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SCHOOL LEADERSHIP THEORIES AND THE MALAYSIA EDUCATION BLUEPRINT: FINDINGS FROM A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Many countries are seeking to improve their education systems in order to enhance their competitiveness in an increasingly global economy. Referring to Asia's tiger economies, Hallinger (2004: 63) argues that 'global economic competition has raised the stakes for educational attainment, individually and collectively. Consumers now define the meaning of quality education globally, rather than locally or nationally'. The growing importance of international comparisons of student learning outcomes, notably the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), increases the visibility of different levels of performance and often informs national reform initiatives. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which operates PISA, claims that PISA rankings are the 'world's premier yardstick' for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems (OECD 2012). It adds that PISA allows governments and educators to identify effective policies to adapt to their own contexts (ibid).

Many countries use international comparisons, such as PISA, as levers to evaluate their own education against other systems. Malaysia is one such country and its educational reform agenda is informed by the PISA scores, despite the critique on cultural relativity and consistency of standards in benchmarking tests (Harris and Jones 2015). The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) (Ministry of Education 2013) is the major policy document driving reform. It is explicit about benchmarking Malaysian student performance against international norms. 'Other systems are improving student performance more rapidly, and have found ways to sustain that momentum. The gap between Malaysia's system and these others is therefore growing (MEB 2013: E6). However, Hallinger (2010: 409) cautions against policy borrowing when seeking school improvement. Some 'education reforms have travelled around the globe far from their points of origin and often appear "foreign" upon arrival in South-East Asia'.

The MEB outlines an ambitious vision to raise learning outcomes from its current position in the bottom quartile of PISA scores in reading, mathematics and science:

‘All children will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education that is uniquely Malaysian and comparable to the best international systems. 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 . . . PISA, within 15 years’ (MEB 2013: E-14).

The Blueprint acknowledges that this vision will require a ‘transformation of the Malaysian education system’ (ibid). The Ministry of Education has identified eleven ‘shifts’ to achieve this transformation. Shift five focuses on school leadership and aims to ‘ensure high performing school leaders in every school’ (MEB 2013: E-20). It notes that the quality of school leaders is the second biggest school-based factor in determining school outcomes (MEB 2013: E-27), echoing international research findings (e.g. Leithwood et al 2006).

The Blueprint also stresses that ‘an outstanding principal is one focused on instructional and not administrative leadership’ (MEB 2013: E-27) and intends that future leaders will lead in a different way. However, this is challenging to achieve as administrative leadership is the norm in highly centralised systems such as Malaysia, for example in neighbouring Thailand. ‘Despite new system expectations for principals to act as instructional leaders, the predominant orientation of Thai principals remains largely unchanged’ (Hallinger and Lee 2014: 6).

The Blueprint makes numerous references to the importance of instructional leadership and less frequent, but still significant, mentions of distributed and transformational leadership. These leadership models were all developed and honed in Western contexts, raising questions about their suitability for Asian contexts. Walker and Hallinger’s (2015) synthesis of principal leadership in East Asia concluded that this body of knowledge is at an early stage. This prompted the authors to conduct research on whether, and to what extent, leadership practice in Malaysian schools includes elements of instructional, distributed and transformational leadership. The first part of the research, reported in this paper, comprises a systematic literature review of all published sources, in English or Bahasa Malaysia, on these three leadership models, and alternative terms used in the literature. Shared and teacher leadership are often compared with distributed leadership, and have some overlapping concepts, while leadership for learning is regarded as an alternative term for instructional leadership.

The Blueprint’s ambitious agenda is intended to bring about enhanced student outcomes through changing leadership practice from the dominant managerial role practiced in Malaysia and many

other centralised systems (Hallinger and Lee 2014). However, such radical changes are difficult to achieve because of deeply-embedded cultural expectations within a society where ‘power-distance’ (Dimmock and Walker 2002, Hofstede 1991) is accentuated. As in neighbouring Thailand, Malaysian principals are civil servants who function as line managers within the hierarchy of a highly centralised national system of education (Hallinger and Lee 2014). This systemic culture suggests that shifting leadership practice from administrative to instructional leadership is difficult to achieve (Lee and Hallinger 2012).

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013) also recognises the need to give schools and their leaders more autonomy. ‘In the future, all schools will be responsible for operational decision-making in terms of budget allocation and curriculum implementation’ (MEB 2013: E29). However, this is modest by international standards, and does not include teacher recruitment and selection. Initially, only a small number of schools, high performing, cluster and Trust schools, will be eligible and most schools will have to wait until wave three of the reform (2021-2025) before being given even this limited range of autonomy. If ‘operational flexibility’, and ‘a peer-led culture of professional excellence’ (Ibid: 39) are considered to be important for school improvement, delaying the implementation of school-based management is surprising.

