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UNDERSTANDING WISDOM AS EXPERIENCED BY PRIVATE UNIVERSITY LEADERS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Jozef R Raco*

Abstract: Challenges in education were very tough due to the constant changes in social, economic, politic and culture. It brought about public greater demand for better education. The role of university leaders was getting more complex and difficult. Facing those challenges, a university leader should have wisdom. The purpose of this inquiry was to understand the meaning of wisdom as experienced by university leader.

A qualitative approach was used to guide the inquiry. Interviews were conducted with ten university leaders of private universities in Jakarta. The participants were asked to reflect on their experience while acting as university leaders. Transcriptions of the interviews were utilized as text for analysis. Common themes were identified and constitutive pattern emerged from the linked-themes as a new understanding.

A new understanding of the meaning of wisdom as university leaders derived. The emerging constitutive pattern identified as 'knowledge' came forward from data interpretation. 'Knowledge' as a new meaning and understanding of wisdom was grasped from several themes derived from the text. The participant acknowledged that 'knowledge' was very important for wisdom. Wisdom was impossible to understand without 'knowledge'

Key words: wisdom, knowledge, understanding, qualitative, themes, constitutive pattern.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of wisdom was already known long time ago but very few study conducted about this topic since it was considered as part of philosophy and theological domain. In addition it was regarded as a difficult theme and had multi facets. Only just recently this topic became an object of researches in social and behavior sciences.

University leaders, who were currently facing a lot of challenges and demands due to the constant changes in social, political, economic and culture, realized that wisdom was very important issue especially when it comes to make a decision in a very difficult situation. In such a situation they had to consider many aspects before executing a decision or issue a statement.

In this study the researcher tried to understand the meaning of wisdom as experienced by university leaders based on their lived experiences. The researcher believed that revealing the meaning of wisdom will have significant implications in the area of education. Nowadays understanding wisdom is quite urgent considering complicated problems being handled by school management. That is why understanding

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wisdom would be a great contribution for the university, its management and science development as a whole.

University leaders in this study were those who were holding higher position at private university in Jakarta. They could be rectors, dean or director of academic unit of a university.

Wisdom was universally accepted to be a great value and yet it had been applied to many different aspects. That was why there was no single definition applying to wisdom even though there was a lot of study conducted since the beginning of civilization. Different cultures, time and interests constructed various types of definitions about wisdom. However if we looked back to the old Greek of thinking, wisdom was emerged in the concept of 'philosophia' which means 'loving of wisdom'. Wisdom itself was affixed to god. It was the god's authority and human being was only able to love it. Men and women could approach wisdom by using their intelligent and knowledge. That was why reasoning was a tool to understand wisdom. The Greek philosophers differentiated between speculative and practical wisdom. The speculative or theoretical wisdom was looking for a truth by exploring the knowledge. While the practical one was also searching for truth in service of actions.

The old Greek concept on wisdom, which was emphasized more on the reason and the use of intelligent, later influenced the western theory on wisdom known as the explicit theory. This theory highlighted wisdom from the perspective of experts. The explicit theory presented seven characteristic of wisdom. First wisdom was addressing difficult regarding the meaning and conduct of life. Second it represented truly outstanding knowledge, judgment and advice. Third, it was a perfect integration of knowledge and character, mind and virtue. Fourth wisdom coordinated and promoted individual and societal growth. Fifth, it involved balance and moderation. Sixth, wisdom included an awareness of the limits of knowledge and uncertainties of the world. And seventh, it was difficult to achieve but easy to recognize. Wisdom according to this theory was requiring intellectual abilities, mastery of critical life experience, openness to new experiences and values referring to personal growth, benevolence and tolerance. The explicit theory then was represented by Baltes *cs*, which was known as Berlin group paradigm.

Other theory, which was affiliated to eastern way of thinking, known as implicit theory had quite difference concept on wisdom. According to this theory, wisdom was not a concept of philosophers or the thinkers but it emerged from living in society and learning its language and meaning so that one could express the self and understood others. It was considered as lay perception, folks' ideas or folks' conceptions. The concept of wisdom came from everyday life influenced by cultures and individuals. It had three level of analysis. First, the way cultures and societies employed wisdom. The question emerged from this level was how culture collectively formed and employed about wisdom. The second level was the way people judge other individual's relative wisdom. The question came forward was how individuals identified others in their own lives that could be relied on to see things wisely. The third level was the way people view their own behavior, feelings and thoughts as wise. The question appeared here was how one views one's own self development of wisdom. For implicit theory, wisdom was not unitary but multidimensional construct and defined differently across various populations.

