

Instructional Leadership: A Systematic Review of Malaysian Literature 1995-2015

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the research on school leadership in Malaysia, specifically the role of school principals as instructional leaders. The authors describe the purpose of the review, the methodology and conceptual framework guiding the review process and findings. The authors adopted an exploratory approach to reviewing the Malaysian literature on school leadership and management. This literature review examined the personal antecedents affecting instructional leadership, instructional leadership practices affecting the schools and the school outcomes in the Malaysian school context. We found inconsistent picture of instructional leadership in Malaysia. The review also identifies limitations in the research methodology and findings evident in Malaysian literature. We also compare and contrast the findings on instructional leadership from studies using quantitative and qualitative approaches. The paper concludes by advocating for using variety of methods like explanatory, exploratory, mixed method and 360 evaluations research for future studies of instructional leadership.

Keywords: *instructional leader, literature review, school leaders, school principal Malaysian principals*

Introduction

During the last three decades, scholarship in educational leadership has expanded from a largely Western discipline to a global enterprise. Educational reforms undertaken throughout the world have stimulated scholars to more closely examine the relationship between school leadership and improved organizational performance (Caldwell, 1998; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Mulford & Silins, 2009; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). In particular, attention has been paid to the features or characteristics of school leaders that lead to improved outcomes and leadership for learning (Hallinger, 2013), as well as the leadership qualities and capacities of individuals holding this position (Sharma, 2011). Scholars from North America (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004), the United Kingdom (Bell, Bolam, & Cubillo, 2003; Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Harris, Leithwood, Gu, Brown, Ahtaridou & Kingston, 2011; Southworth, 2002), Europe (Huber, 2003; Kruger, Witziers, &

Slegers, 2007; Thoonens *et al.*, 2012), and Asia Pacific (Feng, 2003; Hallinger & Lee, 2013; Hao & Wu, 2011; Lee, 1999; Rahimah, 1998; Pan & Chen, 2012; Robinson *et al.*, 2008) have demonstrated increasing interest in issues related to the development and practice of school leadership and its effects (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013a, 2013b).

Within this body of scholarship, an emerging challenge centres on the need to more clearly distinguish the “culturally imposed boundaries” of the knowledge base in educational leadership and management (e.g., Bajunid, 1996; Cheng, 1995; Hallinger, 2013; Hallinger & Bryant, 2013b). Scholars have voiced the need to better understand how the institutional and cultural contexts of different educational systems influence the practices of school leaders and their effects on the school and its students (Bajunid, 1996; Belchetz & Leithwood, 2007). In particular, scholars in East Asia have asserted that local policy and practice related to school leadership should be based not only on findings from the predominantly “Western” knowledge base, but also on empirical knowledge grounded in the region’s own societies (Hallinger and Bryant 2013a, 2013b).

The issuance of this challenge in the mid-1990s was an acknowledgment of the relative scarcity of empirical research on school leadership in East Asian countries (e.g., Bajunid, 1996; Cheng, 1995; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Hallinger, 1995). Subsequently, over the ensuing 20 years, the expansion of higher education systems in concert with a strengthening policy focus on school leadership in the region’s school systems have resulted in the gradual emergence of a new generation of empirical studies of school leadership (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013b). Consequently, as Hallinger and Bryant (2013a, 2013b) have noted, there is a need to review the indigenous literatures that have begun to develop on school leadership in the region’s societies.

This trend is highly relevant for the Malaysian culture, which has a relatively strong tradition of focusing on school leadership. For example, the Institute Aminuddin Baki (IAB) was founded in the early 1980s by the Ministry of Education charged with developing the leadership and management capacities of Malaysians school leaders. Over the years, the IAB has functioned as a key organization translating international knowledge of education management for implementing training programs and improving the administrative practice of Malaysian school leaders. At the turn of the millennium, the functions of IAB were complemented by the formation of the Institute for the Principalship (now referred to as the Institute of Educational Leadership) at the University of Malaya. This unit also has actively promoted scholarship among Malaysia’s school leaders. The research and training efforts of the IAB and IEL have been supplemented further by Master’s degree programs in educational leadership at a variety of other higher education institutions located throughout Malaysia. Together, these higher education institutions have generated a considerable amount of research pertaining to school management and leadership in Malaysian schools.

