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Leadership in a culturally diverse environment: perspectives from international school leaders in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

School leaders employ essential skills and requisites to lead culturally diversified teams in order to achieve organizational objectives. This study aims to uncover the leadership styles of international school leaders in the culturally diverse environment of Malaysia. In uncovering perspectives on cultural diversity, this exploration employs a qualitative approach using interviews with four school leaders, observation field notes and documentary analysis from three international schools. Qualitative data analysis rendered a contextualization of instructional and transformational leadership attributes in international school leadership. The perspectives of school leaders specified practices of creating a shared mission and vision through the school's core values, curriculum and co-curricular activities while encouraging harmonious interaction among the members of the international school community. Despite the presence of challenges stemming from cultural differences, the school leaders highlighted the vitality of their role in providing a safe learning environment. Hence, this paper provides guidelines to prepare potential school leaders with the essential leadership skills for international schools in multicultural environments and for the advancement of culturally responsive leadership in the globalized era of the 21st century.

Introduction

The leadership and actions of a school leader play a significant role in satisfying the goals set for a multi-layered organization (Bush, 2007; Fullan, 2009). Since schools operate by juggling the needs of the students, employees, curriculum and the institution itself, the “right” form of leadership serves as a binding agent to harmonize functions towards attaining the vision of the organization (Hallinger, 2009).

The culturally diverse population of Malaysian international schools creates an uncharted field in the study of its school leaders’ leadership style. Aside from primarily using English and having a flexible curriculum, what sets international schools unique from other educational institutions is its highly culturally diverse population of students and teachers (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012; Velarde, 2017). Hence, the demand for school leaders with the necessary skills and requisites hinges on leading culturally diversified teams in the best possible way to achieve organizational objectives by factoring cross-cultural aspects of leadership (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Ang, Van Dyne, & Tan., 2011; Groves & Feyerherm, 2011; Hyde, 2018).

With such complexities, this paper aims to uncover the leadership styles of international school leaders in a culturally diverse environment of Malaysia. Although predominantly Islamic, Malaysia serves as a home to a significant number of Buddhists, Hindus and Christians. With religious affiliation linked with racial profile, Malays comprise the majority of the population while Chinese, Indians and...
indigenous groups make up the rest of Malaysia’s racial-ethnic demography (Manan, David, Dumanig, & Naqeebullah, 2015). Abdullah and Pedersen (2009) noted that Malaysia can be regarded as distinctly culturally diverse because of the harmonious co-existence of its people despite racial, ethnic and religious differences. This paper provides an additional perspective to the limited studies in international school leadership in Malaysia and open doors to sharing practices and ideas that could be channelled from one academic setting to another.

**Conceptual and theoretical background**

**International schools in Malaysia**

International schools have started to gain traction at the start of the 21st century especially in Asia where parents are looking for a more western kind of education (Bailey, 2015). Although international schools first started out for students from expatriate families, the rise in the demand for international schools comes from the local population of the host country (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). However, international schools in the Asia-Pacific region have implemented a quota system that regulates and caps the enrolment of local nationals (Javadi, Bush, & Ng, 2017).

Until 2012, a 40 per cent limit on local nationals was legally observed by international schools in Malaysia (Nasa & Pilay, 2017). Notably, Malaysia has seen a rapid growth in the number of international schools for the past five years (PEMANDU, 2013) with an estimation of more than 120 international schools (Nasa & Pilay, 2017) compared to 70 international schools in 2012 ("Number of International Schools", 2012), a growth rate of over 36 per cent following the revocation of the 40 per cent cap (Javadi et al., 2017). According to the 2018 Malaysia Educational Statistics by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2018), 58,723 students were enrolled in 135 recognized international schools following programmes such as Cambridge Assessment International Education (CIE), International Baccalaureate (IB), North American Curriculum and English National Curriculum. From 2013 to 2017, the number of local Malaysian students enrolled in international schools jumped from 43 per cent to 64 per cent (Nasa & Pilay, 2017; Ramey, 2013). The growth of international schools and increased proportion of local students in Malaysia after this limit was revoked could be attributed to the desire of parents to send their children to schools with English as medium of instruction, which they perceive to be better than government schools (Bunnell, Fertig, & James, 2016). Another factor lies in the hopes that it would be easier for their child to study overseas with the exposure and the certifications they could get from studying in an international school (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). In relation to that, Pyvis and Chapman (2007) point out that Malaysian students perceive that an international education could give them an advantage in employability in multinational companies in Malaysia.