In the recent researches, Monika Ardelt introduced three aspects of wisdom which were cognitive, affective and reflective. Cognitive aspects referred to the ability to see the truth or perceived reality as it was. However, the cognitive aspects were only possible

through reflective components where people have awareness, that transcended subjectivity in which people could see things objectively from different angles. Affective components meant that people would have empathy, compassion to others and reduced their self-centeredness. Ardeli added that wisdom was materialized by people through actions. It was an action oriented concept. Wisdom was in fact a property of individual and could not exist independently of individuals. Ardeli criticized that mere intellectual understanding and knowledge was not enough for the acquisition of wisdom. wise person knew what was right and acted accordingly. Ardeli acknowledged that knowledge was necessary but not sufficient for wisdom.

METHOD

This study specifically tried to understand wisdom as experienced by school leaders based on their natural context about how they illustrated, received and perceived it. So qualitative method was applied and considered suitable for this inquiry since the main objective was to get people's insights about wisdom based on the participants' experiences. Creswell and Rudel wrote that qualitative method was a good mode of social and human science especially in a research that attempted to uncover the nature of the person's experiences within a phenomenon. Strauss added that qualitative research was useful to gain new perspectives from the things which were already known or to get more in-depth information which might be difficult to convey quantitatively. Furthermore, as Burn stated, this reality (wisdom) could not be subsumed within numerical classification.

Particular reasons I used qualitative method because firstly it was suitable to uncover participants' experiences and perceptions. Secondly wisdom could not be counted by figures or put under numerical classification. Thirdly, the researcher intended to get in-depth information. Fourthly wisdom was an abstract phenomenon and almost impossible to approach quantitatively. Fifth the data gathered were in forms of texts.

Prior to the data collection, the researcher identified at least twenty university leaders who were considered credible to be involved in this study and acting as participants. Criteria for a university leader among other things: he or she is currently acting or formerly active either as a dean, a director of department, rector or even chairperson of the university. The researcher finally got ten who were willing to participate. Those ten people consisted of five holding title of professor doctor, two were doctorate holders and three masters degree. Looking at their positions and high academic degree they hold, the researcher guarantee that they were credible enough to talk about wisdom. All of them were working at private universities in Jakarta. They were contacted by letters, e-mail or phone-calls to ask their readiness to participate. Once they agreed the researcher set up a time and place for a meeting and interview. Prior to the interview, the researcher asked their permission to allow him using tape recorder.

The interviewed data then were transcribed using Microsoft word. There were some following phone calls after the interviews for clarifications of unclear statements. Then the researcher summarized and analyzed the texts. The first step was read, re-read and marked with brackets the passages that were interesting and having sense or meaning. This was also known as classifying, coding, categorizing and labeling the data. Then I organized the data into topics. From those various topics, the researcher then grouped in categories and studied the categories for thematic connections within and among them. It was called 'convergence' (figuring out what things fit together) by Guba. Then the

researcher searched for connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts within those categories which called 'themes'. After that the researcher looked for emergent patterns. These patterns could be represented as dimensions, categories, classification schemes, themes and categories. Constitutive patterns were considered as the highest level of interpretation. The connection among categories, themes, dimensions later produced theories.

Creswell described the qualitative data analysis into four layers (figure 1). Layer 1 was the source of data from interview transcription. Layer 2 was the description of events. From this description then he formed themes (layer 3). Then he combined those themes into broad perspective or known as constitutive pattern.

