



School Leadership in the 21st Century

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Abstract. This paper will discuss school leadership in the 21st century. In the 21st century, the role of school leaders has evolved from traditional administrative figures to visionary captains of education. With the dynamic landscape of education and the rapid advancement of technology, effective school leadership has never been more crucial. Effective school leaders are those who can make evidence-informed decisions, provide the instructional leadership that teachers need to help all their students succeed in school, and create a collaborative school environment in which teachers take part in school decisions. Gone are the days when school leadership simply meant managing administrative tasks. In the current era, school leaders are catalysts for change, driving educational excellence, fostering a positive school culture, and ensuring student success. Effective school leadership can significantly impact student performance, teacher satisfaction, and overall school outcomes. Great leaders need to have strong self-awareness, need to be passionate visionaries, should have great clarity of purpose and should have a clear sense of direction while leading their teams. A great leader will lead a team, rather than working in isolation. Leaders need to constantly upgrade their skill to be effective, relevant and efficient in their role.

Index Terms- leadership, collaborative, decision. Visionary, adaptative, passionate. Community, technology integration, delegate, counselling. Mentor, integrity, accountable, Outcomes, learning and teaching

I. Introduction

The role of school leadership in the 21st century has changed and will keep changing. School leaders must think strategically about the goals and systems that will prepare students for the future. School leaders must combine top-down policy directions with the actions of school-level leaders. Leaders must create new processes and strategies that redefine standards. Leaders must be at the forefront of change and motivate teams to accept new processes. Being resourceful, dynamic, and dexterous: Leaders must be resourceful, dynamic, and dexterous. Leaders must foster an environment of integrity, analysis, and unceasing improvement. Other components of 21st century school leadership include, increased accountability, increased responsibility, distributed leadership, and transformational leadership.



Usually there is a little confusion in understanding the difference between leaders and administrators. Leaders and administrators have different roles in an organization, but they both play important parts in ensuring the organization's success. Leaders are expected to inspire and guide a team to achieve goals. They create visions and ideas, and motivate everyone to lead, to work towards them. Leaders may hold meetings to help everyone understand why they do what they do. Leaders can delegate administrative tasks to team members or administrators so they can focus on strategic vision. Leaders can integrate administrative functions with their leadership goals. Leaders can integrate administrative functions with their leadership goals. Leaders have circles of influence where they collaborate with larger groups or unconventional collections of people to get as many new ideas or types of feedback as possible.

On the other hand, Administrators delegate tasks, ensure compliance with regulations, and make sure the organizational framework supports the leader's vision. Administrators may use their authority to get students, teachers and parents to do things, such as meet deadlines. Administrators can have circles of power and guide everyone with an authority. They may focus more on sticking to business norms or tradition.

School leadership must be visionary to transform schools to fit into the 21st century and continue to ensure that students become learners who constantly engage in their learning. They must ensure that students are emotionally attached to what they learn, which will in turn motivate them to be independent learners. Students of the 21st century want an environment that is about learning, not just memorization. They want to be part of the process of learning, to build connections that would foster 'learning to learn'. The young people of today are the digital generation, and generations before them find baffling their ability to multitask and their ease with technologies that change faster than the speed of a bullet train. However, many schools are still in the 19th century where rote learning, memorization, drills and teacher-centered learning are the norm. In order to lead schools into the 21st century, the role of leadership is indisputably important. School heads have to be forward-thinking, create an environment that is conducive to the digital generation, ensure that teachers are suitably trained, supported and motivated, and that the whole school climate is conducive to learning; ultimately, schools have to become knowledge-based organization.

The world is changing, and teachers must change with the rest of the world.' It is most certainly true that learning can take place anywhere, anytime and even anyhow. The accessibility of knowledge through the Internet has allowed this to take place. Students are more creative and would definitely learn more from hands-on and experiential learning. The shift could be from their dependence on a traditional teacher to one who is willing to allow them to think, explore, innovate and create. Are our teachers giving them this opportunity? The world today is looking for more than a workforce who is hard-working and disciplined. Schools need to keep up with the times to ensure that students acquire thinking and critical minds and even entrepreneurial skills. To achieve all the above, school heads have an imperative role to play.



