Framing the Roles and Responsibilities of Excellent Teachers: Evidence from Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper is based on a study of the roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers, as described by the teachers themselves and their role sets (Merton, 1957). The data collected via semi-structured interviews with the teachers were triangulated with documents which show official expectations of Excellent Teachers. Data were also compared with interviews carried out with other teachers, school administrators and the inspectors, to provide a 360-degree view on the roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers. Five themes emerged from the data analysis, respectively focusing on their roles as teacher, content expert, facilitator, mentor, and innovator.

Keywords: teacher education; teacher development; teacher leadership; teaching practice; mentoring.

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1. Introduction

The fast- paced changes in educational policies have seen greater pressures on teachers at all levels. Schoolteachers, in particular, are expected to adapt quickly to any changes in curriculum and its implementation, the rapid development in instructional technology, increasing demands for students' holistic development and heightened expectations from parents and society (Khan, Yusoff & Khan, 2014). They also have to fulfill their roles and responsibilities in several aspects of their work, notably teaching, co-curricular activities, administration and professional development. Although the notion of teaching as only one of the roles of a teacher has been widely accepted, to pursue excellence in all aspects of their work can feel overwhelming for many teachers (Chaplain, 2008).

Past research has clearly shown that the quality of individual teachers contributes up to 30% of the variance in student outcomes (Hattie, 2003; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). Sartain, Stoelinga and Brown (2011) found that students who are taught by excellent teachers perform better than those who are taught by mediocre or unsatisfactory ones. Therefore, many countries such as Australia, the Netherlands, France, Finland and the United States, which previously focused on just getting enough teachers to teach, are now shifting to making sure that teacher quality becomes the central focus of educational policy (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2015). This includes attracting high potential candidates into the profession by improving teacher recruitment and selection processes, reforming teacher training so as to produce more quality graduates to teach in schools, and creating better professional development systems (OECD, 2015; South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [SEAMEO-UNESCO] Report, 2016).

Countries with comparatively higher performance in PISA often have more stringent and competitive entry requirements into teaching (OECD, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c). Finland

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teachers, for example, are required to have master degree. Teacher quality is also more evident when teachers receive appropriate professional development (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe 2008). Many countries have made it compulsory for government teachers to complete continuous professional development (CPD). Singapore, for example, recommends 20 hours of CPD annually; whereas Malaysia and Timor-Leste require seven and five days respectively (SEAMEO-UNESCO Report, 2016).

In an effort to boost teacher motivation and teacher involvement in continuous professional development, several countries have developed attractive teacher promotion schemes, which are normally tied to salary levels. Many states in the USA, such as Georgia, Ohio and Texas, have introduced and recently reviewed their master teacher or lead professional programmes which recognise outstanding and exemplary teachers (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2014; Ohio Department of Education, 2015; Texas State Board for Educator Certification, 2004). Recently, New York has expanded programmes that certify science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) teachers, thus adding to the pool of master teachers that already exists (New York State Governor, 2016).

There are similar policies in the United Kingdom. Scotland, for example, introduced the Chartered Teacher and Advanced Chartered Teacher Programmes to acknowledge and promote excellent-performing teachers (Connelly & McMahon, 2007). A review of teachers' pay in England, as documented in the School Partnership Trust Academies, SPTA (2015), proposed a new scheme, Leading Practitioners, to acknowledge academic leaders who are not involved in school administration, but are involved in supporting other teachers. This Leading Practitioners scheme has replaced what were previously known as the Excellent Teachers (ETs) and Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) schemes. The Leading Practitioner programme aims to develop and accredit teachers who are effective, innovative and enthusiastic about teaching and student learning.

In New Zealand, several new teacher roles, including the Advanced Classroom Expertise Teacher, were introduced in 2016. The main focus was to help teachers to improve their teaching practices and to raise students' academic achievement (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2016). Countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the Republic of Korea, the Philippines and Singapore, also offer a master teacher track as part of teachers' career pathways (OECD, 2016).

Having special schemes or programmes that recognize teacher expertise and promote pedagogically excellent teachers may help establish teacher leadership and professional learning communities among teachers, which may contribute to school-wide improvements. As noted by Bush, Glover, Ng and Romero (2016), teacher leadership can become more transparent when teacher roles are legitimised.

Malaysia is also addressing teacher quality. The Expert Teacher Scheme, which was first introduced in 1994, is now known as the Excellent Teacher Scheme, one of the career pathways offered to schoolteachers (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2013). The Ministry of Education website shows that Malaysia has a quota of 14,327 for Excellent Teacher posts (http://www.moe.gov.my/my/definisi-guru-cemerlang), and 13,300 teachers have been appointed thus far[1].

