Teacher Education in the Global Era
Perspectives and Practices
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Editor

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Teacher Education in Malaysia: Practices, Challenges and Future Trends for the Twenty-First Century

Donnie Adams and Vicneswary Muthiah

Introduction

Global trends are redefining the current and future needs of individuals at local, national, regional and global levels. Education has been regarded as an indispensable and vital tool for social and economic growth of a country (Harris, Jones, & Adams, 2016). Efforts around the world have depended on education as a means of eradicating poverty and hunger, increasing the income of the people, assuring employment and opening opportunities for individuals to live a lifestyle of comfort and ease.

The five key themes adopted by the international community at the 2015 World Education Forum (WEF, 2015) are: (1) the right to education; (2) equity in education; (3) inclusive education; (4) quality education; and (5) lifelong learning. These themes offer a framework for education policy developments in which teachers can be prepared to face the diverse and changing world of schooling (Florian & Pantić, 2017). This framework is articulated in the Incheon Declaration, Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all (WEF, 2015).

The new vision is aligned to the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2016). The continued emphasis on quality education and even greater concerted efforts at the international-level ensured countries incorporate these policies within their own national agenda. Malaysia, for example, has its 2013–2025 National Education Blueprint (Preschool to Post-Secondary) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012).

The emphasis on quality education in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 is evident throughout the three waves of transformation from 2013 to 2025 (Jones, Adams, HweeJoo, Muniandy, Perera, & Harris, 2015). In the First Wave
(2013–2015), the focus was on raising the quality of the teacher by upskilling the existing pool of teachers, while in the Second Wave (2016–2020) a new secondary and revised primary curriculum is aligned to the twenty-first-century skills.

In the Third Wave (2021–2025), more reforms will be underway emphasizing on the cultivation of a peer-led culture of professional excellence using a school-based management model (Mohamad Johdi & Muhammad, 2018). The attainment of professional and high-quality teachers begins with the development of these teachers while they are still students in teacher training institutions or other higher education institutions offering teacher education courses.

In the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, it was also highlighted that one of the qualities of teachers that is given much consideration is their leadership skills. Specifically, Shift 4 in the blueprint states the aims to transform teaching into the profession of choice by executing the following strategies: (i) raising the entry bar for teachers from 2013 to be among top 30% of graduates; (ii) upgrading the quality of continuous professional development from 2013; (iii) focusing on teachers’ core function of teaching from 2013; (iv) implementing competency and performance-based career progression by 2016; (v) enhancing pathways for teachers into leadership, master teaching and subject specialist roles by 2016; and (vi) developing a peer-led culture of professional excellence and certification processes by 2025 (Norlia, Hamidah, Mahaliza, & Wan Mohd Nazri, 2018).

The success of implementing these educational goals at the grassroots level lies with the teachers who are responsible to impart knowledge and skills while molding the attitudes and behaviors of the students. Teachers are a key to effective, formative education. A teacher would determine the student’s enthusiasm for learning, and that good teaching skills were critical (Alatas, 2018).

Teachers must be prepared adequately to carry out their duties within a very dynamic environment where they themselves must be able to address the challenges of the twenty-first century and maintain a high standard of competence to deliver quality education to the students. Thus, this chapter highlights the entry qualification into pre-service, types of teacher training institutions, challenges in teacher education, the rise of professional learning communities and teacher leadership for the twenty-first century in Malaysia.

**Entry Qualification into Pre-service**

Pre-service teacher education provides the opportunity for new teachers to acquire knowledge that may extend their professional intellectual capacities and enable them to teach appropriately and rigorously (Reid, 2017). Taylor (2016) explains that pre-service education is also a link between the novice and the professional in the field of education. An individual enters a teacher education program and, after a few years, graduates to become a newly qualified teacher who began the journey as a teacher.
in the school setting (Deacon, 2012). These student teachers or teacher trainees are provided with a learning environment to enrich their experiences in delivering pedagogical content knowledge in a professional manner (Mensah, Boateng, & Pillay, 2018).

However, it is important to make a good choice of teacher. These student teachers must have good theoretical and moral training (Alatas, 2018). Teacher’s role in educating students nowadays goes beyond with just presenting them with facts. Students acquire from their teachers a great many habits, ideas and values. Therefore, student teachers should be an excellent person, capable of discerning the values of society and moral virtues so that students will follow them as a guide and model (Alatas, 2018).

The entry qualifications for teacher educators in Malaysia vary. Firstly, teachers are required to have a university degree in the relevant field of specialization before they are recruited based on their teaching experience (Vethamani, 2011). Furthermore, there is an increasing focus toward candidates who possess a postgraduate degree.