Schools are institutions that disseminate learning and ensure that students receive an education to prepare them for the working world. Sergiovanni's (2007) idea of moral leadership, where the objective of schools is to have a learning community, where there is a collection of individuals – school leaders, teachers, parents and the community – who are bonded together by natural will and bound together by a set of shared ideas and ideals is food for thought. Teachers play a central role in the children's learning and it is imperative to acknowledge the fact that life's most important lessons are still imparted without the use of technology/computers.

However, it is my intention to argue that 21st century classrooms need teachers who can turn the power of computer technology into teaching tools that captivate students, motivate them and ultimately move them into greater learning. Our digitally savvy students need these electronic devices to act as a catalyst for their learning and, if properly used, technology will engage students in the 'real 3Rs' - rigour, relevance and relationship.

The 'rigour' of education encompasses the teaching of a planned curriculum. Subjects are taught to ensure learning takes place and students are assessed and rewarded according to what they have learned and how much they score in examinations. How the subject matters are taught depends on the methodologies adopted by the teachers, but with these 21st century students who are more technologically able, mere rote learning or memorisation will not be stimulating enough to acquire knowledge. The use of the Internet could allow them to research, write and design their own homework, and make learning rigorous with in-depth discussion about their work with teachers and friends.

When the students take possession of their learning, they also learn to become more critical about everything that they learn. Students have to take charge of their learning and not just regurgitate what they have learned from the teachers, while teachers have to give them this opportunity through the aid of new technologies. Learning will then be relevant to the students, who will be able to demonstrate their mastery in using the various technologies that have become the norm for them. To implement 'rigour' and 'relevance', school principals need to provide the proper infrastructure and training for the teachers. They also need the resources to be up-to-date and reliable and they must be readily available.

The third 'R' ('relationship') is also crucial. The relationship between all stakeholders (principal, teachers, students, parents and the community) will play a significant role as the synergy between these people will ensure that the school, which is a learning community, will be willing to embrace whatever change is going to take place. Everyone will be able to share the same vision and work towards ensuring that the mission is accomplished. Students' relationship with the use of technology will also motivate them to learn more, as they are in control of a medium they are familiar with. With encouragement from teachers and parents, where there is a relationship of trust and mutual agreement, the motivation to learn will definitely be higher

Students must be guided and helped by their teachers, who in turn must be trained and supported by all stakeholders. Students who do not have access to the



Internet at home must be given support/access in the schools, where there should be learning/resource centres available to them out of hours. It is even believed that children who have never held a textbook in their hands will 'hold the world' one day because they have access and connectivity through the computer. The proponents of the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999) will attest to the fact that encouragement of creativity through the use of the Internet will enhance the use of both the left and the right brain. When students are more balanced in their brain development, they are also able to explore the potential of exploiting their other intelligences, hence becoming more balanced individuals.

The more complex the world becomes, the more creative we need to be to meet its challenges, and this is becoming increasingly clear in education. School leaders now need to be creative to be successful, but while the idea of success has changed, the education system has not always adjusted its methods or goals to meet it. While the education systems mostly remained stagnant, the leadership roles have changed with more expectations. A school leadership is no longer 8.00am to 4.30pm job. It has changed to 24/7 job.

A 20th century education emphasised compliance and conformity over creativity, two skills that were necessary to do well in a professional or corporate environment and to hold down a good job for decades. Compliance and conformity are now a relic, but they are still key values in many schools, informing policy even when not being expressly promoted to students.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of education, school leadership plays a pivotal role in driving the growth and success of a school. School leader's actions and decisions directly impact various aspects of the school environment, from academic achievements to the overall school culture. School leaders set visions for their schools and guide them to achieve them through strategic planning. They build solid teams and contribute to their professional development. Effective school leadership ensures positive school culture, community engagement, and data-based decision-making. The 21st century brings unprecedented challenges and opportunities, requiring innovative approaches to leadership.

II. Transforming School Leadership in the 21st Century

1. Distributed Leadership

- Distributed leadership involves sharing responsibilities and decision-making across a team of educators. This strategy involves the diverse expertise of teachers and staff, fostering collaboration and allowing for more effective problem-solving.

2. Adaptive Leadership

The ever-changing educational landscape demands leaders who can adapt to new challenges and uncertainties. Adaptive leadership focuses on identifying and addressing complex problems that lack clear solutions.



