

**FOCUS GROUP DISCOURSE ON A MODEL OF PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP IN A PRIVATE MALAYSIAN INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE (IB) SCHOOL**

Tee Siok Hoon  
Gopinathan K Raman Kutty  
Chua Yan Piaw  
Kenny S.L Cheah

Department of Education Management, Planning, and Policy,  
Faculty of Education, University of Malaya

**Abstract**

Most of the school transformations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century require pedagogical leaders to be equipped with relevant skills and foresight. Following up from a study of exploring a school's pedagogical leaders on their strategies, challenges, and suggestions to mitigate pedagogical leadership challenges, this led towards a conceptual model of pedagogical leadership for a Private Malaysian International Baccalaureate (IB) School. As supplemented with the information of the model of pedagogical leadership, this paper aims to critically evaluate this Model of Pedagogical Leadership resulting from a focus group session. Twenty-one pedagogical leaders in the school were selected to participate in an online critical discourse on the model. Their data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using ATLAS.ti (CAQDAS). As findings, there were both positive and negative inputs resulting from the participants. Their negative perceptions were concerning the generalizability of use for the model, its limitations, and precaution for application. Conversely, their positive perceptions consist of the potential benefits, clear indicators, and clarification on teachers' professional development, student achievement, and organizational learning. As the implication of the study, the evaluated model should be continually improved with relevance to its practicality, systems improvements, leadership development, and organizational sustainability.

Keywords: Model of Pedagogical Leadership, Descriptors of Pedagogical Leadership

## **Introduction**

Pedagogical leadership is an emerging concept of leadership that is emerging in the body of knowledge today (Male & Palaiologou, 2015), and studies have shown that evolves and overlaps with other forms of leadership such as transformational (Rojas Carrasco et al., 2020), instructional (Ghavifekr et al., 2019), and distributed (Yang & Lim, 2020). In the Malaysian Education landscape, the government has allocated about 15.6 percent from RM50.4 billion in their 2021 budget to education reform (Normah,2020). Since the inception of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025), it provides the necessary vision to become improve the education system with emphasis on access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. Aligned with this vision and considering recent findings from the body of knowledge, pedagogical leaders are increasingly recognized as strategic drivers to enhance teachers' professionalism and educational advancements (Leo, 2015; Muli et al., 2017). On the other hand, they play a significant role to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency among the school communities as mentioned by Dwivedi, Chaturvedi & Vashist (2020); Heikka et al., 2019a; Heikka et al., 2019b). Most of the school transformations also require pedagogical leaders of the 21st century to be equipped with relevant skills and a forward-thinking mindset to transform schools from good to great (Greenhill,2010).

### ***Background of pedagogical leadership***

Generally, scholars acknowledged that pedagogical leadership is an approach by the individual(s) to improve school transformation through teachers' pedagogical training, pedagogical practices, group collaboration, and other methods of professional development (Male & Palaiologou, 2017; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019) Pedagogical leadership is sustained by a positive school culture that is explained by continual improvements in academic matters and organizational processes that eventually enhances the capacity of teachers and students' achievement (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017). Without pedagogical leadership, organizations will only operate in a repeated process of management that is unable to deal with the present and future challenges that are so vital for survival and success (Bush & Glower, 2016; Bush & Glower, 2014; Peng et al,2016). This is inscribed in many national policies on education (Gento Palacios et al., 2020, 2020). The importance of the pedagogical leadership aspect rests on the right principles and role of leadership in guiding and supporting the teaching and learning processes that both teachers and students need to perform at their optimal best (Peng et al, 2016). On the other hand, there have been many scholars and studies indicating the various essential dimensions of pedagogical leadership (Andrews & Abawi, 2017; Gento Palacios et al., 2020), and this contributes to a better conceptualization and understanding of the principal's role as a pedagogical leader. In essence, educational leaders may better equip themselves with abilities in supervising their organizations via the management of particular models in teaching and learning (Farrell, 2017; Rodriguez-Gallego et al., 2020).

In addition, most of the studies in recent years that focus on the term pedagogical leadership are based in the west and not the east (Male & Palaiologou, 2015, 2017; Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Leo,2015; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). The knowledge base on pedagogical leadership in Malaysia is also at the infancy stage (Rahman et al., 2017; Samad et al., 2017), and it could probably be hidden amongst the other studies of instructional (Sabri & Baba, 2017), distributed (Balachandran & Mohammad, 2021), transformational leadership

(Safiek, 2020), professional learning communities (Rasidi et al., 2020). Therefore, this creates a gap for more research towards more understanding and applications of PL in Malaysia.

