



Citation for published version:

Harris, A, Jones, M, Cheah, KSL, Devadason, E & Adams, D 2017, 'Exploring Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices in Malaysia: Insights and Implications', *Journal of Educational Administration*, vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 207-221. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-05-2016-0051>

DOI:

[10.1108/JEA-05-2016-0051](https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-05-2016-0051)

Publication date:

2017

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

The final publication is available at Emerald via <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-05-2016-0051>

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Exploring Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices in Malaysia: Insights and Implications.

Journal:	<i>Journal of Educational Administration</i>
Manuscript ID	JEA-05-2016-0051.R3
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper (Qualitative)
Keywords:	Instructional Leadership, Educational Change

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Exploring Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices in Malaysia: Insights and Implications.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to outline the findings from a small-scale, exploratory, study of principals¹, instructional leadership practice in Malaysian primary schools. The dimensions and functions of instructional leadership, explicitly explored in this study, are those outlined in the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model.

Design/methodology/approach

This study is part of a larger international, comparative research project that aims to identify the boundaries of the current knowledge base on instructional leadership practice and to develop a preliminary empirically-based understanding of how principals conceive and enact their role as instructional leaders in Hong Kong, China, Vietnam Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 primary school principals in Malaysia. The sample comprised principals from 14 Government National Schools (SK), 9 principals from Chinese Schools (SJKC) and 7 principals from Tamil Schools (SJKT). The qualitative data was initially analyzed inductively and subsequently coded using ATLAS.ti to generate the findings and conclusions.

Findings

The findings showed that the Malaysian principals interviewed, understood and could describe their responsibilities relating to improving instructional practice. In particular, they talked about the supervision of teachers and outlined various ways in which they actively monitored the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. The data revealed that some of the duties and activities associated with being a principal in Malaysia are particularly congruent with instructional leadership practice. In particular, the supervision of teaching and learning along with leading professional learning were strongly represented in the data.

¹ Note the generic term 'principals' will be used in this article to describe headteachers (primary) and principals (secondary) in Malaysia.

Practical implications

There is a clear policy aspiration, outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, that principals should be instructional leaders. The evidence shows that principals are enacting some of the functions associated with being an instructional leader but not others.

Originality/ value

The findings from this study provide some new insights into principals' instructional leadership practice in Malaysia. It also provides a basis for further, in-depth exploration that can further enhance the knowledge base about principals' instructional leadership practices in Malaysia.

Introduction

There is a general consensus among scholars, practitioners and policymakers that school leadership is an important contributor to improved school and system performance (Fullan, 2007; Leithwood *et al*, 2005, Harris, 2014). Based upon a considerable corpus of international empirical evidence (e.g. Day *et al*, 2008; Leithwood *et al*, 2006; Hallinger and Heck, 1996) it is now widely accepted that the leadership of the principal contributes to better school and student performance. Consequently, around the globe, improved leadership and leadership development continues to be prioritized by policy makers in the pursuit of better educational outcomes (Harris and Jones, 2015). In addition, increasing attention is being paid to the type of leadership associated with organizational improvement, as well as the particular features or characteristics of successful school leaders (Day *et al*, 2011; Hallinger and Lee, 2013; Robinson *et al*., 2008).

Looking at the extensive, contemporary, international knowledge base concerning educational leadership, it remains the case that instructional leadership is a powerful and pervasive theme (Cheng, 1995; Hallinger and Leithwood, 1998; Hallinger *et al*, , 2005; Hallinger, 1995). Instructional leadership remains one of the most important and enduring leadership models, chiefly because of its connection to, and its proven impact upon, school and student outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood *et al*, 2008; Robinson *et al*, 2008). A wide range of empirical evidence highlights and reinforces a positive relationship between instructional leadership and the quality of school performance and student learning (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood *et al* 2008; Robinson *et al*, 2008). This literature also underscores that instructional leadership practices are contextually influenced and that the principal's effects on student outcomes are mediated by certain features of the school (Hallinger and Wang 2015:27).