Figure 1: Layers in qualitative study

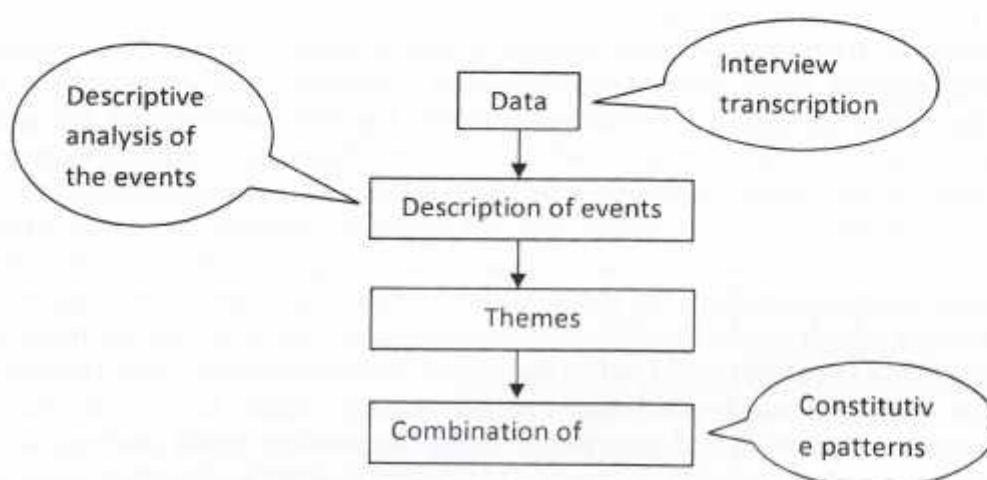


Figure 1: Layers in qualitative study

Source: Creswell (2008). Educational research. Pearson

Validation of the findings was done in several ways such as through participants' checking, the researcher's prolonged engagement with the texts, conformability and also by looking at the competencies of the researcher. The constitutive pattern was considered also as the new theories invented emerged from the research. Then from the constitutive patterns, which were the main findings of the research, the researcher did reflections on it by looking for previous researches or studies which discussed the same topics. After that the researcher came up with conclusions and recommendations.

This research had some limitations. First, the samples of this study were limited only to the university leaders who had daily experiences about wisdom. They were also showed eagerness to participate in this research. All of them domiciled in Jakarta.

REFLECTION ON FINDINGS

The research findings derived from the text analysis shared by the participants during the interviews. The interview always started with a question: 'tell me your experiences as a university leader which you considered as wisdom? Most or the participants said that wisdom was very much related to knowledge. Knowledge then was

regarded as the constitutive pattern which was the highest level in qualitative analysis. Conclusion derived from the participants' stories indicated that wisdom required knowledge. In other way to say that every university leader should have proper knowledge that made him or her able to run a higher institution. According to Oxford dictionary a knowledgeable person means highly educated, having extensive information or understanding, thoroughly acquainted with and skilled in something through study and experiences. Four themes emerged from the data analysis which described the importance of knowledge. Those were 'looked at a whole not partial', 'knowledgeable on higher education', and 'empathy'. Figure below showed the findings.

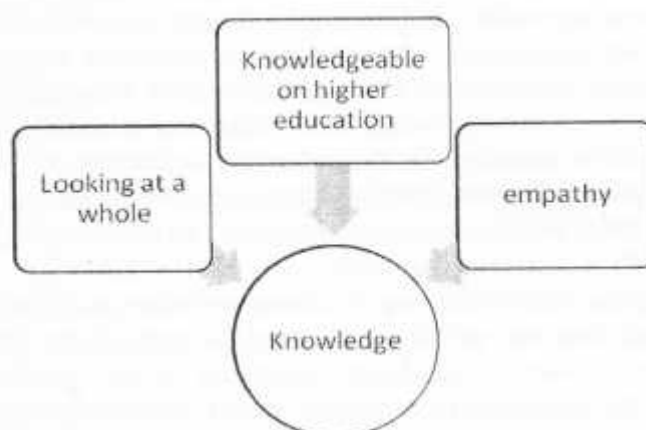


Figure 2: Knowledge and its themes

The first theme was 'looking at a whole. The term 'looking at the whole' meant that a university leader had to know the institution as a whole and not only partially. It also meant looking at a big picture. To be able to see the whole, Kraiss and Bloomfield suggested that a leader should have at least three skills. First, a leader should have a deep understanding of where the institution was going and how effective communication could help it get there. Second, he or she had a high level of organizational knowledge which was a deep understanding of cultures and how organization operated. And the third was having highly developed technical communication skills. New approach of leadership was having holistic focus that was recognizing and appreciating that an organization was a sum of interrelated parts and had social architecture that required a leader to not only able to influence others but also to act in a capacity as mentor and coach.