Nonetheless, at the present time, most of this research remains hidden from the view of the international community of scholars. For example, in their analysis of the Asian literature appearing in core journals on educational administration, management and leadership between 1994 and 2014, Hallinger and Bryant (2013b) were only able to identify eight articles published from or about school leadership in Malaysia. This, obviously, represents only a fraction of the extant knowledge about school leadership and management, which is why we characterize this resource as “hidden”. A primary reason for the lack of international publications of Malaysian leadership is explained, at least in part, by the fact that doctoral students complete their degrees in the Malay language. Therefore, their research articles appear in Malay language journals published domestically, rather than in other outlets in the Asia Pacific region and beyond.

This gap in the international literature on school leadership practice in Malaysia provides the rationale for this paper in which we provide an exploratory review of English and Malay research publications on school leadership. This review covers both English and Malay language publications and includes graduate student theses, selected Malay language education journals, and international journals between the years 1994 and 2015.

Our review pays attention on the following research questions:

1. What are the most common topics studied by Malaysian scholars in educational leadership and management?
2. What are the most common methodologies used by Malaysian scholars in educational leadership and management?
3. What are key findings of this research base?

Examining the national literature in Malaysia on educational leadership and management will contribute to current efforts to understand the extent and manner in which leadership practices are broadly generalizable or contextually limited (Bajunid, 1996; Hallinger, Walker, & Bajunid, 2005). Our findings can influence future research efforts in more productive directions. This type of local grounding of the literature will, over time, also assist domestic policymakers in interpreting the meaning of global research findings for their particular socio-institutional environments (Hallinger, 2011a, 2011b; Hallinger & Bryant, 2013a).

Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory approach to reviewing the Malaysian literature on school leadership and management as cited by (Hallinger, 2013a, 2013b). Such approach is suitable in identifying patterns based on the integrating quantitatively the results from various studies and for literature review in its formative stage (Hallinger 2013). Our assessment of the Malaysian literature suggested the national literature in educational leadership and management to be in formative stage.

Focus of the Review

This review examined the leadership role of school principals in Malaysian. As noted above, the literature on principal leadership has grown over the past decade. Moreover, consistent with global trends, we have witnessed a particular focus on instructional leadership in Malaysian school systems as instructional leadership remained the most common topics of study.

Search Procedures

We conducted our literature search on instructional leadership in Malaysia in three stages. These stages reflected an “exhaustive search strategy” (Hallinger, 2013) in which we sought to identify the highly relevant sources which we found to be adequate. We limited our search to the years between 1994 and 2015. The rationale for examining this period was quite pragmatic. Our initial search of the literature located the first Malaysian publication on instructional leadership as appearing in 1994. Therefore, we set this as the starting date for our review. Our search included both sources written in Malay as well as publications in English to achieve a broader view on instructional leadership, since the Malaysian literature is somewhat limited. As noted earlier, Hallinger and Bryant (2013b) identified eight articles from Malaysia published during the period of our review and none of these articles examined instructional leadership. Thus, to pay attention on reviewing of the literature only on English language publications would not present a real picture of this literature.

The first stage of our search involved examining electronic databases using the descriptor “instructional leadership”. We looked for papers that had been published in journals or conference proceedings. Our search also included students’ dissertations located in electronic format. Articles written in Malay and published in Malaysia were located by running the searches using the database of The Education Planning and Research Department of Ministry of Education, Malaysia. To locate articles written in English, we used the same term plus the descriptor “Malaysia” in search engines including ERIC, ProQuest, and Google Scholar as well as core journals on administration, management and leadership in education in Asia Pacific and beyond. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Asia Pacific Educational Researcher, Asia Pacific Educational Review. Educational Administration Quarterly, Educational

Management Administration and Leadership, International Journal of Educational Management, Journal of Educational Administration, International Journal of Leadership in Education, and School Leadership and Management. However, we could not locate any single article on instructional leadership in Malaysia in any of these journals. While our search returned over one hundred writings in Malay, and 12 in English.

