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# Exploring Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices in Malaysia: Insights and Implications.

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**Exploring Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices in Malaysia: Insights and Implications.**

### Purpose

The purpose of this article is to outline the findings from a small-scale, exploratory, study of principals[1], instructional leadership practice in Malaysian primary schools. The dimensions and functions of instructional leadership, explicitly explored in this study, are those outlined in the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model.

### Design/methodology/approach

This study is part of a larger international, comparative research project that aims to identify the boundaries of the current knowledge base on instructional leadership practice and to develop a preliminary empirically-based understanding of how principals conceive and enact their role as instructional leaders in Hong Kong, China, Vietnam Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 primary school principals in Malaysia. The sample comprised principals from 14 Government National Schools (SK), 9 principals from Chinese Schools (SJKC) and 7 principals from Tamil Schools (SJKT). The qualitative data was initially analyzed inductively and subsequently coded using ATLAS.ti to generate the findings and conclusions.

### Findings

The findings showed that the Malaysian principals interviewed, understood and could describe their responsibilities relating to improving instructional practice. In particular, they talked about the supervision of teachers and outlined various ways in which they actively monitored the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. The data revealed that some of the duties and activities associated with being a principal in Malaysia are particularly congruent with instructional leadership practice. In particular, the supervision of teaching and learning along with leading professional learning were strongly represented in the data.

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[1] Note the generic term 'principals' will be used in this article to describe headteachers (primary) and principals (secondary) in Malaysia.

**Practical implications**

There is a clear policy aspiration, outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, that principals should be instructional leaders. The evidence shows that principals are enacting some of the functions associated with being an instructional leader but not others.

**Originality/ value**

The findings from this study provide some new insights into principals' instructional leadership practice in Malaysia. It also provides a basis for further, in-depth exploration that can further enhance the knowledge base about principals' instructional leadership practices in Malaysia.

**Introduction**

There is a general consensus among scholars, practitioners and policymakers that school leadership is an important contributor to improved school and system performance (Fullan, 2007: Leithwood *et al*, 2005, Harris, 2014). Based upon a considerable corpus of international empirical evidence (e.g. Day *et al*, 2008; Leithwood *et al*, 2006; Hallinger and Heck, 1996) it is now widely accepted that the leadership of the principal contributes to better school and student performance. Consequently, around the globe, improved leadership and leadership development continues to be prioritized by policy makers in the pursuit of better educational outcomes (Harris and Jones, 2015). In addition, increasing attention is being paid to the type of leadership associated with organizational improvement, as well as the particular features or characteristics of successful school leaders (Day *et al*, 2011; Hallinger and Lee, 2013; Robinson *et al*,, 2008).

Looking at the extensive, contemporary, international knowledge base concerning educational leadership, it remains the case that instructional leadership is a powerful and pervasive theme (Cheng, 1995; Hallinger and Leithwood, 1998; Hallinger *et al*, , 2005; Hallinger, 1995). Instructional leadership remains one of the most important and enduring leadership models, chiefly because of its connection to, and its proven impact upon, school and student outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood *et al*, 2008; Robinson *et al*, 2008). A wide range of empirical evidence highlights and reinforces a positive relationship between instructional leadership and the quality of school performance and student learning (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood *et al* 2008; Robinson *et al*, 2008). This literature also underscores that instructional leadership practices are contextually influenced and that the principal's effects on student outcomes are mediated by certain features of the school (Hallinger and Wang 2015:27).

The substantial and expansive body of knowledge about instructional leadership is derived largely but not exclusively from the USA (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Hallinger, 2000; Hallinger, 2011). The early work on instructional management (Bossert *et al*, 1982; Bridges, 1967, 1982) provided a basis for researchers to develop the idea of principals' instructional leadership based on extensive empirical evidence (Dwyer, 1986; Dwyer *et al*, 1983; Hallinger *et al*, 1996; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Heck *et al*, 1990). Over more than three decades,

international scholars have established the importance of instructional leadership and have developed empirically based models of instructional leadership practice (Goldring *et al*, 2009; Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Leithwood *et al*, 2010; Hallinger and Wang, 2015).