[1]*Data and information are subject to the Malaysian Government Open Data Terms of Use 1.0. Please refer to: http://www.moe.gov.my/index.php/en/dataset*

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The terms ‘expert teachers’, ‘excellent teachers’, and ‘lead teachers’ are used to describe these exemplary teachers and academic leaders, whose main task is to promote better teaching and learning practices. According to Hutchings, Mansaray, Minty, Moreau and Smart (2009), excellent teachers are not only able to teach students and facilitate student learning, but also share knowledge, skills and expertise with other teachers in order to sharpen their instructional skills. In addition, they are also often considered as subject leaders (Author et al., 2016).

The challenge for the expert or excellent teachers, and those who monitor their performance, is to ensure that they consistently demonstrate high performance. Otherwise, these supposedly exemplary teachers may not gain the respect and trust from within the school, or outside the school community. Previous research suggests that using both subjective and objective measures in teacher performance evaluation can help to improve teacher quality (Rockoff & Speroni, 2010). However, there is a need to establish standards based on actual job descriptions before any evaluation system can be designed. In other words, it is difficult to differentiate teachers who are excellent from those who are just effective, or even ineffective. Similar concerns have been raised recently by Bush et al. (2016) with regard to formal measures of excellent teachers’ performance. Stronge, Ward and Grant (2011) argue that, in order to ensure that the right people become expert (or excellent) teachers, it is important to understand what it is like to be one. There is very limited research on the roles and responsibilities of Malaysian Excellent Teachers that could contribute to the development of a performance framework. Studies carried out among Excellent Teachers in the country were mostly focused on a small number of Excellent Teachers who teach specific subjects.

This study aims to develop a framework for Excellent Teachers’ roles and responsibilities in response to the need to enhance the standards for this special group of teachers in Malaysia (Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2013). The framework may also be adapted and applied to excellent teachers in other countries. To achieve this, the authors examined descriptions of excellent or expert teachers in the literature (local and international) and their job descriptions as shown in a formal document and a book retrieved from the Ministry of Education Malaysia, which informs the Excellent Teacher Scheme and lists the responsibilities expected of excellent teachers. Besides, researchers gathered interview data on the Malaysian Excellent Teachers’ roles and responsibilities as perceived by the Excellent Teachers themselves and by their role set. An excellent teacher’s role set would be anyone with whom he or she has recurring relationship by virtue of his or her roles as an excellent teacher (Merton, 1957). For example, the excellent teacher might have a role set comprised of colleagues, students, school administrators and district educational officers.

This paper aims to:

i) Identify and discuss the key roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers;
ii) Introduce a framework for Excellent Teachers’ roles and responsibilities, grounded in the data, which can guide Excellent Teachers themselves and school administrators.

2. Literature review

The literature review focuses on the roles and responsibilities of excellent teachers. The terms ‘expert teachers’, ‘excellent teachers’ and ‘master teachers’ have also been used to refer to similar positions. Hattie (2003) and Berliner (2001; 2004), for example, use the term ‘expert teacher’ to refer to those who have certain characteristics that extend beyond those of other teachers, while Bush et al. (2016), focusing on Malaysia and the Philippines, use the

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term ‘master teacher’. Similarly, Ibrahim, Aziz and Nambiar (2013) use the term ‘master teacher’ when referring to the Malaysian Excellent Teacher; while Hamzah, Mohamad and Ghorbani (2008) use the term ‘excellent teacher’.

Excellent teachers, compared to other teachers, focus more on professional development (Robbs & Broyles, 2012). In order to live up to the increasing demands of the teaching job, excellent teachers develop automatic routines necessary to achieve their goals. Robbs and Broyles (2012) found that excellent teachers reflect on their practice as part of their daily tasks to make sure that they keep enhancing their pedagogical skills. In other words, these distinguished teachers keep sharpening their teaching strategies by thinking continuously about what they have achieved (or perhaps, failed to achieve) and how they can improve in the future (Hattie, 2003).

Excellent teachers are seen as exemplary by others. Hoque, Razak, and Mosa (2012) describe Malaysian Excellent Teachers as effective teachers by example and those who are inspirational for ordinary teachers. Cheah (2007) and Ibrahim et al. (2013) stated how Excellent Teachers are not only the masters of their subject matter, but they are also exemplary in delivering consistently effective classroom management. Thus, Excellent Teachers, either by appointment or informally, often become mentors for other teachers, especially newcomers. Expert teachers are more flexible in their teaching and learning approaches, according to Berliner (2001; 2004). Through mentoring and collaborative practices, new teachers can learn to emulate and adapt such behaviours in their teaching and learning contexts. Krull, Oras and Sisask (2007) found expert teachers observant in instructional events, and as such, they are able to give constructive feedback about teaching strategies to other teachers’.