Our second stage involved, the checking of the reference sections of the studies for identification of the other relevant studies. We obtained a list of less than a hundred references that met our criteria. The third stage consisted of selecting studies from those that had been collected in the first and second stages, using several criteria. First, we only selected papers that were empirical studies. Second, we limited our focus on empirical studies on principal instructional leadership, not instructional leadership of other school leaders like vice principals and teacher leaders. Third, we included qualitative studies as well as quantitative studies that involved questionnaire distribution to principals and teachers. We did not, however, include studies that involved the development of indicators to evaluate principals as instructional leaders. Fourth, we only selected studies when the full paper was accessible. Fifth, any study available in both dissertation and journal article form, we removed the dissertation from our list to substitute it with the journal article. Therefore, our final list of empirical studies that was reviewed in this paper contained were only 56 studies written in Malay or English.

Study Sample

Our search revealed that interest in principal instructional leadership in Malaysia began in the 1990s and the first published study on principal instructional leadership in Malaysia was conducted in 1995. In 1990s, a total of 12 studies were done regarding principal instructional leadership. A total of 12 studies were done between 2000-2005; while from 2006 to 2015, another 32 have been conducted. It indicates, the studies on instructional leadership to be an active topic of research in Malaysia. We also noted the distribution of journal articles/conference proceedings versus graduate research papers (i.e., master's and doctoral studies). Since other research reviews have questioned the quality of graduate research papers (e.g., Hallinger, 2013), we decided to exclude these sources. The distribution of studies by time and source is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of studies by time and source

Time period School level	1995- 1999	2000- 2005	2006- 2015	Total	Percentage
Journal Article/Proceedings	2	2	13	17	30.55%
Thesis/Dissertations	10	10	19	39	69.65%
Total	12	12	32	56	100.0%

Finally, we identified 13 studies which met our criteria of conceptual framework stated below. These 13 studies included 5 proceedings and 8 journal articles. Only 2 conference proceedings and 4 journal articles were in English.

Data Extraction

After identifying the studies to be included in this review, we proceeded with reading the studies and extracting relevant data for analysis. We observed that most of the studies were quantitative. These studies used Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) developed by Hallinger (1990) as cited in Hallinger (2005) and translated in Malay. All these quantitative studies used survey methods taking into consideration instructional leadership as independent variable except one study by Maulod, Piaw, Ahmed and Alias (2015) who have taken instructional leadership as dependent variable. Only two studies were done using qualitative approach and none using mixed methods. We developed several Excel spreadsheets and tables to track the numerical and raw text information. For quantitative studies, our tables and spreadsheets included information on the, sample sizes, main variables (independent, mediating, and dependent,) various dimensions of instructional leadership, quantitative analysis methods used, and main findings. For qualitative studies, our tables and spreadsheets included information on the subjects studied, research methods, conceptualizations of instructional leadership, research questions, and major findings.

Data Analysis

To make our review more meaningful, our analysis consisted of both qualitative and quantitative inquiry. First, we adopted what Hallinger (2013) called a “vote counting” method to summarize results, which involved counting studies using the same methods, the same theoretical and conceptual framework, the same instrument of instructional leadership, and similar results. Second, as patterns emerged, we reread the studies, especially those which involved qualitative research methods, in order to attach meaning to the numerical data. In doing so, we created additional tables and spreadsheets to organize our information, which involved expanded our counting and coding of data.

Conceptual Framework

In order our review to be more systematic and meaningful; the authors adopted the conceptual framework explored by Hallinger (2005), focusing findings on three major domains:

- Effects of personal antecedents on instructional leadership (e.g., gender, training, experience) and school context (e.g., school level, school size, school SES);
- Effects of instructional leadership on the organization (e.g., school mission and goals, expectations, curriculum, teaching, teacher engagement); and
- Direct and indirect effects of instructional leadership on student achievement and a variety of other school outcomes.

Findings for each of these effects are summarized below.

Results

Effects of Personal Antecedents on Instructional Leadership

Our exploration found only one study examining the effects of personal antecedents on instructional leadership. Noor (2005), examined instructional leadership on basis of the effectiveness of the school. Noor's (2005) study compared instructional leadership behaviours of principals working in effective and non-effective schools. He found that principals from effective schools had higher means in all six dimensions of instructional leadership than their counterparts from non-effective schools. However, we could not find any other published work on effects of personal antecedents and other school context.

