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## A comparative study on teacher leadership in special education classroom between China and Malaysia

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### Abstract

This research study the teacher leadership style among special education teachers, so as to identify effective teacher leadership style in managing classroom which included managing classroom environment, teaching skills and children's performance. This is a cross cultural comparative study between China and Malaysia, and it employs the quantitative method to collect data from the participating schools. The study assessed the perception and the implementation of teacher leadership practice of special education teachers in creating energy in the classroom; building capacity; securing environment; extending the vision; meeting and minimizing crisis; and seeking and charting improvement dimensions. Respondents were 369 special education teachers from Malaysia and 380 from China. Data were analyzed and the results reveal that the special education teachers practice all the six dimensions of teacher leadership at high level in both countries. From the t-test analysis, there is a significant difference between the level of agreement and the level of implementing the teacher leadership practice in both countries, showing higher level of agreement. The study implies that special education teachers practice, implement, access and maintain high level of teacher leadership in their classroom management.

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*Keywords:* Teacher leadership, special education, classroom management;

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### 1. Introduction

This is a comparative study between Malaysia and China on the special education teacher leadership in classroom management. The main purpose a comparative study is carried out is to establish generalized effective teacher leadership practice in special education classroom that may be valid in more than one countries moreover China is the biggest and growing most rapidly nation among the Asian countries. In addition this study not only be able to describe special education systems, process, or outcomes derived from both countries but also will assist in the development of educational institutions and practices. Finally a comparative study would be able to highlight the relationships between education and society (Joubish, 2009). Effective educational change is dependent on the exercise of appropriate leadership roles. There has been interest in identifying leadership roles for classroom teachers (Howey, 1988; Devaney, 1987; Liberman, 1988; Little, 1984), based on a need for "highly competent leaders who reside where the problems primarily are - in schools - and who can address these in a continuing, collective manner" (Howey, 1988, p. 29).

Leadership qualities are identified as: knowledge of change strategies, knowledge of curriculum alternatives and development process, skill in group process, and decision making. This study hopes to reveal the need to change

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special teacher preparation programs. The importance of teacher preparation has emerged because it prepares teachers and provides them with the competencies necessary for achieving success especially in teaching children with special needs (Ripley, 1997). Printy (2008) study on the influence of high school principals and department chairpersons relate to nature of science and mathematics teacher leadership. Of particular interest is the extent to which leaders affect teachers' professional beliefs and their instructional skills of teacher leadership. Printy's (2008) findings showed the connections between school leaders and teachers think about their work and the quality of their instruction in classrooms. Findings offer insight into important links in the causal chain between teacher leadership and student achievement.

Malaysia has 623 special education teachers for primary school and 191 special education teachers for secondary school with the enrolment in primary school as 1680 and secondary school as 771 for the year 2008 ([www.emoe.gov.my](http://www.emoe.gov.my)). Today, China has 1,540 schools for special education, with 375,000 students (China Education Statistic, 2007). Both countries have a quite high percentage of special needs students and they should be given a great deal of help. Special education teachers play important role because they should offer help to special needs children to live normally and deal with their society. Children with special need in this paper refer to children with learning difficulties. Special education students are more likely to drop out of school than their peers. This trend holds true for students with all types of special needs (Wilmshurst & Brue, 2005; Erozkhan, 2009; Tuncay & Uzunboylyu, 2011). Despite this, students with learning difficulties still have a high rate of drop outs. These students with specific learning difficulties tend to fail or drop out of school. A report in Canada showed that as many as 60% of students with learning or behaviour disorders do not complete school. In the United States, the National Centre on Secondary Education and Transition reports that special education students are twice as likely to drop out as regular education students (Wilmshurst & Brue, 2005). Thus, emphasizing the importance of the leadership role among special education teachers.

## **2. Teacher Leadership Dimension**

There are six key variables as teacher leadership dimensions which guided this study. The six teacher leadership dimensions are creating energy in the classroom dimension; building capacity dimension; securing environment dimension; extending the vision dimension; meeting and minimizing crisis dimension; and seeking and charting improvement dimension. Creating energy in the classroom dimension means the teachers learn and cooperate with their colleagues to teach and handle the students. Besides, the teachers encourage the students to reason, discuss and involve in the learning process. They also provide opportunity for students to show acts of thoughtfulness and appreciations, and display potentials and skills. Building capacity dimension is defined as teachers providing opportunities for students to lead in activity and learning process as well as handling specific responsibility besides providing learning environment and content that meets the needs of the students. In addition, the teachers take the responsibility to guide the students, take the blame, and do the talk in the classroom and always be part of the classroom community. Securing environment dimension means that the teachers ensure the classroom environment is safe for the students and the materials for teaching and learning are relevant, sufficient, well organized and catalogued. Besides, the teachers maintain a consistent database of students and keep updated students' information. Teachers themselves also profile their own strength systematically and share leadership with their colleagues.