Despite the extensive evidence about instructional leadership, however,the knowledge base in certain countries is still emerging (Hallinger and Chen, 2015; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013a, 2013b). For example, in many developing countries, the available literature on leadership and leadership practices is still in its infancy (Hallinger and Walker; 2014; Harris and Jones, 2015). Within Asia, the evidence base about leadership and leadership practices, including instructional leadership, remains particularly patchy and is relatively under-developed (Harris and Jones, 2015a; 2015b; Hallinger and Chen, 2015; Walker *et al*, 2005; Hallinger, 2011). Therefore, while the international knowledge base about instructional leadership continues to flourish and grow, the empirical evidence from certain countries and contexts is still in short supply. Furthermore, it has been argued that more empirical studies are urgently needed to strengthen the research base on instructional leadership, particularly in East Asian societies (Jamelaa and Jainabee, 2011; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013a; 2013b).

A large research programme, of which this study is part, has started to explore instructional leadership within Asia, in seven East Asian countries: Vietnam, Mainland China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand (Hallinger and Bryant, 2013a). Another comparative piece of work is also focusing on leadership preparation and development in a number of Asian countries including Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia (Harris and Jones, 2015a; 2015b). Each of these studies aims to contribute to the knowledge base about educational leadership, in this region, through in-depth, comparative, empirical investigation. Both studies aim to engage with and review, as far as practically possible, the 'indigenous literature' (Bajunid, 1996) on school leadership particularly in countries where the evidence about leadership preparation and practice is barely visible and mostly absent from the international literature (Harris and Jones, 2015a).

As a contribution to securing a more substantial knowledge base on school leadership in East Asia, this article outlines the findings from a small-scale, exploratory enquiry into principals' instructional leadership in Malaysia. In terms of a theoretical reference point, the study

utilised Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model of instructional leadership which expands upon the key dimensions and features of the Bossert *et al* (1982) model of instructional management. The study was also informed by contemporary theorising, conceptualising and writing on instructional leadership (Hallinger and Wang, 2015) including recent reviews of the leadership research literature in Asian contexts (Hallinger and Truong, 2014; Hallinger *et al*, 2015). The existing literature, in English and Bahasa Malaysia, on the subject of principals' instructional leadership in Malaysia was also used as a point of reference.

While the international knowledge base on principals' instructional leadership in Malaysia is undoubtedly still developing, there is an indigenous literature on educational leadership practices in Malaysia stretching over several decades. Banjunid, (1996:50) notes 'that any understanding of an indigenous perspective requires a real understanding of the theoretical bases of the subject, and an understanding of the particular indigenous environment or setting.' Yet, as Walker and Hallinger (2015) note in their various reviews of the available literature in south east Asian countries, much of the available indigenous research remains 'hidden' from the view of international scholars because it is written in the national language. This is certainly true of Malaysia where there is an emerging indigenous literature on the subject of principals' instruction leadership (e.g. Jamelaa and Jainabee, 2012; Ibrahim and Amin, 2014; Sazali *et al*, 2007; Ghani, 2012; Nashira and Mutaphab, 2013; Ghavifekr *et al*, 2015; Sim, 2011). It is clear, however, that more empirical enquiry is needed to further strengthen the existing knowledge base on instructional leadership practices in Malaysia.

*Context*

Before outlining the design of the research project, some background information is provided about the Malaysian policy context, the preparation of school principals in Malaysia and the stated duties of principals. To understand the responses from the principals in this study, and to explain the overall findings, such contextual detail is particularly important. Turning first to the policy level, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2012)[2] outlines the main policy ambitions for significantly improving the performance of the education system. Within this substantial document, there are 11 shifts that are considered to be the platform for much needed educational transformation and system improvement. Shift 5 in the Blueprint focuses

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[2] http://www.moe.gov.my/cms/upload_files/articlefile/2013/articlefile_file_003108.pdf

upon ensuring 'high performing leaders in every school' with 'assistant principals, subject heads, and department heads being developed to act as instructional leaders in their own right' (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012; Executive Summary E17). In addition, the Blueprint states that:

'All school leaders (principals, assistant principals, department heads and subject heads) will be prepared to fully utilise the decision-making flexibilities accorded to them. This includes instructional leadership matters such as school improvement planning and curriculum and co-curricular planning, as well as administrative leadership matters such as allocation of school funds' (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012; Executive Summary; E18).