However, a Ph.D. qualification remains an unpopular choice among candidates. Teachers in Malaysia sometimes do not see pursuing a doctorate degree as a necessity. A possible explanation for this could be due to the salary scheme offered to public service servants, academicians and teachers who obtain a Ph.D. degree in Malaysia. Presently, there is no difference to the salary scheme of a teacher with a Ph.D. degree (Ng, Muhd, Ab Rahman, & Ismail, 2011). Therefore, there is a vital need to reassess teacher’s salary with a PhD degree within the government sector.

**Teacher Training Institutions in Malaysia**

The importance of teacher education in Malaysia and the need to produce teacher with quantity and quality to cater to the needs of education in this nation have therefore led to the emergence of two public institutions providing teacher education, i.e., the universities and the Institute of Teacher Education (ITE).

In 1922, Malaysia established its first teacher training college, the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC). However, based on the recommendations of the Razak Report, its name was changed to *Maktab Perguruan Sultan Idris* (Sultan Idris Teaching College) in 1957. Further to that, its recognition as an institute for teacher training in 1987 resulted in a rename to *Institut Perguruan Sultan Idris* (Sultan Idris Teaching Institute). Ten years later, the institution was further upgraded and given university status. Now, it is known as *Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris* (Sultan Idris Education University) (*UPSI*), and its sole focus continues to be in teacher education (Vethamani, 2011).

However, in order to meet the growing demands of trained teachers in schools, the Ministry of Education Malaysia begun to set up 27 ITEs in every state throughout
the country. These colleges could confer certificates and diplomas to candidates. In 2009, these ITEs were then upgraded into degree-awarding institutions, offering the Bachelor of Education (Primary), and were subsequently renamed to Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia (Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia).

These ITEs are under the jurisdiction of the Teacher Education Division of the Ministry of Education, mainly responsible to train teachers for the primary schools. Over the years, public universities, specifically those with faculties of education, now could provide teacher training for teachers to be absorbed in government secondary schools. Public universities offer the Bachelor of Education as a four-year program. The teacher education under these public universities is under the purview of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). These teachers are mainly catered to teach in secondary schools and matriculation programs. Apart from that, these public universities also offer Postgraduate Diploma in Education for candidates wishing to pursue a teaching career after obtaining a non-educational first degree.

The teacher education program in ITEs and in public universities follows a standard curriculum set by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency, but the universities are given the autonomy to structure their own curriculum. Nevertheless, five components of teacher education are adhered to: (i) the educational component; (ii) the professional practice component; (iii) the school subject content; (iv) the educational electives component; and (v) the educational specialization component. At present, both institutes of teacher education and public universities in Malaysia could train teachers for primary and secondary schools (Mahmud, Nasri, Samsudin, & Halim, 2018).

The Malaysian government also initiated the Malaysian Economic Transformation Program (METP) in 2010 to transform Malaysia into a high-income nation by 2020. Teacher training is now a priority area of the Malaysian government. Under the METP, teachers are under pressure to perform not only effectively in classrooms but also innovatively (Economic Planning Unit 2008). In fact, ‘improving teacher quality in the education system is a top priority’ within the METP blueprint (Goh & Blake, 2015). Consequently, the private sector was allowed to offer teacher training in order to meet increasing request for qualified teachers in Malaysian primary and secondary schools.

The Economic Transformation Program goes as far as to state, ‘We will allow private providers to provide pre-service and in-service training for primary and secondary school teachers. Private providers will be responsible for determining the subject areas …, as well as what business model they use (e.g. face to face, e-learning, or blended models)’ [Performance Management and Delivery Unit, Prime Minister’s Department (PEMANDU), 2010, p. 487]. This major development has opened the doors for teacher educators of various qualifications and teaching experience to enter the teaching profession (Vethamani, 2011).
Challenges in Teacher Education

The journey of the individual in attaining pre-service teacher education can be both challenging and smooth sailing (Cherrington, 2017). Teaching is both art and science and therefore is ever changing, creating problems, challenges and new developments. In other words, these student teachers are inadvertently exposed to challenges and issues which they need to address, cope with and overcome in order to graduate as competent novice teachers.

The twenty-first century is set apart and unique compared to the previous century as within this millennium era, the impact of globalization and rapid development of technological advancement are even greater and broader. Robinson and Aronica (2015) had highlighted that classroom of yesteryear now is quite different. Care, Kim, Vista, and Anderson (2018) argued that the education system of today must be able to equip students with the ability to use and apply core knowledge and concepts. The twenty-first century demands that students must be able to solve problem, communicate clearly, make evidence-based decisions, work together and think creatively within the socio-cultural context of their own society while at the same time equipped with attitudes, values and ethics as a global citizen (Care & Kim, 2018).