Research questions

The broad aim of the review is to establish what is known about how leadership is enacted in Malaysian schools. In particular, it explore whether, how, and to what extent, instructional, distributed and transformational leadership are practiced. The review also seeks to establish the nature of the relationship between each of these models and enhanced student outcomes, as reflected in the current literature. The research questions are:

- 1.What leadership theories are manifested in Malaysian schools?
- 2.How, and to what extent, is instructional leadership practiced in Malaysian schools?
- 3.How, and to what extent, is distributed leadership practiced in Malaysian schools?
- 4.How, and to what extent, is transformational leadership practiced in Malaysian schools?
- 5.What is the relationship between these leadership theories and student outcomes in Malaysian schools?

Conceptual Framework

As noted above, the conceptual framework for this review is informed by the theoretical assumptions underpinning the Malaysia Education Blueprint, with its strong normative emphasis on

instructional leadership, and its support for distributed and transformational models. We also discuss theories linked to these normatively preferred models. Other models, for example moral and authentic leadership, are discussed in the literature (e.g. Begley 2007, Branson 2007, Bush 2011) but they are not included in the review below, as they do not feature in the Blueprint.

Instructional leadership

The first leadership theory advocated in the Blueprint is *instructional leadership* and it suggests that ‘an outstanding principal is one focused on instructional and not administrative leadership [and that] effective school leaders can raise student outcomes by as much as 20%’ (E-27). ‘Ensuring high-performing school leaders in every school’ (5-16) requires building the capacity of school leadership to drive improvement with an instructional leadership orientation; notably, focusing on setting high expectations for their school and acting as peer mentors and coaches to develop school staff. However, the limited evidence cited in the Blueprint derives from the international literature and this ‘policy borrowing’ raises questions about the suitability of imported findings to underpin reform in a different cultural context.

Leithwood et al (1999: 8) link instructional leadership to student development:

‘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: 8).

Instructional leadership is the longest established concept linking leadership and learning. However, several other terms may be used to describe this relationship, including pedagogic leadership, curriculum leadership and leadership for learning. Despite its prominence and longevity, instructional leadership has been criticized on two grounds. First, it is perceived to be primarily concerned with teaching rather than learning (Bush 2013). The second criticism is that it ‘focused too much on the principal as the centre of expertise, power and authority’ (Hallinger 2003: 330). As a consequence, it tends to ignore or underplay the role of other leaders such as deputy principals, middle managers, leadership teams, and classroom teachers. Lambert (2002: 37) claims that:

‘The days of the lone instructional leader are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for the entire school without the substantial participation of other educators’.

Hallinger and Heck (2010) note that, in the 21st century, instructional leadership has been ‘reincarnated’ as ‘leadership for learning’. Rhodes and Brundrett (2010) explore the transition from instructional leadership, concerned with ensuring teaching quality, to leadership for learning, which

incorporates a wider spectrum of leadership action to support learning and learning outcomes. MacBeath and Dempster (2009) outline five main principles which underpin leadership for learning, two of which directly address the weaknesses of instructional leadership. The first is a stress on shared or distributed leadership, counteracting the principal-centric approach of the instructional model. The second is a focus on learning, in contrast to the teaching-centred dimension of Instructional leadership.

Kaparou and Bush's (2016: 905-906) research in outstanding secondary schools in England demonstrates the emergence of constrained instructional leadership, 'limited by government prescription'. Day et al.'s (2016: 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'.

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership has become the most fashionable leadership model in the 21st century, with numerous books and journal articles focusing on this theme. The rationale for this approach is that leadership is too complex to be handled purely through solo leadership. By increasing leadership density, there is more potential for enhanced learning outcomes (Bush and Glover 2014).

Distributed leadership is one of several models which stress shared approaches to leadership (Crawford 2012). Collegial and participative leadership were popular shared approaches in the late 1900s but distributed leadership has become the normatively preferred leadership model in the 21st century. Gronn (2010: 70) states that 'there has been an accelerating amount of scholarly and practitioner attention accorded [to] the phenomenon of distributed leadership'. Harris (2010: 55) adds that it 'represents one of the most influential ideas to emerge in the field of educational leadership in the past decade'.

An important starting point for understanding distributed leadership is to uncouple it from positional authority. As Harris (2004: 13) indicates, 'distributed leadership concentrates on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organization rather than seeking this only through formal position or role'. Gronn (2010: 70) refers to a normative switch 'from heroics to distribution' but also cautions against a view that distributed leadership necessarily means any reduction in the scope of the principal's role. Indeed, Hartley (2010: 27) argues that 'its popularity may be pragmatic: to ease the burden of overworked headteachers'. Lumby (2009: 320) adds that distributed leadership 'does not

imply that school staff are necessarily enacting leadership any differently' to the time 'when heroic, individual leadership was the focus of attention'.