The substantial and expansive body of knowledge about instructional leadership is derived largely but not exclusively from the USA (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Hallinger, 2000; Hallinger, 2011). The early work on instructional management (Bossert *et al*, 1982; Bridges, 1967, 1982) provided a basis for researchers to develop the idea of principals' instructional leadership based on extensive empirical evidence (Dwyer, 1986; Dwyer *et al*, 1983; Hallinger *et al*, 1996; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Heck *et al*, 1990). Over more than three decades,

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3 international scholars have established the importance of instructional leadership and have
4 developed empirically based models of instructional leadership practice (Goldring *et al*,
5 2009; Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Leithwood *et al*, 2010; Hallinger and
6 Wang, 2015).
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11 Despite the extensive evidence about instructional leadership, however, the knowledge base in
12 certain countries is still emerging (Hallinger and Chen, 2015; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013a,
13 2013b). For example, in many developing countries, the available literature on leadership and
14 leadership practices is still in its infancy (Hallinger and Walker, 2014; Harris and Jones,
15 2015). Within Asia, the evidence base about leadership and leadership practices, including
16 instructional leadership, remains particularly patchy and is relatively under-developed (Harris
17 and Jones, 2015a; 2015b; Hallinger and Chen, 2015; Walker *et al*, 2005; Hallinger, 2011).
18 Therefore, while the international knowledge base about instructional leadership continues to
19 flourish and grow, the empirical evidence from certain countries and contexts is still in short
20 supply. Furthermore, it has been argued that more empirical studies are urgently needed to
21 strengthen the research base on instructional leadership, particularly in East Asian societies
22 (Jamelaa and Jainabee, 2011; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013a; 2013b).
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33 A large research programme, of which this study is part, has started to explore instructional
34 leadership within Asia, in seven East Asian countries: Vietnam, Mainland China, Malaysia,
35 Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand (Hallinger and Bryant, 2013a). Another
36 comparative piece of work is also focusing on leadership preparation and development in a
37 number of Asian countries including Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia (Harris
38 and Jones, 2015a; 2015b). Each of these studies aims to contribute to the knowledge base
39 about educational leadership, in this region, through in-depth, comparative, empirical
40 investigation. Both studies aim to engage with and review, as far as practically possible, the
41 'indigenous literature' (Bajunid, 1996) on school leadership particularly in countries where
42 the evidence about leadership preparation and practice is barely visible and mostly absent
43 from the international literature (Harris and Jones, 2015a).
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54 As a contribution to securing a more substantial knowledge base on school leadership in East
55 Asia, this article outlines the findings from a small-scale, exploratory enquiry into principals'
56 instructional leadership in Malaysia. In terms of a theoretical reference point, the study
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3 utilised Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model of instructional leadership which expands
4 upon the key dimensions and features of the Bossert *et al* (1982) model of instructional
5 management. The study was also informed by contemporary theorising, conceptualising and
6 writing on instructional leadership (Hallinger and Wang, 2015) including recent reviews of
7 the leadership research literature in Asian contexts (Hallinger and Truong, 2014; Hallinger *et*
8 *al*, 2015). The existing literature, in English and Bahasa Malaysia, on the subject of
9 principals' instructional leadership in Malaysia was also used as a point of reference.
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17 While the international knowledge base on principals' instructional leadership in Malaysia is
18 undoubtedly still developing, there is an indigenous literature on educational leadership
19 practices in Malaysia stretching over several decades. Banjunid, (1996:50) notes 'that any
20 understanding of an indigenous perspective requires a real understanding of the theoretical
21 bases of the subject, and an understanding of the particular indigenous environment or
22 setting.' Yet, as Walker and Hallinger (2015) note in their various reviews of the available
23 literature in south east Asian countries, much of the available indigenous research remains
24 'hidden' from the view of international scholars because it is written in the national language.
25 This is certainly true of Malaysia where there is an emerging indigenous literature on the
26 subject of principals' instruction leadership (e.g. Jamelaa and Jainabee, 2012; Ibrahim and
27 Amin, 2014; Sazali *et al*, 2007; Ghani, 2012; Nashira and Mutaphab, 2013; Ghavifekr *et al*,
28 2015; Sim, 2011). It is clear, however, that more empirical enquiry is needed to further
29 strengthen the existing knowledge base on instructional leadership practices in Malaysia.
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40 *Context*

