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Factors of leadership skills of secondary school principals

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Abstract

A school principal requires a series of appropriate leadership skills to bring the school, staffs and students to a high level of achievement, and to maintain school effectiveness. This study was conducted to identify (1) level of leadership skill, and (2) factors of leadership skill of a group of Malaysian secondary school principals (n=152). Results indicate that years of service as a school principal and academic qualification were two significant factors of leadership skill. The factors predicted 24.9% of the overall leadership skill. However, there was no significant difference between the male and female principals on leadership skill. In terms of leadership domain, the principals possessed high instructional and cultural leadership skills and low educational management and organizational management leadership skills. The findings imply that school principals should be provided ample opportunities for self-professional development to improve the quality of their leadership skills.

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1. Introduction

Leadership skill of school principals is often the key factor of difference between effective and ineffective schools (Blackburn, 2009). According to some scholars, school principals with good leadership skill encourage positive school climates, including high-quality of school culture; teaching and learning; assessment; academic and non-academic performance; two-way communication; accountability; teacher and student attitudes; and relationship among school, families and the broader community (Glantz, 2008; Chen, 2008; Hallinger, 2004).

Five domains of leadership skill that have been associated with effective school principals were instructional leadership, cultural leadership, strategic leadership, educational management leadership and organizational management leadership. For examples, some scholars have discussed about the significance roles of school principals as instructional leader (Blackburn, 2009; E-Lead, 2008; Alvy & Robbins, 2005; Robbins & Alvy, 2004; Portin, 2004; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Berlin, Kavanagh & Jensen, 1988), and some of them emphasized the important of principal cultural leadership for school effectiveness and student achievement (Blackburn, 2009; Glantz, 2008; Karakose, 2008; Hallinger, 2004; Lam, 2003; Zhang, 1994) while others focused on the significance of strategic leadership (Chen, 2003; Glanz, 2006; Chernow, 1985), educational management leadership (MBE

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Newsletter, 2004) and organizational management leadership (Dembowski, 2008; Sashkin, 1988; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995).

Although the scholars and writers in the literature stressed on the importance of the five domains of school leadership skill, none of them have illustrated level of standard of principal leadership skill needed for school effectiveness and student achievement, or relatively compare the domains among school principals. Hence much research effort needs to be done to provide evidence and to form a bigger picture about the Malaysian principals' leadership skill, specifically from the perspectives of instructional leadership, cultural leadership, strategic leadership, educational management leadership and organizational management leadership domains.

2. Objectives of the study

This study focused on leadership skill of the Malaysian secondary school principals. It was conducted to identify (1) level of leadership skill, and (2) factors of leadership skill of a group of Malaysian secondary school principals.

3. Methods

The study employed a non-experimental research design. A survey was conducted to collect quantitative data using a paper-pencil based questionnaire.

3.1. Subjects of the study

The subjects of the study consist of 152 secondary school principals. The subjects are serving schools in five states in Malaysia, i.e. Wilayah Persekutuan, Perak, Johor, Terengganu and Sabah.

In terms of gender, among the subjects there were 63.16% males and 36.84% females (Table 1). A total of 75.66% of them were bachelor degree holders, 22.37% were master degree holders and 1.97% of them were PhD degree holders. Besides that, most of the subjects have either one to five years (44.74%) or more than five years of service as a school principal (44.74%).

Table 1: Profile of the school principals in terms of gender, academic qualification and years of service as a school principal

Demographic variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	96	63.16
	Female	56	36.84
Academic qualification	Bachelor degree	115	75.66
	Master degree	34	22.37
	PhD degree	3	1.97
Years of service as a school principal	Less than a year	16	10.52
	1 to 5 years	68	44.74
	More than 5 years	68	44.74

3.1. Instrument of the study

The instrument of the study is a paper-pencil based questionnaire consisting ninety-three ordinal-scale items. It measures five domains of school principal leadership skill: (1) educational leadership, (2) cultural leadership, (3) strategic leadership, (4) organizational management leadership, and (5) educational management leadership. Under the five leadership domains, there were 17 leadership dimensions (sub-scales). Each leadership dimension was formed by several questionnaire items. It was an adapted version of the questionnaire "A Skill Approach to Principal Leadership in Florida Schools". The questionnaire was initially developed by the Florida Atlantic University, USA and was adopted with the permission of its developer Professor Tony Townsend.

4. Results

4.1. Leadership skills of the school principals

The Table 2 indicates that among the five domains of leadership skill, the principals possessed highest instructional leadership skill (mean=3.67), followed by cultural leadership (mean=3.66), strategic leadership (mean=3.47), organizational management (mean=3.45) and educational management leadership skill (mean=3.35). The results of one-way ANOVA analysis (Table 2) and the profile plot (Figure 1) clearly indicate that as a whole, there was a significant difference among the five domains of leadership skill of the school principals [$F(4, 755)=31.57, p<.05$].