Effects of Instructional Leadership on the Organization

Six Malaysian studies revealed the various instructional leadership practices of school principals. We observed that scholars tended to describe instructional leadership practices as being low. For instance, the studies by (Abdullah & Kasim, 2011; Abdullah & Wahab, 2007; Ibrahim & Aziz 2014; Sim, 2011; Yusoff, Ahmad, Englecha, & Bakar 2007) have confirmed the lower levels of instructional leadership by principals. In many instances, these principals were found to be proficient at explaining and defining the school goals; however, they tended to not be visible around the school, especially in supervising and evaluating teachers.

Moreover, these findings were consistent with a qualitative case study conducted by Azlin (2004) on the instructional leadership duties performed by a principal. Her findings indicated that the principal's instructional leadership activities were routine, continuous, not planned, and seasonal. The findings also indicated that 66.4 % of

principal's time was spent in meetings, followed by 19.8 % in office related activities, 7.6% in walking around the school, 4.3% in making phone calls, 1.1% in teaching, and 0.07% in observing classroom teaching. This low percentage of instructional supervision by the principal appeared to be a result of attending high number of meetings and performing other official work like preparing reports for Ministry of Education, documentation, replying emails and posts. This finding was fully supported by an exploratory study by Sharma and Kannan (2012) discovered that teachers' perceptions of instructional supervision tended to be non-cooperative, non-continual, and non-beneficial. They observed that instructional supervision in Malaysian schools is a weapon for punishment, rather than a tool for improvement. They further added:

One of the major problems of instructional supervision in Malaysian schools hangs around teachers' feelings on supervision which is carried for wrong reasons. They have blamed supervisors as fault finding persons and many times using inappropriate language. As per researchers' point of view it can be viewed in two perspectives. One the supervisor lacks subject knowledge, which can be covered up by joint supervision by involving subject experts. Secondly the supervisors do not have skills to supervise. As suggested by the teachers it's necessary for supervisors to develop these skills. It's highly recommended that supervisors should undergo training programs on clinical supervision skills and developmental supervision skills. These skills not only would help supervisors to analyse and interpret the instructional observations but also help supervisors to use the appropriate language while discussing the major issues with teachers. Besides would help supervisors to win trust of teachers who in turn would put their sincere efforts towards process of instructional supervision. (Sharma & Kannan, 2012, p. 34)

Effects of Instructional Leadership on School Outcomes

The influence of instructional leadership on outcomes was revealed in several studies in the Malaysian literature. Ibrahim and Aziz (2014) confirmed that the principals' instructional leadership actions were a strong predictor of teacher efficacy and teaching competencies; however, teachers' self-efficacy and teaching competencies had very low impact on students' academic achievement. Abdullah and Wahab (2007) noted the significant impact of principals' instructional leadership behaviour on teachers' instructional techniques, especially supervising and evaluating instruction and providing incentives for teachers, contributing indirectly to students' academic achievement. Similarly, they found teachers' use of instructional tools was strongly influenced by principals' abilities to protect their instructional time and promote their professional development, which ultimately contributes to students' academic achievement. Abdullah and Kasim (2011) reported a strong relationship between the

principals' focus on promoting a learning environment and the affective and behavioral domains of attitude towards change. Taken together, these studies indicate school principals contribute to school effectiveness and student achievement indirectly through their actions to influence what happens in the school and in classrooms and ultimately students' academic achievement. However, these study did not address various issues of school culture, school effectiveness and improvement, professional learning communities and learning climate which were addressed by a range of western studies. All these studies were conducted using instructional leadership as independent or predictor variable. However, a distinguished approach was taken by Maulod, Piaw, Ahmed and Alias (2015) as these scholars tried to establish the relationship between various factors of emotional intelligence and instructional leadership by taking instructional leadership as dependent variable. These scholars found that there is high, significant and positive correlation between three factors of emotional intelligence (relationship management, social awareness and self - awareness) and instructional leadership practices of principals. They also found that all the three factors of emotional intelligence are significant predictors of instructional leadership practices where the dominant predictor is relationship management.