It is particularly important to note here that instructional leadership, as stipulated in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, is not only the stated responsibility of the principal but also extends to those those holding other formal leadership roles in the school.

In terms of being a headteacher or a principal in Malaysia, there are some important aspects to note. Unlike school leaders in the USA or UK (Harris and Jones, 2015a; 2015b), being a principal is a position held towards the end of a teaching career. In Malaysia, principals are on average older than in most other principals in TALIS countries (53.5 Years)[3]. The appointment of headteachers and principals is firmly based on seniority as well as successive evaluations of teaching performance (Jamilah and Yusof, 2011).

Since 1988, the Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB) has been the agency, that has been directly responsible for principal leadership training throughout Malaysia. Before 1999, the training and preparation of school leaders in Malaysia varied quite considerably (Singh, 2010). In 1999, the NPQH National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) was introduced, as a national programme, to be delivered by the IAB. Adapted from the English qualification (Singh, 2010; Bajunid, 1999, Harris *et al*, 2016) the NPQH was introduced in Malaysia to raise the standard of preparation for all school leaders. In 2008, the NPQH was replaced by the National Professional Qualification for School Leadership (NPQEL) and subsequently this became a mandatory requirement for all aspiring principals throughout Malaysia. In both

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[3] https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/TALIS-Country-profile-Malaysia.pdf

these national leadership qualifications, improving the quality of instruction was underlined and reinforced.

Another point to note is that in the Malaysian education system, all headteachers, principals[4] and all teachers in SK and SMK schools[5] are government servants. Consequently, for headteachers and principals, there are clear role expectations and key performance indicators (KPIs), set by the Ministry of Education, that both define and delimit their leadership responsibilities and practices. The principal's role is clearly defined and outlined in the *"Competency Standards for Malaysian School Principals"* (IAB, 2010) which specifies the exact duties and responsibilities associated with the role. These duties includes the implementation of educational programmes stipulated by the Ministry of Education, the supervision of the teaching-learning processes, the monitoring of discipline, the supervision of co-curricular activities, and their supportive involvement in the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and with the Board of Governors (Perera *et al*, 2015).

Apart from the principal, the other formal leadership roles in schools include vice principals, senior assistants, senior subject teachers, heads of subject and administrative staff holding positions of responsibility (Bajunid, 1996). While the headeacher or principal is ultimately responsible to the District and the Ministry for the school's performance, there is a clear expectation that they are accountable for the performance of those in other formal leaderships roles in the school. School leaders also have to ensure that those with a teaching responsibility, comply with their particular set of roles, responsibilities and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

At present, principals in Malaysia are at the heart of the drive for school transformation and improvement. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2012) clearly states that *school leaders will be asked to perform to the high expectations set and agreed to for their school. They will need to stay open to new ways of working, to involve the community in school improvement, and to serve as coaches and trainers to build capabilities in their staff as well as for other schools.* In summary, principals in Malaysia are now increasingly viewed as instructional

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[4]In Malaysia primary school leaders are called headteachers and secondary school leaders are called principals. In this article we will mainly use the generic term 'principal' to refer to all school leaders in Malaysia.
[5]Government Primary National school (SK) and Secondary National school (SMK)

leaders who are seen as chiefly responsible for improving student, school and system performance.

*Research Study*

A small-scale, exploratory, research study was undertaken to explore instructional leadership within the Malaysian school context. The research study used the dimensions and functions of the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model of instructional leadership to gather evidence from primary school leaders about their instructional leadership practices. As highlighted earlier, this qualitative study is part of a larger research project exploring instructional leadership practices in East Asia. Therefore the research design of this study and the instruments used, were specified by the larger study. Modelled on the seminal work conducted by Bossert and colleagues (Bossert *et al*., 1982; Dwyer *et al*., 1983) at the Far West Lab for R and D in the USA during the early 1980s, the larger study aims to uncover fundamental perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors underlying the practice of instructional leadership. It aims to contribute to the knowledge base about instructional leadership in East Asia, through an inductive approach, guided by the broader literature on instructional leadership (Corbin and Strauss, 1998).

