Breaking the Barriers: Teacher Leadership in the Hearth of Educational Reform in the Philippines

BREAKING THE BARRIERS: TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN THE HEART OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THE PHILIPPINES

Paul John Edrada ALEGADO

Beijing Normal University, CHINA

Abstract. This paper describes the educational context and structure of the Philippines as I go through an analysis of the challenges that hinder school improvement and student performance. I highlighted two phenomena that make it a challenge for teacher leadership to thrive: one is the traditional 'principal-oriented' nature of leadership and second, the lack of teacher involvement and independence due to the structural and hierarchal nature that it follows. I argue that these conditions limit the role the teachers play in the organization. The application of teacher leadership in the local context can make a significant contribution to 'de-privatizing the practice' which is currently focused on the principal-ship or administrator-ship. The concept is so critical for collective learning where all teachers are given the opportunity to exercise influence on their own classroom or school settings and contribute using their own expertise, knowledge and other personal assets as the Philippines enters a critical period of a new era adopting a new-fangled educational curriculum called K-12.

Keywords: teacher leadership, principal-ship, K-12 curriculum, Philippines

Introduction to the Philippine educational context

The Philippine public school system has gone through a huge transformation when Republic Act No. 10533, also known as 'The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013'[1], was finally fully implemented in the year 2016. This entails that the previous 10-year basic educational curriculum will be extended for two more years to make it twelve in total, thus this act is more colloquially referred to as the K-12 Basic Education Program. The old system, which ran from 1945 to 2011, was composed of six year-mandatory elementary education and four years of high school for children ages six to fifteen. The ratified educational program, which was put into implementation by Kindergarten Education Act of 2012 and Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, now suggests that the basic education system will take 13 years to complete. That means: one year compulsory kindergarten education, six years of primary school, four years of junior high school and two years of senior high school. The basic education over public and private schools in the country is regulated and supervised by the Department of Education (DepEd). Whilst higher education affairs are being managed by two other agencies—Commission of Higher Education (CHED) and Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). The former controls academic oriented universities and colleges while the latter regulates the technical and vocational training in the country.

The Philippine government holds a strong stance that K-12 curriculum will be the key solution to the enduring crises facing the country's basic education. This program aims to produce highly competitive graduates in terms of literacy, numeracy, and problem solving.[2] However, this educational reform has received criticisms especially by families of poor socio-economic backgrounds who perceived this as time and financial burden. Some others doubted the capacity of this reform to bring forth change. Similar undertakings of the government have proven disappointment to make a difference mainly those directed to structural or program modifications. Structural or organizational reforms have failed because many factors were overlooked in the process. Changing only the

structure or leaders are not sufficient to create meaningful change (Allen & Glickman, 2005).

Thus, if the structural shift of the previous 10-year basic education to K-12 curriculum does not stress the importance of the teachers towards student learning, this reform is yet bound for another failure.

Drawing from international studies and literatures, the very basic aspect of education and training do not suffice the demand and the growing scope of teachers' roles. In the past 30 years, teachers have been identified as the 'problem in education' (Gunter, 2003). However, changing literatures seem to support the crucial role of teachers in educational transformation. Muijs & Reynolds (2011) believed that teachers and teaching were seen to 'matter'. Similarly, Muijs & Harris (2006) described that higher degrees of commitment and association by teachers resulted to more significant effect. The new K-12 curriculum has only few expectations from teachers and school principals. That is teacher education and training which only means simply implementing the policy from top to bottom. If the involvement of the teachers remains 'structural', this reform is doom to fail.

Given this context, it is of significance and of importance to examine the existence of teacher leadership (hereafter TL) in the Philippines public school system and to which degree will its effect contribute to the school improvement and higher student learning outcome. Harris (2003) supported the positive effects of teacher leadership in highly mature educational systems like USA, Canada and Australia. Whereas this concept still struggles in the Philippine context. This is due to the highly-centralized top-down approach nature of the country's education system. Katzenmeyer & Moller (2001) emphasized egalitarian norms in organizational structure of teaching that is quite shrewd in the Philippines where the existing cultural model may not be ready to recognize distinctions in status amongst teachers based on knowledge, skills, or initiatives. The gap be-

tween the formal leadership positions and the teaching staff is highly problematic because subservience to authority and unity among those in the same rank and status are the prevailing standards.

