

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Elementary school leaders' perceptions of their roles in managing school curriculum: A case study

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The implementation of the Malaysian National Education Blueprint in 2012 has expanded headmasters' responsibilities and roles in managing schools. The goal is to stabilize and strengthen the primary school education system, which brings tremendous pressure to bear on the headmasters charged with managing schools, especially in managing the school curriculum. This article explores the roles of elementary school leaders and their perceptions in managing the school curriculum following the National Education Blueprint. It discusses the knowledge and skills in managing and handling the school curriculum, the aspects of school curriculum and guidelines for effective and efficient curriculum. This study is grounded in pragmatic worldview and concerned with applications and solutions that face educational leaders today. It was conducted in a State of Selangor, Malaysia and involved nine headmasters from nine schools. The findings will make a significant contribution to educational leadership by providing a general understanding of headmasters' roles, leadership and challenges in managing primary schools.

**Key words:** Headmaster leadership, school leadership, educational leadership, educational management.

## INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian national goal of education is to develop a world-class quality education system that will realize the full potential of the individual and fulfill the aspirations of the Malaysian nation (Ministry of Education, 2004a). The principal of each school is considered the most important person needed to accomplish this educational goal. As a leader and manager, the principal is key for school improvement and student achievement (Bernhardt, 2004). School administration under the leadership of a principal requires a variety of skills and competencies related to

leadership, experience teaching and administrative ability. Because the principal plays a vital role in fulfilling the mission of quality education in Malaysia, research needs to be done to identify what constitutes quality leadership for primary Malaysian principal, especially in managing school curriculum, and how their perceptions of their roles aligned with what was written in the National Education Blueprint.

The recognition of the headmasters' leadership role and leadership in managing public primary schools in

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Malaysia was written into the Education Act of 1996. As leaders, headmasters are responsible for ensuring that all students learn (Harun, 2008; Jantan, 2004; Mahmood, 1997). They have the responsibility to lead and to work on school improvement and student achievement.

The objective of this study is to explore the roles of elementary school leaders and their perceptions in managing the school curriculum following the Malaysian National Education Blueprint. It discusses the knowledge and skills in managing and handling the school curriculum, the aspects of school curriculum and guidelines for effective and efficient curriculum.

### Review of the literature

Based on the headmaster competency standard in Malaysia, one of the requirements for being a school leader is having knowledge and skills in managing and handling the school curriculum. Curriculum embraces every planned aspect of a school's educational program (National Middle School Association, 2010). Alias et al. (2008) state that school leaders should ensure that teaching and learning are the priority all the time, supervise the teaching and learning process, and enhance cooperation among all parties for an effective teaching and learning process.

A school headmaster is required to think conceptually and strategically in order to achieve school goals. Four main headmaster roles that lead to school success are planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (Institut Aminuddin Baki, 2006). Headmasters need to spend time on planning and organizing school curriculum and instruction (Stronge, 2007) so they can effectively carry out the functions of curriculum leadership (Portin et al., 2003). Effective headmasters must understand how planning, organizing, leading and controlling are used to achieve school success (Kirk and Jones, 2004).

Headmasters have full responsibility for effective teaching and learning in their schools. In order to successfully develop an effective teaching and learning environment, headmasters must have a vision of what they want the school to become. This vision should be encapsulated within the school curriculum (Grigsby et al., 2010). An effective school curriculum is dependent upon headmaster leadership and the appropriate use of multiple teaching and learning approaches at the school (Davis et al., 2005; National Middle School Association, 2010). It is important that teaching and learning approaches should accommodate diverse skills (National Middle School Association, 2010), attitudes and knowledge (Dolceta, 2011) and discovery learning and just-in-time teaching (Prince and Felder, 2007) in order to meet the national goals of education based on the National Education Philosophy.

Most literatures mentioned about variety of tasks and responsibilities of the school leaders but limited research was found focusing on Malaysian headmaster following

the National Education Blueprint. This study comes from the school leaders' perspective and it filled the gaps in the literature because it continues to mine the existing research on school leaders' roles, responsibilities and leadership in managing school curriculum. The fact that the leadership roles and responsibilities of a school leader rapidly evolving and has been defined in so many ways make the results varies over the years and hard to generalize.

### METHODOLOGY

This case study focused on participants' perspectives. A case study is based on real life context (Creswell, 1994) and focuses on understanding the dynamics present within a single setting (Eisenhardt, 1989). By conducting a case study, the headmasters' roles in leading and managing public primary schools in Malaysia at a deeper level can be sought and the information regarding headmasters' beliefs, feelings, needs, responsibilities, and abilities in managing school curriculum can be obtained.