Bennett et al (2003: 3) claim that distributed leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise. Harris (2004: 19), referring to an English study of ten English schools facing challenging circumstances (Harris and Chapman 2002), says that there should be 'redistribution of power', not simply a process of 'delegated headship'. However, Hopkins and Jackson (2002) argue that formal leaders need to orchestrate and nurture the space for distributed leadership to occur, suggesting that it would be difficult to achieve without the active support of school principals. Heads and principals retain much of the formal authority in schools, leading Hartley (2010: 82) to conclude that 'distributed leadership resides uneasily within the formal bureaucracy of schools'. However, the emphasis on 'informal sources of influence' (Harris 2010: 56) suggests that distributed leadership may also thrive if there is a void in the formal leadership of the organisation. Bottery (2004: 21) asks how distribution is to be achieved 'if those in formal positions do not wish to have their power redistributed in this way?' Harris (2005: 167) argues that 'distributed and hierarchical forms of leadership are not incompatible' but it is evident that distribution can work successfully only if formal leaders allow it to take root. In their meta-analysis of distributed leadership, Tian et al (2016: 153) add that, 'in a distributed leadership setting, formal leaders should also be regarded as important "gate keepers", who either encourage or discourage others from leading and participating in organisational changes.'

The interest in, and support for, distributed leadership is predicated on the assumption that it will bring about beneficial effects that would not occur with singular leadership. Leithwood et al's (2006: 12) important English study shows that multiple leadership is much more effective than solo approaches:

'Total leadership accounted for a quite significant 27 per cent variation in student achievement across schools. This is a much higher proportion of explained variation (two to three times higher) than is typically reported in studies of individual headteacher effects'.

Leithwood et al (2006: 13) add that schools with the highest levels of student achievement attributed this to relatively high levels of influence from all sources of leadership. Distributed leadership features in two of their widely cited 'seven strong claims' about successful school leadership. Hallinger and Heck (2010) also found that distributed leadership was significantly related to change in academic capacity and, thus, to growth in student learning.

As suggested earlier, the existing authority structure in schools and colleges provides a potential barrier to the successful introduction and implementation of distributed leadership. 'There are inherent threats to status and the status quo in all that distributed leadership implies' (Harris 2004: 20). Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) refer to the residual significance of authority and hierarchy. Gronn's (2010: 77) 'hybrid' model of leadership may offer the potential to harness the best of both individual and distributed approaches.

As noted earlier, the Blueprint also suggests a shift towards a model of *distributed leadership*. 'All leaders (principals, assistant principals, department heads and subject heads) will be prepared to fully utilise the decision-making flexibilities accorded to them . . . the aspiration is to create a peer-led culture of professional excellence wherein school leaders mentor and train one another, develop and disseminate best practice, and hold their peers accountable for meeting professional standards' (MEB 2013: E28).

Teacher leadership

There are clear links between teacher leadership and distributed leadership, not least because teachers are often the people to whom leadership is distributed. Frost (2008: 337) characterises the former as involving shared leadership, teachers' leadership of development work, teachers' knowledge building, and teachers' voice.

Muijs and Harris's (2007: 961) research in three UK schools showed that:

'Teacher leadership was characterised by a variety of formal and informal groupings, often facilitated by involvement in external programmes. Teacher leadership was seen to empower teachers, and contributed to school improvement through this empowerment and the spreading of good practice and initiatives generated by teachers'.

Timperley (2005: 418) cautions that developing teacher leadership in ways that promote student achievement presents difficulties. Teacher leaders with high acceptability among their colleagues are not necessarily those with appropriate expertise. Conversely, the micro-politics within a school can reduce the acceptability of those who have the expertise. Stevenson (2012) argues that the interpretation of teacher leadership is managerialist in nature and inherently conservative. Helderbran (2010: 363) notes that teacher leadership 'remains largely an academic topic and, even though inroads have been made, teacher leadership remains more a concept than an actuality'. This view is supported by Wenner and Campbell (2016), who argue that lack of time to accomplish their 'regular teaching duties' makes it difficult for teachers to perform leadership. Muijs and Harris (2007: 126) conclude that 'teacher leadership requires active steps to be taken to constitute

leadership teams and provide teachers with leadership roles. A culture of trust and collaboration is essential, as is a shared vision of where the school needs to go, clear line management structures and strong leadership development programmes’.

Transformational leadership

This form of leadership assumes that the central focus of leadership ought to be the commitments and capacities of organisational members. Higher levels of personal commitment to organisational goals and greater capacities for accomplishing those goals are assumed to result in extra effort and greater productivity (Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach, 1999: 9).

Transformational leadership is often contrasted with transactional approaches (e.g. Miller and Miller 2001). The latter relates to relationships between leaders and teachers being based on exchange of valued resources. In its simplest form, teachers provide educational services (teaching, pupil welfare, extracurricular activities) in exchange for salaries and other rewards. This is a basic approach and does not lead to the level of commitment associated with the transformational model.

Leithwood’s (1994: 506) research suggests that there is some empirical support for the essentially normative transformational leadership model. He reports on seven quantitative studies and concludes that:

‘Transformational leadership practices, considered as a composite construct, had significant direct and indirect effects on progress with school-restructuring initiatives and teacher-perceived student outcomes’.

The transformational model is comprehensive in that it provides a normative approach to school leadership which focuses primarily on the process by which leaders seek to influence school outcomes rather than on the nature or direction of those outcomes. However, it may also be criticized as being a vehicle for control over teachers, through requiring adherence to the leader’s values, and more likely to be accepted by the leader than the led (Chirichello 1999).

