Principal leadership preparation towards high-performing school leadership in Malaysia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the Malaysian National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL), a principal leadership preparation programme and the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, a comprehensive plan for a rapid and sustainable transformation of our education system through to 2025 to ensure high-performing school leaders in every school.

Design/methodology/approach – In understanding how the NPQEL operates and its effectiveness in preparing high performing school leaders, a research instrument of open-ended questions were administered to 102 principals from government-funded secondary schools, to establish how they were prepared for their leadership roles and their views of their leadership practices.

Findings – The NPQEL programme provides evidence of strong outcomes in preparing school leaders towards high-performing school leadership in Malaysia in combination of a variety of approaches with respect to its designs and competency standards. Findings indicate that the NPQEL contributes towards the development of the school leaders’ attributes or skills for their leadership roles; and the NPQEL fulfils the aspirations set out in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025.

Originality/value – This paper explores the potential influence of Malaysian NPQEL and the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 on preparing high-performing school leaders in every school.

Keywords Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders, High-performing school leaders, Malaysia

Introduction

Malaysia aspires to be a fully developed country by the year 2020 (Perera et al., 2015). To realise this aspiration, Malaysia must have in place a globally competitive education system capable of producing globally competent and competitive talents. However, the nation’s drive towards a fully developed country sits incongruously with its poor standings in international student assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

According to the TIMSS (2011a) results, Malaysian students are below the international average scores for both mathematics and science where they ranked 26th for mathematics and 32nd for science among the 63 participating countries (TIMSS, 2011a, b). Malaysia’s participation in PISA 2012 also showed that Malaysia ranked 52nd, in the bottom third of 65 participating countries, below the international and OECD average (OECD, 2014). Malaysia’s low rank benchmarked against her neighbours such as Vietnam (eighth) and Singapore (first) in the PISA 2015 ranking (OECD, 2016) created an urgency for the government, specifically the Ministry of Education Malaysia to address the declining standards in its education system.
The government of Malaysia has responded positively by launching the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (referred to thereafter as “MEB”) with the aim to transform the education system with the target of making it comparable with international benchmarks (MOE, 2008) and to provide sustainable transformation of the education system through to 2025 (Ghani and Muhammad Faizal, 2013).

The aspiration is for Malaysia to be in the top third of countries in terms of performance in international assessments, as measured by outcomes in TIMSS and PISA, within 15 years. (MOE, 2012; pp. E–9)

The drive to emulate international education systems’ benchmarks remains enticing, ubiquitous, and prevalent (Harris et al., 2016; Moursedh et al., 2010; Barber and Moursedh, 2007). Malaysia’s aspiration to be the top third in the TIMSS and PISA league table in 15 years of time (MOE, 2013, pp. E–15) warrants a closer look at Malaysia’s principal preparation programmes in its ability to produce high-performing school leaders that is believed could influence student outcomes significantly.

Relatively few studies have explored the potential of principal preparation programmes on principals’ leadership practices (Jones, et al., 2015) and their preparation towards high-performing school leadership in Malaysia (Ng, 2017). Thus, this research will explore the potential influence of the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) programme in Malaysia on principals’ leadership practices and its capability in preparing school leaders towards high-performing school leadership in Malaysia by drawing upon qualitative empirical evidence.

High-performing school leaders
There is substantial evidence indicating that school principal leadership impacts organisational capacity and student outcomes significantly (Hallinger, 2013; Leithwood and Sun, 2012; Adams et al., 2017; Hallinger et al., 2018; Ahmed Jami et al., 2012) and that principals make a difference in schools’ performance (Louis et al., 2010) and school effectiveness (Harris et al., 2013). The importance of school leadership also features prominently in descriptions of high-performing systems (Harris et al., 2016) as exemplified by Barber and Moursedh (2007, p. 4) that “top performing countries leverage a substantial and growing knowledge about what constitutes effective school leadership to develop their principals into drivers of instruction”.