Excellent teachers are also expected to share their knowledge and skills with other teachers, according to Hutchings et al. (2009). They should be able to communicate effectively within and across the school community and with other relevant parties. In order to deliver quality outcomes, excellent teachers are sometimes involved in research and in publication of articles and teaching materials such as modules, textbooks and guidebooks, and in the professional development of other teachers. Turner and Bash (1999) argue that excellent teachers need to use a variety of sources and methods in order to help other teachers develop their talents and achieve greater expertise.

These characteristics of excellent teachers intertwine with the concept of teacher leadership described by Fairman and Mackenzie (2012; 2015) through their teacher leadership model called the Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning. This model is about the different ways that teachers, especially veteran teachers, directly and indirectly influence and work individually and collaboratively with other teachers, at different stages and in different learning contexts, to improve student learning (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; 2015).

Excellent Teacher Schemes

Excellent Teacher Schemes can contribute to making teaching an attractive career and retaining quality teachers in the school system (OECD, 2015). Traditionally, teachers who have shown great potential are acknowledged by promoting them to administrative posts, such as principal and assistant principal (Bush et al., 2016). This tends to force good teachers to spend less time in the classroom because they are engaged in managing the school. As this type of promotion does not appeal to some teachers, who would prefer to remain in the

classroom, more diversified career pathways have been created in some countries to support excellent teachers and acknowledge their expertise (OECD, 2015).

In the state of Victoria, Australia, for example, teacher career advancement is divided into four career stages: Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished, and Lead. Each stage has descriptors which inform of greater competencies, knowledge and skills in teaching expected at higher levels. Teachers at higher levels are also expected to take up more co-curricular responsibilities and to become academic leaders (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011; OECD, 2015). Such academic leadership posts can help to retain the most experienced and effective teachers in the school and make them feel more valued and recognized by the school and the community.

The latest Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2013) outlined three career pathways for teachers: administrative path, excellent teacher path and the normal time-based path. Teachers in Malaysia who wish to join the Excellent Teacher Scheme must apply for the post and must have performed very well for at least the previous three years (based on their annual performance appraisal). The application must go through a first screening by the school principal and the rest of the evaluation and selection process is conducted by a special panel of educational inspectors. The evaluation procedure includes the candidates being observed in the classroom (http://www.moe.gov.my/my/definisi-guru-cemerlang). Most previous research on expert teachers has focused on how the expert teachers behave differently from other teachers when it comes to teaching (Hattie, 2003). This leads to clear expectations of Excellent Teachers in terms of their teaching roles. However, the roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers extend beyond classroom teaching.

The actual demands of a job can be identified by studying the job tasks, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes, that are required for a person to perform the job at an acceptable level (Sekiguchi, 2004). Thus, by looking at the roles and responsibilities of the incumbents, teachers who are selected for the Excellent Teacher posts will be those who can carry out the job effectively.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a multiple case study design, with the use of multiple data sources to establish the credibility of the findings (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). The case study method is best applied to describe and expand understanding of a phenomenon, context or people - in this case, the work of Excellent Teachers. This was achieved mainly through semi-structured interviews and supported by analysis of the document and the book published on the Excellent Teacher's job by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

The trustworthiness of the data was achieved via several means. The written document and the book serve as triangulation to verify the findings and corroborate the interview data (Bowen, 2009). They were used to show official expectations of Excellent Teachers and compared with the interview data. In addition, respondent triangulation was achieved by carrying out interviews, not only with the Excellent Teachers, but also with their role sets. The different methods helped to check consistency between what the participants said in the interviews and information described in the document and the book. Using two tools in data collection can be useful in establishing methodological triangulation. According to Patton

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(2002), studies are of higher quality and have greater credibility when more than one method is employed.

3.2 Participants and Data Sources

The researchers used a mixture of cluster, purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Patton (2015) noted that researchers should select information-rich cases in purposive sampling for in-depth study. Furthermore, the information-rich cases are "those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 2002, p. 230).

The researchers decided to focus on samples from one of the districts in the Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia – the one which is most accessible for them. Selecting participants based on educational districts is a form of cluster sampling technique. All appointments of government school teachers in Malaysia are centralised at the Education Service Commission Malaysia, following a standard recruitment and selection process set by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, to a certain extent, we can say that teachers in any district in the country do share common characteristics because they have been trained, appointed and developed through a consistent system. In other words, by and large, teachers in one district can be considered to be similar to those in other clusters.