**Cultural diversity**

Globalization has increasingly implicated developing countries socially, economically and politically (Shrivastava & Hinkes, 2016), which transformed education to a certain extent (Keller, 2015). As a by-product of global interaction, the culturally diverse environment of international schools with teachers, students and administrators coming from different countries makes this educational system unique compared to local public and private schools (Keller, 2015). Students now have every opportunity to become global citizens by learning how to work with students from different cultural backgrounds before entering the real world.

Cultural diversity is considered as a “social glue” or “shared mental model” that holds members of an organization together (Shrivastava & Hinkes, 2016). However, cultural diversity in an international school context is the most challenging task for school leaders due to the natural presence of miscommunication due to specific differences (Lee et al., 2012). Lussier and Achua (2010) shared, “Despite its benefits, diversity can also bring about negative outcomes if not effectively managed” (p. 397). Thus, personal and professional differences within the organization pose challenges and further
conflicts if they are simply neglected (Lussier & Achua, 2010). High chances of conflicts are inevitable in a culturally diverse organization if there is a lack of clear mission, vision and cultural statement for its members (Slough-Kuss, 2014). Henceforth, institutional end results may never be achieved.

According to Shrivastava and Hinkes (2016), school leaders must be able to manage any form of conflict, be goal-and-task-oriented, and motivate their team members while leading their teams in an effective manner. Hence, it is important for school leaders to identify the best way to manage and lead a diverse team that will bring about a higher success rate to the school. Apart from having relevant policies and practices in place, the role of leadership is critical to the success of a culturally diverse organization (Harris, Jones, & Adams, 2016).

**Leadership styles**

The context of international schools is one in which differences abound in titles and descriptions, and this is no less true when considering those with responsibility for running the schools. Following Hayden and Thompson (2008), we define school leaders as the principal responsible for running the school, supervising and leading its daily operations.

Scholars, practitioners and policymakers all come towards a common consensus that school leadership contributes significantly to improved school performance (Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, Adams, Harris, & Suzette Jones, 2018; Harris, 2014; Jones et al., 2015). International empirical evidence has proven that school leadership contributes to better school and student performance (Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Leithwood, & Kington, 2008; Harris, Jones, Cheah, Devadason, & Adams, 2017; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008).

Hence, increasing attention is being paid to the type of leadership styles of successful school leaders (Adams, Raman Kutty, & Mohd Zabidi, 2017; Day et al., 2008; Hallinger & Lee, 2014; Harris, Adams, Jones, & Muniandy, 2015; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). According to Yukl (2013, p. 7), “leadership is a process of influencing other people to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives.” Effective school leadership is anchored on the goals of school improvement by building professional capabilities and enhancing pedagogical means for better student learning outcomes (Adams et al., 2017). In the Malaysian setting, Jones et al. (2015) noted that principals perceive both instructional and transformational styles of leadership as successful in motivating teachers and building capacity for improved teaching and learning.

However, in many developing countries, the literature on leadership styles or practices in international schools is still in its infancy (Harris et al., 2015). Moreover, there is limited evidence on international school leaders’ leadership style in Malaysia. Past research such as Javadi (2014) probed into middle leadership in an international school in southern Malaysia. This research was further expanded into four international secondary schools in Malaysia (Javadi et al., 2017). Another research by Velarde (2017) focused only on principals’ instructional leadership practices in three international schools.

Since the conception of leadership styles in the 1980s, transformational leadership has pulled away academic leaders from the notion of managing schools to transforming the system towards realizing the school’s vision. Contrary to the autocratic style of managing schools, Bass (1991) saw effective leadership according to how one could lead by modelling, motivating, empowering and challenging members of the school community. The debate between transactional and transformational leadership leads to meta-analytical studies from the 1990s to early 2000s showing a surge in the interest in developing school leaders who possess transformational leadership traits (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Stewart, 2006). Still, the focus remains on the idea of a leader as a person in charge rather than the function or the collective responsibility of individuals.