Following from a holistic case study in a Private Malaysian International Baccalaureate (IB) School, the last phase of its research is to evaluate a contextual model that is conceived from thematic analysis on its precedent questions. Conceiving a contextual model of pedagogical leadership that is research-based was for their pedagogical leaders to justify, identify choices and take actions to solve an organizational problem related to teaching and learning. For the benefit of readers, it is important to first understand how the model is was first conceived alongside its components that made up the model of pedagogical leadership in the Malaysian IB Education provider.

***Explanation on the Model of Pedagogical Leadership for the context of the Malaysian IB Education Provider***

This conceived model from the earlier phases of study was aimed to project and support the understanding of pedagogical leadership amongst the school’s community of leaders. In terms of function, it is to improve the school’s standard operating procedures and compliments their existing pedagogical leadership framework that is recommended by the World IB Organisation (IBO). It also allows the school community to foresee the areas of development in pedagogical leadership, and to achieve a sustainable group of future leaders in the school. The initial data analysis from exploring the school’s pedagogical leaders on their strategies, challenges, and suggestions to mitigate leadership challenges led to their prototype model of pedagogical leadership. The codes that derived from the transcripts of respondents were grouped into four major themes: (a) Become (What they think a pedagogical leader should be); (b) Do (What they think a pedagogical leader should do); (c) Achieve and Evaluate (What they think a pedagogical leader should achieve and evaluate for), and Reflect for tomorrow (What they think a pedagogical leader should think of for tomorrow).



Figure 1: The four themes emerged on Pedagogical Leaders in the Malaysian IB Education Group

In the later stage of data analysis, the model went through a series of improvements and improvements coincide with four major themes that are illustrated as in Figure 2. It consists of: (a) Competency and Dedication (evolved from ‘Become’); (b) Delivery and Implementation (evolved from ‘Do’); (c) Performance and Development (evolved from ‘Achieve & Evaluate’), and (d) Growth and Sustainability (evolved from ‘Reflect for Tomorrow’). Each of the quadrants is placed in a circle that explains its cyclic nature of transiting clockwise or anti-clockwise depending on the needful situation of pedagogical leadership. Alongside the quadrant(s) are the code groups that emerged from transcripts of the participants and grouped as sectors that support the particular quadrant.