Therefore, teachers are expected to contribute toward the attainment of sustainable education. In recent decades, there has been a shift from a teacher-centered learning approach in the classroom to that of classroom practices that are based on partnership among the teachers (Singh, 2014). These changes and reforms are informed to the student teachers who are taking teacher education in TEIs and public universities. Skills required to address these changes are introduced and included in their curriculum as and when required.

However, for teachers who are already in service, the MoE trains these teachers for any curriculum reforms via the in-service training programs (Jamil, Razak, Raju, & Mohamed, 2007). These trainings are carried out using the cascade model, whereby selected teachers are trained by the master trainers, and these teachers are expected to train other teachers at the state and district levels. Other than that, MoE also organized short-term in-service training and development program for teachers who are teaching critical subjects such as mathematics, science, English and ICT or encouraging the teachers to take up a Master of Education program.

Although the government through MoE has implemented various strategies to address numerous changes within the educational landscape, the adequacy and quality of the intervention during the pre-service and in-service teacher education program are often questioned. These changes and the efforts of the government to ensure quality education for the nation are reflected in the adoption of the professional learning community practice at all levels of education. Continuous professional development of the teachers became one of the main goals under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 to provide new competencies of the teachers as aligned to the twenty-first-century skills.
Professional Learning Communities

The professional learning community (PLC) concept has been widely practiced in many countries like Germany (Warwas & Helm, 2018), the Netherlands (Prenger, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2017), China (Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011), Belgium (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016) and the USA (Little, 2012) with the intent of improving teacher quality to enhance their professional skills and improving practices in the school (Dogan, Pringle, & Mesa, 2016).

PLC is a complex and multidimensional concept, but in general, it is accepted as a means of teacher quality enhancement and school improvement (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). In addition, it is also a concept that emphasizes on teacher collaboration whereby teachers work with each other to improve student outcomes. Bennett (2017) explained that the PLC model proposed by DuFour (2006) serves as a framework for teachers to work in a high-performing, collaborative team that focuses on student learning improvement.

The culture of PLC has not only been practiced in the school context but been aligned to include organizational environmental change within the higher education institution as well, including teacher education institutions. This provides the teachers to interact and develop their capabilities as teachers (Masters, 2016). It is hoped that through PLC, pre-service teachers will enhance their professional experience (Le Cornu, 2016).

Traditionally, professional experience was gained through apprenticeship approaches, but PLC presents more contemporary models for the teachers to gain more meaningful professional experience. In the PLC professional experience model, White, Bloomfield and Le Cornu (2010) explained that the pre-service teachers, colleagues, peers, mentors and educators are engaged in reciprocal working and learning relationships where they share and collaborate to attain optimal outcomes. Among other things, Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan and Pearce (2015) asserted that the learning community minimizes professional isolation of the teachers and helps in building a culture of belonging and social connectedness.

Although PLC is a popular term at the international level, the concept is still considered as novel in Malaysia (Roslizam, Jamilah, & Boon, 2018). It was first introduced in the Ministry of Education Malaysia Interim Strategic Planning 2011–2020 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2010) as one of the activities to upgrade the teaching and learning quality in the classroom as well as teachers’ training (Roslizam et al., 2018). PLC is regarded as one of the activities of continuous professional development (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2014). This intention was stated in the Malaysian Transformational Education Bulletin (Buletin Anjakan: Buletin Transformasi Pendidikan Malaysia) No. 7/2015.

Some of the State Education Departments in Malaysia such as Johor and Negeri Sembilan had taken PLC as a strategy in their educational plan. In Johor, PLC is one of the ten key performance indices (KPIs) in Strategic Planning Phase 4 (Roslizam et al., 2018). PLC was included as a fourth strategic goal to ensure that schools have an efficient, effective and innovative management system. Wilson (2016) stated that
PLC is a platform that nourishes the development of teachers’ professionalism and the academic achievement of the students.

In Negeri Sembilan, the State Education Department regards PLC as one of the methods to enhance the education system at the school, district and state levels. PLC was stated as a sixth strategy focusing on the purpose of producing human capitals with the twenty-first-century knowledge and skills. Hence, the PLC concept needs to be encultured during teacher education to ensure that the student teachers understand and embrace the concept and having the capability to implement PLC successfully in schools.

Teacher Leadership for the Twenty-First Century

Garcia-Martinez, Diaz-Delgado and Ubago-Jimenez (2018) commented that teacher training programs have become ‘technically oriented.’ Teacher education is evolving and changing; therefore, creating future leaders is utmost importance. Pre-service teachers must be prepared with the knowledge on various leadership concepts and use them in their participation in organizational activities, programs and policies (Masturah, Norlia, & Khalip, 2016). Teachers’ routines are no longer restricted within classroom boundaries (Grant & Gillette, 2006). Teachers are in a unique position to promote change within schools (Adams, Samat, & Abu Samah, 2018; Adams, 2018; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010).