The challenges of educational reform

In the Philippines, students' academic learning outcomes are measured by a test named as National Achievement Test (NAT). These are sets of standardized examinations taken by students on their 6th, 10th and 12th year designed to assess the academic learning level which includes their knowledge in five different categories; English, Filipino, Mathematics, Sciences and Social Studies. NAT exams are significant because they provide empirical evidence on the attainment level of students in specific grade period which guides policy makers, principals and school teachers in their respective courses of action. It also measures the rate of improvement of the students and schools which reflect the overall strength and weaknesses of the country's basic education systems.

Department of Education published in 2011-2012 that the average NAT score for the country was 67% for the elementary level and 49% for the secondary level. This score was particularly low considering that the test itself is a weak universal measure for the development of critical thinking skills and other learning factors. This is disappointing despite the hard work and untiring efforts of principals, department heads, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to tackle the problems faced by public schools. De Los Reyes reflected that this is a deficiency on the Philippines commitment as signatories of the United Nations (UN) Millennial Development Goals for 2015 to alleviate educational inequality and poverty. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) in 2015, there is still a huge contrast between the attainment of tertiary education by families belonging to the highest 70% and the lowest 30%. The data collected showed that from the 3 to 24-year old students who enrolled school during aca-

demic year (AY) 2010 to 2011, merely 4% of those under the poverty line attended college, while 18% come from the highest 70% demographics. Meanwhile, the data regarding 6 to 24-year olds who had not attended school were at the highest came from the lowest 30% population. This was attribute to two main reasons; one was the lack of personal interest at 28.9% and second, the high cost of education which accounted for 26.8% according to the census.

The role of education in the alleviation of poverty in the country has been more palpable and urgent than ever. Hargreaves (2005) and Harris (2009) both considered education as still the most valuable gatekeeper of opportunity and a formidable distributor of life chances. In the Philippines, 90% of school children attend public schools in the hopes of improving their lives in the future. This is especially true for those who experience various consequences of poverty where good education is the only hope out of it.

The accustomed answer to student poor performance in public schools has been always been teacher training based on the students' scores from annual National Achievement Test (NAT). Teacher training on a new educational paradigm is perceived by policy makers to 'turn-around' poor student performance. In 2010, the DepEd introduced a new tool for educational planning called Understanding by Design (UbD). This is based on the premise that poor student learning outcomes are due to poor quality of teachers and the inadequacy of their tools (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Although it can be argued that these training programs can improve student learning, more proactive use of curriculum which practices teacher leadership may hold greater promise for teachers.

The traditional 'Principal-Oriented' leadership model

Across countries, there is a legitimately common pattern in the school structure regarding leadership positions. Each school is often headed by a single individual known as principal or sometimes referred to as head teacher. He bears the responsibility for the school operation, which depends on country governance structures usually Department or Ministry of Education. Traditionally,

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school leaders have been described as head teacher who has more responsibilities than their colleagues. The rise of teachers who demonstrated leadership capabilities and taught well at the same time has steered to the formulation of 'teacher leadership' as a concept believed to be as equally critical behind transformations in schools. Prof. Evers reiterated that teacher leadership has been seen more developed in places like Australia, Canada and the US (Teacher Leadership Seminar on October 4th, 2017). While in the Philippines, leadership remains traditionally interpreted as principal-centered. This is partly because of the recruitment of principals and how the pool of candidates is 'privitazed'. Meaning to say it is only exclusive to those former teachers with extensive years of teaching experience can become principals. Henceforth, the principal role is the peak step in a teaching career rather than a separate occupation. At the primary level, the principal is usually the only person in a formal leadership role. In smaller jurisdictions or schools also lean to combine leadership and management functions to a principal.

A lot of political and systematic glitches also contribute to this mess. Principals are routinely rotated to different jurisdictions. They can be assigned to a school for a short period of time for about six months or a year. Luistro[3] suggested that the constant and fast turn-over of principals or school heads resulted in the failure to fully implement and evaluate team efforts and changes to the institution. Henceforth, school improvement cannot be left alone in the hands of the principals no matter how great they are. Spillane (2006) expressed that even if principals were mandated to stay longer, one leader does not have all the time, and expertise to lead educational reform. Even the most promising initiatives, in this case K-12 curriculum, are most probable to fail if it's only dependent on one person. Sutherland & Brooks (2013) also acknowledged the complicated and interconnected historical, political and cultural climate that come with the role of principal in the Philippines. For example, the turn-over of principals can be very unpredictable. They can be promoted to larger jurisdictions anytime during the academic year and immediately leave their posts as

soon as they are promoted. I myself have experience it in high school when we had three principals in one year. Also, politics in the regional to district can affect the principal's rotation or promotion.