On the other hand, as the goals of the schools shifted to improving student learning outcomes based on international standards in the early years of the 21st century, schools continue to lean towards instructional and distributed forms of leadership (Harris, 2011; MacDonald, 2009; Roberts & Mancuso, 2014). Showing positive effects on student learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2008;
Robinson et al., (2008), instructional leaders prioritize managing the curriculum and promoting a positive learning climate aside from communicating the school’s mission and vision (Hallinger, 2009).

High performing schools are characterized by having different leaders functioning towards the achievement of organizational goals (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). However, “instructional leadership practices are contextually influenced and that the principal’s effects on student outcomes are mediated by certain features of the school” (Hallinger, Wang, Chen, & Liare, 2015, p. 27).

Despite the low impact of transformational leadership on students’ learning outcomes, school leaders who possess traits related to this leadership style have a significant positive impact on employees (Ibrahim, Ghavifekr, Ling, Siraj, & Azeez, 2014; Keung & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Teacher retention could also be attributed to the qualities of a leader, and transformational leaders are preferred over those who are transactional in nature (Mancuso, Roberts, & White, 2010). Success stories from turnaround schools are attributed to visionary principals who inspire not only their teachers but also students and parents by showing strong drive to persevere and by including them in the process of transforming the school (Fullan, 2005).

Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed in this study with an emphasis on seeking school leaders’ views on the practice of their leadership styles. Selection of school leaders in multiple sites ensured internal validity as varied perspectives were taken into consideration to establish a unique conceptualization of their leadership styles. Following a subjectivist perspective, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) highlight the notion that our reality can be interpreted from multiple perspectives; hence, it is imperative to look at the practices of international school leaders from varied angles in order to have an in-depth understanding of their reality.

Interviews and sampling

An interview guide of open-ended questions was designed to explore school leaders’ instructional and transformational leadership styles (see Appendix). A pilot test was done with a school leader from an international school in Klang Valley. The idea of a qualitative sample is that it is contextually representative of the purposive sampling technique and is “unique” of that sample. It cannot be piloted and then extended or replicated. The need for qualitative interviews to be piloted is not relatively obvious because as the interviews progressed, the quality of the interview guide improves (Harding, 2013). However, conducting one “test” interview was helpful for refining the interview guide and getting a general feel on how the interviews will go. The pilot interview ran for 25 minutes, and the researchers sought for feedback from the interviewee regarding the quality of the questions and the interview itself. Overall, the interviewee gave a positive evaluation on the flow of the interview, as well as the language and the focus of the questions.

Purposive sampling was employed in this study to ensure a specific set of criteria are met (Bryman, 2012). The research was conducted in Kuala Lumpur international schools based on a rating higher than 3.5 according to international schools’ reviews on Google Search; more than 10 years in operation; and, a student population from at least 20 nationalities. Schools that failed to meet these criteria were eliminated, yielding a stratum of six schools (n = 6). However, this figure was subsequently reduced to three as, of the six potential sites, only three consented to this research. The other three schools did not disclose specific reasons for not participating in this research. The concentration of international schools in Kuala Lumpur is higher compared with other major cities like Johor Bahru and Penang (International Schools Database, 2019); thus, this makes Kuala Lumpur a potentially rich source of information in exploring international school leadership. Table 1 illustrates the profile of international schools in this study.
In ensuring that this research follows ethical standards, the researchers secured the approval from the Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya to conduct the research. Next, emails were sent to the three prospective international schools based on the aforementioned set of criteria to inform them of the objectives and procedures of the research. The international schools were contacted to set a meeting with the school leaders to discuss the data collection procedures. Once informed consent was sought, the school leaders were interviewed, which lasted at an average of 30 minutes. The school leaders agreed for the interviews to be audio recorded.

**Observation field notes and documentary analysis**

Observation field notes and documents provide an access to the unexpressed information of the organization (Bryman, 2012). Ensuring privacy of stakeholders, the consent from the administrators allowed the researchers to observe and take photos of classrooms, school facilities and student–teacher interactions. Data from school documents such as the student handbook, scheme of work, school magazine and annual school report were obtained to provide a more comprehensive picture of the school leaders’ leadership styles.