A participant said that the importance of a university leader to have a holistic view about the organization at the time when he was assigned as a new rector by bearing a lot of expectations from the university's foundation. He said:

"When I was appointed as a rector, the foundation was asking me to make this university better than before. My focus at that time was how to improve the system and increase the number of new enrollees. However, I knew quite well that to reach the goal I could not work alone. I had to empower the whole elements and units of the university. I should look at the whole university from all angles both the weaknesses and the strengths. However I had to focus more on how to improve the weaknesses while maintaining or even developed the strengths. Every single

unit, element or member of this institution was important. Every element should contribute.”

Another participant shared a special story on ‘look at the whole’ She said that ‘looking at a whole’ meant considering the interest of the university. She said:

“when my term as a rector was about to end, the university senate had to convene to elect a new one. It was mandated by the university’s regulation. At the first run of the election process I won a majority votes. But then it was annulled by the foundation without a clear reason. Annuling me as a winner was quite controversial because it could be understood that I was fail running the school since I was the incumbent. Facing this fact, there was only two options left for me either to fight or to surrender. But surrender to the foundation’s decision will be embarrassing to my colleagues who supported me. While continuing in the race meant fighting to the foundation. But fighting meant creating new problems and the whole university’s interests would be at stake and probably it will end up with instability and chaotic situation. By considering the interest of the whole and after deep self-reflection, meditation, introspection and praying finally I decided to quit the rector-ship contest and I begged my supporters to understand my stand.”

Other participant shared their stories by saying:

“it was happened one day when I had to cancel a student to attend the inauguration since I discovered that she still had ‘D’ mark in one of her subject which was considered as unqualified to graduate according to the University’s rules and regulations. The student came from a poor family who was actually in need for a help. If I allowed her to graduate, I helped her for sure but at the same time I jeopardized the regulations. I might put the whole university interest at stake. After meeting with the student and her parents I encouraged her to re-sit the failed subject and luckily she could improve the grade, then I allowed her to join the next batch graduation”.

In summary, the theme ‘looking at a whole’ was concluded based on the participants’ expression such as: taking away of self interest, helping people without jeopardizing the rules and regulations.

The second theme was ‘knowledgeable on higher education’. Morgan and Clonts wrote that a university leader had to grow their knowledge and understanding of how adults developed as learners and leaders. They continued reminding that a university leader should understand than changes were happening everywhere and they had no choice but shared responsibilities to other people. He or she as university leader could not pretend that the whole work and targets could be achieved by his or her own efforts. A university leader was not only facilitated in development of students’ content knowledge and cognitive skills but also shaping the ‘hidden curriculum’ of societal and cultural values and civic responsibility.

A participant said that a university leader should understand the education for adults since dealing with adults was different with children or kids.

“for adults I emphasized on innovation and exploration. They were not kids who merely depended on the teachers, but they were adults who had to explore, search and found new things. Pedagogy that I applied in my university was pedagogy for adult or critical pedagogy. We guided them to evaluate the existing values”.

Another participant in the interview said:

“Institution of higher learning had three principles namely teaching, research and community service. Students should not only get knowledge at class room but also were able to share their knowledge and understanding for the good of the societies in forms of community development or social service. Students would learn a lot when they encountered with community”.

Other participant shared his stories by saying:

I found out that as a university leader I had to formulate many regulations and wrote academic guidelines for students. I had to update the curriculum, created study program and put planning for the whole university. I did learn those things through seminars, meetings, communicating with other university leaders”.

In summary, a university leader should have proper knowledge on higher education which was derived from expression of the participants such as: understanding adults’ learning, learned from community, society, seminars, meeting and involving in co-leaders activities.

The third theme was ‘empathy’. Washington and Sutton in their article on Individual differences in servant leadership (2006) wrote that a good leader should not be motivated by aspirations to lead but to serve and transcend their personal interest in order fulfill the needs of followers and to empathize with their followers. They continued writing that a leader must be emphatic listeners who really recognize their followers. The emphatic behavior of a leader was acknowledged by the participants during interview. A participant shared:

“when I was active a rector in Papua I worked very closely with the people there. I was counted as an old brother by local people. Whenever I moved around I always got warmly welcome. The local people knew for sure that I worked for them and my present was merely for their benefits”.

