



# Framing the roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers: Evidence from Malaysia



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We identified the key roles and responsibilities of Excellent Teachers.
- Five themes describing roles and responsibilities emerged from the data.
- The themes are: teachers, content experts, facilitators, mentors, and innovators.
- Based on the findings, we introduced a framework for Excellent Teachers' roles.

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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.

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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 (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006; Hattie, 2003). 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

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(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 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 recognize 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](http://www.moe.gov.my/my/)), and 13,300 teachers have been appointed thus far.<sup>1</sup>

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 (Bush 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 (Malaysia 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

<sup>1</sup> 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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