Collins (2001) referred to principal-centered nature of TL as "genius with a thousand helpers". This model is very limiting to a single person which cannot be helpful in securing systemic change in educational practices across organizations. TL can only be effective if leaders recognize leaders and leadership at different levels of a system and for schools, giving teacher leadership an opportunity to develop. The notion of teacher leadership is not focused on the traditional hierarchical structure of bureaucratic management. The principal can make teacher leadership viable if they would be willing to distribute leadership including 'relinquishing' some of their power to the TLs. Harris (2003) emphasized that a good foundation of mutual trust is key to the successful distribution of leadership and those in formal leadership positions like the principal have an integral role to play to make this transpire.

In a nutshell, the principal-oriented nature of the Philippine educational system requires the only principal to be both an instructional and administrative leader. The Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001 specifies the following as responsibilities of principals as instructional leaders "creating an environment within the school that is conducive to teaching and learning; implementing the school curriculum and being accountable for higher learning outcomes; introducing new and innovative modes of instruction to achieve higher learning outcomes; and encouraging staff development"[4]

Problems related to teacher involvement

The public school system in the country is consist of more than 38,000 public elementary schools and more than 7,000 public high schools making it one of the largest in Asia. All public schools are under administrative management by DepEd which organized them into three jurisdictions; districts, divisions and regional. DepEd is highly centralized with its central office constantly

monitoring policy implementation at the local or lower levels. De Guzman (2006) characterized it as historically hierarchal which still dominates until the present. He stressed that while current reform efforts in the country are focused on school-based management, the overall organization of the education system follows the de-concentration form of decentralization. This means that the central office remains highly in control even if management responsibilities move from central to local levels.

In public schools, teachers are classified into different teaching positions such as teacher, master teacher, head teacher among others. All of which are equally involved in classroom teaching. However, there is no clear distinction between the duties of one teaching position to another. They are based on personal qualifications rather than the duties, responsibilities and qualification requirements of the positions. This classification scheme was implemented to support and compensate initiatives for teachers pursuing professional growth but not to enhance leadership potential. Moreover, the promotion to a higher teaching position does not require an increase in duties and responsibilities. It is merely based on higher degrees like post graduate qualifications and participation in continuing professional enrichment programs. DepEd compensates its teachers using a tool called Teachers' Preparation Pay Schedule (TPPS). It is a classification and compensation scheme for teaching positions in elementary and secondary schools based on a combination of competencies which include academic or educational preparation, work experience and extracurricular professional training and certificates. For leadership assignments and roles, TPPS does not provide a clear provision to more compensation or reduced teaching load. Generally, teachers who perform additional assigned tasks or leadership roles are not provided with benefits but such tasks can be used to earn credentials for promotion. Teachers can be promoted to principal through two different career tracks, one is the school administration track or second is the master teacher career under the classroom teaching track with the criteria which include

educational background, training, experience and performance. This system reiterates hierarchal way to practicing TL. This can serve as a hindrance to teacher leadership because these policies cannot encourage TL and these policies cannot provide adequate resources to teachers and schools.

Also, teachers do not enjoy ample support from such policies. The lack of opportunities for professional growth is a source of frustration and burden to TL. No training programs are facilitated that could expose teachers to new knowledge and teaching approaches for them to grow professionally. Professional development should be prioritized if teachers were to lead the improvement of school and student learning in their instantaneous roles as teachers and leaders. The inadequacy of professional development trainings and programs across the system could also be the root of the displeasure and may be part of the reason behind some teachers' lack of confidence that made them shy away from practicing leadership duties.