To explore contemporary, instructional leadership practices in Malaysia, 30 open-ended interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of primary school principals. Primary school principals were selected for the larger study because the literature suggests that the effects of *principal* instructional leadership are substantial at this level of schooling (e.g., Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Louis *et al*., 2010; Leithwood *et al*., 2006; Robinson *et al*., 2008). The selection of primary principals in this study was based on a number of criteria. Firstly, 30 principals were chosen from four different States in Malaysia. Although this is clearly not a representative sample, selecting principals from different States provided some variation in background and context. Secondly, all the principals in the sample were considered to be effective principals by the District and were viewed as high performing leaders. Thirdly, the principals selected for the study had various lengths of tenure and experience, again to provide a diverse sample. Fouthly, as Malaysia is a multi-racial country where each race has

its own identity within the broader society, the selection process ensured that Malay, Chinese and Tamil school leaders were represented. Finally, principals were selected on the basis that their schools represented a range of settings (rural and urban) and their schools were of various sizes (small 60 -100 children and large, 1200 -3000 children). The descriptive statistics below provide the details of  the selected sample.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of principals' demographics (*n*=30)

| Demographics | Frequency | Per cent |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| *Male* | 11 | 37 |
| *Female* | 19 | 63 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| [6]*Malay* | 12 | 40 |
| *Chinese* | 10 | 33 |
| *Indian* | 8 | 26 |
| Age | | |
| *35-39 years* | 3 | 10 |
| *40 - 45 years* | 5 | 17 |
| *46 - 50 years* | 5 | 17 |
| *51 – 55 years* | 5 | 17 |
| *Over 55 years* | 12 | 39 |
| Highest Education | | |
| *STPM &Diploma* | 6 | 20 |
| *Undergraduate* | 18 | 60 |
| *Master degree* | 6 | 20 |
| Tenure as principal | | |
| *less than 5 years* | 7 | 23 |
| *6 – 10 years* | 12 | 40 |
| *11 - 15 years* | 7 | 23 |
| *More than15 years* | 4 | 14 |
| involvement in principal training preparation | | |
| *Yes* | 6 | 20 |
| *No* | 24 | 80 |

In terms of the data collection process, a semi-structured interview schedule, designed by the larger project, was used. All participants completed a consent form before the interviews took place and all ethical processes were followed, including guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. The interview schedule was translated into the Malay language and was verified by a group of native language speakers as being an accurate translation of the English version. The interviews conducted in English and Bahasa Malaysia, offered

[6] One chinese principal and one indian principal worked in an SK schools

principals the opportunity to express how they viewed their role and that of others in relation to the dimensions and functions of instructional leadership, as outlined by Murphy and Hallinger (1985). In-depth accounts of instructional leadership practices were sought (Bajunid, 1996; Dwyer *et al.*, 1983; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985) and opportunities were given for principals to give 'rich descriptions' of their leadership practices, behaviours and actions (Denzin, 1978; Glazer and Strauss, 1965).

All interviews were digitally recorded and those conducted in Bahasa were translated into English. Each interview was transcribed and uploaded into a common drive. All transcripts were read by all team members and a constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1965) was utlised to generate key themes and propositions for further investigation and further testing against the data. Following this initial inductive phase, team members worked in pairs to interrogate the data and to generate provisional codes. This coding was then shared and re-tested against the data to cross-check and to remove all redundant codes.

In the next phase of analysis, the final set of codes were entered into ATLAS.ti along with the dimensions and functions of the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) instructional leadership model. This afforded the possibility of probing the data further for specific examples of instructional leadership practice as well as interrogating the data using the inductively formed codes. Transcripts were analysed using the combined coding procedure through ATLAS.ti and further synthesized and refined to generate emergent themes. Inter-researcher reliability was established through the shared coding and re-coding of data plus working across data sets.

The remainder of this article outlines the findings based on the data collected with a subsequent discussion of the implications. The findings are organized firstly, under the dimensions and functions of instructional leadership, as outlined in the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model, and secondly, by exploring issues that emerged from the inductive analysis of the data. Indicative quotes from the interviewees have been selected to illuminate and corroborate the findings.