This study involved public primary schools in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Selangor is divided into nine school administrative districts: Gombak, Hulu Langat, Hulu Selangor, Klang, Kuala Langat, Kuala Selangor, Petaling, Sabak Bernam and Sepang. This study involved headmasters with one headmaster was selected to represent each district.

Participants selected for this study were the school leaders who have direct control in managing schools. Based on the *Lists of schools in Selangor* retrieved from the Selangor State Education Department website (<http://jpnselangor.moe.gov.my/>), nine schools that have the same resources and received government allocation were selected for this study. The participants were drawn based on convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling, in which the sample is drawn from that part of the population which is close at hand (Patton, 2002). That sample is called a convenience sample because the population selected is readily available and convenient to the researcher. The nine primary headmasters selected were all principals of fully aided government schools and the schools had similar characteristics in regard to their resources, sources of funding, curriculum and administration.

Merriam (1998) stated that interactive methods of data collection are frequently used in qualitative case studies. This study relied on semi-structured interviews, observations and document reviews. The interviews with participants were conducted based on structured questions. Participants were invited to participate in the study and were asked to confirm their interest by email. The primary focus was on headmasters' roles as instructional leaders. To strengthen this case study, the observation and review of school documents related to headmasters' routines and responsibilities were being used.

Triangulation of data from various sources was used for this study. Creswell (2009) mentions that collecting information using a variety of sources and methods is one aspect of what is called triangulation. Because a variety of sources lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007), multiple sources of data collection was used. Multiple sources of data help in developing "converging lines of inquiry" which are more accurate if data emanate from different sources of information (Yin, 2004). Additionally, employing triangulation as a part of the research methods allows for a broader understanding of the issues investigated and provides improved credibility for the findings.

Member checking was used to enhance validity (Creswell, 2009). In member checking, the researcher solicits participants' views of

interpretations and credibility of the findings (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Lincoln and Guba (1985: 314) considered the member checking technique to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility”. This approach involves taking data, analyses, interpretations and conclusions back to the participants in order for them to judge the accuracy and credibility of the information.

Finally, to enhance the validity of this study, thick description was provided for all interviews, observations and documents reviewed in order to help place the participants in the context and let participants determine if the situation described in the study applied to their situation. Creswell (2013: 252) states that, “thick description means that the researcher provides detail when describing a case or when writing the research”.

## FINDINGS

This article explores the roles of elementary school leaders and their perceptions in managing the school curriculum following the national education blueprint. It discusses the knowledge and skills in managing and handling the school curriculum, the aspects of school curriculum and guidelines for effective and efficient curriculum. As one headmaster mentioned, “Schools need effective leaders to develop and plan the school curriculum and instruction. In the effective school, the headmaster acts as a curriculum leader and effectively manages the school operation.” All of the participants indicated that major responsibilities of the headmaster were to: (a) Develop the school program, (b) Develop curriculum planning, (c) Develop and create the school mission and vision, and (d) Develop the school strategic plan.

### Develop the school program

When the participants were asked about the school curriculum and instruction, all participants mentioned that they believed headmasters are responsible for an effective school program. One of the participants said that “Unique characteristics of the effective school programs are correlated with student success and their academic achievement.” All participants agreed headmasters should ensure the development of the following aspects of a school program:

1. After-school program.
2. Reading library program.
3. Anti-bullying program.
4. Free breakfast and lunch program.
5. Community involvement program.
6. Information technology program.
7. Integrated study program.
8. Cooperative learning program.
9. Mentor and mentee program.

### Develop curriculum planning

Seven out of the nine participants in this study mentioned

curriculum planning for students as an important component of leadership because it encourages teachers to think about their teaching and reflect on their own practice and what they offer to students. All the participants felt curriculum planning helped to promote student learning and development. One of the participants stated that “Good curriculum planning should include consistency of approach from all teachers, documentation of students’ learning and development and careful analyses and interpretation that clearly shows how students are progressing toward the learning outcomes.”

One of the participants admitted a strong developmental perspective and believed that theoretical perspective and leadership style influence the way a headmaster plans curriculum. The respondent added, “Curriculum planning should be based on individual development, and this development is determined by genetic and environmental influences.” This was different from the response of another headmaster who said, “In planning the curriculum, children have a right to be consulted and heard. That means curriculum planning considers learning from the student’s perspective and teachers have to use critical reflection to make curriculum decisions.” This participant believed that having a critical perspective is important and influences the way a curriculum leader plans and develops their curriculum. Another participant mentioned that her school is using a professional curriculum planning module to better assist her to develop program plans for students that will best support their learning. That module helps her develop a whole school program and curriculum plans for students that reflect a strong understanding of the NEB’s goals and standards.