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44 Before outlining the design of the research project, some background information is provided
45 about the Malaysian policy context, the preparation of school principals in Malaysia and the
46 stated duties of principals. To understand the responses from the principals in this study, and
47 to explain the overall findings, such contextual detail is particularly important. Turning first
48 to the policy level, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2012)² outlines the main policy
49 ambitions for significantly improving the performance of the education system. Within this
50 substantial document, there are 11 shifts that are considered to be the platform for much
51 needed educational transformation and system improvement. Shift 5 in the Blueprint focuses
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58 ² http://www.moe.gov.my/cms/upload_files/articlefile/2013/articlefile_file_003108.pdf
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3 upon ensuring 'high performing leaders in every school' with 'assistant principals, subject
4 heads, and department heads being developed to act as instructional leaders in their own
5 right' (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012; Executive Summary E17). In addition, the
6 Blueprint states that:
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11 'All school leaders (principals, assistant principals, department heads and subject heads) will
12 be prepared to fully utilise the decision-making flexibilities accorded to them. This includes
13 instructional leadership matters such as school improvement planning and curriculum and co-
14 curricular planning, as well as administrative leadership matters such as allocation of school
15 funds' (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012; Executive Summary; E18).
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21 It is particularly important to note here that instructional leadership, as stipulated in the
22 Malaysian Education Blueprint, is not only the stated responsibility of the principal but also
23 extends to those those holding other formal leadership roles in the school.
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28 In terms of being a headteacher or a principal in Malaysia, there are some important aspects
29 to note. Unlike school leaders in the USA or UK (Harris and Jones, 2015a; 2015b), being a
30 principal is a position held towards the end of a teaching career. In Malaysia, principals are
31 on average older than in most other principals in TALIS countries (53.5 Years)³. The
32 appointment of headteachers and principals is firmly based on seniority as well as successive
33 evaluations of teaching performance (Jamilah and Yusof, 2011).
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39 Since 1988, the Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB) has been the agency, that has been directly
40 responsible for principal leadership training throughout Malaysia. Before 1999, the training
41 and preparation of school leaders in Malaysia varied quite considerably (Singh, 2010). In
42 1999, the NPQH National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) was introduced,
43 as a national programme, to be delivered by the IAB. Adapted from the English qualification
44 (Singh, 2010; Bajunid, 1999, Harris *et al*, 2016) the NPQH was introduced in Malaysia to
45 raise the standard of preparation for all school leaders. In 2008, the NPQH was replaced by
46 the National Professional Qualification for School Leadership (NPQEL) and subsequently
47 this became a mandatory requirement for all aspiring principals throughout Malaysia. In both
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³ <https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/TALIS-Country-profile-Malaysia.pdf>

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3 these national leadership qualifications, improving the quality of instruction was underlined
4 and reinforced.
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8 Another point to note is that in the Malaysian education system, all headteachers, principals⁴
9 and all teachers in SK and SMK schools⁵ are government servants. Consequently, for
10 headteachers and principals, there are clear role expectations and key performance indicators
11 (KPIs), set by the Ministry of Education, that both define and delimit their leadership
12 responsibilities and practices. The principal's role is clearly defined and outlined in
13 the "*Competency Standards for Malaysian School Principals*" (IAB, 2010) which specifies
14 the exact duties and responsibilities associated with the role. These duties includes the
15 implementation of educational programmes stipulated by the Ministry of Education, the
16 supervision of the teaching-learning processes, the monitoring of discipline, the supervision
17 of co-curricular activities, and their supportive involvement in the Parent-Teacher
18 Association (PTA) and with the Board of Governors (Perera *et al*, 2015).
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28 Apart from the principal, the other formal leadership roles in schools include vice principals,
29 senior assistants, senior subject teachers, heads of subject and administrative staff holding
30 positions of responsibility (Bajunid, 1996). While the headteacher or principal is ultimately
31 responsible to the District and the Ministry for the school's performance, there is a clear
32 expectation that they are accountable for the performance of those in other formal leaderships
33 roles in the school. School leaders also have to ensure that those with a teaching
34 responsibility, comply with their particular set of roles, responsibilities and Key Performance
35 Indicators (KPIs).
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43 At present, principals in Malaysia are at the heart of the drive for school transformation and
44 improvement. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2012) clearly states that *school leaders*
45 *will be asked to perform to the high expectations set and agreed to for their school. They will*
46 *need to stay open to new ways of working, to involve the community in school improvement,*
47 *and to serve as coaches and trainers to build capabilities in their staff as well as for other*
48 *schools.* In summary, principals in Malaysia are now increasingly viewed as instructional
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56 ⁴In Malaysia primary school leaders are called headteachers and secondary school leaders are called principals. In this
57 article we will mainly use the generic term 'principal' to refer to all school leaders in Malaysia.