*Insights*

The insights from this small-scale, study are organised around the model of instructional leadership developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). This model suggests that

'instructional leadership is a process of mutual influence that is both adaptive and responsive to the changing conditions of the school over time' (Hallinger and Wang 2015:14). The conceptual framework incorporates three main dimensions: *Defines the School Mission, Manages the Instructional Program and Develops a Positive School Learning Environment* (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985). Each of these dimensions, and the associated functions, will be discussed in relation to the data from the study.

i)  Defines the School Mission

In their meta-analysis of the school leadership literature, Robinson *et al* (2008) reaffirm the importance of the school leader's vision and goals in securing positive organizational outcomes. In the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model of instructional leadership two functions *a) Frames the School Goals and b) Communicates School Goals* comprise the dimension 'Defining the School Mission'. The first of these, *a) Frames the School Goals* refers to the 'principal's role in determining the areas in which the school will focus its resources during a given year' (Hallinger and Wang 2015:28). The second *b) Communicates School Goals* is 'concerned with the ways in which the principal communicates the school's most important goals to teachers, parents students etc' (Hallinger and Wang 2015:30).

Turning first to (*a) Frames the School Goals,* the data revealed that principals readily outlined their own personal vision and aims for the school, including their aspirations for its future performance. They were clear about their personal goals and expectations. In terms of the formal, stated goals and aims of the school, the data highlighted the fact that the formal goals of the school tend to be centrally determined at the Ministry and District level.

*Vision and mission of the school are very important. We have to know what the vision and mission is and we are guided on this* (R 19)[7].

*The Ministry of Education oversee the school and sets targets for us. The district also set targets and goals and they try to support us. We just follow what they say. All schools have to do this it is expected.* (R1)

*Our goals come from the Ministry and we have to achieve them* (R28)

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[7] "P" is the code for principal, and "30" was the number of participants.

*My vision is to ensure that children of all backgrounds suceed. That is my personal goal and that is what drives me* (R30)

In terms of the second function *b) Communicates School Goals* the principals in the study readly described how they shared their school goals, with parents and the wider community through talks, newsletters, events or the school web-site. Several respondents also talked about how their own personal leadership vision was communicated to others.

*In terms of vision, I want quality, I want all the students to pass the basics. If the students can't do this then when they get to secondary school this is where the problem starts. So we regularly communicate this priority with parents* (R3).

*I work with parents and other stakeholders to communicate my vision for the school, this is important. Any way I can, I bring the parents in. Sometimes we provide food boxes which parents from the flats collect if they attend the parents' briefings* (R29).

The Malaysian principals in the sample, spoke a great deal about communicating their own personal vision for the school and their personal aspirations. They were also very clear about what they wanted from the school and what they expected of staff and students. So in terms of setting the broad mission and vision for the school and communicating it, the data showed that this aspect was particularly strongly supported.

ii) Manages The Instructional Program

The second dimension of the instructional leadership model, Manages the Instructional Program, 'focuses on the coordination and control of instruction and the curriculum' (Hallinger and Wang 2015:21). This dimension involves three functions: *c) Supervises and Evaluates Instruction, d) Co-ordinates the Curriculum and e) Monitors Student Progress*. This dimension is concerned with the principal 'managing the technical core' of the school (Hallinger and Wang 2015:31). This dimension requires the principal and other leaders to be engaged in enhancing, supervising and monitoring teaching and learning at the school.

The data revealed that in terms of *c) Supervises and Evaluates Instruction,* principals in Malaysia are heavily involved in a routine range of monitoring and supervisory practices. The role of monitoring and evaluating teachers is taken very seriously by principals in Malaysia and it is undertaken throughrougly and systematically. Teachers in Malaysia have to be formally evaluated and observed by the principal, several times in a school year. The supervision and evaluation activities described by principals in the sample therefore focused largely on monitoring teachers' performance mainly for accountability purposes, as well ongoing support and development.

*For official purposes, I visit my teachers three times a year to observe them* (R 5).

*Every month we will observe certain teachers. I will take 20, my senior assistant will take 10. We observe every month. Then we call and we will help them.* (R 13)

*We have to do pencerapan (Supervision/Observation). Every month we have to choose 10% of the teachers to observe. My senior assistants and I have to supervise and observe every month.* (R 16)

*Every month I do a 30-minute observation of all teachers with my leadership team. I give the teachers a grade and submit these to the PPD (District office) so that they can measure the performance of teachers every month (*R 4)

In addition to the formal monitoring and evaluation of teachers, the principals in the sample spoke about conducting daily walks around the school so they could observe teachers and teaching in a more informal way. It is a requirement by the Ministry of Education that principals walk around their school on a daily basis, entering classrooms, observing teaching and maintaining discipline. Through this process, principals are able to obtain an overview of the quality of the teaching and learning processes.