School principals must be competent in leadership without undermining management and administration (Adams et al., 2018). They must create both well-led and well-managed schools, while balancing the overloaded and often conflicting demands of the highly complex role. Barber et al. (2010) point out that the role of school leadership is not only important, it is now more critical as the international trend towards devolution of school management to the school level continues and how this contributes to the success of the system. In addition, effective school leadership is required to enable young people acquire the skills and knowledge needed in the twenty-first century.

In Malaysia, evidence shows that school leaders do play a significant role in improving their school outcomes and promoting learning environment in their schools (Perera et al., 2015; Ghani et al., 2011; Jamilah and Yusof, 2011; Tee et al., 2010). Shifts in recent policies have reinforced principal’s accountability towards achieving school effectiveness and school improvement (Rahimah and Ghavifelek, 2014; Othman and Wanlabeh, 2012). As highlighted in the MEB: “Today, all principals in Malaysia possess the autonomy to shape the learning environment of their respective schools” (MOE, 2012, pp. 5–15). School leaders now are expected to lead the teaching and learning process, create professional learning communities while sustaining school excellence by improving examination results year on year (Tie, 2012).
However, Malaysian principals are burdened with heavy management duties such as administrative work and meetings affecting their primary focus in improving the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms (Tie, 2012). This is expected to be achieved through the involvement of all stakeholders in developing the goals, mission and values of the school (Rahimah and Ghavifekr, 2014). The role of principals in Malaysia is now more challenging in the nation’s efforts to produce high-performing schools. This is especially so when the Ministry of Education (MOE) has sets its target in the Educational National Key Results Area (NKRA) that all schools must be high-performing schools and all schools in the system need to improve its achievement (MoE, 2011). The MOE aspires to do this by posing challenges, motivation and providing support to all schools, particularly low-performing schools.

It is now a necessity to prepare and develop the leadership orientation of current and future school leaders that are capable to contribute to a knowledge society (Harris, et al., 2013; Hussein, 2012) and improve school performance (Ng, 2017) to meet the targets of the Education NKRA. Thus, there is a need to prioritise the leadership preparation of the school leaders as mapped out in the MEB (Jones et al., 2015). Malaysia aims to equip every public school with high-performing school leaders who have the leadership capacity to improve student outcomes by the year 2020 (IAB, 2014; MOE, 2013). This ambition is clearly stated in Shift 5 from the 11 shifts stated in the MEB (2012). Shift 5 is expected to be achieved via enhancing school leadership quality, and it is stressed that effective school leaders are not only managers but also instructional leaders who can transform their school environment (MOE, Annual Report, 2016).

**Principal instructional leadership and high-performance schools**

School principals are encouraged to be instructional leaders, primarily because this type of leadership has a stronger impact on students’ learning outcomes than other types of leadership (Bendikson et al., 2012). The more focused the school’s leadership is on instruction, the more effective the school will be in improving the school’s performance (Robinson et al., 2008). The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MOE, 2013) emphasised that outstanding school leaders are those who practise instructional leadership and not administrative leadership and with that, student outcomes can be raised as much as 20 per cent (E-27). Hence, ensuring high-performing schools will require high-performing school leaders in every school (5–16). This means that the MOE has to build capacity of school leadership to drive improvement with an orientation towards instructional leadership. Day et al.’s (2016, p. 231) study of principals in effective and improving primary and secondary schools in England shows that “principals and key staff were positive about the role of instructional leadership strategies in promoting and sustaining the academic standards and expectations in their schools”. (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 8) provide a clear link of instructional leadership to student outcome:

> Instructional leadership...typically assumes that the critical focus for attention by leaders is the behaviour of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students. (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 8).

Despite its popularity (Hallinger and Wang, 2015) and its rejuvenation to “leadership for learning”, instructional leadership has been criticised for its primary concern with learning and teaching (Bush, 2013) and too focused on the principal as “the centre of expertise, power and authority” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 330). As a result, it tends to underestimate the role and importance of their assistants, middle leaders, members of senior leadership team and especially leadership from teachers.

