

AN INVESTIGATION ON THE DIMENSIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to investigate the level of service quality for different dimensions based on the perception of private school teachers towards service quality. The investigation indicated level of perception for different dimensions namely tangibles, responsiveness, empathy, reliability and assurance. A questionnaire on Service Quality (SERVQUAL) was administered to a total of 93 teachers in private schools in Selangor, Malaysia. The findings indicated that teachers at the selected private schools had significant higher perception when the level of perception was compared with the middle score of the scale (middle score =5.5 with full scale ranging from '1' to '10'). On the other hand, the results indicated that the teachers' perceptions for all the dimensions were significantly more than the middle scale of '5.5'. The dimensions in the service quality were significantly correlated. Dimensions of assurance and empathy have been identified as important dimensions in the service quality. These two dimensions were highly correlated with responsiveness as well.

Keywords: *service quality, dimensions of service quality*

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In realizing educational inspiration, mission and vision, the private sector also plays a vital role in the education system. There are many private schools which have been set up by the private sector especially in urban areas and these schools offer pre-school, primary and secondary education as well as post-secondary or pre-tertiary education. Private education is well-rooted in the Malaysian education system and the history of private education in Malaysia can be traced way back to the 1950s. However, private schools are required to follow the Malaysian curriculum. Therefore, these private schools have to use the National Pre-school Curriculum for pre-school education and the National Curriculum for primary and secondary education as required by the Education Act 1996. In addition, private schools are opened to both local and international students. As a requirement before operating and recruiting students, it is a mandatory for these schools to obtain approval from the Ministry of Education, through its Private Education Division. As for private schools that accept international students, they need to obtain a license from the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Thus, private schools need to show fulfillment of service quality which is one of the necessary requirements. In line with this, leaders play an important role in providing good quality service in order to satisfy customers' requests in term of the quality of teaching, service, curriculum, leadership, management and administration, supervision, students and organization environment culture as well as staff development. Undeniably, pre-tertiary education is also a basic investment necessary to improve the overall quality of life; thus, aspects such as student discipline, learning environment, controllable class size, improved student safety and good individual attention (Butcher & Bedrick, 2013) need to be considered. Butcher and Bedrick (2013) highlighted that parents who send their children to private schools always compare school service quality between private schools and public schools. The perception towards service quality provides guideline to leaders to improve educational performance which is aligned with students' expectations. Hence, evaluating service quality is crucial and critical to be implemented (Sharifuddin, M. Hairolnezam, Asma & Norhidayah, 2014).

Therefore, in order to achieve and maintain the goals of providing the best service competitively among private schools, Private school leaders need to distinguish their institutions from others in terms of overall quality excellence. Hence, the measurement of effective schools should be viewed holistically from the perspective of national and international issues that present challenges to its effectiveness and global relevancy such as, delivering quality service in pre-tertiary education.

Besides high service quality delivery, building customers' relationship (Liao & Chuang, 2007), students' engagement with a school (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999), school reforms (Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2003), and other important aspects also need to be revised to sustain the good image of a school. The effort and capabilities in improving service quality as well as ensuring the fulfillment of customers' needs are important in portraying excellent reputation and bringing satisfaction to customers as expected by them (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990).

Therefore, in order to execute successful service strategies, one needs leaders who always retain good practices and not just acting as managers alone (Fullan, 1991). In fact, leadership behavior plays a key role in maintaining service excellence to external customers. In this study, the leaders in private schools refer to the top management which leads and coordinate the school operation in order to implement the mission of their organizations. Leaders must have vision to take their schools to a higher position that stakeholders expected. In addition, top management also means the people who are responsible to ensure the effectiveness of the schools including the quality of the service offered in facilities, teachers, and administration to support staff. The major challenge faced by the top management as a school leader is to ensure the acceptance of teachers on the importance of commitment to service quality and providing visible leadership (Bush, 2007). Leaders of schools can change schools and society through their strong influence. According to Cammock (2001), leaders must have vision to take the school to the position that all stakeholders expect and finally inspire teachers to make the vision a success.

Thus, it is crucial for leaders to have more input on the aspects of service quality which needs to be focused on for the school development. Many studies such as Hallinger and Murphy (1986) and Heck, Larson and

Marcoulides (1990) reported that leadership is the most important role to propel school improvement. However, more input on specific dimensions of service quality is needed especially among private schools leaders. Hence, this study hoped to provide an overview of private school heads' leadership and mainly focus (based on the service quality dimensions) on the quality of service. This was done by looking into the perception of teachers towards service quality.