*Everyday I do a learning walk around the school, I visit classrooms- I don't want to disturb teachers in their work but they are used to me walking in. We also have learning walls in each classroom and across the school and this helps me keep in touch with what is going on in lessons. I observe some classes every day.* (R2)

*I make sure I do my learning walk around the school twice a day. First, when I go around the school I will make sure things are in the right place. I don't want to see any rubbish. I check that routine work is being done and I sit in at least three classes for five minutes* (R15)

*We have to go around to the classes every morning, we have to go around the school at least once, just walking to make sure teachers go according to their timetable, go into class on time* (R 19)

Principals in Malaysia walk around their schools everyday to evaluate teachers both formally and informally. This is an expectation placed upon them and therefore it is part of their formal role and responsibility. The principals in the sample stated that they generally undertook a walk around the school, at least once a day, which involved spending time in classrooms and observing teaching. A number of the principals noted that this walk allowed them to gauge the nature and quality of the teaching and learning processes in the school. The principals pointed towards the fact that in addition to supervision, teachers were allocated a mentor to help and support them in their everday work. Data from the recents TALIS[8] survey shows that a) A larger proportion of teachers report having a mentor assigned compared to most other TALIS countries. (26.5%) b) A larger proportion of teachers report acting as a mentor to another colleague compared to most other TALIS countries. (26.5%). c) a larger proportion of teachers work in schools where the principal reports the use of some kind of formal appraisal than in most other TALIS countries. (99.1%) d) Of those schools where the principal reports formal appraisal practices, a larger proportion of teachers have their classrooms directly observed than in most other TALIS countries. (100%). It could be concluded, therefore, that in terms of the the supervision, monitoring and formal support that teachers receive, principals in Malaysia are particularly strong instructional leaders.

In direct contrast, evidence about the next two functions of instructional leadership *d) Co-ordinates the Curriculum  and e) Monitors Student Progress* was less forthcoming from the data. Possibly this is because in Malaysian primary schools, co-ordinating the curriculum is not the job of the principal but is the responsibility of other leaders in the school.

*I do not have a role in the curriculum inside the school, it is not my job* (R2)

[8] https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/TALIS-Country-profile-Malaysia.pdf

*Like any other government school, I have 4 Vice principals assisting me in my daily job. The VP for admin, VP for student affairs VP for Curriculum and VP for afternoon sessions* (R 19)

There was less evidence therefore, in the data, of principals saying that they engaged directly with classroom teachers over curriculum matters or of them personally monitoring student progress. Most principals in Malaysia have a vice principal for student affairs and also heads of subject who are responsible for curriculum matters and monitoring students' progress. Therefore, principals tend not see their role as co-ordinating the curriculum or monitoring student progress but rather to seek regular feedback on these issues from those with direct reporting responsibility.

*Occasionaly, I go around to the classes and check students' work. We have one saying "Operasi Menggilap Mutiara"~ Meaning polishing the pearl. We see students as pearls and so we all polish them.* (R11)

*I leave curriculum and student matters to my vice-principals, they report to me as required* (R 28)

iii) Develops a Positive School Climate

The third dimension of the instructional model includes five functions: *f) Protects Instructional Time, g) Develops Professional Development, h) Maintains High Visibility, i) Provides Incentives for Teachers and j) Provides Incentives for Learning*. This dimension 'is broader in scope and intent that the second dimension and overlaps with dimensions incorporated into transformational leadership frameworks' (Hallinger and Wang, 2015:33). These five functions reinforce the idea that effective schools develop cultures of continuous improvement through a relentless focus on enhancing teaching and learning.

Once again, in terms of interpreting and representing the data, it is important to note that principals in Malaysia do not have a core responsibility for *f) protecting instructional time*. Consequently, there was very little discussion from principals about this particular function. In terms of *i) Provides Incentives for Teachers and j) Provides Incentives for Learning* there

were examples, from the data, where principals rewarded staff and students. Even though school resources are allocated centrally, some principals found creative ways to reward students and staff through gifts, certificates, trips or free time. This practice however varied from principal to principal in the sample.