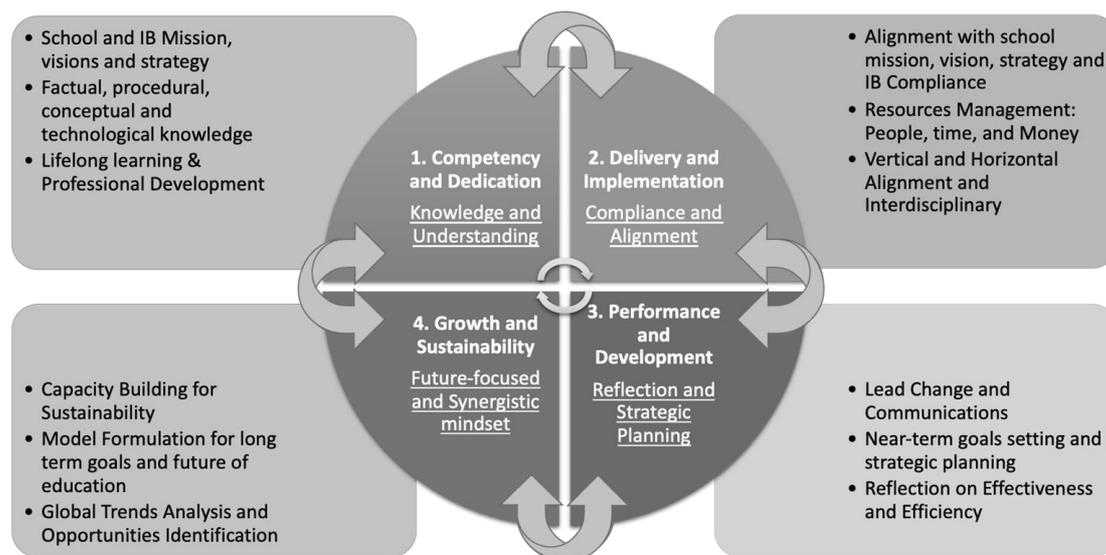


Figure 2: The Enhanced Model of Pedagogical Leadership

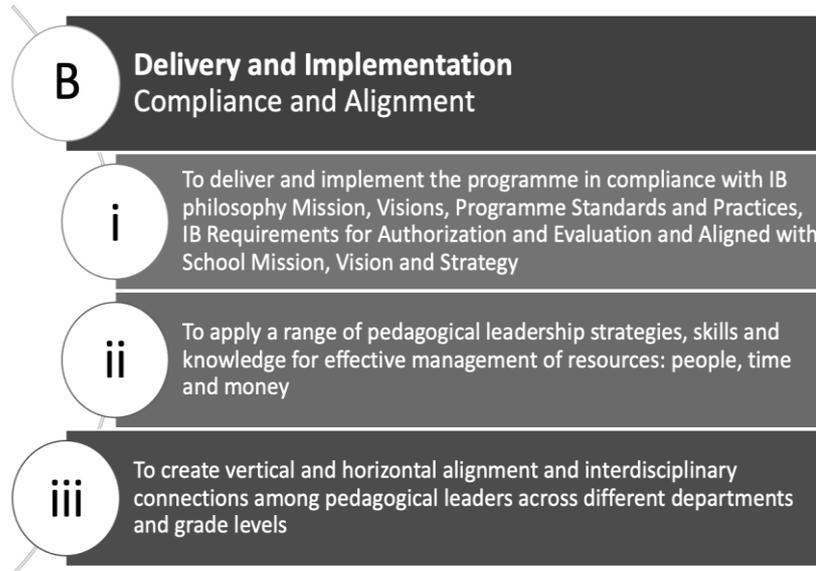
From the researcher’s reflective journal, interviews with the Chairman of the school, and selected senior pedagogical leaders, the idea of having the four quadrants in the Model of Pedagogical Leadership interwoven with the Eastern philosophy from Confucius teaching (Bi, et al, 2012) is unique. The researcher has considered the Eastern philosophy to be fused with the IB Matrix of Pedagogical Leadership Model to cater towards pedagogical leaders serving in the Mandarin Language Department. When blending the four quadrants in the conceived Model of Pedagogical Leadership with the four quadrants in Confucius’s eastern philosophy, the synthesis aligns with each other in nature and function. This can be explained through a) Quadrant 1-Individual level (aligned with Self-cultivation according to Confucius Teaching), b) ) Quadrant 2-Departmental level (aligned with Family according to Confucius Teaching), c) Quadrant 3-School level (aligned with Nation Governing according to Confucius Teaching) and d) Quadrant 4-Global level (aligned with Global Peace- according to Confucius Teaching). The key idea of this Model is to highlight that leadership is a unique and dynamic journey, which involves constant change and development in three dimensions. Bi, et al, (2012) reiterates Confucius's leadership philosophy as Self-Cultivation, Family Alignment, Nation Governing, and World Peace which has some similarities to the above four quadrants. Each quadrant also considers and integrates the information from their existing IB guidelines and handbook for pedagogical

leaders. The following information is derived from these documents as a result of document analysis during the earlier phase of research.



Novice	Practitioner	Mastery
i. able to understand School Mission, Visions, Strategy and IB Mission, Visions, Programme Standards and Practices, Requirements for Authorization and Evaluation	i. able to describe School Mission, Visions, Strategy and IB Mission, Visions, Programme Standards and Practices, Requirements for Authorization and Evaluation by giving multiple examples	i. able to explain School Mission, Visions, Strategy and IB Mission, Visions, Programme Standards and Practices, Requirements for Authorization and Evaluation by giving extensive examples and making connections in a global context
ii: able to outline limited pedagogical leadership related factual, procedural, conceptual and technological knowledge and limited ability to transfer the knowledge and understanding across different situations	ii. able to discuss substantial understanding about pedagogical leadership related factual, procedural, conceptual and technological knowledge by giving multiple examples and able to transfer the knowledge and understanding across different situations	ii. able to interpret pedagogical leadership related factual, procedural, conceptual and technological knowledge with extensive examples and able to effectively transfer the knowledge and understanding across different situations
iii: able to demonstrate limited commitment on lifelong learning through a range of professional development trainings and action research	iii: able to show higher commitment on lifelong learning through active participation in a range of professional development trainings and action research	iii: able to prioritise commitment on lifelong learning through continuously participating and conducting a range of professional development trainings and action research