**Data analysis**

The interview questions were designed to match the research questions. Data were analysed using a three-step thematic analysis approach. Firstly, all data collected was organized according to the type of materials such as interview transcripts, field notes, observation data, documents and photographs. Secondly, the interview data were transcribed by the researchers. All transcripts were read by the researchers and a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) was utilized to generate key themes. Following this initial inductive phase, the transcript was reviewed again to look for any new emerging codes. All code labels were then carefully examined and reduced by merging similar or overlapping codes. Thirdly, a qualitative data analysis tool, ATLAS.ti™, was used to code the final set of codes. ATLAS.ti™ is a widely used software in qualitative research as it efficiently helps in organizing transcribed data into codes and themes (Friese, 2019). Transcripts were analysed using the combined coding procedure through ATLAS.ti and further synthesized and refined to generate emergent themes. In order to achieve trustworthiness of the findings, data were triangulated, as the accounts from the observation field notes and documents analysed were consistent with the interview responses and the main themes identified in this study.

**Findings**

This section of the article presents an integrated thematic finding of the leadership styles of international school leaders according to the following themes: roles and responsibilities; communicating the school’s mission and vision; modelling leadership values; inclusivity programs and policies; integrating international mindedness in the curriculum; and, ensuring a safe learning environment. Secondly, it will explore issues that emerged from the inductive analysis of the data. Indicative quotes from the interviewees have been selected to illuminate and corroborate the findings together with the accounts from the observation field notes and documentary analysis. Table 2 indicates the brief demographics of the school leaders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International School</th>
<th>Google Reviews</th>
<th>Years in Operation</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Nationalities in School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>3.5 out of 5 (92 reviewers)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1,010</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>4.0 out of 5 (36 reviewers)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>4.2 out of 5 (85 reviewers)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Roles and responsibilities**

The examination of the school leaders’ roles and responsibilities in the three schools involved documentary analysis and interviews. Leader 1, as the school principal admitted that his academic and non-academic role must be aligned with the principles of International Baccalaureate [IB] and with the demands of the school system, which is headed by a board of trustees. The principal recognized his authority and autonomy in terms of academic planning. As part of a bigger school system with five campuses in Malaysia, School A follows the framework recommended by the International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO] and the general organizational chart of the school system. The documentation from the IBO requires that IB schools form their organizational structure based on the grounds of collaboration and inclusivity. School A is an IB World School divided into three levels: Primary Years, Middle Years and Diploma Programme.

In School B, Leader 2 serves as the principal for elementary school. Aside from managing the teachers, she also ensures that the taught curriculum follows the prescribed British National Curriculum. She also oversees co-curricular activities like out of school trips and school-wide events. In addition to that, she coordinates with her counterparts in the lower and upper middle school to ensure cohesiveness in curriculum and student transition.

In School C, Leader 3 serves as the principal of the middle school and is responsible in terms of managing the curriculum and overseeing student and teacher affairs. With more than 1000 students, School C is divided into three schools: elementary, middle school and high school following the IB Diploma Program.

**Communicating the school’s mission and vision**

All school leaders elaborated on the significance of communicating the school’s mission and vision and following them up with relevant actions. For the school leaders, the mission and vision are not just mere statements, but these serve as a primary tool especially in the culturally diverse setting of international schools. One of the principals explained the integral role of the school’s mission in building core values:

> Education is a work in progress and with the rate of change that we are seeing in education today, most schools are playing catch up. For us in our institution, our mission is thankfully guided by the words of the IB—the International Baccalaureate. We are encouraged to follow the concept of international mindedness. (Leader 1)

Similarly, the elementary school principal noted the importance of the school’s mission in guiding students:

> If students have not learned how to relate with someone from another culture, how to play with someone, and how to work with other people, we have not succeeded fully in our mission. (Leader 2)

More importantly, the mission and vision of the school provides a sense of direction and service for the school community as described by the middle school principal:

> We state [our mission] here very clearly. This is what we intend to do and we try to serve the people what we have in terms of the expat population that we have here and also the Malaysians who would like to join us. (Leader 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Demographics of school leaders (n = 3).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An observation and document analysis by the researchers saw the school’s mission and vision posted strategically on walls all over the schools. These are also printed in school documents such as the student and teacher’s handbook.