*I work with local businesses who sponsor gifts for the teachers as a reward for excellent teaching or long service. This shows the teachers they are valued and recognised* (R 27)

*I find ways to reward my teachers and celebrate their success* (R30)

In terms of *h) maintaining high visibility* around the school, the principals' monitoring visits and daily walks were considered, by them, to be the chief way in which they achieved this partucular goal. These daily walks showed '*that the headteacher is vigilent and is available to staff and students'* (R30)

The third dimension of instructional leadership, *iii) Develops a Positive School Climate* the function *g) Develops Professional Development* was most supported by principals and most well represented in the data. Principals in Malaysia have a core responsibility for promoting the professional learning and development of teachers and this is reinforced through their key performance indicators (KPIs). Consequently, this is a responsibility that they take seriously to ensure that this is done well.

*Every 2 months once, we will do in house-training. All the teachers will be involved. If teachers get new knowledge, then you always motivate them. Motivating teachers is very important because this is the key to success* (R 13)

*I train my teachers myself. I don't call other consultants. I train all my teachers. I'm the trainer. That is why, as the Head, you must be knowledgeable. Of course, I cannot be good in everything, I am not a math's teacher, not a science teacher, but I can just monitor the rest.* (R14)

*Teachers here attend all training workshops and seminars organized by the Ministry that are compulsory. But, due to the pressure of wanting to maintain or improve our status as a*

*cluster school my teachers are always so focused on rushing the syllabus and getting students to pass exams and sometimes they are not motivated to go for training.* (R 18)

Teachers in Malaysia have to attend seven days of professional learning and development to meet their KPIs and fulfilling this is a requirement of service and therefore is compulsory. Often, the theme of this training is pre-determined by the principal or the District and teachers are required to attend. The most recent TALIS[9] data shows that in Malaysia a) A larger proportion of teachers report having undertaken professional development in the 12 months prior to the survey than in most other TALIS countries (96.6%). b) Compared to most other TALIS countries, a larger proportion of teachers report that the feedback they received has led to an increase in the number of hours of professional development they undertake (85.5%). c) Compared to most other TALIS countries, a larger proportion of teachers report that the feedback they received has improved their teaching practice (95.2%).

The data from the study confirms that in terms of leading professional learning and professional development, principals in the study could be viewed as active instructional leaders.

**Discussion**

While the limitations of a small-scale study are fully and readily acknowledged, it is suggested, based on the data, that the 30 Malaysian principals, in the sample are strong instructional leaders in certain areas. For example, the monitoring and evaluation of teaching is regularly undertaken by principals as it the professional development of teachers. The data showed that principals, in the sample, engage teachers in appropriate and relevant professional learning of direct benefits to them and their students. They set the broader goals of the school and readily communicated these to all stakeholders as a core part of their leadership responsibility.

The inductive analysis of the data highlighted, however, that principals in the sample also experienced some tensions in their current leadership role. This could be described as a tension between *collectivism and collegiality* verus *compliance and control*. Turning first to

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[9]https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/TALIS-Country-profile-Malaysia.pdf

compliance and control, the data showed that principals stated that they felt a huge weight of personal responsibility and accountability for school performance.

*As a principal the Ministry places great pressure on me, so I must deliver good results, that is my job. I have no choice. Typically my day is full of tasks that I have to do for the District.* (R1)

*The principal is fully responsible for the school results. We cannot run away from that responsibility.* (R7).

*Whether the results are good or bad or excellent will affect the headmaster only. Even the parents, education department officers, and public won't blame the teachers. They will blame the headmaster. Either way, good or bad the headmaster is responsible. If the results drop, the headmaster will be blamed. If the results go up also the credit goes to the headmaster. In the terms of teaching and learning the principal is 100 % accountable.* (R 20)

Principals in the study also reported feeling the pressure of meeting particular targets.