Discussion & Conclusion

From this literature review, we were able to explore a variety of topics on instructional leadership and its effects on a school outcome. We found that principals in Malaysian schools are expected to play role of an instructional leader, they spent more of their time on other administrative duties. This literature review examined the personal antecedents affecting instructional leadership, effects of instructional leadership practices on the organisation, and effects of instructional leadership on school outcomes in the Malaysian school context. We found only one study identifying antecedents (e.g., effective and non-effective schools) affecting instructional leadership effectiveness. We could not identify any single piece of published work that has considered other antecedents (gender, race, locale, school type, teachers' qualification). Such limitations raise important concerns about the nature of our understanding of instructional leadership, as noted by Hallinger (2005):

It is virtually meaningless to study principal leadership without reference to the school context. The context of the school is a source of constraints, resources, and opportunities that the principal must understand and address in order to lead. Contextual variables of interest to principals include student background, community type, organizational structure, school culture, teacher experience and competence, fiscal resources, school size, and bureaucratic and labor features of the school organization. (p. 14)

Although we found a sizeable number of studies examining instructional leadership practices (e.g., Abdullah & Kasim, 2011; Abdulla & Wahab, 2007; Ibrahim & Aziz, 2014; Sim, 2011; Yousoff et.al 2007;), these studies did not provide a clear picture of instructional leadership practices of principals. Some of these studies reported moderate to high levels of instructional leadership in terms of framing school goals and communicating; however, other studies revealed low visibility of principals and low rates of supervising instruction. Several scholars have noted principals' lack of observational skills and interest in providing feedback to teachers as affecting their instructional supervisory tendencies (Azlin, 2005; Sharma & Kannan, 2012). Sharma and Kannan (2012) further argue that instructional leadership may not be the purview of the principal, but should be a distributed effort with different subject experts, similar to the literature published by Western scholars (e.g., Day et al., 2001; Hallinger, 2005; Southworth, 2002). Also, we did discover that instructional leaders had indirect effects on students' academic achievement (Abdullah & Wahab, 2007), teachers' self-efficacy and competencies (Ibrahim & Aziz, 2014), and teachers' attitudes towards change (Abdullah & Kasim, 2012). Finally, we were able to discover a different approach by Maulod et. al., 2015 where they found the various factors of emotional intelligence that effect instructional leadership. However, our systematic review process could not get a complete and consistent picture of instructional leadership practices of principals in Malaysia.

The discrepancies and inconsistent picture of instructional leadership practices in Malaysia raise questions about the methodology used to collect data in the studies we reviewed. There are two key issues with using PIMRS as the primary source of data collection. The first issue is of language. Not only is the instrument written in English and most of the respondents in Malaysian schools are not comfortable with English, but also the translation of the instrument from English to Malay may result in discrepancies in interpretation. Second, data are collected through the principals who are in full control of the responses as the researchers in Malaysia have to handover the survey instrument to principals to get it administered by the teachers and once administered, they need to collect it from principals. While interviewing teachers, the control of principals over data is not significant as interviews are conducted face to face and individually between the researcher and respondent (teacher). Also, most of the studies have not reflected instructional leadership of principals from the perspectives of principals themselves; instead the studies have reflected the perception of teachers on instructional leadership of principals. Hence, it is important to study how these principals actually practice their leadership. We have also observed the dominance of instructional leadership as independent variable except one Maloud et.al, 2015. Our observation led to the fact that all the quantitative studies carried out in Malaysia employed survey method for collecting data and used perspective of one type of respondent teachers alone which leads to biases or prejudices which is main reason for inconsistent picture. Moreover, the nature of data

collected by the researchers in their studies lacked in explaining the statistical accuracy of analysis in most of the studies except in studies conducted by (Abdullah & Kasim, 2012; Maulod, Piaw, Ahmed and Alias (2015). Therefore, we strongly recommend that future studies in school leadership should involve variety of methods which include explanatory, exploratory, mixed methods and even 360 evaluations and should consider variety of respondents like principals, vice principals, teacher leaders , teachers and even students and try to explore the factors that influence principals' instructional leadership practices which is the caveat in Malaysian literature. The studies need to compare responses from the above stated methods in order to generate the true image of nature of instructional leadership carried out in Malaysian schools.

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