In Malaysia, despite the popularity and importance accorded to instructional leadership and its prominence in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, there has been very little
discussion about how it is conceptualised within the Malaysian education system in general and how school leaders perceived it specifically. There is limited evidence focusing on principals’ instructional leadership (Harris et al., 2017). In practice, evidence of the enactment of this leadership model in Malaysia remains limited and may be “hidden” (Walker and Hallinger, 2013).

Principal leadership preparation
High-performing systems invest significantly on professional leadership development to build leadership capacity and develop high-quality school leaders to achieve desired outcomes (Harris et al., 2014). For policymakers, the rationale for investing in leadership preparation and development is based on the belief that it will, in time, affect the quality of school leaders and, in turn, better student outcomes (Harris et al., 2016; Louis et al., 2010). Change and improvement are less likely to occur without skilled and competent leadership (Harris et al., 2014). Barber et al.’s (2010) recent study of high-performing and improving systems in eight different countries identified the development of high-quality leadership and building leadership capacity was as an essential pre-requisite for successful school transformation and better system improvement. They concluded that leadership is “one of the most important drivers of improvement” (pp. 38) and implied less-performing education systems could gain leverage by adopting or adapting leadership programmes from significantly higher-performing systems.

Preparation and training of school leaders has emerged as a key priority (Jones et al., 2015). In Singapore, for example, school principals are appointed under the jurisdiction of the MOE, and potential school leaders have to undergo the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) as an official requirement for their leadership preparation and training (MOE Singapore, 2012). Similarly in Indonesia, school principals are appointed by the district-level government and will need to undergo the Development and Empowerment for School Heads (LP2KS) as part of their school leadership training programme (Jones et al., 2015).

Malaysia had no national principal preparation programme until 1999, with the implementation of the NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship) adapted from England’s NPQH as the official national leadership preparation and development programme (IAB Annual Report, 2013). The Institute of Aminuddin Baki (IAB) played the main role in the Malaysian NPQH curriculum development and was subsequently entrusted with the responsibility of training and preparing all principals in Malaysia (IAB, 2014).

In 2008, the NPQH in Malaysia was revised and renamed National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) and subsequently in 2014 made mandatory for aspiring principals (IAB, 2014). This new entry-level qualification was aimed at aspiring and all newly appointed principals in Malaysia (Jones et al., 2015). The name change presupposes that Malaysian principals are now viewed as educational leaders and not merely just managers of their schools (Anthony and Hamdan, 2010).

The NPQEL central objectives are to ensure all principals are equipped with knowledge, skills, effective management and leadership practices to address the current challenges and the future demands of leading a school and transforming a system (Jones et al., 2015; Anthony and Hamdan, 2010). The MEB promises that the Ministry will ensure individualised professional development support for every principal (MOE, 2013).

For nearly two decades, Malaysia has pursued the goal of developing high-performing school leaders through implementing a borrowed leadership qualification from England (Harris et al., 2016). The NPQEL is made a mandatory requirement for school leadership appointment and at the same time made available a pool of qualified candidates and improved succession planning by states, and the Ministry would then be able to fill vacancies at a faster rate (MOE, Annual Report, 2016). The NPQEL in Malaysia encompasses six core
areas: instruction and achievement; resource and operation; vision development; change management and innovation; self-management; and interpersonal relationships, designed to enhance the competency standards of future school leaders (NPQEL, 2012) in line with the “international curriculum” of principal leadership development programmes in different countries (Santhanamary and Hamdan, 2011). Other supporting programme for the NPQEL which was implemented in 2016 is the PRime (Program Residensi dan Imersif) which is a mentorship programme (consisting of both immersion and residency), aimed to help newly appointed principals in their transition into new schools.

The NPQEL programme runs for a total of 20 weeks (five months) which is made up of face-to-face lectures (six weeks), online learning (four weeks), benchmarking which is the PRime Residency programme (two weeks) and immersion which is the PRime Immersion programme (eight weeks). Both the PRime programmes are aimed at preparing the NPQEL candidates by providing practical knowledge and experience in school management and leadership (IAB, 2012).