*I am given my targets from the Ministry through the District and then I tell the teachers. There are 20 targets this year for student achievement.* (R 25)

*I stick to the Ministry goals, how many A's etc then I tell the teachers and the students. I am pressured with examination performance and the amount of A grades we achieve.* (R 27)

*The Ministry wants us to follow standard operating procedures (SOPs) – this means we must follow the SOPs, we must do everything according to the procedure. We cannot deviate from the rules and regulation.* (R 21)

*The actual autonomy given to headmasters in Malaysia is quite restricted. You can implement something new but it depends on whether the headmaster is willing to face the challenge, dare to face the challenge.* (R 22)

Despite the pressure of the role, the data also showed that principals in the study wanted to practice their leadership in alignment with deeply held personal norms and values.

*I don't want to be popular, I'm a very humble person. I don't like to use harsh words because I don't do that. Mine is a more friendly style of administering.* (R 14)

*I do not react as a boss. I am friendly with the office staff. When we are friends we can get along.* (R 23)

*I am like a friend to them, we work together to achieve our aims we achieve outcomes by being like a family. If you ask the teachers about me they would say that I am like their sister or their friend.* (R25)

*Above all what I want for my school is harmony. I am trying to achieve team work so that the teachers understand that although I am the principal, I do not want to be alone.* (R27)

The findings from this study suggest that principals in the sample are keen to deliver the outcomes expected by the Ministry and the District but also feel some tensions in achieving this in ways that accord with their personal core beliefs and values.

**Implications**

There are four implications for future research and empirical investigation arising from this small-scale, exploratory study. Firstly, more detailed, fine-grained empirical work is necessary to test the exploratory findings, particularly concerning role tensions and the practical enactment of instructional leadership in a Malaysian context. Secondly, the aspiration from the the Ministry of Education for the leadership base 'to be strengthened with assistant principals, subject heads and department heads being developed as instructional leaders in their own right' would suggest a view of instructional leadership that is shared or distributed (Harris, 2015). Therefore it is perfectly possible, that at other leadership levels within the school, there are not only more examples of authentic instructional leadership in action but also a broader representation of instructional leadership practice. The views of other school leaders, it is suggested, are worth probing and exploring in future empirical studies.

Thirdly, the data from this study highlighted that the principals, in the sample, spent a large proportion of their time monitoring and supervising instructional practice, as well as promoting the professional development of teachers. It could be argued, therefore, that the practice of these principals' is heavily congruent with instructional leadership. In light of the evidence about the positive impact of principals participating in, and leading the professional learning of teachers, (Robinson *et al*, 2009) further empirical investigation into this particular aspect of the work of Malaysian principals would be both important and timely.

In summary, the evidence from this study points to the fact that principals in Malaysia are engaged in some of the core work of instructional leaders. Where the instructional dimensions, or functions are viewed as a natural part of the designated principal's role and in line with their particular set of leadership responsibilities, they tend to befulfilled. Conversely, if the instructional practices or functions are not considered to be part of the principal's role, then the evidence suggests that they are not undertaken. The final implication from this study therefore concerns the importance of factoring in contextual and cultural factors into any explanation of leadership practices (Harris and Jones, 2015). While research suggests that there are some core leadership practices that transcend cultural boundaries (Leithwood *et al*, 2008) there is also evidence showing that principals' leadership actions and behaviours are culturally defined and contextually bound (Harris and Jones, 2015a; 2015b; Hallinger, 2016). In the case of Malaysia, the role specification and the expectations set by the Ministry of Education, and the District, play a huge part in how principals view and enact their role.

At present, the leadership practices of Malaysia principals are deeply influenced by their formal job descriptions and their KPIs. Therefore, to foster deep, authentic and extended instuctional leadership, across all 10,000 principals in Malaysia, will necessitate some change. Firstly, some reduction in the routine, administrative tasks that principals in Malaysia undertake, on a daily basis, could provide more time to focus on instructional improvement. Secondly, some redefinition of roles and responsibilities to align more with the functions associated with being an instructional leader might help to expand and deepen this form of leadership practice.

The findings from this study, along with the evidence from the indigenous literature and international assesments, would suggest that principals in Malaysia are enacting many of the

functions of instructional leadership. Through their supervision, monitoring, guidance of professional learning and practice, principals are actively shaping and improving instructional practice. The remaining challenge, however, is to ensure that all principals in Malaysia fully embrace all aspects of instructional leadership in ways that contribute directly to school and system improvement.

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