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Principal Preparation and Professional Development in Malaysia: Exploring Key Influences and Current Practice

Corinne Jacqueline Perera, Donnie Adams and Vasu Muniandy

I have never seen a good school with a poor principal, or a poor school with a good principal. I have seen unsuccessful schools turn around into successful schools and regrettably outstanding schools slide rapidly into decline. In each case, the rise or fall could be readily traced to the quality of the principal.  

Fred M. Hechinger, Former Education Editor of The New York Times

Malaysian Education

The national education system in Malaysia has undergone extreme changes and development in response to its evolving education policies and national aspirations that have grown over time. Educational priorities are focused on improving the quality of education, to attain the objective of the nation in becoming a fully developed country by the year 2020, as envisaged by Vision 2020 (United Nations Report, 2005). As such, schools have to move in tandem with these changes and raise their performance.
In 1999, when Malaysia first participated in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the average student score exceeded the international average score, placing Malaysia in the forefront (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012). However, in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 Malaysia stood at the bottom one-third of the average student score (NST, 2012; World Bank Report, 2013). Given the cleft in this international assessment, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) is looking into improving the future scores of TIMSS and PISA, within the next 15 years, with the aim of achieving the top-three placing in these international assessments. As such, the Malaysian educational system is under enormous pressure to raise the quality of learning, teaching and academic achievements in schools (Jantan and Khuan, 2004)

One of the prime concerns of the MOE is to realize the goals of Vision 2020 in making Malaysia the centre of educational excellence in the region (Ahmad, 2004). To this end, the MOE has established the National Education Blueprint 2013–2025, (referred to thereafter as ‘NEB’) as a means of monitoring the progress of the education system against international benchmarks (MOE, 2008).

National Education Blueprint 2013–2025

The NEB represents the government’s initiatives to formulate a comprehensive transformational plan, identified by its ‘11 shifts’ to elevate the country’s education system (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012; The STAR, 2013). It is an agenda that outlines policy initiatives for implementation over a span of 13 years, sequencing its transformation process to occur in three strategic ‘waves’ of change.

The NEB has mapped out a priority list of commitments for nationwide educational reforms, with reform efforts being directed towards reconstructing educational conceptions to suit local capacity. According to the NEB, principal leadership ranks high on the list
of priorities for school reforms and the role of principal leadership has become all the more essential. The NEB defines an extended meaning of what leaders have to do in the future:

School leaders will be asked to perform to the high expectations set and agreed to for their school. They will need to stay open to new ways of working, to involve the community in school improvement, and to serve as coaches and trainers to build capabilities in their staff as well as for other schools. (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012)

Among the major impacts envisioned by the NEB, ‘Shift 5’ elaborates on enriching the quality of principal leadership in schools. It highlights the strategic approaches aimed at equipping all schools with high-performing principals who will adopt sharper accountability for improving student outcomes. Outstanding principals will be selected to serve at low-performing schools where their expertise can be leveraged on. They are also encouraged to take up these positions in lieu of faster career progression opportunities and attractive revised incentives provisioned for them through a New Principal Career Package designed to assist principals achieve their full potential towards delivering higher student outcomes (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012).

Taking the lead from (Barker, 2008; Bush, 2008; Fullan, 2004; Hallinger and Heck, 2011; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000), large-scale reforms are adaptive challenges that require leaders to understand the critical role they play, as well as become more efficient in leading their organizations towards continuous sustainability. Likewise, as professional leaders, Malaysian school principals are supposed to understand the nation’s philosophy of education surrounding the NEB and communicate the philosophy, goals and strategies aimed at stepping up the quality of education.

Evidence shows that school leaders, particularly the principals, do play a significant role in improving their school outcomes, supporting the premise that principals are responsible for promoting the learning environment in their schools (Ghani et al., 2011; Jainabee and Jamelaa, 2011; Karim, 1989; Khuan et al., 2004; Marzuki,
1997; Marzuki and Ghani, 2007; Ahmad et al., 1999; Sharma, 2010; Tahir and Kaman, 2011; Tee et al., 2010). These studies place the principal in the highest order of priority and regard a principal’s practices as the main contributing factor in creating effective schools.

Principal Leadership

In the Malaysian school setting, those in formal leadership positions include the school principal, the senior assistants, senior subject teachers, members of the Parent–Teacher Association Board, administrative staff holding positions of responsibility and other people of influential authority (Bajunid et al., 1996). Although a range of leadership roles exist in many schools, the principal remains at the apex of leadership in a school’s social system (Tee et al., 2010). In Malaysian public schools, ‘headmaster or headmistress’ refers to the heads of primary schools, while ‘principal’ refers to the head of secondary schools (Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid, 2000). However, in the scope of this chapter, the term ‘school leader’ refers specifically to the heads and principals of both primary and secondary public schools in Malaysia.