Table 2: Mean scores of leadership skills of the school principals

Leadership skill	Sub-scale	Mean	SD
Instructional Leadership	Passion for Teaching & Learning	3.75	.31
	Taking Initiative	3.62	.28
	Achievement Focus	3.67	.41
	Total	3.67	.30
Cultural Leadership	Learning the school community	3.51	.56
	Ensuring accountability	3.69	.44
	Supporting others	3.63	.35
	Maximizing school capability	3.60	.44
	Total	3.66	.32
Strategic Leadership	Contextual know-how	3.41	.54
	Management of self	3.50	.47
	Influencing others	3.44	.49
	Total	3.47	.45
Educational Management	Analytical thinking	3.25	.47
	Big picture thinking	3.43	.58
	Gathering information	3.33	.55
	Total	3.35	.53
Organizational Management	Financial management	3.46	.59
	Understand legal issues	3.34	.52
	Workforce planning	3.48	.53
	Understanding of technology	3.32	.58
	Total	3.45	.49

Note: Result of one-way ANOVA test on the difference among five domains of leadership skill: $F(4, 755) = 31.57, p = .000$.

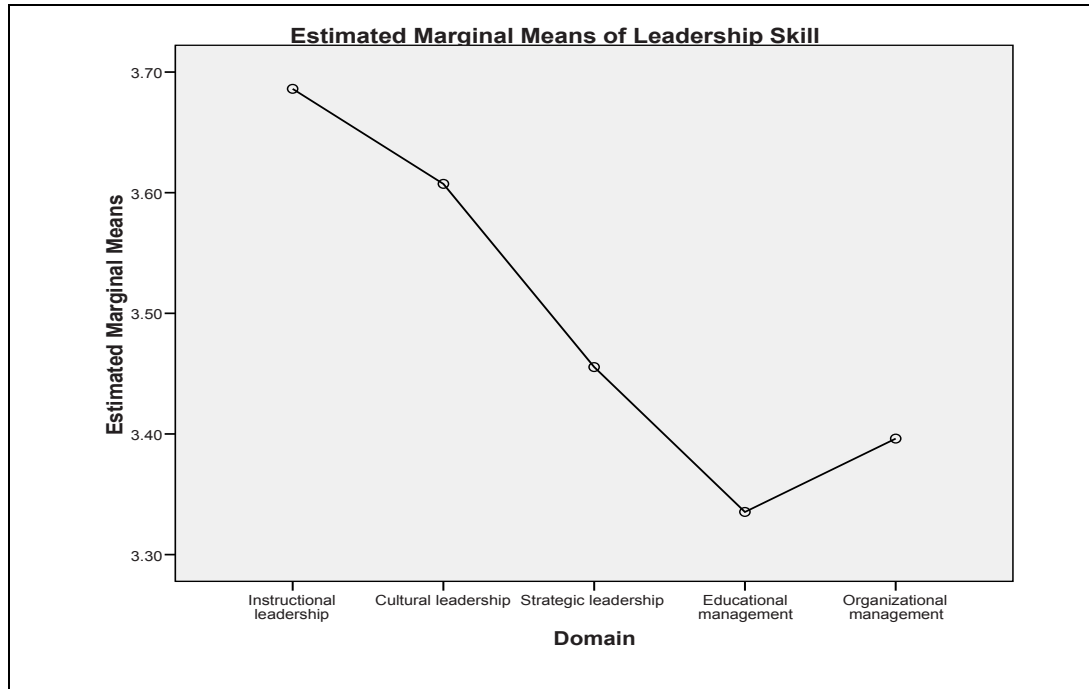


Figure 1: Profile plot of the five domains of leadership skill

4.2. Factors of leadership skills of the Malaysian secondary school principals

A Logistic regression analysis was used to identify whether demographic variables contribute to the variance of the leadership skill of the Malaysian school principals. In this analysis, the dependent variable was leadership skill while the independent variables were gender, academic qualification and years of service as a school principal (Table 3).

Table 3: Factors of school principal leadership skill

Factor	Nagelkerke R Square	Chi-square	df	Sig
1	.175	25.11	2	.000
1, 2	.249	38.79	6	.000

Note: 1= years of service as a school principal, 2= Academic qualification

Table 3 shows that two demographic factors were contributed significantly to the school principals’ leadership skill. Years of service as school principal predicted 17.5% of the leadership skill variance (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .175$; $\chi^2=25.11$, $p < .05$). Adding academic qualification to the Logistic regression model, the two factors contributed 24.9% of the school principal’s leadership skill variance (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .249$; $\chi^2=38.79$, $p < .05$). Briefly, the two variables - years of service as a school principal and academic qualification contributed 24.9% of leadership skill of the school principals. Besides that, gender was not a significant factor of leadership skill of the school principals. In other words, there was no significant difference of leadership skill between the male and female school principals.

DISCUSSION

The results of the Logistic regression analysis indicate that leadership skill of school principals was significantly associated to years of service as a school principal and academic qualification. This finding implies that formal training is needed for school principals before assuming their position. This finding is consistent with the finding of Chen (2003). Chen's result indicated that educational background was significantly associated to leadership competencies. The finding is also compatible with the finding of Karakose (2008) that years of service and experience were two factors of principal cultural leadership behaviours. This finding is understandable and reasonable as the Malaysian principals were appointed based on their seniority and educational background.

The findings also imply that the education ministry should provide more opportunities for the school leaders to further their studies in the field of educational leadership, especially at the level of master and PhD degrees, because academic qualification was found as a significant factor of principal leadership skill.

The findings also reveal that among the five domains of leadership skill, principals scored lowest on organizational management and educational management leadership domains. Since school principals need leadership skill for planning and administration, resource deployment and staff development, the education ministry should provide ample opportunities for school principals to improve their leadership skills. To improve and enhance the quality of organizational management and educational management leadership skills, courses such as principalship or educational leadership studies at postgraduate levels should be developed for the school principals.

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