Contemporary findings through a contextualised and systematic empirical investigation in Malaysia show that there was no significant difference between principals’ leadership practices and principals who have attended the NPQEL (Jones et al., 2015). Evidence also exists on the limitations of the NPQEL to adequately prepare principals to undertake the role (Gurcharan, 2010). These findings counter the mainstream literature on the heavy influence a professional preparation and training has on principals’ leadership (Orr and Orphanos, 2011).

Hallinger (1995, p. 4) warns of “transferring western knowledge without paying attention to local culture”. The NPQEL needs to be tailored to the Malaysian context and its specific needs (Lumby et al., 2008). This has implications on the content of the NPQEL to ensure high-performing school leaders in every school. Undoubtedly more empirical work is required as the reforms outlined in the MEB are further implemented (Jones et al., 2015). Despite the investment in principal preparation and training in Malaysia, the empirical evidence about its contribution towards the prime purpose of equipping all schools with high-performing school leaders remains questionable (Ng, 2017).

Therefore, this research will explore how much principals understand the aspiration of the MEB 2013–2025, their opinion about the NPQEL selection process, their views on the NPQEL programmes, especially its practicality and influence in preparing them as high-performing school leaders in Malaysia.

**Methodology**

A qualitative approach using open-ended questions was employed in this study. The limitations of open-ended questions in providing any causal explanations are fully acknowledged (Krosnick and Presser, 2010). The findings therefore are indicative rather than definitive.

102 principals were selected as samples in the study. The sampling frame for selecting the principals used multiple criteria that included: principals from government-funded secondary schools, principals from schools in Kuala Lumpur and principals who have attended the NPQEL programme either prior to their appointment or during their appointment as principals of their respective schools.

The data analysis is based on 14 open-ended questions distributed to 102 principals. The open-ended questions data was analysed using a four-step approach. Firstly, all data sets were read to become familiar with the data sets. Secondly, constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1965) was utilised to generate key themes and propositions for further investigation and further testing against the data. Thirdly, provisional codes were generated using a qualitative data analysis tool, ATLAS.ti. The code labels were carefully examined, and codes were reduced by merging similar or overlapping codes. Finally, data from the
open-ended questions were synthesised for emerging patterns and further refined to generate emergent themes. The data was reviewed again to look for any new emerging codes.

Findings and discussion
This section begins with the demographic data of the principals, followed by the findings of the themes identified from the data. This study identifies principals who have attended the NPQEL programme either prior to their appointment or during their appointment as principals of their respective schools. Table I summarises the demographic data.

Out of the total 102 respondents, there is an almost equal number of male (52) and female (50) principals. The majority (57) of the principals are above 50 years old. There is one (1) principal with the highest qualification with a PhD, while the majority of them (76) possess bachelor’s degrees. These principals have started their career as teachers, and they have spent varying number of years teaching before they were appointed as senior assistants with the majority (86) of them having spent more than 20 years as teachers.

Furthermore, these principals had held various senior assistant positions before their appointment as principals with the majority (39) spending 6–10 years as senior assistants.

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<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Years working as a senior assistant</td>
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<td>Less than 5 years</td>
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Table I. Descriptive statistics of principals’ demographics (n = 102)
Interestingly, there is one respondent who had been a senior assistant for 20 years before being appointed as a principal. At the time of this study, an overwhelming majority of them (99) have been appointed to their present position as principal for less than five years. The remainder of this article outlines the findings based on the emerging themes from the data with a subsequent discussion of the implications. The section begins with the analysis of how much principals understand the aspiration of the MEB 2013–2025, followed by their opinion about the NPQEL selection process and programme, especially its practicality and influence in preparing them as high-performing school leaders.

Malaysia education blueprint (MEB)

(1) Knowledge of the MEB.

From the principals’ data (P1-P102)[1], 59 per cent (60 principals) of the principals have not read the MEB as compared to 41 per cent (42 principals) of them who reported to have read it. Principals who read the MEB shared their thoughts on the most significant point of the MEB, the focus on student outcomes as shared by Principal 2:

Students need to be equipped with required skills and knowledge in line with current needs. Students (have to be) nurtured with the Malaysian culture of respect, multisocial (skills), caring and love (P2)

Principals further described the MEB as a good plan and that the 11 shifts are meant to transform and improve the country’s education system.