**Modelling leadership values**

The school leaders’ leadership values are defined by a set of principles or ideals the entire community is expected to uphold. For example, School A refers to these values as the “IB Learner Profile” such as knowledgeable, balanced and principled based on the principles of IB. In School C, the principal mentioned that their core values include honesty, respect, responsibility and kindness. He added,

> Everything we do is within the context and is based around those four core values. (Leader 3)

More than just stating and having these values posted in every classroom and hallways, all school leaders were particular about the impact of modelling these values in their schools. As noted by the school leaders from one of the schools:

> If the school leader does not take the initiative to make sure that students learn to respect each other then this will result to a far more chaotic world. (Leader 1)

In relation to this, the elementary school principal highlighted the values exuded by the school leaders to avoid inter-racial conflicts:

> It is our kind of leadership that steps in and says NO. We take measures to counteract such segregation. (Leader 2)

Moreover, normalization of values becomes integrated into the fabrics of the school as mentioned by the principal:

> When respect and acceptance for others become ‘enculturated’ into the environment, there shouldn’t be a need to focus on it all the time. It becomes a part of the way we do things around here. (Leader 3)

Respect and role modelling were the leadership values modelled by the school leaders in their schools. In the observation done in all three schools, the researchers noticed how students of different ethnicity interact with each other. Students were seen playing and chatting with each other, which manifests a sense of inclusiveness in the school community.

**Inclusivity programs and policies**

School leaders send a clear message of inclusivity to members of the school community through the school’s co-curricular programs. The co-curricular programs include local and international school trips; cultural activities like “International Day”; and, festive celebrations like Christmas for Christians, Lunar New Year for the Chinese population, Hari Raya for the Muslims and Deepavali for the Indians.

In these activities, all school leaders highlighted the purpose of these programs, and they attributed the planning and implementation to teachers and students. As mentioned by the leader from one of the international schools:

> Of course, you would then have the classic fun fairs, the food, the fashion shows, the rest of that which you would commonly see in any other international school. (Leader 1)

The role of school leaders in developing such programs was explained by the elementary school principal:

> We do have International Day, and in the past the International Day was celebrated like they have a kaleidoscope of several cultures, but this year I chose to work with Africa because I felt that children seeing dancers from different countries, eating food from different countries, are not learning much about that country. (Leader 2)
Although a superficial recognition of the diversity of cultures, dressing up in festive occasions was elaborated by the middle school principal as an opportunity to learn about other cultures:

For Eid, we do have celebrations for that as well. We recognise all the religions and nationalities and people really celebrate them. I think it’s a wonderful thing. During Deepavali, teachers and students will bring and wear Indian dress even though they’re not Indian. People are excited. (Leader 3)

Dealing with a culturally diverse community, the school leaders noted how religious and cultural beliefs play a role in creating and implementing policies. One of the school leaders explained:

Although we have the uniform, there is opportunity for interpretation there. They may wear what they like but they have to be as modest as they are. The other thing is we make allowances for kids who on Fridays need to go for prayer. Kids are excused from class and they go for prayer. We always make sure in our cafeteria we have vegetarian option for our students who are vegetarians. (Leader 3)

School rules and policies especially on accepting and respecting others’ culture and race are also documented and communicated through accessible media like school website, student planner and the teacher’s guidebook.

**Integrating international mindedness in the curriculum**

Generally, as international school leaders, they must ensure teachers incorporate international mindedness in the school’s curriculum and in classroom activities. In their school, the principals stated that integrating in the curriculum started with planning that involved teachers:

Well, first of all, they [teachers] design the curriculum. It’s their responsibility to decide the degree of exposure and how to apply the learning with regards to international mindedness. (Leader 1)

The middle school principal was more specific in citing how they ensure that topics help students understand the value of international mindedness through relevant topics:

For example, in 7th Grade they’re studying things about the Holocaust and in 8th Grade they’re studying human trafficking and in 6th Grade they study disaster relief. So, they are looking at global perspectives in the curriculum. (Leader 3)

The researchers’ observation notes that in all three schools, classroom walls are decorated with instructional materials and students’ work clearly indicate cultural integration. The classrooms serve as a clear evidence of how international mindedness is addressed in certain subject areas. For example, a classroom featured an art piece of Islamic patterns influencing architecture.