### Develop and create the school mission and vision

One of the participants said that school leaders must be able to inspire others to reach for ambitious goals. A shared vision should be recognized as a common direction of growth and help the school to be better. Another headmaster proposed that in effective schools “school leaders should clearly articulate the school mission and vision and help teachers and staff share an understanding of instructional goals, accountability, and assessment and most importantly high expectations for the school.” To be an effective curriculum leader, another headmaster suggested a principal should create common goals, build effective terms to implement goals, and engender commitment to accomplish the goals. Overall, headmasters in this study agreed that one of the important roles curriculum leaders possess is to plan and develop the school mission and vision.

### Develop the school strategic plan

When asked about the school strategic plan, one out of

nine participants was not able to show or discuss his school strategic plan. That participant was a newly appointed headmaster and had less than one year of experience in a school site. He was drafting a new school strategic plan and said, "It is not like we do not have a school strategic plan, currently we are using the old plan developed by previous headmaster."

One participant said one of the most important things in managing a school is having the school's strategic plan. He believed the purpose of developing a strategic plan was to refocus and engage the teachers and community to think, to act strategically, and to help the school continue to grow. Three participants mentioned the main purpose of having a school strategic plan is to educate students to be responsible and successful, and the aim is to improve student academic achievement. One headmaster said "The strategic plan made clear how we will use effective strategies to help students learn, and one key to successful planning is having a realistic, approachable and comprehensive assessment of the school strengths and weakness."

The participants in this study were aware of their roles and responsibilities in managing curriculum and instructions. All of participants were aware of their responsibility to (a) encourage good teaching, (b) increase student academic achievement, (c) ensure effective teaching and learning, and, (d) supervise curriculum management. All of the participants recognized their responsibility to improve student academic achievement by encouraging effective teaching. All headmasters agreed that in order to achieve these goals supervision plays an important role and that headmaster need to carefully supervise curriculum management. They all agreed headmasters continuously review the implementation of the written curriculum and teaching objectives. One of participants stated that the headmaster "shall educate teachers on the importance of instructional practice and effective curriculum by monitoring curriculum delivery." Another said, "It is headmasters' roles to review student academic achievement data and identify their learning needs. This can be done by supervising curriculum management". The participant added, "Curriculum management plans include expectations and procedures for delivery of teaching and learning." One participant stated he conducted annual reviews of the curriculum and programs as outlined in his curriculum management plan, and he believed it was his responsibility to ensure his curriculum management plan included a complete list of teacher evaluation and student assessments.

## DISCUSSION

A school leader is an instructional leader who is responsible to guide and supervise the school curriculum and finance. In managing the school curriculum and instruction, the headmaster acts as a curriculum leader

and has to effectively manage the school operation. Headmasters are responsible for developing a school program, including planning and implementing the curriculum, and the school mission, vision, and strategic plan. Developing a strong school mission and vision helps schools a reach common understanding of how to improve student achievement and overall school performance. Effective school leaders should be able to help their schools to develop visions that ensure the best thinking about curriculum development. Headmasters should be aware of these responsibilities and are responsible to encourage good teaching, increase student academic achievement, ensure the effectiveness of teaching and learning, and supervise the curriculum management. Some literatures highlighted headmasters' knowledge and skills in managing and handling school curriculum. Alias et al. (2008) state that school leaders should ensure that teaching and learning are the priority at all the time. School leaders need to supervise the teaching and learning process, and enhance cooperation among all parties to create effective teaching and learning environment. Others stated that school leaders need to spend time on planning and organizing school curriculum and instruction in order to effectively carry out the functions of curriculum leadership (Portin et al., 2003; Stronge, 2007).

Most of the school leaders are comfortable with their role of as a curriculum leader, however, it is believed that they are spending considerable amounts of time trying to help, empower, train, inform, and reward their staff to ensure the effectiveness of school curriculum activities. One participant complained about the lack of training provided by the Ministry of Education for novice headmasters and the increased workload associated with achieving the National Education Blueprint goals. Waters et al. (2003) mentioned about the lack of practical guidance and training to assist principals and headmaster to become effective leaders. It can be concluded that most of the headmasters in the State of Selangor have a wide knowledge in managing school curriculum although they are facing tremendous challenges it appears that they manage to effectively lead the school curriculum following the National Education Blueprint standard.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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