The contemporary policy climate within which schools have to operate also raises questions about the validity of the transformational model, despite its popularity in the literature. Transformational language is used by governments to encourage, or require, practitioners to adopt and implement centrally-determined policies. In South Africa, for example, the language of transformation is used to underpin a non-racist post-Apartheid education system. The policy is rich in symbolism but weak in practice because many school principals lack the capacity and the authority to implement change effectively (Bush et al 2009).

When transformational leadership works well, it has the potential to engage all stakeholders in the achievement of educational objectives. The aims of leaders and followers coalesce to such an extent that it may be realistic to assume a harmonious relationship and a genuine convergence leading to agreed decisions. When 'transformation' is a cloak for imposing the leader's values, or for implementing the prescriptions of the government, then the process is political rather than genuinely transformational (Bush 2011: 86).

The transformational model stresses the importance of values but the debate about its validity relates to the central question of 'whose values'? Critics of this approach argue that the decisive values are often those of government or of the school principal, who may be acting on behalf of government. Educational values, as held and practiced by teachers, are likely to be subjugated to externally-imposed values.

Leadership and student outcomes

Recent evidence in England (Leithwood et al 2006), and internationally (Robinson et al 2007), provides powerful empirical support for the widely accepted view that the quality of leadership is a critical variable in securing positive school and learner outcomes. Leadership is second only to classroom teaching in its potential to generate school improvement. However, much less is known about how leaders impact on outcomes. While 'quick fix' solutions to school under-performance, often involving strong managerial leadership, can produce short-term improvement, sustainable progress is much harder to achieve (Bush and Glover 2014). Day et al (2016) show that a combination of transformational and instructional leadership strategies helps principals to achieve and sustain improvement. However, Shatzer et al.'s (2014: 452) findings in the US show that 'neither instructional nor transformational leadership predicted a statistically significant amount of variance in measures of student achievement without controlling for school context and principal demographics.'

Review Methods

The review process began with an electronic search of key databases such as Science Direct, Ebsco, Emerald, Shibboleth, Ingenta Connect, ERIC, Web of Knowledge, JSTOR and Athens, accessed via university libraries, the Ministry of Education and Institut Aminudin Baki (IAB) websites, and through Google and Google Scholar search engines. The authors conducted a systematic literature search of sources, in English and Bahasa Malaysia, relevant to the project, using the following search terms:

- Instructional leadership
- Distributed leadership

- Transformational leadership
- Shared leadership
- Teacher leadership
- Leadership for learning
- Leadership and student outcomes

The initial search identified 74 sources written in Bahasa Malaysia and 145 English language sources. Fine grained analysis reduced this to 38 Bahasa Malaysia papers and 69 English language sources, all of which have been included in the review. The paper also draws on international research and literature on these themes. The review is based on a systematic review of books, research reports, conference proceedings, unpublished PhD theses, policy documents, and 20 peer-reviewed journals, including such leading journals as Educational Administration Quarterly, Educational Management, Administration and Leadership, School Leadership and Management, Journal of Educational Administration, International Journal of Educational Management, and School Effectiveness and School Improvement. These journals have an international orientation in terms of the nature of their published research and their target audience. We narrowed the literature search to a 23-year period (1994-2017) and the seminal leadership and management sources include theoretical and empirical evidence from English speaking countries (e.g., US, the UK), other Asian countries and evidence from other centralised school systems. The inclusion of Bahasa Malaysia sources helps to address a fundamental weakness in much of the current literature; an almost total reliance on English language sources. Hallinger and Chen (2015: 21) note the problem of ‘a hidden literature’ with ‘a substantial number of research papers . . . written in indigenous languages’. The leadership models highlighted in the Blueprint are seen as central to the ‘roadmap of policies and initiatives’ (1-1) to achieve the Ministry’s vision. The next section presents the results and analysis of this systematic review.

Results and Analysis

Instructional leadership

Despite the international interest in instructional leadership, and its prominence in the Blueprint, there has been very little discussion about how it is conceptualised within the Malaysian education context. There is limited evidence focusing on principals’ instructional leadership (e.g. Abdullah and Kassim, 2011; Mat Ail et al, 2015, Fook and Sidhu, 2009; Ghavifekr et al, 2015; Harris et al 2017, Sharma et al, 2012), but very little on other leadership actors, such as other senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers. This may be due to the centralised and hierarchical nature of the Malaysian schools’ system. However, the Blueprint foreshadows a greater emphasis on the instructional

leadership role of senior and middle leaders. 'The leadership base in each school will be strengthened with assistant principals, subject heads, and department heads, being developed to act as instructional leaders in their own right' (MEB 2013: E27). However, in practice, evidence of the enactment of this leadership model in Malaysia remains limited and may be 'hidden' (Walker and Hallinger, 2015).

