teachers and non-teachers. Management scholars suggest several techniques to minimize resistance such as education and communication, participation, facilitation and support, negotiation, manipulation and co-optation, and coercion (Robbins *et al.* 2011). The first three techniques are often used with non-powerful groups, whilst the last three techniques are recommended when the effort of reducing resistance involves powerful groups. In SBM contexts, principals or head teachers need to implement one of the recommended techniques to gain support from teachers and non-teachers. However, to gain support, principals or head teachers need to implement the concept gradually, and empower staff to make relevant decisions (Wohsletter, 1993). Teachers and non-teachers may not be aware of the value of

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SBM in achieving CSE status. Thus, school principals or head teachers have to introduce the SBM on a gradual basis to create awareness among teachers before implementing it. Such awareness helps to prepare teachers to understand the value of any new initiative. Once such awareness have been created, leaders usually find it easier to get followers (i.e. teachers and non-teachers) to be cooperative, dependable, and honest. This eventually encourages teachers and non-teachers to be honest in providing and exchanging feedbacks pertinent to realize the goals of their schools, that is, achieving the CSE status.

SUPPORTS

Besides, minimizing resistance, incorporating SBM also requires supports from other key stakeholders such as the governing bodies. Once the programmes have been selected and the orientation of the school staff's to SBM has been conducted, schools need to ensure that they have the relevant resources, namely, manpower, time and money. These resources are often not readily accessible for most schools. Relevant and sufficient manpower, that is, experts need to be acquired or custodians need to be trained to conduct the relevant programmes. Being competent is another desirable characteristic of group members (Daft, 2005). Ensuring staff are competent is often subject to time and money. For example, the most effective implementation of SBM have the teachers available outside of school hours, and the number of staff is adequate to sustain programmes (Giordano, 2008). Working outside of school hours usually requires teachers to allocate their time with expected monetary or non-monetary rewards. Meanwhile, ensuring adequate number of staff may not be timely since the feeder of manpower is often the state education department. Without timely and sufficient manpower, school may not be able to achieve the CSE status on time. In fact, similar findings were revealed by Pomuti's (2008) study, that is, autonomy to school management and scarcity of resources impede the implementation of SBM in schools. Najjumba *et al.* (2013) makes similar mention of the need to strengthen school management practices and supports to ensure the successful implementation of the said program in Ugandan primary schools.

The main source of funds for schools also comes from the state and governing bodies such as Ministry of Education or local state authorities which allocate funding to schools. Should schools intend to get other sources of funding, schools must provide staff administrative training and time to adjust to new roles and gain the necessary financial support (Wohsletter, 1993).

One way of maximizing resources is to ensure that school management select niche areas relevant to students' potential and abilities based on students' performances in competitions at national and international levels. Essentially, the success of SBM is a consolidation of many factors ranging from school management, allocation of resources, experienced and adequate manpower trained in specialized fields to oversee and manage co-curricular programs and activities and most importantly, student potential and abilities necessary to fit the bill.

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CONCLUSION

In general, CSE is a prioritization of many factors including effective teaching learning environment, school support and student receptivity to learning excellence (Yin & Ching, 2007). What can be summarized from the studies on CSE is the right combination of push and pull factors and the realistic mechanism to implement such a decision-making model. Different countries approach the said merit and decentralization system with different emphasis in niche areas depending on the resources and funding available in the said country. In this context, the paper elaborates the factors that encompass areas such as students' achievement in academic, co-curricular or personality areas in character development. The merit system can only come to fruition if collaborative efforts are maintained between policy makers and supportive technical mechanism to ensure the sustained implementation of the said merit system (Adediran *et al.* 2012). Giordano (2008) makes mention that using school clusters mainly as administrator units does not allow them to achieve their main objective or improving education quality. Successful implementation of CSE requires a number of committed stakeholders at different levels. Real changes can be accomplished through grants programmes that allow cluster management committee to define their own plans for education improvement.

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