Contemporary challenges and changes: principals’ leadership practices in Malaysia

Michelle Jones\textsuperscript{a*}, Donnie Adams\textsuperscript{a}, Mabel Tan Hwee Joo\textsuperscript{b}, Vasu Muniandy\textsuperscript{a}, Corinne Jacqueline Perera\textsuperscript{a} and Alma Harris\textsuperscript{a,c}

\textsuperscript{a} Instituto of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya, Malaysia; \textsuperscript{b} UCSI University, Malaysia; \textsuperscript{c} Institute of Education, University College London

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This article outlines the findings from a contemporary study of principals’ leadership practices in Malaysia as part of the 7 System Leadership Study. Recent policy developments within Malaysia have increased principals’ accountability and have underlined the importance of the role of the principals in transforming school performance and student learning outcomes. This article draws upon emerging empirical evidence about principals’ leadership practices and highlights some of the challenges associated with the new accountability expectations and demands placed upon principals in Malaysia. It provides a contemporary insight into the way in which principals in Malaysia view their leadership practice. The article proposes that despite the pressure on them to secure better school and student outcomes, principals in Malaysia increasingly view their leadership practices as transformational and distributed.

Keywords: leadership practices; principal leadership preparation; transformational leadership; distributed leadership

Introduction

A substantial evidence base outlines that the school principal has a significant impact on organizational and student outcomes (Hallinger, 2013; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). In their work, Jensen, Hunter, Sonneman, & Burns (2012) suggest that the principal’s role is an essential one of creating effective collaborative working conditions. Other writers have suggested a broader set of responsibilities for school leaders where they create professional learning communities, where teachers collaborate to improve their practices and to improve student learning outcomes (Jones & Harris, 2014; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). Nevertheless, the contemporary evidence from many countries highlights that the principal is still viewed as being primarily responsible for school performance and outcomes (Bush, 2011).

In Malaysia, recent policy shifts have reinforced the accountability of the principal and underlined the centrality of this leadership role in securing school effectiveness and school improvement (Rahimah & Ghavifekr, 2014). In general, the school system in Malaysia is viewed as bureaucratic and hierarchical in nature, with an over emphasis on centralized school management (Abdullah, DeWitt, & Alias, 2013). Within this system, the school principal is regarded as the highest authority in the hierarchy of school administration and is given a great deal of responsibility (Suraya & Yunus, 2012). These responsibilities are clearly outlined in the “Competency Standards for Malaysian School Principals”, which is