The next sampling strategy used was stratified purposive sampling. There are a total 85 Excellent Teachers in the district, 24 of whom are in the senior grades of DG48 and above[2], and have at least three years of experience as Excellent Teachers. The purpose of selecting Excellent Teachers who have had more than three years of experience in the post, and were in the senior grades, is to get information-rich data from those with significant experience of the role. Seven of these 24, in the more senior groups (DG52 and above), were chosen as participants. The remaining 17 senior expert teachers were stratified by subject. Palinkas et al. (2016) stated that maximum variation strategy can be applied via purposive stratified sampling to increase heterogeneity amongst the participants and thus capture their different experiences. Nine more senior Excellent Teachers, each from different subjects, were chosen to participate in the study. This produced an overall sample of 16 senior Excellent Teachers, drawn from eight different schools. Table 1 shows the Excellent Teachers, and their roles sets, included in the research.

----------Insert Table 1 about here----------

Table 1 also shows that, from each school, the researchers interviewed either a school administrator (labelled as SA in the findings section), a principal or assistant principal, or a teacher (labelled as NT) who teaches the same subject as the participating Excellent Teacher. The principals were approached first but, if they were not available, the assistant principals or the subject teachers were then approached for the interview. Two principals, two assistant principals and four subject teachers agreed to take part. In addition, two educational officers (labelled as DEO) at the relevant district educational office, and two inspectors (labelled as EI) from the same state, were also interviewed to provide a wider perspective on the roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers. They were chosen based on their availability and willingness to be interviewed.

[2]*The public service in Malaysia adopts a scheme which uses grades to indicate seniority and the salary structure of the positions. According to this scheme, the ordinary grades for school teachers in Malaysia ranges from 29 to 54, labelled as grades DG29 and DG54 respectively. In addition, there are also special grades for the highest posts, labelled as JUSA C, B or A.*

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3.3 Data collection

In order to carry out interviews among teachers and educational officers in the selected public schools and district, permission was sought through the Educational Planning and Research Division at the Ministry of Education, and also the State Educational Department. The full research proposal, along with the interview protocol, was sent together with the relevant form. The researchers also sought consent from the individual participants and they were made aware of the limits of confidentiality of the data, particularly for publication purposes.

Participants were briefed of their rights as participants in the research, including the right to take a break or withdraw from the interview at any time.

The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide, linked to the research questions, and focused on Excellent Teachers' roles and responsibilities. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) note, interview questions should address the topics and issues in the research. In the interview with the Excellent Teachers, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of being an Excellent Teacher. They were to relate the various duties they have to carry out, both in the school as well as outside the school. As suggested by Gray (2004), researchers also used probes and prompts to provide more depth and insight, particularly by giving more explanation or providing examples of incidents to describe the nature of their work. A similar protocol was used to seek information about the Excellent Teachers' work from other individuals' perspectives. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) and recorded on digital tape-recorder with the consent from the participants.

Other forms of data utilized in this study were the formal document retrieved from the official website of the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the book that describes the roles and responsibilities of an Excellent Teacher, which is published by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, namely *'Terma Rujukan Konsep Guru Cemerlang'* (translated as 'Terms of Reference for the Excellent Teacher Concept'). This book serves as a guidebook for the Excellent Teachers, including their expected roles and responsibilities.

3.4 Data analysis

The data were transcribed verbatim, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). The transcriptions were then translated using the back-translation method to ensure accuracy (Brinslin, 1970). Dependability and confirmability were achieved via audit trails whereby the participants checked the transcriptions for accuracy.

The transcribed and translated data were then imported into ATLAS.ti version 7.5, qualitative data-analysis software, which allows researchers to use the open-coding methods and apply meaningful names for each code to develop themes inductively (Freise, 2014). The interview data from the Excellent Teachers and their role sets were analysed iteratively and separately by the researchers, using content analysis and the open-coding method. Then, researchers used axial coding to categorise and relate the data to build the themes and subthemes. The researchers met to collate the emerging themes and finalise them accordingly based on the central aim of the study, that is, to describe the key roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers. Based on the interview data, five central themes emerged related to Excellent Teachers' roles and responsibilities. In addition, researchers also studied the formal documents carefully to extract the relevant information with regard to the expert teachers' written roles and responsibilities. At this point, data were examined deductively, focusing on getting evidence to further support the emerging themes and to corroborate the findings from the interview data.

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4. Findings

The findings of the study are presented thematically based on the coding of the interview data and document analysis. Five themes identified in relation to the Excellent Teachers' descriptions of their roles and responsibilities were:

i. Excellent Teacher as teacher
ii. Excellent Teacher as content expert
iii. Excellent Teacher as facilitator
iv. Excellent Teacher as mentor or leader
v. Excellent Teacher as researcher and innovator

4.1 Excellent Teacher as teacher

Excellent Teachers value and prioritize their teaching as the most important component of their job. The participants regard teaching as the top priority among their various duties. The teaching task in their expert subject is prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Indeed Ministry of Education documents indicate that the Excellent Teacher's main job is to:

> "Prepare lesson plans, implement the teaching expertise and be accountable for the formation and development of students in accordance with the highest standards set by the Ministry of Education." – (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2006)

Parallel to this, the Excellent Teachers in this study also express how they would always do pre-class preparation, and apply various instructional methods and strategies to incorporate creative and innovative teaching and to deliver engaging and effective lessons.