A comprehensive educational development plan aimed to bring the country’s education to a level where the quality is comparable with that of other developed countries and not at the bottom third in the league table. What is important is the effectiveness, impact and outcome (P39)

Among the important matters in the MEB are the 11 shifts, 5 system aspirations, 6 student aspirations and we must know the 3 transformational waves until 2025 (P18).

The common understanding among principals is that the MEB is focused on improving student outcomes and highlights the process of improvement for the education system.

(2) Aspiration of the MEB.

Principals were asked their views and perception on the Shift 5 aspiration in the MEB of ensuring high-performing school leaders in every school. Almost all of the principals believed there is a connection between high-performing leadership and improved student outcome, albeit in general terms.

It is most appropriate that Shift 5 ensures high performing leaders are placed in every school as a means to improve student achievement (P33)

The principals further mentioned a specific leadership style, instructional leadership that they believe leads to high student achievement.

The excellence of a school depends on effective instructional leadership. (P87)

Shift 5 is about to ensure high performing school leaders in every school. It means that instructional leadership is indeed compulsory for every schools. (P22)

It is appropriate that an instructional leader lead the school to inculcate teamwork in order to achieve the aspiration of the country’s education. (P36)

Instructional leaders have a strong impact on students’ learning outcomes (Bendikson et al., 2012). Principals in this study are aware of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MOE, 2013) aspirations on instructional leaders who can transform the environment and raise student outcomes in their
Few principals have reservations on the MEB aspirations citing a lack of understanding and its demanding nature on the principal coupled with a lack of incentives:

I believe that Shift 5 in the education Blueprint is holistically noble but the perception by the people who carry it out seems ambiguous and at times off track. (P3)

It is a good call but too high demand on the role and responsibility of the principal but without extra reward. (P77)

Despite the few reservation, most of the principals are in support of the MEB aspiration and specifically identified instructional leadership as the best practice they believe leads to high student achievement.

**NPQEL programme**

(1) Selection into NPQEL programme.

All the principals had attended the NPQEL programmes either before their appointment as principals or during their term as principals. However, a handful of the principals argued that it is insufficient to depend only on NPQEL because experience is very important to a principal as the leader of the school.

The selection of high performing principals need to take into account their experiences as senior assistant for co-curricular, senior assistant for students’ affairs and senior assistant for academic in addition to the NPQEL. If there is no such combination, it is very difficult for the principal to address challenges in schools because of lack of experience. Many young new principals only have the NPQEL certificates and face difficult problems in their schools. (P64)

In the same vein, there are principals who cautioned that only those who are really interested should apply and attend the NPQEL programme as it is a very intensive and a challenging programme. Hence, they feel that the State Education Department (JPN) should play a more prominent role in both the selection procedure and the evaluation of the NPQEL candidates at the end of the programme so that only suitable candidates are selected and that those who completed the programme are sufficiently trained to be high-performing leaders.

The principal (candidate) must go through the NPQEL training and evaluation and vetted by the State Education Department. (P77)

Others felt that the NPQEL programme is very intensive and challenging and the candidates selected for the NPQEL programme should have personal qualities to ensure that they benefit from the programme. Qualities such as physically fit, resilient, good communication skills, competent, leadership experience (have held senior assistant positions), knowledgeable and genuinely interested in becoming a principal are deemed important criteria for a stringent selection of suitable candidates. As a result, the process and procedure for the selection of suitable candidates need to be assessed further, and this is reflected clearly further.

The selection criteria is noble but the process might not be perfect. A true leader is not someone who is ambitious and passes a course, then get appointed to head a school. School heads need to be people who are passionate about education and who have experience from the bottom plus they need to be dynamic individuals who are compassionate besides being fair in decision making. School heads need also be visionaries. (P3)

(2) Benefits from the NPQEL programme.

All the principals agree that the NPQEL programme is beneficial to prospective principals and current principals and that the NPQEL should be made mandatory to those who have ambitions to be principals one day. They all concur on the fact that the NPQEL programme
provides leadership knowledge in the forms of basic leadership skills, leadership theories, best practices of high-performing principals, guidance and exposure to the leadership position in schools. They felt that the NPQEL programme is a good leadership preparatory programme, and it provides the values, training and guidance.