3. Technology Integration

- In the digital age, school leaders must embrace technology as an integral part of education. From virtual classrooms to AI-powered learning platforms, technology is reshaping how students learn and teachers teach. Leaders who understand and harness the potential of technology can create more engaging learning experiences, personalized instruction, and improved communication between all stakeholders

4. Inclusive Leadership

- Inclusive leadership recognizes the importance of understanding and respecting the diverse backgrounds of students and staff. Leaders prioritizing cultural competence create inclusive environments where everyone feels valued, leading to improved academic and social-emotional outcomes. This strategy involves tailoring teaching methods, curriculum content, and school policies to reflect and respect the cultures and identities of the school community.

5. Data-Informed Decision Making

- Data-driven decision-making enhances accountability and allows leaders to tailor their approaches based on evidence rather than assumptions.

6. Emotional Intelligence

- Effective leadership in the 21st century extends beyond technical skills. Emotional intelligence, including empathy, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills, is essential for building strong relationships with students, teachers, parents, and the wider community.

7. Innovative Professional Development

- 21st-century school leaders are reimagining professional development by offering opportunities for collaborative learning, personalized growth plans, and access to resources that keep educators up-to-date with the latest teaching methods and educational research.

8. Community Engagement

- Schools are no longer isolated institutions, but are embedded within their communities. Influential leaders actively engage parents, local businesses, and community organizations to create a network of support for students. Leaders strengthen the educational ecosystem by involving the community in school activities and decision-making.

9. Focus on Well-being

- School leaders are adopting strategies to promote mental, emotional, and physical health within the school environment. This includes creating spaces for relaxation, implementing mindfulness practices, and offering resources to support the holistic well-being of all stakeholders.



10. Global Citizenship Education

- Preparing students to be global citizens is essential in a world interconnected by technology and globalization. School leaders can connect students with schools worldwide through technology and online platforms to understand various learning methods, future higher education, and career opportunities. Effective school leaders are integrating global perspectives into the curriculum, fostering an understanding of different cultures, promoting environmental awareness, and encouraging active participation in solving global challenges.

School leadership must be visionary to transform schools to fit into the 21st century and continue to ensure that students become learners who constantly engage in their learning. They must ensure that students are emotionally attached to what they learn, which will in turn motivate them to be independent learners. While these students are connected worldwide in their learning, they are also exposed to people from all over the world. The classrooms then become a 'potpourri' of multiculturalism, where everyone can learn from anyone, and where the ideals of love, tolerance, respect and acceptance will hopefully become natural sentiments shared among them – values that the world badly needs these days.

Leadership in 21st century schools, involve a number of components, such as vision, accountability, responsibility, distributed leadership, learning leadership and agility. Leaders must be visionary to transform schools and ensure students are engaged learners. Leaders must be more accountable and must be more responsible. Leadership should be distributed across all levels of the school. Leaders must set direction and put learning at the centre and be flexible, open to change, and reactive. 21st century school leaders should be able to think strategically about goals and systems. They should focus on the people they are serving and help them to succeed and grow. Successful education systems promote leadership at all levels. This encourages teachers and principals to lead innovation in the classroom, school and out in the community.

Leadership development is essential for students and teachers because it can help them acquire the skills and confidence needed to become influential leaders in their personal and professional lives. These skills include communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and teamwork, all valuable assets in any setting. Aspiring leaders must be confident and approachable and needs to spend time to learn the school's culture, mission and vision. These too will guide them in making the best decisions for their school. Leaders must be visible, ask questions, value what they see and give praise for effective 21st century teaching and learning practices. Managing change and conflict is one of the most important challenges facing leaders in the 21st century. In a world of rapid transformation and disruption, leaders must not only stay on top of the latest trends and developments, but also be able to respond quickly and effectively to unexpected or unforeseen events.

The 21st-century economy demands creativity, innovation, and an entrepreneurial mindset. The labour market requirements are also changing due to



globalization and technological innovation School leaders are recognizing the importance of cultivating these skills in students. Leaders foster an environment that prepares students for the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing world by encouraging risk-taking, problem-solving, and a willingness to embrace failure as a learning opportunity.