Extending the vision dimension means that the teachers understand and perform duties to achieve the vision and mission of education. At the same time, they involve parents and caretakers in the students' education and inform them regarding students' progress and needs. Furthermore, they access students' needs and take actions to meet these needs. They also strive to be proactive and take actions to make positive change. Meeting and minimizing crisis dimension means that the teachers are able to manage students' behavior to reduce distraction, handle emergency of students, and review record of the physical health and behavior of students to take necessary actions. They are proactive in ensuring that parents or caretakers take good care of the students, organize parents-teachers meeting to resolve problems, and organize teachers' meeting to discuss steps to ensure safety of students regularly. Seeking and charting improvement dimension means teachers are open to new ideas and approaches; share techniques of teaching and managing students with colleagues; attend courses, workshops or seminar to update skills; ready to learn and experiment on skills learn; refer to experts and books to overcome challenges; and strive for self and professional improvement.

### 3. Statement of the Problem

Malaysia and China are still in their infant stage in the field of special education for children with disabilities, either public or private as the countries lack properly trained teachers, funds, and expertise to provide the best practices. Unlike the United States, Malaysia and China do not have strong special education law to protect these children with disabilities. The complexity of special education makes understanding and overcoming it a challenge for educators. Special education teachers need to learn the critical importance of expanding their knowledge of educational research and theory to guide leadership decisions that effectively address today's educational challenge. There is a need for better teacher preparation program to train special education teachers and a need to develop curricula that are effective and culturally sensitive environment.

Special education teachers face changing roles in response to the demands of a rapidly changing society and profession. Special education teachers face higher expectations, need for collaboration; parent and student counseling; demands for content knowledge; and accountability for students' learning. Thus special education teachers need to concentrate on advancing their expertise as teaching professionals by increasing their knowledge and skills in these three key areas, namely knowledge of learners and learning, knowledge of subject matter and curricula goals, and knowledge of effective teaching models, strategies and practices. These teachers need to apply this expertise in the classroom that impacts the learning and achievement of their special needs students. As these changes unfold, there is a growing sense of urgency to prepare special education teachers for the new expectations. A reasonable response to this would be to relook at the teacher training program.

### 4. Research Objectives

The following are the main objectives of the study:

- (a) To identify the special education teachers' perception towards the level of teacher leadership in Malaysia and China;
- (b) To identify the level of agreement on the overall teacher leadership perceived by special education teachers in Malaysia and China;
- (c) To identify the level of implementation on the overall teacher leadership practiced by special education teachers in Malaysia and China;
- (d) To identify the difference between the agreement and implementation of teacher leadership practice based on Malaysia special education teachers' perceptions;
- (e) To identify the difference between the agreement and implementation of teacher leadership practice based on China special education teachers' perceptions;
- (f) To identify the special education teachers' perception on their agreement and implementation level of each teacher leadership dimension: (i) creating energy in the classroom; (ii) building capacity; (iii) securing environment; (iv) extending the vision; (v) meeting and minimizing crisis; and (vi) seeking and charting improvement in Malaysia and China;
- (g) To compare and contrast the findings in both countries.

### 5. Methodology

This research used the quantitative method by using a survey questionnaire for special education teachers in Malaysia and China. According to Borg and Gall (1989), the assumption made in a survey is that descriptive data gathered at one time is normal and in a similar situation can be replicated in future. They further stated that a descriptive research is basically related to comprehend the current situation and emphasize the exact circumstances of a population. Thus, survey method is appropriate in explaining respondent's perception in a study (Leedy, 1992). The study in Malaysia is conducted in the four states of Malaysia, comprising a sample of 369 special education teachers. The four states in Peninsular Malaysia include Kedah (27 schools) representing the northern region, Kuala Lumpur (25 schools) representing the western region, Kelantan (23 schools) representing the eastern region and Melaka (48 schools) representing the southern region. The study in China comprises four provinces in the state of Wuhan, China, including a sample of 380 special education teachers. Four normal schools which have special

education program from four provinces were randomly selected and one learning disabilities special school. A total of 50 percent respondents were selected in the learning disabilities special school whereas the other 50 percent were selected equally from the four special education program normal schools.