58 ⁵Government Primary National school (SK) and Secondary National school (SMK)
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3 leaders who are seen as chiefly responsible for improving student, school and system
4 performance.
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10 11 *Research Study* 12

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15 A small-scale, exploratory, research study was undertaken to explore instructional leadership
16 within the Malaysian school context. The research study used the dimensions and functions
17 of the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model of instructional leadership to gather evidence
18 from primary school leaders about their instructional leadership practices. As highlighted
19 earlier, this qualitative study is part of a larger research project exploring instructional
20 leadership practices in East Asia. Therefore the research design of this study and the
21 instruments used, were specified by the larger study. Modelled on the seminal work
22 conducted by Bossert and colleagues (Bossert *et al.*, 1982; Dwyer *et al.*, 1983) at the Far
23 West Lab for R and D in the USA during the early 1980s, the larger study aims to uncover
24 fundamental perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors underlying the practice of instructional
25 leadership. It aims to contribute to the knowledge base about instructional leadership in East
26 Asia, through an inductive approach, guided by the broader literature on instructional
27 leadership (Corbin and Strauss, 1998).
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38 To explore contemporary, instructional leadership practices in Malaysia, 30 open-ended
39 interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of primary school principals. Primary
40 school principals were selected for the larger study because the literature suggests that the
41 effects of *principal* instructional leadership are substantial at this level of schooling (e.g.,
42 Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Louis *et al.*, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Robinson *et al.*, 2008).
43 The selection of primary principals in this study was based on a number of criteria. Firstly, 30
44 principals were chosen from four different States in Malaysia. Although this is clearly not a
45 representative sample, selecting principals from different States provided some variation in
46 background and context. Secondly, all the principals in the sample were considered to be
47 effective principals by the District and were viewed as high performing leaders. Thirdly, the
48 principals selected for the study had various lengths of tenure and experience, again to
49 provide a diverse sample. Fourthly, as Malaysia is a multi-racial country where each race has
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its own identity within the broader society, the selection process ensured that Malay, Chinese and Tamil school leaders were represented. Finally, principals were selected on the basis that their schools represented a range of settings (rural and urban) and their schools were of various sizes (small 60 -100 children and large, 1200 -3000 children). The descriptive statistics below provide the details of the selected sample.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of principals' demographics (n=30)

Demographics	Frequency	Per cent
Gender		
<i>Male</i>	11	37
<i>Female</i>	19	63
Ethnicity		
⁶ <i>Malay</i>	12	40
<i>Chinese</i>	10	33
<i>Indian</i>	8	26
Age		
<i>35-39 years</i>	3	10
<i>40 - 45 years</i>	5	17
<i>46 - 50 years</i>	5	17
<i>51 – 55 years</i>	5	17
<i>Over 55 years</i>	12	39
Highest Education		
<i>STPM & Diploma</i>	6	20
<i>Undergraduate</i>	18	60
<i>Master degree</i>	6	20
Tenure as principal		
<i>less than 5 years</i>	7	23
<i>6 – 10 years</i>	12	40
<i>11 - 15 years</i>	7	23
<i>More than 15 years</i>	4	14
Involvement in principal training preparation		
<i>Yes</i>	6	20
<i>No</i>	24	80