There is an overall concern that Malaysian principals need to reskill and deploy effective strategies that can drive student outcomes. However, there is also a growing emphasis and general consensus among policy-makers that a school’s outcome is the responsibility of the school principal. Increasingly, therefore, initiatives aimed at attaining educational excellence are locating the prime responsibility of the principal leadership.

This changing role of the principal strongly emphasizes the importance of effective principal leadership in bringing about greater achievement in students’ academic performances (Leithwood and Mascall, 2008; Sim, 2011). ‘Key Performance Indicators’ and the ‘School Improvement Performance Index’ are used to measure academic results such as the number of ‘As’ obtained and the ‘passing
rate percentage’ (Tee et al., 2010). With academic measures being the prime concern, schools in Malaysia are now reinforcing the principal’s role in stimulating academic success (Tee et al., 2010).

In the local context, however, some findings reinforce that an effective principal leadership is the most important role that determines students’ academic excellence and that schools with a positive learning environment can enhance academic excellence (Mahmood, 1993; Suraya and Yunus, 2012). In the context of attaining excellence in education, active support and endorsement of school leadership is required for the implementation of planned change. Essentially, a principal has always been looked upon invariably as the school’s leader, whose role in school leadership is to steer the school towards achieving excellence (Nor et al., 2008; Suraya and Yunus, 2012).

Roles and Responsibilities of Malaysian Principals

The “Competency Standards for Malaysian School Principals” (IAB, 2010) outlines the general duties and responsibilities of Malaysian school principals. Their main job includes the implementation of educational programmes stipulated by the MoE, supervision of the teaching–learning processes, monitoring of discipline, supervision of co-curricular activities and their supportive involvement in the Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) and with the Board of Governors.

A study that examined 221 Malaysian principals on their level of leadership and management competency discovered that these principals possessed relatively low leadership and management competencies (Fook, 2008). The competencies of principals’ skills in recognizing individual and cultural differences and appreciating staff contributions were at the lowest mean level. The co-curriculum management competencies were comparatively lower than the competencies in curriculum planning and implementation. This indicates an imbalance in the focus on co-curriculum activities in schools.
Overall, the principals were discovered to possess a moderate level of competencies in curriculum and co-curriculum management.

In another study (Sharma, 2010), 30 principals from Malaysian national schools were rated by 300 teachers who were reported to have at least six years of experience with their respective principals. Findings from this study revealed that the teachers’ perception of their principals’ leadership was positive and that their leadership competencies were perceived as moderate.

In June 2013, a pilot study was conducted at three of Malaysia’s best-performing schools in the town of Kuching, Sarawak. Three principals were interviewed to find out what their daily leadership practices were, what influenced these practices and what their views were on effective school leadership. These principals also shared their leadership training experiences and the impact of this training on their professional learning. The interim findings from this pilot study indicate that the leadership styles of these performing principals were largely influenced by their years of practical experience as teachers and then as principals. As for training courses, these principals had not undergone any formal training in preparation for principalship like the National Professional Qualifications for Headship (NPQH) or National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) but had participated in workshops and short professional development courses.

It was interesting to note that despite having undergone fairly rudimentary training courses in principalship, these principals spoke of the various leadership styles—a combination of transformational, instructional and distributed styles. The findings from this research suggests that these are outstanding principals who are forward-thinking and have a considerable impact on their school’s academic outcomes and that their practices have not been influenced directly by any training courses.

Similarly, another study (Amin and Abdul Razak, 2008) conducted in Malaysia showed that leadership training had no direct relationship on the quality of school leadership and management. However, others argue strongly in support of the benefits gained by school leaders in acquiring improved knowledge, skills and attitude (Nur Anuar et al., 2006; Ruhaya et al., 2006).
Principals’ Leadership Development

In Malaysia, until recently, formal training was not a prerequisite to be appointed as a principal. The appointment of principals used to be based on their seniority and job performance as teachers (Jamilah Ahmad and Yusof Boon, 2011). Most principals held a teaching certificate at the onset of their appointment and it was customary that principals underwent a leadership course only after they held office as a principal (Jamilah Ahmad and Yusof Boon, 2011).

In 1999, the NPQH was introduced by the MoE to prepare principals to face the challenges of running a school (Singh, 2009). This was the first professional qualification (Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid, 2000) designed as a principal’s preparation programme specifically for aspiring school principals who wanted to be appointed to headship (Anthony and Hamdan, 2010). The NPQH was then regarded as an entry-level qualification for newly appointed principals. Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), or in English the National Institute of Educational Management and Leadership (NIEML), played an influential role in developing the curriculum for NPQH, which was adapted from the UK model (Singh, 2009).