The author argues that the nature of the 'principal-oriented' nature of the system and the classification of teacher limit the role they play in the organization. These two are interrelated as the principal plays a crucial role in promoting the cultural conditions for teacher leadership to thrive especially in a context where hierarchical set-up is palpable. The attitude and predisposition of the principal can facilitate or restrains the leadership of teachers. Greenlee (2007) found that the connection of teachers in leadership activities are significantly dependent on the teacher-principal relationship. Moreover, the system also lacks incentives and motivation to teachers who perform leadership roles which prohibits them on stepping up as leaders. It is therefore critical to create schools where teacher leaders emerge as influencers and every student can realize their potentials and have a chance of an improved life. The K-12 reform is a good start but the improvements in student performance are highly dependent on the teachers and teacher leaders we cultivate on the process. The important contribution of teachers to school improvement should be recognized in the Philippines rather

than accusing them of the fault. The accustomed answer to student poor performance in public schools has been always been teacher training based on the students' scores from annual National Achievement Test (NAT).

Teacher leadership in the Philippine context

The concept of teacher leadership is still disputed and highly contested, with different researchers proposing different meanings or adopting different approach. Evers (2014) adopted a broader definition – teacher leadership as the exercise of influence on others in teaching and learning contexts. This definition by Evers seems to be used and highlighted by a lot of researchers. For example, Danielson (2006) defines teacher leadership as a set of skills demonstrated by teachers who continue to teach students but also have an influence that extends beyond their own classrooms to others within their own school and elsewhere. It involves influencing others by mobilizing and energizing; with the aim of improving the school's performance of its critical responsibilities; related to teaching and student learning. It goes beyond following an order from an authority or a principal. A teacher becomes an influencer because he or she is well-informed and persuasive. Consequently, a teacher leader should possess essential characteristics such as expertise and skill in engaging others in their respective work environments. It requires a steadfast passion for the fundamental mission and vision of the school. It also instils courage to confront obstacles to achieving such. When teachers are put equally in the center of these missions and visions, a different approach might be in need to achieve school improvement. This can involve adopting different measures as part of the change process. For example, improvement can happen when teacher leaders try to motivate their teammates to become more skilled and thoughtful about their work by doing things differently or doing them better. From time to time, teacher leaders recognize a chance to initiate a practice to improve a program. In such situations, TL can show others how to use the new approach and encourage to emulate. Fullan[5] regarded 'mobility' as the litmus test of TL. If it mobilizes teacher's

commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things. It is individual commitment, but most importantly, it is collective mobilization.

Experience, expertise and decision-making

Danielson (2006) believed that bureaucratic conceptualization of teaching is deeply embedded in the fact that teaching is a flat profession in most settings. That is to mean that the first day on the job for a teacher with ten years of experience is practically the same as for a novice just entering the profession. It entails that both are the teacher of record with responsibility for a class they oversee on equal grounds. He gave an interesting paradigm using a comparison with other professions. For example, in architectural firms, no supervisor would ask a newly licensed architect to handle a major project on the first week of his job. Rather, they would let him work on a team with more experienced architects. Likewise, a newly certified accountant would not be appointed to a major client on his own. At the very least, the firm would give him an experienced colleague to mentor him and would gradually assume greater autonomy in the future. Thus, we can say that the work of an experienced teacher is not the essentially same as that of a novice. Experience is of great importance, especially in the teaching profession which confers many benefits to both educators and their students. It includes strong familiarity with the curriculum, better understanding of students, wide repertoire of instructional methods and strategies, and also the ins and outs of the school and the district. Meaning to say, experience is oftentimes accompanied by 'expertise'. Such expertise is a product of professional experience with the constant desire to reach out beyond their own classrooms.

While it is arguable that the teaching profession is never fully mastered nor teachers never completely make use of the potential of their work with students, some teachers seek extra challenges and opportunities to extend their influence. Some of them desire to influence more individuals other than that of

they teach in the class. Their vision outspreads outside classrooms and beyond even their own organization or departments.

Just like in the Philippines where traditional practices transpire, the only ways in which teachers with a predisposition for leadership is to either become administrators or become active in teacher unions. Both career paths can be challenging and yet they can provide leadership opportunities outside the classroom. In most settings, it would mean that teachers have to leave teaching their students and exercise influence in a more of an organizational archetype. We start to see improvements in the Philippines when teachers can now pursue both teaching and some leadership roles for those who want to practice greater influence while continuing their work. Danielson (2006) explicated that more teachers feel an urge to exercise leadership as 'teachers' rather than administrators or principals. They see themselves as teachers fore mostly; and might not be genuinely interested in becoming administrators but are looking to extend their reach.