NPQEL should be mandatory because school heads can apply (the content) before they are appointed and they be given responsibilities and this will reduce the “trial and error”. (P40)

The NPQEL is one course that provides very good exposure to future school principals. There is much knowledge to be obtained and very useful for practice (P86)

The NPQEL teaches and expose those basic (knowledge) that principals should have. (P11).

The NPQEL is very focused and must be continued so that leaders are trained and knowledgeable. (P70)

Leadership preparation of school leaders has to be mapped out according to the MEB (Jones et al., 2015). The development of high-quality leadership and building leadership capacity is an essential pre-requisite for successful school transformation and better system improvement (Barber et al., 2010). While all principals agree that the NPQEL programme provided the knowledge needed to be a school leader, there is a substantial number of them who believe that the NPQEL provided more than the basic and technical knowledge of leadership. The programme is helpful in other ways by building their confidence, motivation, practical skills and provided the latest information that enabled them to be role models in their schools.

It is very helpful in grooming me to be what I am today. Only two months and I can and have done so much. Can’t wait for new term to start. (P68)

Undoubtedly more professional development is required for current principals if the reforms outlined in the MEB are to be implemented (Jones et al., 2015). There are suggestions that the NPQEL be extended as a continuous professional development for current principals. The call for providing such courses to current principals is based on the rationale that principals should not be only prepared at the initial stage but also developed throughout their career with constant support in the form of monitoring and in-services courses designed in the style of the NPQEL programme.

Excellent job by IAB. Should call the principals for refresher courses every now and then and also follow through their performance. (P77).

(3) Experiences from the NPQEL programme.

The responses from the principals were varied when they were asked what were their experiences with the NPQEL programme. Principals shared they had gained knowledge and leadership skills. Special mentions were made to the PRIME and IMMERSION programmes where principals found them useful as these two provided real-life situations in which they could learn from and relate to. Both the PRime Residency and Immersion programmes were able to provide practical knowledge and experience to principals in school management and leadership (IAB, 2012).

PRIME enable us to link directly with our responsibilities which we have to shoulder. (P95).

PRIME and IMMERSION are very effective in providing me the spirit and confidence to be a leader to lead the school. (P7)

PRIME and IMMERSION activities are useful as a resource and guide for me to lead and manage schools. (P14).
However, a number of the principals felt that despite the benefits of the NPQEL programme, it was stressful, tough, intense and a burden to them. The biggest struggle was the e-learning sessions and writing of reports.

A very tough course which required your time, energy and apart from that... support from those who are so dear to you. (P81)

NPQEL... very challenging especially in answering the e-learning and preparing the reports. (P73)

(4) Practicality of NPQEL.

The principals considered the management and managerial aspects of the NPQEL programme as a practical approach. They listed financial management at the top followed by strategic planning, problem-solving and leadership and management skills.

Knowledge on financial management is very important because every cent from the government spent must be accounted for. (P102).

Strategic planning is considered to be important because the principals believed that it is related to the setting of the vision and mission of the school and provides a way forward.

Strategic planning... (provide) a helicopter view. Plan big, deep and long,... It is important cause now I have the tools and means to move forward. (P68).

The majority of the principals were of the opinion that the importance placed on leadership qualities such as confidence, competency, communication skills, time and stress management, resilience and management of change was immensely influential on their leadership skills.

With the exposure (to the NPQEL), firstly, I am more confident in carrying out my duties... Secondly, I am more mentally resilient and able to be a role model to my staff and thirdly, the opportunity to learn from others during the practical part of the programme. (P20)

(5) Influence of the NPQEL.

Evidence exists on the limitations of the NPQEL to adequately prepare principals to undertake the role of school leaders (Gurcharan, 2010). Another study by Jones et al. (2015) shows that there was no significant difference between principals’ leadership practices and principals who have attended the NPQEL. In this study, 21 principals testified they had changed their leadership styles towards instructional leadership upon completion of the NPQEL programme. These findings match the mainstream literature on the heavy influence a professional preparation and training has on principals’ leadership styles and practices (Orr and Orphanos, 2011).