A teacher with good leadership competency is also a responsible teacher (Gielen & Chloe, 2014). Teacher leadership is required in four aspects of responsibilities: (i) facilitating improvement in teaching and learning of the students in the classroom; (ii) developing school through administrative and managerial tasks; (iii) improving relationships and collaboration with other stakeholders; and (iv) becoming a role model and leader referral (Nor Asma Sheirnawani Abdul Rahman, Mohd Asri Mohd Noor, Rohaila Yusof, & Hamidah Yusof, 2015).

Teacher leadership needs to be nurtured during pre-service education. The concept of teacher leadership has been in existence for some time, but with the dynamic changes, there is a need for refocus on the potential of teachers in formal and informal leadership roles to ensure school improvement (Muijs, Chapman, & Armstrong, 2013). The intentional focus on teacher leadership could also create more opportunities for teachers to take more responsibility without neglecting their main tasks of teaching in the classroom.

The traditional view of teacher leaders sees them as seasoned and expert teachers who can mentor and share their wealth of experience with others (Neumerski, 2012). Thus, in the past, teacher leader is a role open only to veteran teachers and this notion leads to the disempowerment of novice teachers who might have been able to contribute to school improvement through formal or informal leadership roles (Nolan & Palazzolo, 2011). Ado (2016) stated that teacher leadership should be seen from a different framework, as veteran teachers not leading novice teachers but empowering teachers to take actions that can provide benefits to the students and schools.
Novice teachers should be encouraged to act as teacher leaders in the informal setting (Muijs et al., 2013). Nolan and Palazzolo (2011) further added their arguments that teacher leadership should be a paradigm that include teachers at various career stages including the time that they are still student teachers and not for veteran and experienced teachers only. The embrace of a redefined concept of teacher leadership may benefit schools with high attrition (Ado, 2016).

Henceforth, preparing the pre-service teachers for teacher leadership should be incorporated in the teacher education programs so that these teachers are ready and prepared for the realities of governance and politics in the school (Xie & Shen, 2013). Ryan (2009) added that ‘teacher preparation programs must make deliberate attempts to require the analysis of knowledge, skills and dispositions of teacher leaders, and nurture these traits to ensure that change [school improvement] is embraced by new educators, leaders and our profession’ (p. 203).

According to the Teacher Leader Model Standards which was published by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (Ado, 2016), there are six domains that must be presented, understood and applied by teacher leaders. These domains are illustrated in Fig. 1.

**Fig. 1** Six domains of the teacher leader model standards. *Source* Adapted from Ado (2016)
The practice of teacher leadership in Malaysian schools is mainly regarded as responsibility of the head teachers or even at the principal or headmaster level. However, Ayob (2012) argued that these head teachers are merely ‘head’ as they execute directives from education administrators at the district and state levels. Otherwise, teachers are also supported by coaches known as School Improvement Specialist Coach Plus (SISC+) who guide and coach the teachers through a series of coaching sessions (Salwati, Ghavifekr, & Zuraidah, 2019).

It is common in the Malaysian classroom that teachers focus more on completing the syllabus and preparing the students for examination. These students become passive learners and do not reflect the students of the twenty-first century at all. Hence, coaching and mentoring are means of reaching out to these teachers in enhancing their knowledge and skills to become more effective in the classroom.

Leadership among these coaches who teach other teachers needs to be effective. According to Bush (2011), teacher leadership is a form of leadership aside from others like transformational and distributed leadership that is important to build teacher professionalism in the school where they teach.

The learning environment of today needs teachers to show critical values, knowledge and skills to provide meaningful learning in an effective teaching process with greater collaboration among other teachers and administrators in the school. Inasmuch, this calls for teacher leadership not only among the principals or headmasters and senior teachers but extended to novice teachers as well.

Therefore, the refocus and reframing of the teacher leadership in alignment with the challenges in teacher education must be considered in the pre-service teacher education so that student teachers are capable of becoming teacher leader when they enter the professional career as a teacher.

**Conclusion**

Teachers are responsible to produce human capital for the nation. Teachers must gain the necessary competencies before they embarked on their professional career and become an effective and efficient change agent. The Malaysian government has been putting efforts to strengthen the quality of both in-service and pre-service teachers. The budget allocations of the Malaysian government have been increased for in-service training programs and teachers’ continuous professional development.

Thus, Malaysia has made a great progress in its teacher education. However, to be effective in reforming our education policy, equal weight must be given to how we recruit teachers and the quality of their education (Alatas, 2018).
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