Another interesting point to look at is that how TL in the Philippine context is closely related to the teachers' tenure-ship in the school. Theoretically, teachers normally have longer tenure-ship than any administrators or principal. In the country where principals are rotated frequently, the school that has been turned around by a great will mostly to change or reverted to its previous state when that principal moves to another jurisdiction. Therefore, the cultivation of teacher leadership may well be a sensible investment for a school fully committed to refining practice over the long term. It may also prove decisive in uplifting teachers who have leadership potentials to stay with education rather than leave the profession for one that offers better chances for ongoing professional development and advancement. Moreover, in most schools, traditional societal norms about teacher and leadership in the sense of autonomy and individuality hinder the development of professional learning communities which are quite important for meaningful school improvement. That is, it is progressively recognized that if schools are to attain better results with their students, it must be a

collective endeavor rather than a collection of individual efforts. Teachers are prevented to rise from their normal teaching roles because of too much focus on principal archetype of leadership where teachers are traditionally follow.

Here comes the concept of TL as a specific form of distributed leadership. Teacher leaders are a critical resource for accomplishing many tasks that need to be known, theorized, and attained in schools and in student learning. The rise of school-based management, which both increased the amount of site-based decision-making, and the number and kind of participants, piloted in an emphasis on the administrative roles of teachers as a way of distributing mandated new decision structures as well as distributing the increased burden of leadership more widely. This gave the appearance that teacher leadership was part of a distributed approach to leadership having, primarily, an administrative focus. However, with emphasis now firmly on school improvement and the achievement of gains in student learning outcomes, teacher leadership nowadays has a strong pedagogical and instructional focus. Talk of "parallel leadership" also captures this new focus, with principals and teacher leaders being partners in leading administratively and pedagogically, respectively.

Conclusion

Teacher leadership, when fully practiced by educators and valued by their colleagues, will make a significant contribution to 'de-privatizing practice' which is currently focused on the principal-ship or administrator-ship in the Philippine context. The concept is so critical for collective learning when everyone is given the opportunity to exercise it on their own classroom or school settings and contribute using their own expertise, knowledge and other personal assets. TL is not a new phenomenon; something that did not just spring into existence in the early years of the 21st century. This concept has a deeply rooted history, reaching back for more than 100 years. In the light of broader school

reforms, the concept of teacher leadership has been notably being used and acknowledged for school reform and improvement.

The Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy seems to agree when they established that teachers should have more control over their work environments (Danielson, 2006). Thus, the concept of TL in school decision making has a long history, with teachers being involved in school governance. Teachers should not only take initiative for what occurs in the school but rather are encouraged to participate in making decisions. We can recall much in the US when John Dewey advocated for democratic schools in a democratic society. His vision foresees a partnership between students and teachers in a democratic venture. The changing dynamics nowadays, where more tolerant school principals and administrators accept the involvement of teachers not only as a 'follower' of the school's policy and structure, but rather a part of the process which include decision-making, creating ideas and implementation. John Dewey (1903) reflected that it is fundamental that *"every teacher had some regular and representative way to register judgment upon matters of educational importance, with assurance that this judgment would somehow affect the school system"* (p. 195). True teacher leadership encompasses extemporaneous and organic teacher initiative and facilitation.

Also, teacher leaders can assume a wide range of leadership roles to support school and student success. Whether these appointments are bestowed formally or shared informally, they construct the entire school's capacity to improve. Because teachers can lead in a variety of ways, many teachers can serve as leaders among their peers. Teachers can exhibit leadership prospective in manifold, sometimes intersecting, ways. Some leadership roles are formal with clear designated responsibilities whilst other more informal roles materialize as teachers interact with their peers. The variety of roles ensures that teachers can find ways to lead that fit their talents and interests. Regardless of the roles they accept, teacher leaders have the potential to shape the culture of their schools, advance student learning, and influence practice among their peers.

NOTES

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⌧ Paul John Edrada Alegado
Institute of International and Comparative Education
Beijing Normal University
10 Xinjiekou Waidajie, Haidian District,
Beijing China, 100000
E-Mail: pauljohnalegado24@yahoo.com