Interestingly, a few principals believed they were instructional leaders even before attending the NPQEL programme. What led those principals to believe that they are instructional leaders are varied: the use of data, their ability to motivate their subordinates and possessing a mission and vision for the school, provide a lot of guidance and instructions on every single matter, the ability to manage human capital and teamwork in the school. This reflected the principals’ interpretation of instructional leadership as varied and wide-ranging.

Instructional leadership is based on data analysis and current issues. (P70)

I have changed my leadership style after the NPQEL programme. I am more responsible towards the organization, academic progress and development of the physical part of the school. (P11).

I have changed my leadership style. I walk around the school. Observe and be patient. Whatever I do I must proceed slowly. (P94)
Nevertheless, the NPQEL programme is reported to have made them changed for the better in terms of being more confident as an instructional leader.

(6) Leading post-NPQEL.

The NPQEL central objectives are to equip all principals with the knowledge, management skills and leadership practices to meet the current challenges of leading a school (Jones et al., 2015; Anthony and Hamdan, 2010). However, after NPQEL, despite principals being more confident to lead their schools, more than half of them reported that they were not optimistic in improving their schools. Reasons provided varied such as low student numbers, students are from low social economic status background, unidentified problems of the school and the need for more time.

It is not easy to improve our school as its SKM (national primary school) and the number of enrolment does not increase much each year. So there are not many students that we can carry out our co-curricular (activities). (P22)

No because the students in school are children of farmers and from the interior. (P24)

No, because need more time to understand how the school operate and change the culture of the school. (P30)

Principals who showed optimism in leading school improvement believed that they could do so through teamwork, strategic planning and detailed management of all aspects of the school.

Yes will improve when I have implemented the complete strategic planning. (P66)

Yes, when work together with all staff members of the school to improve school achievement. (P38)

Sure will improve in the near future. Make detailed plans in all aspects which cover discipline, academic and co-curriculum. (P6)

The MEB promises that the Ministry will ensure individualised professional development support for every principal to address the challenges of transforming their schools (MOE, 2013). The findings presented earlier reveal information that represents the principals’ knowledge and their thoughts of the MEB aspirations. The analysis further provided crucial perspectives from the principals on how the NPQEL programmes benefitted them, its practicality, influence and their opinion about the selection process. Although information on principals’ experiences from the NPQEL Programme and leading post-NPQEL was obtained, it is important to note that the analysis was based totally on their perspective and there are no inputs from the NPQEL providers.

Implications

There are three implications for future research and empirical investigation arising from this small-scale, indicative study. Firstly, more detailed, fine-grained empirical work is necessary, particularly concerning the aspirations of the MEB in producing high-performing school leaders in Malaysia. Secondly, while it could be deduced that the NPQEL programme brings much benefit to the principals, this does not imply that this particular programme is the only way principals develop their leadership practices to lead their schools. The findings rather suggest that experience of the principals while they were teachers and senior assistants could have a greater impact on their leadership development (Harris, et al., 2017). The views of these principals, it is suggested, are worth probing and exploring in future empirical studies.

Thirdly, the data from this study highlighted that guidance and learning from superiors that the sample principals have worked with would have affected their leadership
development as school leaders. Good leaders could be their role models who would impact greatly on their apprenticeship towards headship/principalship and bad leaders could equally impact on the learning of the teachers by making conscious efforts not to emulate the toxic ways of their principals when they become leaders themselves (Adams et al., 2018).

In summary, the evidence from this study points to the fact that NPQEL, the principal leadership preparation programme in Malaysia, has adequately prepared principals towards instructional leadership in line with the MEB aspirations to ensure high-performing school leaders in every school. The remaining challenge, however, is to ensure that all principals in Malaysia fully embrace all aspects of the MEB aspirations in ways that contribute directly to school and system improvement.

Note
1. 102 Principals’ responses from open-ended questions (P1-102).

References


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