In addition, an Inspector confirmed that the main job of an Excellent Teacher is to teach. He elaborated that the reason for creating the ET post is to ensure that good teachers remain as teachers (not as educational administrators), without losing the opportunity to develop in their career.

> "The main role of an ET is as a teacher. The ET post is created because we do not want teachers who are really good in teaching to be promoted as administrators, thus we lose their expertise… the Excellent Teacher Scheme is created, so that teachers have the opportunity to go for fast track promotion other than the administrative posts." – (EI 2)

One teacher noted that Excellent Teachers in her school are given the same amount of teaching time as given to ordinary teachers. This requirement creates a problem because the ETs are busy with other tasks too, including those which require them to help students and teachers, and they may miss the classes they are supposed to be teaching. Other teachers in the school would then have to replace them whenever necessary.

> "…the ETs actually have their hands full. …Other teachers have to replace their teaching time whenever they are away from school." – (NT 3).

4.2 Excellent Teacher as content expert

As content experts, Excellent Teachers are expected to contribute by writing textbooks, books, modules and articles, mostly related to their major subjects.

> "I write modules for the Science subject, [and become] a person referred to in the subject of Science at the school and state level…" – (ET 4)

Their experience in writing would normally extend to becoming reviewers or evaluators of manuscripts for publication, as stated by ET 3: "(I was) invited to evaluate textbooks".

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Besides reading materials, Excellent Teachers are also invited to develop items for standardized examinations. In many instances, they become the head of the examiners for certain standardized national examinations. They are expected to keep abreast of current changes in the curriculum, for example, on the latest assessment format or exam items. It has been documented as part of the expert teacher's job that they should be involved in the implementation of changes in the curriculum for their subject:

> "(Excellent Teachers are to…) lead and assist in the task of curriculum and co-curriculum related to the subject area of expertise or specialization." – (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2006).

Several quotes from the participants illustrate Excellent Teachers' contributions as content experts in those aspects. One Excellent Teacher (ET4) reported that to a certain extent, Excellent Teachers become the point of reference with regard to curriculum and co-curricular matters. This would mean that they are acknowledged as experts in their respective subject matter. Similarly, a few other aspects of work that Excellent Teachers do as content experts are also highlighted by their role sets. For example, a teacher noted:

> "Most Excellent Teachers that I know are involved in assessment by preparing examination papers at the national level or becoming the head examiners/markers for the subjects they teach." – (NT 4)

One District Educational Officer (DEO 1) noted that, Excellent Teachers are distinguishable from normal teachers because the former possess exceptional content and pedagogical knowledge and skills.

4.3 Excellent Teacher as facilitator

Excellent Teachers' expertise may be acknowledged by others, within and beyond their own schools. The participants have experience as facilitators and they were often invited as guest speakers, trainers and facilitators in workshops, in their respective schools or in other schools, at the district, state, and national level. They helped both students and teachers to improve teaching and learning, and ultimately, students' academic performance:

> "I was always given the responsibility to organize academic enhancement programmes and also invited to share and give (talks) on techniques in answering (exam) questions." – (ET 9)

> "Excellent Teachers are given the trust to lead a lot of special co-academic programmes and workshops or talks related to their major subjects." – (ET 3)

Excellent Teachers were also directly involved in Professional Learning Community (PLC) programmes which were introduced to enhance teacher professional development. In this programme, Excellent Teachers often worked collaboratively with other teachers in the same school, or in other schools in the district or state, who taught the same subject.

> "Excellent teachers are involved with the State Department of Education as part of the State Master Trainer and become the committee of the State Council of Excellent Teachers…with the help of the other colleagues, (they) would contribute to the subject panel (or department)." – (ET 7)

According to a school principal, in certain states in Malaysia, there is a specific day every week when Excellent Teachers would carry out training or sharing of knowledge in other schools in the district. This confirms the contribution of Excellent Teachers in the PLC programme at the district level.

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> "Every Wednesday, as part of the ETs' contribution to the schools in the district, they are expected to help teachers (to teach better) in the particular subjects (that they are expert in)." – (SA 1)

4.4 Excellent Teacher as mentor or leader

While Excellent Teacher facilitation and training are organised learning processes, mentoring is more subtle and implicit. Mentoring is usually embedded informally in the everyday work of Excellent Teachers. It involves Excellent Teachers helping other teachers and students by sharing knowledge, building networking, guiding on career development and providing psycho-social support. As such, Excellent Teachers are often looked upon as teacher leaders.