Figure 3: Criterion for Quadrant 1 (Competency and Dedication)



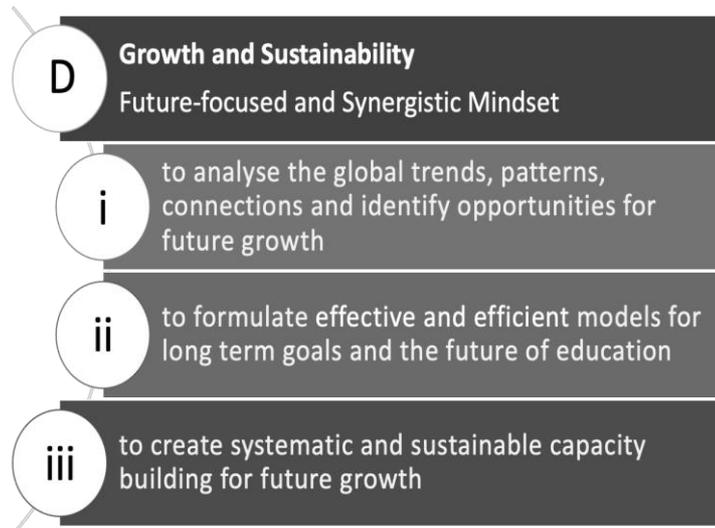
Novice	Practitioner	Mastery
i. able to deliver and implement the programme in compliance with IB philosophy, Mission, Visions, Programme Standards and Practices, IB Requirements for Authorization and Evaluation and aligned with School Mission, Visions and Strategy <b>with a lot of guidance from the IB and School</b>	i. able to deliver and implement the programme in compliance with IB philosophy, Mission, Visions, Programme Standards and Practices, IB Requirements for Authorization and Evaluation and aligned with School Mission, Visions and Strategy <b>confidently and independently</b>	i. able to deliver and implement the programme <b>beyond the expectations</b> of compliance with IB philosophy, Mission, Visions, Programme Standards and Practices, IB Requirements for Authorization and Evaluation and aligned with School Mission, Visions and Strategy
ii. able to apply <b>very limited</b> pedagogical leadership strategies, skills and knowledge for effective management of resources: people, time and money	ii. able to apply and explain <b>substantial</b> pedagogical leadership strategies, skills and knowledge for effective management of resources: people, time and money	ii. able to apply and justify <b>extensive</b> pedagogical leadership strategies, skills and knowledge for effective management of resources: people, time and money in a <b>holistic and interconnected approach</b>
iii. able to outline <b>partial</b> vertical and horizontal alignment and <b>limited</b> interdisciplinary connections among pedagogical leaders across different departments and grade levels	iii. able to create vertical and horizontal alignment and interdisciplinary connections among pedagogical leaders across different departments and grade levels	iii. able to evaluate and improve vertical and horizontal alignment and <b>enhance meaningful interdisciplinary connections and engagements</b> among pedagogical leaders across different departments and grade levels

Figure 4: Criterion for Quadrant 2 (Delivery and Implementation)



Novice	Practitioner	Mastery
i. able to reflect the effectiveness and efficiency of the <b>limited</b> pedagogical leadership practices from a <b>department or programme perspective</b> in relation to school performance and development from various stakeholders	i. able to reflect <b>confidently and independently</b> on the effectiveness and efficiency of the pedagogical leadership practices from a <b>school perspective</b> in relation to school performance and development from various stakeholders	i. able to reflect <b>critically and creatively</b> on the effectiveness and efficiency of the pedagogical leadership practices from a <b>global perspective</b> in relation to school performance and development from various stakeholders
ii. able to describe near-term goals and outline action plans <b>lack of clarify and focus</b> for school performance and development	ii. able to explain near-term goals and strategise action plans for school performance and development	ii. able to <b>prioritise</b> near-term goals and strategise <b>impactful, realistic, achievable and time-framed</b> action plans for school performance and development <b>in line with global development</b>
iii: able to <b>initiate</b> limited change at <b>department or programme level</b> with a lot of <b>support and guidance from school</b> and communicate among stakeholders	iii: able to <b>lead change confidently and independently at school level</b> and communicate <b>effectively</b> among stakeholders	iii: able to <b>lead change beyond school level</b> and communicate <b>effectively and on timely-manner</b> among stakeholders to gain their support