This study focused on the achievement of service quality in private schools in Selangor. Hopefully, knowledge of the service quality achievement will enable leaders to determine a better approach in providing effective educational environments to achieve learning goals and appropriate academic standards (Gordon & Partigon, 1993). On that note, the objective of the study was developed to analyze teachers' perceptions of service quality in private schools. To achieve the aims and objectives, the following research questions were established to guide the study:

1. What is the teachers' overall perception of service quality?
2. What is the teachers' perception of service quality in terms of different dimensions, namely empathy, responsiveness, reliability, tangibility and assurance?
3. Is there any relationship among the different dimensions of service quality?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey research design. It involved the collection of information from a sample of individuals who were teachers from two private schools (which were also pre-tertiary institutions) in Selangor. The survey research chosen was deemed appropriate since this study was aimed to explore teachers' perceptions towards school challenges in management process.

The population of this study was the teachers from all the private schools in Selangor. Since it was not possible to collect data from every

member in the population; therefore, this study has employed cluster sampling to investigate the perceptions and expectations on service quality. Each of the two selected private schools was treated as a unit of cluster in this study. There were altogether 93 teachers involved in the study.

The research instrument, a questionnaire named as Service Quality (SERVQUAL) was developed and refined by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1991). It was further refined by Van Schalkwyk and Sit (2013). The SERVQUAL questionnaire consisted of 22 items with five dimensions of service quality in education. They were: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The Likert scale responses for the questions were ranged from one to ten (1-10) scales in which one referred to a low level of service quality (Strongly Disagree) to 10 which referred to a very high level of service quality (Strongly Agree). Table 1 presented the reliability statistics for all the dimensions of SERVQUAL instrument.

Table 1: Reliability statistics for expectation dimensions

| Dimension | Cronbach's alpha | N of Items |
|----------------|------------------|------------|
| Tangibles | .888 | 4 |
| Reliability | .955 | 5 |
| Responsiveness | .882 | 4 |
| Assurance | .958 | 4 |
| Empathy | .912 | 5 |
| <i>Overall</i> | .981 | 22 |

[Scale: 1 (low) – 10 (high)]

The reliability analysis in Table 1 showed that the overall reliability of SERVQUAL was at high alpha levels ($r=0.981$).

FINDINGS

Table 2 presented the overall mean for the perceptions of teachers towards service quality. This result addressed research question one, “What is the teachers’ overall perception of service quality?” The mean is 6.52 with standard deviation 1.20.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for overall perception of service quality

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Overall Perception | 93 | 3.40 | 10.00 | 6.52 | 1.20 |
| Valid N (list wise) | 93 | | | | |

The result was further investigated in order to find out whether the level of service quality perception was significantly higher than the middle point of the perception. Since the Likert scale ranged from 1 to 10, the middle point taken was 5.5. Thus the test value in the one sample t-test was 5.5. The result of the one sample t-test in Table 3 shows that there was a significant difference in the overall perception of service quality from the middle point of the scale. Hence, the result shows that the teachers' overall perception towards service quality was at above the average scale of 5.5.

Table 3: One-Sample Test for Overall Perception of Service Quality

| | Test Value = 5.5 | | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------|----|-----------------|-----------------|---|--------|
| | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Overall Perception | 8.21 | 92 | .000 | 1.02 | .7747 | 1.2690 |

The results in Table 4 presented the overall mean for the different dimensions of perception towards service quality. The results addressed research question two, namely “What is the teachers’ perception of service quality in terms of different dimensions, namely empathy, responsiveness, reliability, tangibles and assurance?”

Based on the findings in Table 4, the teachers distinguished the needs of students and had their best interests at heart which fell under the empathy dimension. Empathy had the highest mean compared to others in SERVQUAL dimension. The mean was 6.78 with standard deviation of 1.45. The means for perceptions in terms of responsiveness, assurance, tangibles and reliability were 6.64 (standard deviation=1.41), 6.63 (standard deviation =1.53), 6.63 (standard deviation =1.46) and 6.21 (standard deviation =1.35) respectively. Descriptively, the means for perception for all the dimensions were close to each other.

Table 4: Teachers' Overall Perception of Service Quality

| Dimension | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----------------|------|--------------------|
| Empathy | 6.78 | 1.45 |
| Responsiveness | 6.64 | 1.41 |
| Assurance | 6.63 | 1.53 |
| Tangibles | 6.63 | 1.46 |
| Reliability | 6.21 | 1.35 |

[Scale: 1 (low) – 10 (high)]

Table 5 shows the output of one-sample t-test for comparing all the dimensions from the test value (middle point) of 5.5. The results indicated that means for all the different dimensions were significantly different from 5.5. Since all the means of service quality were more than 5.5, the results indicated that the teachers' perceptions for all the dimensions were significantly more than the average value (middle scale of 5.5).