Principals' instructional leadership

Abdullah and Kassim's (2011) study of secondary schools in Pahang claims that Malaysian principals practice a high level of instructional leadership, including establishing goals, managing the instructional programme, promoting a learning environment, and creating a cooperative school environment. However, the methods and the results derived from this research are not explained sufficiently to assess the validity of these judgements. Mat Ail et al's (2015) survey of 113 teachers in three Junior Science colleges in Pahang, using the Principal Management Instructional Rating Scale (PIMRS) and the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire, shows teachers' positive perceptions of principals' instructional leadership and teachers' commitment. In particular, they show that three dimensions of principal instructional leadership; explaining school objectives, managing the instructional programme, and shaping a positive school learning culture, are rated highly. Similarly, Quah's (2011) survey of 220 teachers in 11 Johor schools suggests that secondary school principals in Malaysia are considered successful instructional leaders despite their limited attention to weak teaching methods and underperforming students. Awang et al's (2011) survey of knowledge management, in 25 Smart schools, where technology is integrated into teaching and learning, and non-Smart schools, in urban and rural Malaysia, showed evidence of promoting a learning environment, mainly through 'mentoring [which has been] a way of sharing knowledge' (p. 273). This study also shows that 'management encouraged staff learning, organised appropriate training and promoted knowledge acquisition both internally and externally' (p.275).

Fook and Sidhu (2009) presented findings from their 'exemplary' case study secondary school in Seremban. Their study included 11 semi-structured interviews with the principal and other stakeholders. The research was designed to examine the leadership characteristics of the principal, who had received a number of national awards. The principal's instructional leadership practices included ensuring a shared school vision, and top-down decision making on curriculum implementation, for example in choosing the 'right teacher to teach the right class' (ibid: 110). He also developed the intellectual and professional capital of the school, and brought back 'best practices from other schools' (p.109), intended to lead to a conducive teaching and learning

environment. This may be seen as a step towards investment in professional learning, associated with high performance, as noted by Harris et al (2013: 217):

‘Looking at the high performing education systems in Asia, like Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai, . . . they all invest in teachers’ professional learning and heavily subscribe to models of collaborative enquiry to generate new professional knowledge’.

Sharma et al’s (2011) study of instructional supervision in three Asian countries (India, Malaysia and Thailand), drawing on an open ended questionnaire, and interviews with 12 teachers and eight headteachers, shows that instructional supervision has been perceived as a hierarchical activity. Teachers have no ownership of the process while its impact upon teachers’ development has been questioned. Another comparative study (Sharma et al, 2012) examines principals’ instructional leadership practices in successful schools in India, Malaysia, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates. The data, gathered from a survey of 55 principals, and from interviews with five principals, suggest a focus on principals’ leadership commitment for students’ development. Continuing professional development, and a shared sense of leadership, has also been identified as part of a principal’s instructional leadership role and practice, respectively.

Ghavifekr et al’s (2015) quantitative study of teachers’ perceptions about principal instructional leadership practices in vocational and technical colleges in Kuala Lumpur contributes to the knowledge base, although the research was not focused on schools. The survey of 80 teachers, using closed questions, show teachers’ agreement about principals’ positive commitment to manage the college towards achieving its goals, while there are ‘high expectations on teachers regarding students’ academic achievement’ (ibid, 2015: 58) Another aspect of instructional leadership highlighted in this study is the principal’s role in guiding teachers in their assigned tasks but there is only limited involvement of the principal in classroom observations. This study provides useful data but the limited depth from answers to closed questions, and the modest sample, suggests that the findings are indicative rather than conclusive.

Davarajoo’s (2012) quantitative study in three different types of primary school (national, national type Chinese, and national type Tamil) concludes that there is a significant relationship between heads’ instructional leadership and teachers’ commitment and job satisfaction in all three school types. Rajanthiran and Abdul Wahab’s (2017) study of 13 Tamil Primary schools in Selangor shows a high level of principal instructional leadership, and a strong positive link with teacher job satisfaction. Similarly, Abdul Hamid and Abdul Wahab (2017) found evidence of instructional

leadership in their study of six high performing schools in Kedah, and of a significant relationship between instructional leadership and positive attitudes towards organizational change.

Mohd Tahir et al 's (nd) quantitative study, based on a sample of 350 randomly selected teachers from 15 primary schools, shows that heads' instructional leadership practices have an impact on the level of teachers' trust in their head which, in turn, impacts on teacher commitment. Jaafar's (2004) survey of 800 teachers in 78 rural schools in Perlis, Kedah and Penang, indicates that the principal's instructional leadership influences public exam results in effective and less effective primary schools, through its impact on teacher commitment and job satisfaction.

Abdullah and Kassim's (2012) qualitative study of six schools in Pahang concludes that the expansion of principals' responsibilities limits the time available to plan, lead and monitor the implementation of the curriculum. This problem is exacerbated by teacher shortage and absence. Ismail's (2009) quantitative study of instructional leadership in high and low performing secondary schools in Kedah, with 296 teachers, shows that instructional practices differ in these school types. Abdul Aziz et al's (2014) normative concept paper provides advice to principals on how to create a climate of learning.

Harris et al's (2017) research contributes to the discourse and knowledge base on primary school principals' instructional leadership (IL) in Malaysia. Thirty principals from different states and contexts, viewed as high performing leaders by their districts, participated in the project. Monitoring and evaluating teachers is one of the leadership practices which is 'taken very seriously by principals in Malaysia' (ibid: 213), while the allocation of a mentor for developmental purposes is highlighted, and principals also enact instructional leadership practices through promoting teachers' professional learning and development.