Another participant told me during the interview:

“I knew that I was dealing with human being who had heart, feelings and conscious. I had to respect them and sometimes I had to put myself in their condition. I got their respect since I was part of them”

As mentioned above that the aim of this study was to articulate how the university leaders understand on wisdom based on their everyday experiences. The meaning of experiences could only be understood in the light of the context of the participants’ lives. In other words the significance of wisdom can only be made clear if the participants told their stories. The stories were varied just as the context of the participants varied as well. Despite this, there were common themes leading to constitutive pattern within the experience of wisdom.

The study revealed that knowledge was a very important part of wisdom. Wisdom could be difficult to understand without knowledge. Previous researchers also disclosed that knowledge could not be separated from wisdom. Even the antique Greek philosophers could not split knowledge from wisdom. Webster Encyclopedia defined knowledge as a capacity for reasoning and understanding. It included also forms of mental activities. All participants said that a wise university leader should be knowledgeable, skillful and having positive attitude toward school administration. The participants understood that knowledge could be in formal form which was got through formal activities in a class. However knowledge could be developed via informal activities such as from experiences. Knowledgeable also meant had a good feeling and empathy to their subordinates. Through

good relation and attitude of a university leader toward their staffs would be very helpful to guide and control them.

The important of knowledge for a university leader was indicated clearly by the fact that most of them were holding higher degree. Even holding higher degree such as doctorate was a requirement for those who will be sitting as a top official of a university. Since a knowledgeable leader would be able to run a higher institution, they could easily handle problems and would get respect from lower level staff.

Ediger in his study on 'Leadership in the school setting' already noticed that a school leader should be knowledgeable and skillful. He or she had to have an exceptional knowledge about curriculum, knowledge to improve instructions in the school settings and be excellent in school administration. Knowledge also required for a university leader to carry a day to day administration including managing faculties, setting goals for student's outcomes, responding the community and institutional directives and functioning as an agent for continuous improvement.

The participants of the study also revealed that knowledge was not only got through formal process by also via informal one which was through practical activities. A lot of knowledge possessed by a university leader which was not necessary learned in the class, but mostly from encountering with societies, communities.

Related to wisdom the Greek philosophers already confirmed that wisdom was the ultimate form of knowledge. Aristotle said that a wise individual knew more that the material, efficient or formal cause behind events. Bierly in his study on learning process placed wisdom on the highest level. He wrote that on the hierarchy of learning the data was on the lowest level, followed by information in the next level, then went up to knowledge on the higher level and at the top was wisdom. Furthermore he explained that data, raw facts, were only accumulating the truth to the learning process. Information gave the data meaningful. Knowledge provided a clear understanding about the information and considered as an analysis and synthesis of the learning. The wisdom, using knowledge to establish and achieve goals, was discerning judgments and taking appropriate action. In this case wisdom was more than knowledge. The final end of wisdom was other people interest, contributed to the welfare of others, well being of one's country, serving God and serving the universal values such as respect human life, honesty, sincerity, fairness and enabling people tot fulfill their potentialities.

Later the western concept of knowledge was heavily weighted toward cognitive ability. However Maxwell warned that if we just emphasized on knowledge, a lot of problems could not be solved or even would create more problems to the world. Furthermore he wrote the problems of the world, fighting, was, crimes were occurred because of the knowledge. People did not use the knowledge properly.

CONCLUSION

Knowledge was a very important factor of wisdom as being told by the participants. However wisdom was more than knowledge. Intellectual knowledge was required before a leader went deeper to wisdom. A good university leader should have proper knowledge or even highest knowledge to make him or her able to run a university. In this study the researcher revealed that knowledge embraced several themes which were: looking at the whole, knowledgeable about higher education, and empathy. Knowledge was the first and a main requirement to be a university leader. Intelligent and knowledge sometimes were

used interchangeable. Knowledge did not only refer to a certain subject or discipline but also about the system and university administration. A knowledgeable leader knew how to get the hearts of the people. A knowledgeable leader who got the sympathy of the staff would find it easy to guide and lead them.

The researcher was thinking that the role of higher education was to train people about life and wisdom. Every higher education such as a university should introduce wisdom in their subjects. Wisdom would bring peace, love and hope. The urgency of wisdom was cried out by Sternber when he wrote ' if there is anything the world needs, it is wisdom, without it I am exaggerated not at all in saying that very soon there may be no world'.

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