In terms of the data collection process, a semi-structured interview schedule, designed by the larger project, was used. All participants completed a consent form before the interviews took place and all ethical processes were followed, including guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. The interview schedule was translated into the Malay language and was verified by a group of native language speakers as being an accurate translation of the English version. The interviews conducted in English and Bahasa Malaysia, offered

⁶ One Chinese principal and one Indian principal worked in an SK school

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3 principals the opportunity to express how they viewed their role and that of others in relation
4 to the dimensions and functions of instructional leadership, as outlined by Murphy and
5 Hallinger (1985). In-depth accounts of instructional leadership practices were sought
6 (Bajunid, 1996; Dwyer *et al.*, 1983; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985) and opportunities were
7 given for principals to give 'rich descriptions' of their leadership practices, behaviours and
8 actions (Denzin, 1978; Glazer and Strauss, 1965).
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14 All interviews were digitally recorded and those conducted in Bahasa were translated into
15 English. Each interview was transcribed and uploaded into a common drive. All transcripts
16 were read by all team members and a constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss,
17 1965) was utilised to generate key themes and propositions for further investigation and
18 further testing against the data. Following this initial inductive phase, team members worked
19 in pairs to interrogate the data and to generate provisional codes. This coding was then shared
20 and re-tested against the data to cross-check and to remove all redundant codes.
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28 In the next phase of analysis, the final set of codes were entered into ATLAS.ti along with the
29 dimensions and functions of the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) instructional leadership model.
30 This afforded the possibility of probing the data further for specific examples of instructional
31 leadership practice as well as interrogating the data using the inductively formed codes.
32 Transcripts were analysed using the combined coding procedure through ATLAS.ti and
33 further synthesized and refined to generate emergent themes. Inter-researcher reliability was
34 established through the shared coding and re-coding of data plus working across data sets.
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41 The remainder of this article outlines the findings based on the data collected with a
42 subsequent discussion of the implications. The findings are organized firstly, under the
43 dimensions and functions of instructional leadership, as outlined in the Hallinger and Murphy
44 (1985) model, and secondly, by exploring issues that emerged from the inductive analysis of
45 the data. Indicative quotes from the interviewees have been selected to illuminate and
46 corroborate the findings.
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51 52 53 *Insights* 54

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56 The insights from this small-scale, study are organised around the model of instructional
57 leadership developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). This model suggests that
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3 'instructional leadership is a process of mutual influence that is both adaptive and responsive
4 to the changing conditions of the school over time' (Hallinger and Wang 2015:14). The
5 conceptual framework incorporates three main dimensions: *Defines the School Mission,*
6 *Manages the Instructional Program and Develops a Positive School Learning Environment*
7 (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985). Each of these dimensions, and the associated functions, will
8 be discussed in relation to the data from the study.
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14 i) Defines the School Mission
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18 In their meta-analysis of the school leadership literature, Robinson *et al* (2008) reaffirm the
19 importance of the school leader's vision and goals in securing positive organizational
20 outcomes. In the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model of instructional leadership two
21 functions *a) Frames the School Goals and b) Communicates School Goals* comprise the
22 dimension 'Defining the School Mission'. The first of these, *a) Frames the School Goals*
23 refers to the 'principal's role in determining the areas in which the school will focus its
24 resources during a given year' (Hallinger and Wang 2015:28). The second *b) Communicates*
25 *School Goals* is 'concerned with the ways in which the principal communicates the school's
26 most important goals to teachers, parents students etc' (Hallinger and Wang 2015:30).
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34 Turning first to *(a) Frames the School Goals*, the data revealed that principals readily
35 outlined their own personal vision and aims for the school, including their aspirations for its
36 future performance. They were clear about their personal goals and expectations. In terms of
37 the formal, stated goals and aims of the school, the data highlighted the fact that the formal
38 goals of the school tend to be centrally determined at the Ministry and District level.
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44 *Vision and mission of the school are very important. We have to know what the vision and*
45 *mission is and we are guided on this (R 19)⁷.*
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49 *The Ministry of Education oversee the school and sets targets for us. The district also set*
50 *targets and goals and they try to support us. We just follow what they say. All schools have to*
51 *do this it is expected. (R1)*
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56 *Our goals come from the Ministry and we have to achieve them (R28)*
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58 ⁷ "p" is the code for principal, and "30" was the number of participants.
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My vision is to ensure that children of all backgrounds succeed. That is my personal goal and that is what drives me (R30)