Table 5: One-Sample Test for Dimensions

| | Test Value = 5.5 | | | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------|----|--------------------|--------------------|---|--------|
| | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Tangibles perception | 5.49 | 92 | .000 | .83333 | .5319 | 1.1347 |
| Reliability perception | 5.13 | 92 | .000 | .71935 | .4410 | .9977 |
| Responsiveness perception | 7.77 | 92 | .000 | 1.13978 | .8486 | 1.4310 |
| Assurance perception | 7.13 | 92 | .000 | 1.13172 | .8165 | 1.4470 |
| Empathy perception | 8.52 | 92 | .000 | 1.28495 | .9856 | 1.5843 |

A detailed analysis of the dimensions which had the highest level of teachers' perception of service quality was provided in Table 6.

Table 6 showed teachers' perception of service quality based on their experience in their school. Empathy showed the highest mean among the dimensions in service quality. It indicated that the teachers highly recommended personnel accessibility. The personnel were easily contacted by phone, email or even in face to face situations. It represented the highest

mean which was 7.04 (standard deviation=1.76). However, the teachers were less satisfied with the lack of individualized attention (such as doing something extra for students and staff) from the administrative personnel (mean=6.47, standard deviation=6) comparatively.

Meanwhile, for the dimension of Responsiveness, the teachers highly agreed that they were willing to assist students (mean=7.51, standard deviation= 1.86). Nevertheless, the teachers perceived that promptness of service delivered to students was less satisfactory. It had the lowest mean which was 6.15 (standard deviation =1.67) comparatively.

The descriptive results showed a few higher scores among the items. Among the items were an item in Empathy dimension, namely “The School personnel are easily accessible to students’ with the mean of perception 7.04 as well as an item in Responsiveness dimension, namely “Teachers at the school are willing to assist students” with the mean of perception 7.51. Teachers’ responsiveness indicated their empathy in ways in helping students. Hence, educators need to be responsible in order to show empathy.

Table 6: Teachers’ perception of service quality dimensions of empathy and responsiveness

| Items | | MEAN | SD |
|------------------------------|--|-------------|-------------|
| Empathy | | | |
| 22 | The school personnel are easily accessible to students (e.g. easily available to see or to contact by phone, email, etc.). | 7.04 | 1.76 |
| 19 | Teachers give the students individual attention. | 6.98 | 1.80 |
| 20 | The school personnel do know what the needs of the students are (e.g. recognizing students as customers). | 6.81 | 1.59 |
| 21 | The school personnel have the students' best interests at heart. | 6.62 | 1.79 |
| 18 | Students receive individualized attention from administrative personnel (e.g. doing something extra for students). | 6.47 | 6 |
| Overall Mean & SD | | 6.78 | 1.45 |
| Responsiveness | | | |
| 12 | Teachers at the school are willing to assist students | 7.51 | 1.86 |
| 10 | The school informs students when services will be provided. | 6.46 | 1.71 |
| 13 | Personnel of the school are not too busy to respond promptly to students' requests. | 6.44 | 1.71 |
| 11 | Students receive fast (prompt) service delivered from the school's personnel. | 6.15 | 1.67 |
| Overall Mean & SD | | 6.64 | 1.41 |

[Scale: 1 (low) – 10 (high)]

Table 7 shows the results of the other three dimensions in SERVQUAL. For the dimension of Assurance, the highest mean (mean=6.80, standard deviation=1.76) referred to the degree of politeness of the personnel comparatively. On the other hand, the teachers perceived at a lower rate in terms of receiving adequate support from the school management to improve the facility of services (mean= 6.46, standard deviation= 1.70).

Table 7: Teachers' Perception of Service Quality Dimensions of Assurance, Tangibles and Reliability

| Items | | MEAN | SD |
|------------------------------|---|-------------|-------------|
| Assurance | | | |
| 16 | The school personnel are polite. | 6.80 | 1.76 |
| 14 | Students can trust the school personnel | 6.71 | 1.81 |
| 15 | The school personnel inspire confidence | 6.56 | 1.72 |
| 17 | Personnel receive adequate support from the school management to improve the provision of their services. | 6.46 | 1.70 |
| Overall Mean & SD | | 6.63 | 1.53 |
| Tangibles | | | |
| 3 | Personnel at the school are well dressed and neat at all times. | 6.76 | 1.52 |
| 4 | The materials of the school (e.g. pamphlets and study material) suit the image of the school. | 6.63 | 4.08 |
| 1 | The school has up-to-date equipment. | 6.00 | 1.61 |
| 2 | The school's physical facilities (e.g. buildings and furniture) are attractive, visually appealing and stylish. | 5.94 | 1.46 |
| Overall Mean & SD | | 6.63 | 1.46 |
| Reliability | | | |
| 9 | The school keeps accurate records (e.g. accounts, academic reports, etc.). | 6.63 | 1.76 |
| 6 | When students have problems, the personnel of the school are sympathetic and reassuring. | 6.37 | 1.45 |
| 7 | The school is always dependable and provides the service right the first time. | 6.14 | 1.55 |
| 8 | The school provides services at the time it promises to do so. | 5.99 | 1.57 |
| 5 | When the school promises to do something by a certain time, it does so. | 5.97 | 1.79 |
| Overall Mean & SD | | 6.21 | 1.35 |