Figure 5: Criterion for Quadrant 3 (Performance and Development)



Novice	Practitioner	Mastery
i. able to identify <b>limited</b> global trends, patterns, connections and describe opportunities with <b>lack of clarity and future-focused for growth</b>	i. able to analyse the global trends, patterns, connections and identify opportunities for future growth	i. able to synthesise the global trends, patterns, connections with <b>future-focused and synergistic mindset</b> and to <b>prioritise</b> opportunities for future growth in a <b>global context</b>
ii. able to outline <b>brief</b> models for <b>near-term goals</b> and the future of education	ii. able to suggest models for <b>long term goals</b> and the future of education among <b>IB Community</b>	ii. able to <b>formulate effective and efficient</b> models for <b>long term goals</b> and the future of education in a <b>global context</b>
iii: able to plan capacity building for future growth	iii: able to create <b>systematic and sustainable</b> capacity building for the future growth of education industry in <b>IB Community</b>	iii: able to create systematic and sustainable capacity building for the future growth of education industry in a <b>global context</b>

Figure 6: Criterion for Quadrant 3 (Growth and Sustainability)

***Purpose of this Study***

Following the presentation of the model of pedagogical leadership for the private Malaysian Education Provider, this paper aims to present the critical evaluation of this Model of Pedagogical Leadership resulting from a focus group session. The critical inputs from the focus group of pedagogical leaders were meant to discuss how it can serve as a concept to inform, guide, evaluate and develop their pedagogical leaders. As mentioned earlier, the reason for achieving this purpose is based on the notion that studies on pedagogical leadership are almost non-existent in Malaysia. On the other hand, studies among Malaysian IB schools are also rare, as compared to other public schools. Therefore, this scenario deepens the gap for study in pedagogical leadership when considering the unique context of IB Schools. Emphasizing contextual applications of Pedagogical Leadership is important for evaluating the situation and competency of school leaders (Bryant, et al, 2019). In terms of research questions, this article will only address two key questions from the larger study that consists of several precedent research questions. All the research

questions were built upon each other. However, as far as the research question for this article is concerned, they are listed as follows:

1. What were the negative perceptions of pedagogical leaders on the model of pedagogical leadership as conceived from data analysis in the Malaysian IB Education Provider?
2. How did the conceptualized model enable the school community to further understand pedagogical leadership?

It is important to highlight that because previous questions were leading to this particular question, there are continuous and descriptive data to support the conceptualization of the Pedagogical Leadership Model for the school. However, they are not included in this article as the scope is too wide to be considered in this article.

### ***Methodology***

As mentioned earlier, this article is a section of a larger part of the study where it consists of a holistic case study approach. Data collection for this study was carried out in a Malaysian IB education provider about a year between Mid-2020 to Mid-2021. It was implemented through 3 phases: Phase 1 (Participant observation, document analysis, field observations, and reflective journal); (b) Phase 2 (Nineteen selected pedagogical leaders for online personal interviews plus and reflective journal); and Phase 3 (Twenty-one pedagogical leaders for focus group interviews plus and reflective journal). The multiple sources of data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti Qualitative Data Analysis Software (version 9) through methodological, data, researcher, and theoretical triangulation. All these methods of triangulations served to conceive a conceptual model (as explained earlier) because the researcher had analyzed the data concerning their strategies, challenges, and practicalities as pedagogical leaders in the school. As a process, all the recorded interviews and focus groups are transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to address each research question in the total study. As far as findings for this article are concerned, the data groups were selected through an iterative and reflective approach to producing the content, process, and context of pedagogical leadership in the private Malaysian IB Education provider.