In 2009, the NPQH was changed to NPQEL and was offered as a specialized school leadership course for teachers who aspired to be principals. The NPQEL began as a five-month in-service training programme, tailored to equip ‘next-in-line’ principals with the knowledge, skills and abilities to meet educational challenges and perform their expected roles (Anthony and Hamdan, 2010).

In July 2013, the MoE announced that as of 2014, only teachers with NPQEL qualifications could be appointed as principals in Malaysian public schools (IAB Report, 2013). As England dropped the mandatory nature of the NPQH, Malaysia did the opposite. It has now become mandatory for a new, first-time principal to acquire the NPQEL certification before assuming his or her position as a public school principal.

In line with the MoE’s initiatives to raise the quality of education through school leadership, the IAB has also been commissioned to develop high-impact training programmes that can give
Corinne Jacqueline Perera, Donnie Adams and Vasu Muniandy

rise to a generation of highly professional school leaders in Malaysia. Through professional leadership trainings, school leaders can gain more insight into and understand the complexities of school leadership in new and more meaningful ways.

‘Managing Educational Leadership Talent’ (MELT), framework, introduced by IAB is an initiative to refine leadership skills, attitude and practices to become more effective and respected school leaders (Anthony and Hamdan, 2010). In their effort to improve the assessment of training needs for school leaders, IAB developed a competency needs assessment tool, called the KOMPAS that was developed through the ‘High Impact School Leaders Competency’ research conducted in 2008 to determine the competencies required by school leaders for their training and development needs. The national ‘Competency Needs Index’ is published annually to provide the level of training needs required by school leaders, so that they can plan their training ahead of time, and to build a professional learning community (Harris and Jones, 2010, 2011; Khair Mohamad Yusof, 2011).

In 2007, the MoE signed a memorandum of understanding with King’s College, London, and appointed 30 excellent principals to undergo leadership training at the College for two months (EPRD, 2007). These courses were designed specifically to cater to the training needs of Malaysian school leaders, as they were challenged with increasing educational accountabilities and had to keep pace with various emerging phenomena in the teaching and learning arenas (Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid, 2000; Jainabee and Jamelaa, 2011; Rosnarizah Abdul Halim, 2008).

Recognition and Awards for Principals

In line with the nation’s aspirations to be a knowledge-based economy through the pursuit of educational excellence by the year 2020, the MoE has introduced a number of awards (Khuan et al., 2004; Nur Ain Wong Abdullah, 2009; Rahimah Haji Ahmad, 1998). Since 1991, the ‘National Aspiring School Award’ has been
introduced and presented to schools that exhibit overall excellent quality management. This award was a form of recognition and a token of appreciation to schools for their achievement towards the development of education (Wan Chik Rahman Wan Din, 2002).

Beginning 1998, the ‘National Excellent Principal Award’ was introduced to reward deserving school principals who displayed excellent leadership qualities as a result of their achievement in attaining ‘Aspiring School Awards’ (Chan and Gurnam, 2009) and for their added compliance to the established quality standards (Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid, 2000). Recipients of School Awards are generally passionate about achieving these awards and are thus driven with increased team spirit to stay competitive and maintain their school’s rankings (Tee et al., 2010).

In 2005, in an effort to sustain school excellence and exceptionally outstanding school leadership, excellent principals were reappointed for further promotion and were awarded the designation of a ‘super principal’ (Chan and Gurnam, 2009). Principals with effective leadership and management competencies were awarded this achievement to enhance their professional self-confidence and to continue leading their schools efficiently.

**Effective Leadership: Leading Change in the 21st Century**

Findings from various studies also show that preparation does make a difference to the leadership quality and school outcomes (Bush, 2009; Bush and Oduro, 2006; Lumby et al., 2008). Although the need for effective leadership preparation is widely accepted, the kind of leader ideal for the 21st century schools needs to be well rounded, confident and able to engage all stakeholders for the benefit of learners (Bush, 2011).

The 21st century principals will be challenged and expected to lead schools that are far different from those today. Therefore, in preparation for tomorrow’s challenges, the role of a principal needs to be redefined with central priority being given to improving
student learning. Recognizing the raised expectations for principals and acknowledging the centrality of leadership for student learning, principals should learn how to enrich their experiences while mobilizing their skills and competencies to creatively resolve school-based conflicts. With the right combination of knowledge and experience, principals should also strive to improve their personality and attitude, and persevere towards developing new knowledge and refining their behaviour to be more effective and respected leaders. In that way, the aspiration of the Malaysian Blueprint to produce high-quality leaders would be fulfilled.

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