**Ensuring a safe learning environment**

Finally, the school leaders highlighted their role in advocating a safe learning environment amidst the differences in religious and cultural beliefs among the students and teachers. The school leader from School A was explicit in claiming:

As school leaders, it is our responsibility to safeguard the future of thousands of children during our tenure. (Leader 1)

To be more specific, the school leaders convey the way they ensure a safe and accepting school environment that values the differences among the members of the school community. For instance, the principals explained:

Teachers feel that they are in an accepting and safe environment. This is not an issue. We speak about it often, but we are not consumed with it as cultural diversity is part of what we honor and believe in at our school. (Leader 3)
However, the middle school principal from School C did not discount the existence of cases of racial discrimination and shared how they deal with it:

We have students who make racially insensitive remarks. We take it very seriously. It is not just the class teacher who deals with it, but it’s also our head of pastoral care, who would then talk to the students, eliminate that attitude, and contact the parents. (Leader 3)

Throughout the days the researchers spent in the schools, it was observed how students were also exposed to other languages through language classes, classroom decorations and celebrations. In an inclusively safe learning environment, showcasing the cultural beliefs, languages and traditions of the stakeholders in various parts of the school could harbour a deeper sense of acceptance.

Discussion

The international school leaders in this study mentioned concrete ways they uphold the school’s mission and vision, model leadership values, encourage inclusivity programs and policies, integrate international mindedness in curriculum and ensure a safe learning environment in their schools. The responses from the school leaders were triangulated with document analysis and researchers’ observation field notes, rendering a contextualization of international school leadership. In the context of cultural diversity, school leaders in this educational setting differ from other public or private academic organizations and share distinct similarities with multicultural institutions in Malaysia.

By utilizing formal elements such as the school’s mission-vision, policies and curriculum, international school leaders in Malaysia manifest certain attributes of instructional leadership. Particularly in Malaysia’s culturally diverse environment, the school leaders’ practices institutionalize a school culture based on the mission-vision. As instructional leaders, sharing a socio-cultural and academic mission is a significant factor in driving a strong curriculum and a positive school environment (Hallinger, 2009). Alongside upholding value statements, school leaders have the capacity to transform their organization by emphasizing collaboration and collectivism (Burnes, Hughes, & By, 2018). In the continuous search for effective school leadership in the Malaysian setting, framing and communicating the school’s mission and vision to highlight academic aspirations strengthens the thrust of school leaders in a multicultural environment, where stakeholders have varied interpretations of what the school’s mission and vision should be.

Similar attributes related with goal setting, curriculum development and modelling leadership values exhibited by international school leaders in Malaysia could also be associated with certain transformational leadership traits (Roberts & Mancuso, 2014). When the school leaders expressed the role of the school’s mission and vision, they articulated “a shared vision or broad purpose” for the members of their community who have different sets of ideals (Leithwood & Sun, 2012, p. 400). Other than that, integrating cultural contexts in the curriculum also bridges academic goals and the school’s core values with the teachers and students (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2017; Dunne & Edwards, 2010; Hallinger, 2018; Keller, 2015). The culturally diverse population of Malaysian international schools are susceptible to conflicts due to cultural differences. School leaders can maximize the school’s mission, vision and core values to provide a starting point in creating shared experiences among all the members of the school community. Van Vuuren, Van der Westhuizen, and Van Der Walt (2012) pointed out the necessity for leaders to acknowledge the role of diversity and to keep an open mind in dealing with other people by aligning individual beliefs with a universal context.

By designing a culturally balanced environment through pedagogical policies (Bernardo & Malakolunthu, 2013), international school leaders in Malaysia created an awareness through activities catering to all stakeholders regardless of their race and avoid alienating minorities in the process. Hence, there is a need for school leaders to model leadership values based on the school’s mission-vision to provide ethical and moral standards (Hayden & Thompson, 2008; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). In a context such as Malaysia where figures of authority such as the school principal are given
much prominence and due respect, international school leaders have the responsibility to project leadership values that is acceptable and respectable among the school community.

Although the leadership styles only cover instructional and transformational leadership attributes, cultural perspectives remain dominant throughout the responses of the leaders. Cultural diversity serves as a focal point in the way the school leaders discussed their practices from the school’s mission-vision, their leadership values and the school’s curriculum. Hence, in an international school setting in Malaysia, school leaders are expected to manifest competencies in understanding others’ cultures on top of their pedagogical and managerial expertise to be more effective especially when dealing with multi-racial conflicts (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Keung & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Lee et al., 2012). As international schools in Malaysia continue to grow, the possible challenges of cultural diversity could be overcome with effective school leadership that rests on the foundation of acceptance, respect and tolerance, as well as the utilization of school factors to propagate values of inclusion.