This body of literature provides useful insights into aspects of instructional leadership practice in some Malaysian schools. It shows that it is conceptualised primarily as a hierarchical activity, focused largely on the principal. While there is some evidence of mentoring, the main focus is on monitoring, but with little sign of classroom observation. This is consistent with Kaparou and Bush's (2015) research in Greece, which also highlights the principal's limited repertoire of instructional leadership activities within a paternalistic administrative approach to leadership. Modelling, the power of example (Southworth 2004), also does not appear to be a feature of instructional leadership in the researched schools. However, there is some evidence of its impact on student outcomes, mediated by enhanced teacher commitment and job satisfaction.

Leadership for learning

As noted above, this term has been used by some scholars as an alternative to instructional leadership. However, there is only limited research on this topic in the Malaysian context. Tie (2011) interpreted the term broadly, to include capacity building for leaders, for example. He notes that the Malaysian Ministry of Education stresses that learning is the primary purpose of education but laments the over-emphasis on examination results. He concludes that the government values leadership for learning but adds that identification of the specific skills required to transform the learning environment is still required.

Adimin (2012) applied the leadership for learning model, proposed by Reeves (2002), in the Malaysian context. He categorised school leaders into four groups, i.e. lucky leader (high results, low understanding of antecedents), losing leader (low results, low understanding of antecedents), leading leader (high results, good understanding of antecedents), and learning leader (low results, good understanding of antecedents). Malaysia's schools are classified into seven bands, where band one is highly effective and band seven is poor. The bands are determined on the basis of scores which are a composite of public examination performance (70%) and schools' verified self-assessment.

Adimin (2012) argued that leaders in band 5 schools are in the 'lucky' category. He added that this category of school can be easily downgraded to bands 6 or 7 if they do not improve their leadership in order to improve student learning. Leaders in bands 6 and 7 schools are categorised as the 'losing' leader. This type of leader does not understand, or their understanding about how to be a successful school is low. Therefore, it is difficult for this leader to be successful unless they are given the opportunity to learn and develop themselves through self-learning or management and leadership training. He argued that school leaders in the 'learning' category, especially those who have just transferred to a low performing school, have a high possibility to be successful because this type of leader has good understanding of how to build a successful school. School leaders in band 1 and 2 are categorised as the 'leading' leader. He claimed that such leaders understand how to be successful, and that their leadership results in high levels of achievement, but the alignment of leadership categories with school bands may be simplistic, under-estimating the influence of other factors, including socio-economic variables.

There is little sense of whether leadership for learning is regarded as different from instructional leadership and, if so, how such differences are understood and articulated. The authors' research will examine such distinctions.

Distributed Leadership

Perhaps because Malaysia has a highly centralised system, there is only limited research on distributed leadership in this context. Jones et al's (2015) study of principals' leadership practices in Malaysia provides evidence of principals' transformational and distributed practices attributed to their emerging accountability for school outcomes. They conclude that secondary school principals are 'increasingly seeing themselves as leaders who are responsible for change and empowering others' (ibid: 362).

Two quantitative studies examined the relationships between distributed leadership and teacher self-efficacy (Abdul Halim 2015) and between distributed leadership, job stress and job commitment (Boon and Tahir 2013). Abdul Halim's (2015) correlational study, involving 831 teachers in 17 residential and national secondary schools, found a moderately high, positive, correlation, and a significant relationship between, distributed leadership and teachers' self-efficacy. The author reports that teachers' self-efficacy is relatively high in residential schools compared to national secondary schools. Boon and Tahir's (2015) survey of 600 senior and middle leaders in Johore involved three questionnaires on distributed readiness, work stress, and organisation commitment. By using structural equation modelling, they found positive relationships between the dimensions of leadership, work stress and work commitment among middle managers.

Fook and Sidhu's (2009:111) research, discussed earlier, showed evidence of 'distributing leadership . . . through the development of macro and micro management teams' to contribute to the management of change. Rabindarang et al's (2014) explanatory mixed methods study included a questionnaire, completed by 359 teachers, and interviews with four teachers. Their study established that distributed leadership reduces job stress among teachers in technical and vocational education.

Abdullah et al (2012) studied distributed leadership in a daily Premier School in Selangor. They identified three elements of distributed leadership; sharing the school's goal, mission and vision, school culture (cooperative, collaboration and professional learning community), and sharing responsibilities. Zakaria and Abdul Kadir (2013) studied the practice of distributed leadership among teachers in a city in north Malaysia, based on demographic factors using the Distributed Leadership Inventory developed by Hulpia et al (2009). The findings showed that distributed leadership was only moderately practiced by the teachers in the city, for example in respect of participative decision making, cooperation within the leadership team, and leadership supervision.

Norwawi's (2017) research on leadership in high performing schools showed evidence of distributed leadership but this appears to be 'allocative' (Bolden et al 2009) rather than 'emergent' (Bennett et

al 2003), with principals delegating tasks to their senior and middle leaders rather than empowering them to act independently.