In terms of the second function *b) Communicates School Goals* the principals in the study readily described how they shared their school goals, with parents and the wider community through talks, newsletters, events or the school web-site. Several respondents also talked about how their own personal leadership vision was communicated to others.

In terms of vision, I want quality, I want all the students to pass the basics. If the students can't do this then when they get to secondary school this is where the problem starts. So we regularly communicate this priority with parents (R3).

I work with parents and other stakeholders to communicate my vision for the school, this is important. Any way I can, I bring the parents in. Sometimes we provide food boxes which parents from the flats collect if they attend the parents' briefings (R29).

The Malaysian principals in the sample, spoke a great deal about communicating their own personal vision for the school and their personal aspirations. They were also very clear about what they wanted from the school and what they expected of staff and students. So in terms of setting the broad mission and vision for the school and communicating it, the data showed that this aspect was particularly strongly supported.

ii) Manages The Instructional Program

The second dimension of the instructional leadership model, *Manages the Instructional Program*, 'focuses on the coordination and control of instruction and the curriculum' (Hallinger and Wang 2015:21). This dimension involves three functions: *c) Supervises and Evaluates Instruction, d) Co-ordinates the Curriculum and e) Monitors Student Progress*. This dimension is concerned with the principal 'managing the technical core' of the school (Hallinger and Wang 2015:31). This dimension requires the principal and other leaders to be engaged in enhancing, supervising and monitoring teaching and learning at the school.