Without any doubt, we can say that school leadership in the 21st century is undergoing a profound transformation. Changing leadership models give way to more inclusive, adaptable, and tech-savvy approaches. By embracing distributed leadership, staying adaptable, leveraging technology, promoting cultural responsiveness, making data-informed decisions, valuing emotional intelligence, rethinking professional development, engaging the community, prioritizing wellbeing, fostering global citizenship, and nurturing an entrepreneurial mindset school leaders can create environments that empower students to thrive in an ever-changing world. These strategies not only shape the present but also lay the foundation for a brighter educational future. As we move further into the 21st century, these strategies will continue to evolve, ensuring that school leadership remains effective, relevant, and impactful.

Education leaders need to adapt to the changing needs of the labour market to prepare students for success. Some important things that need to be addressed. Researchers and policymakers are focusing on skills mismatch to determine how relevant education and training are to labour demand. Soft skills like creativity, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking will be more important in the future of work. Education and training programs help workers acquire new skills to stay relevant and employable. Higher levels of education and training are strongly correlated with better labour market outcomes. Employers tend to favour candidates with higher levels of education and training. Higher education institutions should internally disseminate reports to stimulate a dialogue about labour market responsiveness. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2023 highlights that 69 million jobs will be created in the next five years, but 83 million jobs will be put at risk by economic pressures and automation.

Globalization has had a significant impact on school leadership and education, and educational leaders need to be prepared for the challenges and opportunities it presents. Globalization has affected leadership styles, and Western culture has become the dominant model for leadership in business and academia. However, school leaders need to develop a holistic understanding of globalization and leadership in schools, and how to inspire teachers to achieve high standards.

Educational leaders can use glocalization, which is the integration of local and global forces, to improve their practice. They can develop global literacy in areas such as political, economic, cultural, and moral literacy. Globalization has expanded access to educational opportunities, and online learning platforms have made learning more accessible and flexible.



Besides academics, globalization has made emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity more important in educational leadership. Leadership must promote inclusivity and respect among students and staff by navigating diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives.

Personal qualities like curiosity, persistence, resilience, flexibility, responsibility and hard work are as important as ever for leaders. Nobody is born with all the qualities of an effective school leader fully realised. Part of being a leader is having the will to work on personal growth and improving yourself constantly. Other qualities are increasingly important for leaders: creativity, entrepreneurship, innovation, constant learning and teamwork are all crucial for today's leaders.

Some of the Skills needed for school leadership in the 21st century

	21 st Century Skills		21 st Century Skills
1	Communication	12	Adaptability
2	Inclusive	13	Integrity
3	Team building	14	Resilience
4	Active listening	15	Positivity
5	Empowerment and Trust	16	Negotiation
6	Management	17	Empathy
7	Inspiring	18	Creativity
8	An ability to delegate wisely	19	Collaborative ability
9	Emotional Intelligence	20	Ability to inspire
10	Authenticity	21	Feedback
11	Think strategically	22	Confidence

Leadership skills are the qualities individuals in influential roles possess to direct and complete tasks, support initiatives, create a sense of unity within a team, and empower others. Leadership skills include the abilities or strengths shown by people in management roles that guide and encourage a group of people and their team toward achieving a common goal or set of goals. These skill-sets include communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, decision-making, and more. While possessing leadership skills can make a leader effective, certain workplace skills or qualities also lend to effectiveness. Effective leaders are respectful, empathetic, patient, motivational, and willing to be held accountable. When a leader makes his or her team feel respected, cared for, and motivated, they are more likely to be successful in leading their team.

Good governance principles like accountability, transparency, participation, rule of law and responsive to name a few, will be very helpful in decision making in the role of leadership at any level. The school leaders are expected to do lot more than their normal duties. The school leaders are a vital link between the government and the community. They have to meet the changing expectations of both parties without compromising their professional ethics and moral values. Apart from the normal duties such as teaching and learning, staff supervision, dealing with students and



parents, the school leaders have to carry out several other duties. These are financial management, procurement, counselling, communication, community participation, religious and cultural activities, disaster management, to name a few. A school leader wears so many different hats during a day.