This limited body of literature shows some evidence of the emergence of distributed leadership in some Malaysian schools, for example through team-work. It appears to have enhanced teacher self-efficacy and reduced teacher stress. Perhaps as a consequence, teachers feel empowered and may enhance their commitment. However, despite its normative emphasis in the Blueprint, the literature suggests two cautions. First, distributed leadership may be practiced only moderately. Second, the model appears to be allocative, consistent with the hierarchy, rather than emergent. More work is required to establish whether and how distributed approaches can be meaningful in this hierarchical context.

Shared Leadership

As noted earlier, shared leadership is often used as an alternative term to distributed leadership or as a wider overarching concept for collaborative approaches to leadership (Bush and Glover 2014, Crawford 2012). There is very limited attention to this model in Malaysia but, as noted, earlier Sharma et al's (2012) study of principals' instructional leadership practices in successful schools in India, Malaysia, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates shows that a shared sense of leadership has been identified as part of a principal's instructional leadership practice.

Razak (2005) studied collaborative leadership in technical and vocational schools. The results showed that there is collaboration between head teacher and teachers in planning staff development programmes which were observed from willingness to share experience, to undertake roles, and to share opinions. The fundamentals for collaboration include using expertise, adult learning, focus on curriculum, tolerance, and trust in management. Another collaborative leadership study was conducted by Saad and Sankaran (2013), who investigated teachers' attitudes toward head teacher encouragement in making collaborative decisions. The results showed a significant relationship between teachers' attitudes and head teachers' encouragement. Teachers' willingness to become involved in decision making increased head teachers' encouragement to involve them.

Rahimah and Ghavifekr (2014: 52) also reinforce the view that principals in Malaysian schools are expected to involve various stakeholders in goals and mission development as well as in decision making related to curriculum and instruction. Their normative view is

that 'leadership must be distributed, allowing for all involved to be truly involved and collaborative', despite the constraints arising from centralisation and the cultural context.

Busra's (2017) study of collaborative leadership practice at two Government Aided Religious schools in Wilayah Persekutuan shows that decisions are made collaboratively among teachers and the school management team, leading to enhanced teacher job satisfaction. Mohd Sabri and Baba (2017) also note the presence of informal collaborative leadership in their study of three primary schools in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. However, Harris et al (2017) found only minimal evidence of shared instructional leadership in their study of 30 Malaysian primary schools.

Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership is often aligned with distributed leadership as distribution often involves classroom teachers. Although teacher empowerment has been considered as an integral element of the attempt to move towards decentralisation from a highly centralised education system (Lee 1999), there is limited evidence within Malaysia (but see Jones et al 2015). The Blueprint stresses the need to enhance 'attractive' pathways into leadership for teachers. This might include becoming subject specialists, focusing on developing curriculum and assessment.

Another dimension of teacher leadership highlighted in the Blueprint is that of master teachers. Lee (1999: 93) highlights the emergence of 'master teachers' in Malaysia, whose role was mainly targeted to 'pedagogical guidance to their own colleagues'. Bush et al's (2016) study of master teachers in Malaysia and Philippines, drawing on interviews with master teachers, principals and teachers, show that they occupy the hinterland between formal and informal teacher leadership. In both countries, their work is legitimised by their appointment to an established position with enhanced salary and status. They conclude that 'the advent of master teachers in both countries has succeeded in keeping talented and ambitious teachers in their classrooms but their leadership role is patchy and depends on personal variables rather than school or system endorsement' (ibid: 37). They also note that the development of teacher leadership has been limited because of the emphasis on the formal hierarchy.

Ngang's (2012) research on teacher leadership in special education classrooms in China and Malaysia reveals that teacher leadership is evident in classroom management in both countries. The

Malaysian evidence arises from a survey of 369 special education teachers in Peninsular Malaysia. The paper suggests the provision of training for teacher leadership, and capacity building. The role of teachers in building capacity within schools has attracted attention and Harris et al (2013: 217) argue that:

‘In Malaysia, which aspires to be high performing, the Education Blueprint . . . is the clearest signal yet that collaborative professional learning is viewed as a potential strategy for securing educational improvement and change. It reinforces collective professional learning as a means of transforming education quality and performance’.

Park and Ham’s (2016) quantitative study of three countries, Australia, Malaysia and South Korea, found that an increased level of effective interaction between principals and teachers leads to consolidation of trust, and enhanced teacher collaboration. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013) also discusses the pathway to teacher leadership. However, the limited Malaysian research on teacher leadership tends to align it with formal roles, such as master teacher. This seems to limit the scope for ‘emergent’ teacher leadership, arising from personal initiative.

Transformational leadership

The Blueprint advocates transformational leadership as a lever to improve the Malaysian educational system, which may require a holistic transformational perspective. ‘The transformed Ministry will have strong leaders at every level [...] and a culture of high-performance’ (E-20) and this is a shift to ensuring leadership employment by ‘highly-skilled individuals capable of transforming the departments and schools under them’ (E-21).