Excellent Teacher mentoring is not confined to the workplace but may also extend to teachers of other schools in the same district or state. In some cases, where a certain school has poor student academic achievement, Excellent Teachers are purposely transferred to this school to help the teachers and students improve their performance. However, in most instances, Excellent Teachers would visit the schools regularly to provide support for the teachers and the students and to focus on the areas that need enhancement. When mentoring, Excellent Teachers use their expertise to give advice and guidance in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Several participants commented on the role of Excellent Teachers as mentors:

> "Excellent Teachers would be sent to other schools with lower performance, to help the teachers improve their teaching and learning." – (ET 8)

> "(Excellent Teachers) give advice, guide teachers in their subject expertise or major subject area." – (SA 1)

This mentoring role is also confirmed by a teacher (NT 2) who mentioned how Excellent Teachers in her school are regarded as role models by many teachers, regardless of their department. Excellent Teachers were exemplary in teaching and learning, and they would extend their effort to make sure that all students perform well academically.

One district education officer elaborated on how the ETs are automatically looked upon as mentors by other teachers in relation to the curriculum and they are expected to be well-equipped in respect of current subject knowledge and curriculum changes.

> "...the ETs are the reference... they are the subject specialists. When they become the reference, they must be the mentors. Automatically, they become the mentors. The ETs must be aware of matters related to the curriculum and its development." – (DEO 2)

According to an inspector, Excellent Teachers' mentorship and expert feedback is crucial, especially for new teachers:

> "They (the Excellent Teachers) would act as an expert who would give advice and guidance by becoming the mentors to the new teachers. They would give feedback to these new teachers and report their progress to the school administrators." – (EI 1)

Excellent Teachers (for example ET 7 and ET 16) also claimed to be willing to share their knowledge and skills with other teachers. They were often asked for favours by their colleagues and in most instances, they try to assist other teachers as much as they possibly could. Excellent Teachers also reported that they frequently discussed with other teachers how to tackle weak students in the classroom and how to create innovative teaching materials to enhance teaching and learning.

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Teachers and administrators should consider having Excellent Teachers in their school as a blessing. As noted by an inspector, having Excellent Teachers in a school is advantageous as they are valuable assets for the school. They are a source of expert guidance for other teachers.

4.5 Excellent Teacher as researcher and innovator

The findings also indicate that Excellent Teachers are involved in action research. One Excellent Teacher (ET 10) with expertise in Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) gave an explicit account of doing action research to improve students' writing ability in the subject, for better performance in the national examination. Another Excellent Teacher (ET 11) described not only how she had carried out action research but also how she had shared the findings in writing, and in a presentation.

This was confirmed by another teacher:

> "The Excellent Teachers would normally carry out action research in their respective schools. The research output is then shared with other teachers who are facing similar issues." – (NT 3)

Excellent Teachers in this study (ET 9 and ET 10) also mentioned how they would strive to create teaching materials, or integrate technology in their teaching, so that students could learn better. In order to do so, they would keep abreast with the latest instructional practices via ICT and keep trying to produce innovative teaching approaches and materials that would help stretch students' minds in learning.

The data from the interviews and analysis of the Ministry of Education document and book showed consistency with the interview responses. The Ministry document, for example showed that Excellent Teachers are expected to:

> "Conduct research, produce scientific writing and research, innovation and explore new findings in the subject or area of specialization and expertise, and disseminate the findings." – (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2006)

The roles and responsibilities mentioned by the Excellent Teachers are essentially those mandated by the Ministry. The interview data provided empirical evidence on how Excellent Teachers carry out these roles and responsibilities in actual school setting. Furthermore, data showed how Excellent Teachers' work extends beyond the school context to include the district, state and national levels. Although this has not been specifically spelled out in the documents that we analysed, the final point in the list of Excellent Teachers' roles and responsibilities in the documents denotes how Excellent Teachers are subjected to directives by an immediate or distant superior. The documents say that:

> "[Excellent Teacher are expected to] carry out tasks as directed by the District Education Officer, Director of Education and Director of the Ministry of Education." – (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2006)

This would mean that Excellent Teachers, as with other public servants in the country, are subject to assignment of additional duties by their relevant superiors.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The teaching profession provides a promising career with clear diverse pathways for teachers to climb their career ladders. Teachers who are not interested in administrative posts

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can opt for another leadership pathway which acknowledges their expertise and experience. Fuller, Goodwyn and Francis-Brophy (2013), for example, note that having such a scheme allows teachers who are really good at teaching to remain in the classroom, whilst still being promoted to higher senior positions. In Malaysia, the Excellent Teacher Scheme is the career route that is offered to teachers for better career development opportunities (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2013). This promotion scheme is parallel to emerging career development practices by some countries to retain expert teachers in the classroom, as highlighted in the OECD (2015) report.