**Limitation**

In as much as this research was able to present various experiences and insightful thoughts on leadership in a culturally diverse educational setting, this study comes with certain limitations. As a qualitative study, the sample size hinders generalization; thus, this research is confined in providing an exploration of leadership rather than a conclusive idealization of international school leadership. Moreover, the short tenure of most of the school leaders in this study reflects the prevailing landscape of international schools, which are mired by quick turnover of leaders and teachers (Hayden & Thompson, 2008; Mancuso et al., 2010).

While the sample in this study is clearly not representative, the evidence it provides is indicative and provides a snapshot of the leadership styles of international school leaders in a culturally diverse environment such as Malaysia. It would be ideal for future case studies to interview school leaders in international schools who have served for at least five years for deeper introspection into their leadership styles.

**Conclusion**

Our findings contribute to a growing global knowledge base that both describes and analyzes international school leadership in a culturally diverse environment. It is essential to build upon studies from different regions of the world to determine the context-specificity of empirical findings (Clarke & O’ Donoghue, 2017; Hallinger, 2018). Given its salience to the challenges of cross-cultural aspects of leadership, it is time for this knowledge base to receive greater acknowledgement and attention from scholars, policymakers and practitioners.

Leadership plays a critical role in the success of a culturally diverse organization. Although it can be argued that leadership practices are effects of specific situations rather than principles (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2018), our findings will benefit aspiring international school leaders in a culturally diverse environment by providing a sense of cultural introspection and highlighting the trends in leadership qualities essential in dealing with interpersonal and organizational issues related to diversity. Armed with this information, aspiring international school leaders can seek ways to develop these high-value skills. Likewise, school leaders can take away reflective points from this paper as it features the leadership style that best fits a multicultural academic system.

Given Malaysia’s multicultural setting and social dynamics, international school leaders are not just confined in a “box” of a particular leadership style. The harmonious play of instructional and transformational leadership attributes is crucial in addressing the demands of a culturally diverse academic community. To accept cultural diversity and translate international mindedness into action present a promising option for an effective international school leadership.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Donnie Adams is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Education, Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya. He is a recipient of UM’s Bright Sparks scholarship, which recognizes outstanding researchers from within UM and other universities, and a recipient of University of Malaya’s Excellence Award 2016. His research and development work interests are in leadership in special educational needs and school-wide reformation of inclusive education agenda in Malaysia.

Joseph M. Velarde is currently doing his Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Malaya. He completed Masters of Educational Leadership at the University of Malaya and Bachelors Degree in Communication Arts at the University of the Philippines. He has been an English (Language and Literature) teacher for 12 years in the Philippines and in Malaysia. He has championed student and teacher leadership through student-led organizations and professional learning communities. His current research focuses on school leadership and cultural diversity.

References


### Appendix

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. How would you describe your school community’s population (students, teachers, staff) in terms of race, ethnicity, or culture?
2. How do the local students interact with international students? Likewise, how would you describe the interaction between local and international staff?
3. How does your school’s mission-vision address cultural diversity?
4a. How does your school integrate the study and appreciation of culture in your curriculum?
4b. What are the roles of teachers in promoting or appreciating cultural diversity in school?
5. How does your school show appreciation of cultures of all students and teachers?
6a. As a school leader, what are some of the ways you promote equality among teachers and students?
6b. Are there cases of racial discrimination or favouritism among teachers and students in this school? If yes, how do we address such issues? If none, would you mind sharing your stories of success?
6c. As a school leader, how do you practice cultural sensitivity? How do you encourage or ensure that a child’s or a teacher’s culture is acknowledged, appreciated and respected school wide?
7. How do your school’s practices and programs on cultural diversity affect teachers’ performance and satisfaction?
8. How do your school’s practices and programs on cultural diversity affect students’ learning and behaviour?
9. How do your school’s practices and programs on cultural diversity affect overall school climate?
10. In general, why do schools have to promote respect for and awareness on cultural diversity among its stakeholders, do you think?