	Skills	Perform - Duties
1	Manage Finance	School grants, Fees, Canteen sales, donations, etc
2	Procurement	Stationery, hardware, etc
3	Counselling	Students, parents, teachers, community at large
4	Communication	Oral, written – MOE, parents, Students, teachers, community
5	Community Participation	Sports, festivals, fundraising, Parent/Teacher meetings
6	Religious/Cultural Activities	Festivals, participation, Coordinate,
7	Disaster Management	Coordination with Government ministries, Evacuation centres,
8	Budget Preparation	Plan with school management, and MOE
9	OHS Safety	Safety and security for students, teacher and parents, school facilities – building, grounds, wash rooms, lights, and water

As we go further into 21st century, more essential skills and attributes will become necessary. Now there is lot of emphasis on ‘soft Skills’ that is all leaders must acquire and develop for the better performance in future. The ability to clearly convey messages, understand others' needs, and respond to feedback. The ability to work well with others and to identify problems before they happen and come up with creative solutions. The ability to be flexible and adjust to changing demands and to take ownership for work and fit into leadership roles. The ability to recognize situations that require caution and take appropriate action. Other soft skills include time management and organization.

Globalization and technological revolution will also provide numerous opportunities and challenges to the school leadership. School leaders in the 21st century, are expected to transform schools to prepare students for the future by ensuring they are engaged learners who are emotionally connected to their learning. They are to think strategically and consider the goals and systems that will support preparing students for the future. Have a modern mindset that is equipped to deal with the unique challenges of the 21st century by developing local and virtual teams to bring together specific expertise to solve problems. Be able to adapt and to respond quickly to unexpected changes in the environment Empower others by listening to teachers and students, learn their talents and interests, and delegate tasks accordingly. Coach teachers and students, and praise them for what they achieve. The workload of school leaders has increased in recent years due to increased school autonomy and accountability for learning outcomes. Countries are working to develop new forms of leadership to meet the needs of rapidly evolving societies.



Personal qualities like curiosity, persistence, resilience, flexibility, responsibility and hard work are as important as ever for leaders. Whatever changes come, these school principal leadership qualities are always the key to success. 21st-century educational leaders are responsible for preparing young people for the future. They need to be able to adapt to modern challenges and have a modern mindset. Leaders in the 21st century need to be able to continuously innovate and manage disruptions effectively. To do this, they need to remember that everyone has something to offer and cultivate a culture where every employee feels comfortable to suggest ideas and propose solutions.

III. Conclusion

In a world of collaboration, communities and networks, leadership teams need to listen deeply, encourage sharing of information and viewpoints and foster an environment of trust. The vertical leadership style also has a role to play but in a different form by having the ability to take decisions in ambiguous environments, helping teams manage conflicts, acting as a guide in uncertain times or leading with conviction, courage and empathy.

The traditional viewpoint of school leaders is rapidly losing its importance. The traits commonly associated with these positions, charisma and vision, are still important in leadership positions, but they are in itself not enough. To be successful in today's dynamic education landscape, leaders need to be able to shift between their multiple roles with ease. At one point they might need to act as head of their school or institution, while at another point they might need to act as mentors to a high performance team or an individual. It is all about leadership versatility and being able to lead effectively across generations, cultures, mindsets and differing sets of motivations.

Great leaders are said to possess a heightened ability to think outside the box. Instead of continually reinventing the wheel, they learn to do new and unexpected things with the tools already at hand, while encouraging others to do the same. Leaders in the 21st century need to be able to continuously innovate and manage disruptions effectively. To do this, they need to remember that everyone has something to offer and cultivate a culture where every employee feels comfortable to suggest ideas and propose solutions. This will go a long way in creating an adaptive and agile organization that is well equipped to face disruption.

Leadership in the 21st century will be a combination of multiple courageous decisions. Although it is more challenging, the impact of positive leadership will also be very high during these times. Some of the challenges that education systems are facing currently are the strongest ever, due to COVID pandemic, globalization, technological revolution and human migration. To effectively navigate an institution through such challenges, it needs leaders with courage, conviction, strong mental resolve, unwavering focus and a strong sense of purpose. But we also need to keep in mind the fact that a leader cannot achieve anything alone. This is more relevant now than it was before. To achieve critical educational and institutional objectives, a leader needs to have an open mind, should be open to collaboration, have the ability



to align differing viewpoints and should have the charisma to lead teams with differing motivations and needs. Although it seems that leadership in the 21st century is highly challenging, it can be highly rewarding when done right. Whether it is an individual or a leadership team, the characteristics of effective leadership are applicable to both.

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