## Findings

**Research Question 1:** *What were the negative perceptions of pedagogical leaders on the model of pedagogical leadership as conceived from data analysis in the Malaysian IB Education Provider?*

One participant highlight that the Model may not be able to answer all the questions concerning pedagogical leadership, nor does it represent all expectations or suggestions of different pedagogical leaders. Another participant also agreed that that the model could not address all pedagogical leadership challenges, nor every department, program, or school can benefit from it. The chairman of the school (participant R19) highlighted,

*“Leadership does not refer to certain leadership skills in general, not just by the head (cognitive), but more to the heart of a leader: attitude and willingness”.*

R19, Reference 83:2, ATLAS.ti

Thus, the model may need to be constantly rechecked, re-examined, and evaluated from time to time to implement new approaches or create new models. As in the case of pedagogical leadership, it is more difficult to express or quantify. So, this model should not be regarded as final and universal. The participants argued that this model may have limitations of use to other schools in different contexts. One participant mentioned that not all the leadership knowledge is explicit and can be documented or portrayed as a figure. Participant R15 suggested,

*“In Quadrant 1, I would suggest including interpersonal skills essential for building relationships. Similarly for other quadrants lack of soft skills which are a combination of people skills, social skills, communication skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, mindsets which are desirable in any leader”.*

R15, Reference 93:30, ATLAS.ti

Another participant mentioned that pedagogical leadership is trans-disciplinary and influenced by context and culture. It is affective and not just cognitive or behavioral. As participant R19 also mentioned,

*“The highest level of leadership is leadership with "heart", with unconditional and unquestionable love and dedication of AGAPE. Use your heart, your feelings, step out from your comfort zone into that unknown over the cliff. That is what you believe in in your lifetime”.*

R19, Reference 83:3, ATLAS.ti

The participants also suggest that future studies will be needed to compare it with other and different pedagogical leadership models. To improve the Model of Pedagogical Leadership, the chairman of the school offered his inspiring insights as follows:

*“As with any life-long journey, it is dynamic. It is dynamic, that it differs from one human being from the others. There are so many variables. There are so many things that will impact you in that growth journey”.*

R19, Reference 83:12, ATLAS.ti

Another participant mentioned that while cultural and contextual factors have played a key role in shaping this model, the model is dynamic and unique, incorporating Western (IB) and Eastern (Confucius) philosophy, and all the pedagogical leaders in this IB school network played a role in the design of the model. In general, the focus group of pedagogical leaders gave their valuable suggestions their merit consideration for future research

***Research Question 2: How did the conceptualized model enable the school community to further understand pedagogical leadership?***

Other participants agreed that this conceived model could enhance and support their existing standard operating procedures for the existing pedagogical leadership framework. For example,

*“When I look at the four quadrants that she has, yes, it's for IB school. And at the same time, it also reflects our standards and practices, and the principles and practices that we have in our IB documents. So, it is in line with the beliefs of our school.”*

R1, Reference 83:8, ATLAS.ti

Another participant R 12 explained,

*“This Model is more like a comprehensive model of leadership in an international school setting - it is a conceptual model mostly reflecting leadership aspects and not so much on the concept based on teaching and learning”.*

R12, Reference 90:31, ATLAS.ti

Other pedagogical leaders endorsed that teachers in Mandarin Department can follow this model to train and evaluate the leaders in the Mandarin department. Participant R4 said:

*“We can use this in the education area, and then how are we going to do like training or like how the pedagogical leadership can grow. And I think it's like, if we follow this, the model actually, I think we can know how to be a very good leader. And we can contribute not only to the school but also can contribute to the community like the IB community. So this is the impressive, impressive part for me.”*

R4, Reference 83:9, ATLAS.ti

The conceived Model of Pedagogical Leadership was considered unique among the focus group participants as they noted that it embraces the western and eastern philosophy and it also highlights the dynamism in the journey of leadership not just for pedagogical leaders in the Mandarin Department, but other academic departments. For example,

*“Leadership is not confined to a department or position and as such it is transferable”.*

R9, Reference 86:26, ATLAS.ti

*“It is more likely applicable in other programs and other subjects because the model looks like it depicts the journey of a leader”.*

R12, Reference 90:32, ATLAS.ti

When asked on inputs about blending the West with the Eastern Philosophy, the chairman (R19) made an extensive commend,