Malaklolunthu and Shamsudin (2011), and Tie (2011), argue that Malaysian principals can be perceived as transformational leaders because bringing about change and improving school examination results are both aligned to their role. Given the demands on principals, Malaklolunthu and Shamsudin (2011) suggest the need for transformational leadership development in order to improve school performance.

Six Malaysian studies employ quantitative approaches to analyse the relationships between transformational leadership and a range of variables, including teacher self-efficacy (Pihie et al, 2008), substitutes for leadership (Abdullah 2005), and job satisfaction (Mad Shah and Mahfar nd, Ismail and Ramli 2012). All these studies showed significant positive effects. Similarly, three studies (Dolah and Hashim, 2017, Abdul Rahman and Hashim, 2017; Hashim and Abd Shukor, 2017) show a significant positive relationship between transformational leadership and teacher motivation. Mokri et al’s (nd) study of headteachers’ practices in seven low performing schools in the Segamat district

of Johor indicated that their transformational behaviours were only at a moderate level. Yasin and Mahmood's (2008) study of two schools in the Batu Pahat district of Johor concludes that principals practice transformational leadership, and that intellectual stimulation recorded the highest score.

This body of literature indicates the positive impact of transformational leadership on teacher efficacy and job satisfaction, echoing the distributed leadership findings. Significantly, but unsurprisingly, the moderate level of transformational leadership seemed unable to raise low performance. The authors' research will seek to build on this quantitative data through case studies that will seek greater depth through grounded understanding of whether and how transformational leadership is interpreted and implemented in 14 dissimilar Malaysian schools.

Leadership and Student Outcomes

The Blueprint highlights an ambition to improve Malaysia's position in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, from its current standing in the bottom quartile to the top third by 2025. Research on the relationship between leadership and student outcomes is important in understanding how this might be achieved.

The Standard Quality of Education in Malaysia (SQEM) refers to student outcomes as education that produces students who are knowledgeable and competent, with high moral standards, responsible, and capable of achieving high levels of personal well-being. It stresses students' excellence in academic work, co-curricular activities, and personality. This is a much broader approach than PISA, which focuses on student performance in language, mathematics and science, but also much more difficult to measure.

Despite its perceived importance, there are very few studies focused on leadership and student outcomes in Malaysia. Abdul Ghani (2012) developed a model to understand excellence practices in two types of high achieving school in Malaysia; boarding schools and religious schools. The practices are professional leadership, conducive school environment, concentrating on teaching and learning, high expectations, continuous assessment, collaboration and cooperation between school and home, and the school as a learning organisation. The study found significant differences in practice between boarding schools and religious schools, both of which are considered to be high performing, in terms of head teacher leadership and school environment.

Abdul Majid, Eow and Chuah's (2013) action research at a school in Putrajaya revealed that the early morning culture, focused on 'fresh mind' activities developed by the school leaders, such as public speaking, acting, dancing and singing, has a significant impact on academic excellence, achievement

in sports and co-curricular activities, good character, students' confidence, capability to compete globally and love for the school.

An unpublished master's degree dissertation (Sahali 2008) addressed the relationship between leadership and student outcomes, using The Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire (LBDQ). They found that neither considerate nor initiating structure leadership styles affected student outcomes. Fook and Sidhu's (2009: 110) research in a secondary school in Seremban highlights that the 'school improved academically under the current leadership', but does not indicate and how leadership contributed to this improvement.

This limited body of literature provides some tentative indications about the relationship between leadership and student outcomes but offers few clues about how the reported initiatives bring about school improvement and student progress.

Synthesis and Conclusion

The Malaysia Education Blueprint documents an ambitious attempt to transform the schools' system so that is among the best in the world, for example in respect of PISA scores. One key dimension of this reform relates to school leadership. The Ministry of Education is exhorting principals and other leaders to move away from administrative leadership and to adopt instructional, distributed and transformational approaches. There is substantial evidence for the beneficial effects of these leadership modes in the international research and literature. However, as this literature review demonstrates, there is much less evidence to support their efficacy in centralised contexts, including Malaysia.

Instructional leadership is conceptualised primarily as a hierarchical activity, focused largely on the principal. Distributed leadership appears to be allocative, consistent with the hierarchy, rather than emergent. This view is confirmed by Hallinger and Walker (2017), whose synthesis of studies of principal instructional leadership, in five East Asian societies, found that, in Malaysia, the instructional leadership role of principals is highly prescriptive, based on policy imperatives.

Both distributed and transformational leadership appear to have enhanced teacher self-efficacy and reduced teacher stress. Perhaps as a consequence, teachers feel empowered and may enhance their commitment, but the moderate level of transformational leadership seemed unable to raise low performance. There is emerging evidence of a link between leadership and student outcomes, mediated by enhanced teacher commitment and job satisfaction, but there are limited insights into what leadership behaviours are most likely to promote school improvement.

The review suggests a gap between leadership theory, developed in Western contexts with high degrees of decentralisation, and leadership practice in centralised contexts such as Malaysia, where even a limited degree of autonomy will not be granted to most schools until 2021. A contingent approach to leadership may be the most appropriate way to draw on theory while ensuring that it is adapted to fit the specific school and country contexts (Bush and Glover 2014).

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