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3 The data revealed that in terms of *c) Supervises and Evaluates Instruction*, principals in
4 Malaysia are heavily involved in a routine range of monitoring and supervisory practices. The
5 role of monitoring and evaluating teachers is taken very seriously by principals in Malaysia
6 and it is undertaken throughroutgly and systematically. Teachers in Malaysia have to be
7 formally evaluated and observed by the principal, several times in a school year. The
8 supervision and evaluation activities described by principals in the sample therefore focused
9 largely on monitoring teachers' performance mainly for accountability purposes, as well
10 ongoing support and development.
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18 *For official purposes, I visit my teachers three times a year to observe them (R 5).*
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21 *Every month we will observe certain teachers. I will take 20, my senior assistant will take 10.*
22 *We observe every month. Then we call and we will help them. (R 13)*
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26 *We have to do pencerapan (Supervision/Observation). Every month we have to choose 10%*
27 *of the teachers to observe. My senior assistants and I have to supervise and observe every*
28 *month. (R 16)*
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33 *Every month I do a 30-minute observation of all teachers with my leadership team. I give the*
34 *teachers a grade and submit these to the PPD (District office) so that they can measure the*
35 *performance of teachers every month (R 4)*
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40 In addition to the formal monitoring and evaluation of teachers, the principals in the sample
41 spoke about conducting daily walks around the school so they could observe teachers and
42 teaching in a more informal way. It is a requirement by the Ministry of Education that
43 principals walk around their school on a daily basis, entering classrooms, observing teaching
44 and maintaining discipline. Through this process, principals are able to obtain an overview of
45 the quality of the teaching and learning processes.
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51 *Everyday I do a learning walk around the school, I visit classrooms- I don't want to disturb*
52 *teachers in their work but they are used to me walking in. We also have learning walls in*
53 *each classroom and across the school and this helps me keep in touch with what is going on*
54 *in lessons. I observe some classes every day. (R2)*
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3 *I make sure I do my learning walk around the school twice a day. First, when I go around the*
4 *school I will make sure things are in the right place. I don't want to see any rubbish. I check*
5 *that routine work is being done and I sit in at least three classes for five minutes (R15)*
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10 *We have to go around to the classes every morning, we have to go around the school at least*
11 *once, just walking to make sure teachers go according to their timetable, go into class on*
12 *time (R 19)*
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16 Principals in Malaysia walk around their schools everyday to evaluate teachers both formally
17 and informally. This is an expectation placed upon them and therefore it is part of their
18 formal role and responsibility. The principals in the sample stated that they generally
19 undertook a walk around the school, at least once a day, which involved spending time in
20 classrooms and observing teaching. A number of the principals noted that this walk allowed
21 them to gauge the nature and quality of the teaching and learning processes in the school. The
22 principals pointed towards the fact that in addition to supervision, teachers were allocated a
23 mentor to help and support them in their everyday work. Data from the recents TALIS⁸ survey
24 shows that a) A larger proportion of teachers report having a mentor assigned compared to
25 most other TALIS countries. (26.5%) b) A larger proportion of teachers report acting as a
26 mentor to another colleague compared to most other TALIS countries. (26.5%). c) a larger
27 proportion of teachers work in schools where the principal reports the use of some kind of
28 formal appraisal than in most other TALIS countries. (99.1%) d) Of those schools where the
29 principal reports formal appraisal practices, a larger proportion of teachers have their
30 classrooms directly observed than in most other TALIS countries. (100%). It could be
31 concluded, therefore, that in terms of the the supervision, monitoring and formal support that
32 teachers receive, principals in Malaysia are particularly strong instructional leaders.
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46 In direct contrast, evidence about the next two functions of instructional leadership *d) Co-*
47 *ordinates the Curriculum and e) Monitors Student Progress* was less forthcoming from the
48 data. Possibly this is because in Malaysian primary schools, co-ordinating the curriculum is
49 not the job of the principal but is the responsibility of other leaders in the school.
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54 *I do not have a role in the curriculum inside the school, it is not my job (R2)*
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58 ⁸ <https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/TALIS-Country-profile-Malaysia.pdf>
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5 *Like any other government school, I have 4 Vice principals assisting me in my daily job. The*
6 *VP for admin, VP for student affairs VP for Curriculum and VP for afternoon sessions (R*
7 *19)*
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11 There was less evidence therefore, in the data, of principals saying that they engaged directly
12 with classroom teachers over curriculum matters or of them personally monitoring student
13 progress. Most principals in Malaysia have a vice principal for student affairs and also heads
14 of subject who are responsible for curriculum matters and monitoring students' progress.
15 Therefore, principals tend not see their role as co-ordinating the curriculum or monitoring
16 student progress but rather to seek regular feedback on these issues from those with direct
17 reporting responsibility.
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25 *Occasionally, I go around to the classes and check students' work. We have one saying*
26 *"Operasi Menggilap Mutiara"~ Meaning polishing the pearl. We see students as pearls and*
27 *so we all polish them. (R11)*
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31 *I leave curriculum and student matters to my vice-principals, they report to me as required*
32 *(R 28)*
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36 iii) Develops a Positive School Climate
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39 The third dimension of the instructional model includes five functions: *f) Protects*