[Scale: 1 (low) – 10 (high)]

In addition, the results for Tangibles dimension showed that the item with the highest mean was “Personnel at the school are well dressed and neat at all times” (mean=6.76, standard deviation=1.52). The teachers positively perceived and agreed with the personnel in maintaining their work professionalism. This result depicts the importance of the school personnel in being well dressed and polite. Nevertheless, the teachers were not confident with their school physical facilities. It had a moderate rating (mean= 5.94, standard deviation=1.46) indicating that the teachers perceived that the physical facilities should be at higher standards and schools should also have up-to-date equipment.

The results in Table 8 presented the correlations among the dimensions of service quality. The results addressed research question three, namely “Is there any relationship among the different dimensions of service quality?”

All the paired dimensions in Table 8 had indicated significant correlations with $p < 0.05$. The dimensions in the service quality were significantly correlated. The coefficients of correlation for the related pairs in descending order are responsiveness and assurance ($r=0.829$), responsiveness and empathy (0.827), reliability and empathy (0.749), reliability and assurance (0.739), reliability and responsiveness (0.701), tangibles and reliability ($r=0.434$), tangibles and assurance ($r=0.403$), tangibles and empathy ($r=0.395$) and tangibles and responsiveness ($r=0.351$). The two highest coefficient correlation came from responsiveness and assurance (the coefficient correlation was 0.829) and responsiveness and empathy (the coefficient correlation was 0.827). The correlations with responsiveness indicated that responsiveness (in terms of willingness or readiness to provide service) was crucial in promising or strengthening other dimensions such as assurance (in terms of ability to inspire trust and confidence) and empathy (giving personal attention). On the other hand, the dimensions of assurance and also empathy were crucial and should be emphasized in order to show the practice of responsiveness.

The results of coefficient in correlation for the dimension of tangibles with others (namely reliability, assurance and empathy) were not as high as others. Thus, the dimension of tangibles (appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and written materials) needs to be further improved since the development was not highly shown in the analysis of correlation.

Table 8: Correlations of dimensions in SERVQUAL

| | | tangibles | reliability | responsiveness | assurance | empathy |
|----------------|---------------------|-----------|-------------|----------------|-----------|---------|
| Tangibles | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .434** | .351** | .403** | .395** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 | .001 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 |
| Reliability | Pearson Correlation | .434** | 1 | .701** | .739** | .749** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 |
| Responsiveness | Pearson Correlation | .351** | .701** | 1 | .829** | .724** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .001 | .000 | | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 |
| Assurance | Pearson Correlation | .403** | .739** | .829** | 1 | .827** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | | .000 |
| | N | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 |
| Empathy | Pearson Correlation | .395** | .749** | .724** | .827** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | |
| | N | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 | 93 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate the direction to develop service quality based on perception towards dimensions of service quality. The perceptions indicated level of perception in terms of different dimensions namely tangibles, responsiveness, empathy, reliability and assurance. A questionnaire on Service Quality (SERVQUAL) was administered to a total of 93 teachers in private schools. The teachers at the private school had a significant higher perception when the level of perception was compared with the middle score of the scale (middle score =5.5 with full scale ranging from 1 to 10). On the other hand, the results indicated that the teachers'

perceptions for all the dimensions were significantly more than the middle scale of 5.5. The dimensions in the service quality were significantly correlated. Apparently, effort of caring with individualized attention is an important factor to inspire trust and confidence among customers. In addition, empathy becomes a major factor in the development of leadership (Bass, 1985). Hence, the dimensions of assurance and empathy played an important role in service quality. The two dimensions were highly correlated with responsiveness. The findings have implications towards identification of important dimensions of service quality. In fact, it has become a major trend of higher institutions to improve service quality. Furthermore, Yorke (2000) emphasized that it becomes instructional leaders' task to find some ways of developing a quality culture in a learning organization. Hence, based on these findings, higher institutions may consider providing training for educators with regard to giving prompt service with politeness and full empathy. The three highly correlated dimensions namely responsiveness, empathy and assurance indicated that willingness in assisting students with full empathy inspires confidence towards service quality.

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