The authors' data show that the framework for Excellent Teachers' roles and responsibilities encompasses five main themes. The first responsibility of an Excellent Teacher is teaching. Excellent Teachers in this study agreed that their most important duty is teaching, and with high-quality instructional performance. Similarly, in other countries, the expert teacher or lead teacher roles also require those in the post to focus on teaching and learning, hoping that that this would have a positive impact on students' learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Stronge et al., 2011). As noted by Hattie (2003), expert teachers take their work seriously and spend time planning lessons and preparing themselves before any lesson. This was illustrated in the data when Excellent Teachers in the current study mentioned how they placed teaching as their top priority, carefully designed their lessons by thinking about strategies and innovative approaches. Excellent Teachers extended these efforts to involve parents and to inform them of students' learning progress and achievement.

Excellent Teachers also played the role of content expert. Ibrahim et al. (2013), focusing on English teachers, highlighted that these teachers are regarded as "material developers". They are expected to come up with creative and innovative materials that can facilitate students' learning. Excellent Teachers in this study were also considered as someone who could help other teachers on curriculum matters, including assessment. It is pivotal to highlight this because studies in high-performing nations found that teachers were substantially engaged in the student assessment process (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 2013). From the current research findings, we can say that Excellent Teacher's knowledge, skills and expertise are recognized beyond the school environment. Excellent Teachers are contributing significantly to the larger educational community at the state or even the national level when they are involved in developing teaching and learning resources, building items for standardized examinations and assuming leadership for crafting assessment-related exercises.

The third role of an Excellent Teacher was as facilitator. Excellent Teachers in Malaysia are often master trainers involved in teacher training and may lead the implementation of curriculum change at micro- or macro-levels. The practice of Excellent Teachers visiting other schools is also evident in some high-achieving countries (see report from The 2012 International Teaching Summit). The effectiveness of professional learning community (PLC) has long been acknowledged (Hord, 2009; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006). Through the PLC initiatives, Excellent Teachers have the chance to work collaboratively with other teachers at the school, district and state levels to help them overcome weaknesses and enhance their strengths. Excellent Teachers in the study also had the opportunity to work directly with students to improve their academic performance. In addition, since 2011, 1548 schools in Malaysia have been involved in PLC programmes which are directly monitored by the District Educational Office or the State Educational Office.

Whether or not they are formally appointed by the school principal, or by authorities at the state or national level, Excellent Teachers are often looked upon as mentors by other

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teachers, especially those who are in the same field or subject specification (Hellsten, Prytula, Ebanks & Lai, 2009). Excellent Teachers in the present study reported being mentors to other teachers, especially new teachers. Mentors are not only experts in their subject area but also have exemplary characteristics which make them suitable role models for other teachers (Cheah, 2007; Ibrahim et al., 2013). For new teachers, for example, mentoring may involve clinical observations to help the new teachers adapt better in the classroom (Berliner, 2001). Such monitoring of quality teaching and learning can help to develop new teachers.

Previous studies have identified a close relationship between mentoring and teacher performance (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). This mentorship relationship is designed so that the Excellent Teachers do not 'condemn' the newcomers. Instead, they become the critical friend or buddy to their respective mentees and work together as partners, to strengthen the newcomers' pedagogical skills (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Langdon, 2011). A comparative study on good mentoring practices by Pennanena, Bristol, Wilkinson and Heikkinen (2016) highlighted how group mentoring has been exercised successfully in Finland. The focus is more on supporting teacher professional development and emotional wellbeing. However, in the current study, it is unclear from the data collected whether such a mentoring model exists. It would be interesting to see if such a collaborative culture also exists in mentoring practices between Excellent Teachers and other teachers in Malaysian schools.

Participants in this study mentioned that Excellent Teachers are directly involved with research and innovation. Teachers in general, and especially Excellent Teachers, are well-exposed to research activities, especially action research. Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei and Andree (2010) noted how teachers in Western countries engage in research as a collaborative effort to ensure better teaching and learning. Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) also relate how Japanese and Chinese teachers work collaboratively on research. Through lesson study, these teachers continuously improve their teaching. Although the data from the current research denotes how Excellent Teachers engage themselves in research activities, there is no evidence of them working closely with other teachers on research projects. This is yet another area for future research that should be taken into consideration. The culture of doing research, however, should not only be restricted to Excellent Teachers. Instead, all teachers should be encouraged to be part of research and innovation projects led by Excellent Teachers so that they gain experience and benefits from carrying out scientific endeavours that can improve teaching and learning.

The roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers may seem to be straightforward but, in practice, they may be problematic. One problem with regard to the teaching role of these Excellent Teachers was the allocation of time. The total teaching hours for Malaysian Excellent Teachers were the same as those for ordinary teachers. Although the Excellent Teacher Scheme is meant to keep effective teachers in the classroom (and not in administrative positions), it is difficult for the Excellent Teachers to be fully focused on their teaching when they are also expected to carry out other tasks, including mentoring and conducting training sessions and outreach programmes that extend to district, state and national levels. In contrast, in the Republic of Korea, Master Teachers only spend half of their working time teaching. The remaining time is spent on coaching and mentoring, designing curricula and developing school-based programmes for teacher professional development (OECD, 2016). In other countries, when these academic leaders have to undertake outreach work, normal classroom teaching-learning responsibilities are no longer their main focus. Instead, they are expected to focus more on modelling and leading improvements in teaching skills. This is the case for Leading Practitioners in England (SPTA, 2015). Thus, educational policymakers need to carefully address the issue of time allocation when reviewing or creating 'excellent teacher' or 'master teacher' pathways. It

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may be appropriate for the teaching load of Excellent Teachers to be reduced, compared to other teachers, to allow time and space for their other curriculum activities and academic leadership responsibilities. Otherwise, internal conflicts will occur among the Excellent/Master Teachers, other teachers in their schools and their administrators (Bush et al., 2016)

In terms of selection and recruitment, the framework can be a useful guide to promote teachers to the Excellent Teachers Scheme. Stronge et al. (2011) stress that, in order to promote the right people to become expert (or excellent) teachers, it is important to understand the details of the job. Job descriptions which are too general may create difficulties for the employees (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). This may also lead to a person-job mismatch, which could affect Excellent Teachers' performance ratings (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Such role conflicts and ambiguity may have negative effects on Excellent Teachers' performance and, indirectly, on student achievement (Khan et al., 2014). The data from this study serve to clarify the roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers, which can be helpful in establishing a performance measurement tool for identifying individual Excellent Teacher achievement. It can also serve as a personal or peer-monitoring tool to assess Excellent Teachers' progress and whether they are fulfilling all their roles and responsibilities. The OECD (2016) report highlighted the importance of developing clear and transparent guidelines for promotion and evaluation systems, and for acknowledging and rewarding teachers according to their roles and responsibilities.

Many previous studies on expert teachers or master teachers (excellent teachers) are concentrating on how they apply their content and/or pedagogical skills in the classroom settings. This may give the impression that their roles are limited to instructional duties. However, other studies emphasize how expert/master teachers need to influence other teachers through sharing of best practices in teaching. This relates to facilitation and mentoring activities by senior/veteran teachers, if not expert/master teachers. Similarly, literature on teacher leadership (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; 2015) has highlighted the value of collaboration among teachers to improve teaching and learning practices. In addition, emerging expectations for teachers, in general, and expert teachers in particular, include implementing innovative practices and conducting research. In the context of this study, the actual work of excellent teacher encompasses all of the above mentioned expectations. Although not all five roles and responsibilities of excellent/expert/master teacher may exist in all settings, the current findings may be useful to describe the nature of excellent/expert/master teachers' work in a holistic manner.

Many countries have not yet created academic leadership pathways for teachers. In other words, teachers only have the linear promotion scheme that forces them to assume administrative posts when they climb their apparent career ladder. OECD (2016) reports that only two of the nine Asia-Pacific countries included in their study, the Republic of Korea and the Philippines, have introduced the master teacher pathway. The findings from this study offer valuable insights to policymakers in other countries to design career pathways and promotion schemes for successful teachers. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence that can support the effect of implementing this alternative scheme on teacher retention and related issues. Future studies can look into the impact of having Excellent/Master Teacher Schemes in retaining quality teachers in the profession.

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Table 1

The details of participants from each school, subject labels to indicate their expertise.

School	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**	**H**
Senior Excellent Teachers (Grade DG52 and above)		1 (Sc) 1 (IRS)	1 (Agr) 1 (Sc)	1 (ML)		1 (Sc)		1 (Agr)
Excellent Teachers (Grade DG48)	1 (Maths)			1 (ML)	1 (Agr) 1 (Hist) 1 (IRS)		1 (Com) 1 (ICT)	1 (Acc) 1 (Sc)
Total ETs from each school	**1**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**3**
Principals							1	1
Assistant Principals			1	1				
Teachers	1 (Maths)	1 (IRS)			1 (Hist)	1 (Sc)		
Total participants from each school	**2**	**3**	**3**	**3**	**4**	**2**	**3**	**4**
District Educational Officer					2			
Inspectors					2			

Key: *ML – Malay Language; IRS – Islamic Religious Study; His – History; Maths – Mathematics; Ac – Account; Sc – Science; Com – Commerce; Agr – Agriculture Science*

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