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Alma Harris Michelle Jones Kenny Soon Lee Cheah Edward Devadason Donnie Adams

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Exploring principals’ instructional leadership practices in Malaysia: insights and implications

Alma Harris and Michelle Jones
University of Bath, Bath, UK and
Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and
Kenny Soon Lee Cheah, Edward Devadason and Donnie Adams
Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to outline the findings from a small-scale, exploratory, study of principals’ 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’s (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), nine principals from Chinese schools (SJKC) and seven principals from Tamil schools (SJKT). The qualitative data were initially analysed inductively, and subsequently coded using ATLAS.ti to generate the findings and conclusions.

Findings – The findings showed that the Malaysian principals, who were 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. These data revealed that some of the duties and activities associated with being a principal in Malaysia are particularly congruent with instructional leadership practices. In particular, the supervision of teaching and learning along with leading professional learning were strongly represented in the data.

Research limitations/implications – This is a small-scale, exploratory study involving 30 principals.

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 the principals’ instructional leadership practices in Malaysia. They also provide a basis for further, in-depth exploration that can enhance the knowledge base about principals’ instructional leadership practices in Malaysia.

Keywords Instructional leadership, Educational change

Paper type Research paper

1. 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