*“If you take the First Quadrant, as some young buddy, you know, coming to education, coming to the teaching profession, that's the self-improvement time. Then you take the Second Quadrant: This is when you are in a 30, to the 40s perhaps, you are a Department Head or Unit head, you have a few people following you. In Chinese philosophy, during the First Quadrant is yourself. The Second Quadrant is then from yourself, you prove that you move into taking care of your home.*

*If you can't prove yourself to be a good person, competent or otherwise, you don't have a good home. Then from the Second to the Third Quadrant is when you are 40 to 50 years old, then you know how to take care of the company or the community you're in. So from the home to your community, the next level, the community could be a state, could be a province, or even the nation itself, depending on which platform you scaffold from. So it is so dynamic. When you are about 40- 50 years old, it is when you are in the Third Quadrant. Then the last quadrant is perhaps when you're 50 years, 60 years or beyond, like me. So is where you start talking about a visionary, a worldwide global issue of education, on professional, on something like that”.*

R19, Reference 83:5, ATLAS.ti

In addition, most of the focus group participants agreed that:

- i) A model is a form of leadership approach characterized by an ability to formulate, encourage, and support classroom-level actions to increase teacher and student achievement.
- ii) The model highlights the process whereby pedagogical leaders could generate learning outcomes for students and the classroom environment through pedagogical approaches and teaching practices.
- iii) The model could impact student participation in learning activities; improving instructional responsiveness; making better use of available resources; applying new instructional technologies; managing conflict among colleagues during instruction.

All the features and functions in the Model could allow the school community to see the potential benefits, clear indicators, and clarification on teachers' professional development, student achievement, and organizational learning. In other words, their teachers could foresee the development of pedagogical leadership and sustainability of the future leaders to lead in the 21st century. As participant R2 highlighted;

*“The framework is excellent to map out the journey of a pedagogical leader at a school”.*

R2, Reference 88:28, ATLAS.ti

They have also highlighted that pedagogical leaders must develop a culture of learning, and implement effective teacher learning programs and professional development to sustain student achievement in the long term. The pedagogical leadership model conceived from this study has yielded a substantial gap for staff professional development as pedagogical leaders in the future.

### **Discussions**

Generally, schools have complex systems that need to be constantly adjusted to move forward towards success (Muli et al. 2017). Future studies in Pedagogical leaders ought to decide what consists of quality educational reforms and put those idealistic visions into procedures to be implemented in their school systems so goals can be achieved (Glickman & Burns, 2020). Along the process, pedagogical leaders need to always identify the obstacles that hinder the achievement of goals. Future researchers could also explore more ways to mitigate the challenges that persist in their organization such as in the area of technology and other resource management (Bond & Giles, 1997; Pettersson, 2021). For future studies, schools need to accurately measure teachers' and students' progress so that they know their position in their learning process. If teachers or students are falling behind in a certain subject area, then they need to be given time and opportunities to learn, as pedagogical leaders are key persons to support teachers to generate ideas on what works best for their students (Radinger, 2014).

### **Conclusions**

In acquiring competence in 21st-century skills, personal, social, and emotional development and moral (or ethical) sensitivity are important. The pedagogical leader needs to be aware of where they are as a school, what they need to do in the coming year and how to achieve what they want, and who is responsible for the educational goals (Fernandez et al, 2019; Radinger, 2014). Future research could also consider the timeline for implementation and predicting what the impact will look like with various descriptors and rubrics to help the academic department to plan their annual pedagogical plan. They would eventually support teachers' professional development by initiating innovations in schools, leading the teaching-learning process, developing a learning culture, and building an inclusive culture (Atasoy, 2020). Alternatively, this attempt could provide training and capacity building on pedagogical leadership, as it contains various steps that can be used for self-learning and training purposes.

Any future conceived model or framework of pedagogical leadership should set up the process of self-reflection, understand key takeaways, suggest some sessions for conducting their future training programs, and ultimately understand the concept of pedagogical leadership, its framework, and its practices. Up to the point of writing, numerous studies have been conducted on concept-based learning and teaching. Contrary to the conventional Objectives-based two-dimensional (2-D) content program, which focuses on facts and skills, the concept-based curriculum emphasizes concepts. As such, this model incorporates the larger dimension of concepts and big ideas while maintaining the facts and skills to

ensure that conceptual thought and comprehension are central to and guide curriculum design and instruction. As such, this model cannot present the other components that are considered tacit, and in this case, could only be experienced through observation and personal practice.

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