## 6. Discussion

There are a few similarities found in this study between the two countries Malaysia and China. First of all, the Malaysian (mean=4.40) and China (mean=4.51) special education teachers highly agreed that teacher leadership skills is good to practicing them in their classroom management but they are not highly implementing them in their daily practice with mean score 4.04 and 4.01 respectively. Thus, t-test analysis showed that there is a significance difference between the level of agreement and the level of implementing teacher leadership practice at the significant level at 0.01. Secondly, the percentage for the different level of agreement and implementation are almost the same. majority of special education teachers 94.5 percent in Malaysia dan 95.8 percent in China are highly agreed towards teacher leadership practice and about 71 percent (70.8% and 72.1%) of them are highly implemented teacher leadership practice in both countries.

Finally, the special education teachers from both countries do agree that seeking and charting improvement dimension is most important dimension in classroom management (mean score of 4.49 and 4.58 respectively). This may be because of the education system in both countries are very examination oriented, made the special education teachers focus more on this dimension compared to other dimensions. There are not many differences found in this study between the two countries Malaysia and China. The major difference is the special education teachers in China highly agree that seeking and charting improvement dimension is an important dimension to practice in the classroom and they are also highly implementing it in their classroom management. However special education teachers in Malaysia highly agree that seeking and charting dimension is an important dimension to practice but they are highly practicing securing environment dimension (mean score=4.14) rather than seeking and charting improvement dimension (mean score=4.10).

The special education teachers in Malaysia and China agreed that teacher leadership is very much needed but the effort put into the implementation can be further improved. Malaysia needs add in their special education teacher training curriculum or continuing education, areas related to building capacity and creating energy in the classroom dimensions. China on the other hand, add in their special education teacher training curriculum or continuing education, areas related to meeting and minimizing crisis, securing environment, and creating energy in the classroom dimensions.

## 7. Conclusion

In Malaysia and China, there is still a lack of governmental support for persons with disabilities. The burden of caring for exceptional persons falls mainly on the parents. Special education teachers need to work effectively with families of exceptional children, in areas such as parent education programs and developing effective support structures. Teacher leadership training program will mainly help those special education teachers to acquire the skills to collaborate with parents. Most importantly, there is a need for greater involvement of the government with regards to individuals with disabilities. Researchers realized that it is impossible for individuals with learning disabilities and their families to achieve quality of life without the support of the government and community. The advocacy for equal rights and opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities would perhaps be our greatest challenge. Regardless of the form, collaboration is essential in the development of quality special education teachers. It is imperative to support them as they search for ways to enhance their instruction and improve achievement. When educators share common goals and exert coordinated effort to improve themselves through collaborative endeavors, their skill levels increase. By tapping the wisdom of veteran special education teachers, knowledge of specialized instructors, or input of support personnel, the special education classroom as a whole becomes stronger. This strength is the foundation of successful schools.

One of the most promising benefits of special teacher leadership is the increased opportunity it gives teachers to interact with one another regarding instructional issues. Specifically, teachers who collaborate are more likely to

discuss with their colleagues areas of the curriculum they have difficulty teaching. They are also likely to obtain ideas and feedback from their peers to help solve these instructional dilemmas. As a result, teachers learn skills from one another that they can then use in their classes. As more school staff members participate in collaborative efforts, a ripple effect of shared knowledge and skills may spread through the school. A related school-wide benefit to teacher leadership is increased teacher sensitivity to others' roles and responsibilities. In some schools it is common to hear professionals suggesting that their jobs are the most difficult in the school while others have less burdensome assignments. These conversations often include special education teachers. When teacher leadership is fostered, however, the ongoing communication tends to increase awareness that every professional in school is working diligently and that everyone has difficult tasks to do. When this understanding is combined with sharing of knowledge and skills, teachers perceive that they are supported in their work.

As the nation comes to recognize the need to promote teacher leadership in classroom management, it is clear that concerned group such as school leaders, district officers, academician from higher education institution, must do their part to make this happen. Situated as those teachers are on the lowest rungs of education's professional hierarchy, teachers need a lot of help if their voices are to be heard. Based on the findings, we hope that special education teacher leadership training will be a capacity building strategy for the special education teachers in order to alter their habits, attitudes and practices to something professionally better for the enhancement and improvement of students' level of achievement. This study has made significant impact in the special education management system. However, the study reveals that there is still some work to be done to improve teacher leadership for improved learner-achievement.

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