40 *Instructional Time, g) Develops Professional Development, h) Maintains High Visibility, i)*
41 *Provides Incentives for Teachers and j) Provides Incentives for Learning.* This dimension 'is
42 broader in scope and intent than the second dimension and overlaps with dimensions
43 incorporated into transformational leadership frameworks' (Hallinger and Wang, 2015:33).
44 These five functions reinforce the idea that effective schools develop cultures of continuous
45 improvement through a relentless focus on enhancing teaching and learning.
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53 Once again, in terms of interpreting and representing the data, it is important to note that
54 principals in Malaysia do not have a core responsibility for *f) protecting instructional time.*
55 Consequently, there was very little discussion from principals about this particular function.
56 In terms of *i) Provides Incentives for Teachers and j) Provides Incentives for Learning* there
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3 were examples, from the data, where principals rewarded staff and students. Even though
4 school resources are allocated centrally, some principals found creative ways to reward
5 students and staff through gifts, certificates, trips or free time. This practice however varied
6 from principal to principal in the sample.
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11 *I work with local businesses who sponsor gifts for the teachers as a reward for excellent*
12 *teaching or long service. This shows the teachers they are valued and recognised (R 27)*
13
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16 *I find ways to reward my teachers and celebrate their success (R30)*
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20 In terms of *h) maintaining high visibility* around the school, the principals' monitoring visits
21 and daily walks were considered, by them, to be the chief way in which they achieved this
22 particular goal. These daily walks showed '*that the headteacher is vigilant and is available*
23 *to staff and students'* (R30)
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28 The third dimension of instructional leadership, *iii) Develops a Positive School Climate* the
29 function *g) Develops Professional Development* was most supported by principals and most
30 well represented in the data. Principals in Malaysia have a core responsibility for promoting
31 the professional learning and development of teachers and this is reinforced through their key
32 performance indicators (KPIs). Consequently, this is a responsibility that they take seriously
33 to ensure that this is done well.
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40 *Every 2 months once, we will do in house-training. All the teachers will be involved. If*
41 *teachers get new knowledge, then you always motivate them. Motivating teachers is very*
42 *important because this is the key to success (R 13)*
43
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46
47 *I train my teachers myself. I don't call other consultants. I train all my teachers. I'm the*
48 *trainer. That is why, as the Head, you must be knowledgeable. Of course, I cannot be good in*
49 *everything, I am not a math's teacher, not a science teacher, but I can just monitor the rest.*
50 (R14)
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54 *Teachers here attend all training workshops and seminars organized by the Ministry that are*
55 *compulsory. But, due to the pressure of wanting to maintain or improve our status as a*
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3 cluster school my teachers are always so focused on rushing the syllabus and getting students
4 to pass exams and sometimes they are not motivated to go for training. (R 18)
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8 Teachers in Malaysia have to attend seven days of professional learning and development to
9 meet their KPIs and fulfilling this is a requirement of service and therefore is compulsory.
10 Often, the theme of this training is pre-determined by the principal or the District and
11 teachers are required to attend. The most recent TALIS⁹ data shows that in Malaysia a) A
12 larger proportion of teachers report having undertaken professional development in the 12
13 months prior to the survey than in most other TALIS countries (96.6%). b) Compared to most
14 other TALIS countries, a larger proportion of teachers report that the feedback they received
15 has led to an increase in the number of hours of professional development they undertake
16 (85.5%). c) Compared to most other TALIS countries, a larger proportion of teachers report
17 that the feedback they received has improved their teaching practice (95.2%).
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26 The data from the study confirms that in terms of leading professional learning and
27 professional development, principals in the study could be viewed as active instructional
28 leaders.
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33 Discussion

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36 While the limitations of a small-scale study are fully and readily acknowledged, it is
37 suggested, based on the data, that the 30 Malaysian principals, in the sample are strong
38 instructional leaders in certain areas. For example, the monitoring and evaluation of teaching
39 is regularly undertaken by principals as it the professional development of teachers. The data
40 showed that principals, in the sample, engage teachers in appropriate and relevant
41 professional learning of direct benefits to them and their students. They set the broader goals
42 of the school and readily communicated these to all stakeholders as a core part of their
43 leadership responsibility.
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51 The inductive analysis of the data highlighted, however, that principals in the sample also
52 experienced some tensions in their current leadership role. This could be described as a
53 tension between *collectivism and collegiality* versus *compliance and control*. Turning first to
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57 ⁹<https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/TALIS-Country-profile-Malaysia.pdf>
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3 compliance and control, the data showed that principals stated that they felt a huge weight of
4 personal responsibility and accountability for school performance.
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8 *As a principal the Ministry places great pressure on me, so I must deliver good results, that is*
9 *my job. I have no choice. Typically my day is full of tasks that I have to do for the District.*
10 (R1)
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14 *The principal is fully responsible for the school results. We cannot run away from that*
15 *responsibility. (R7).*
16
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19 *Whether the results are good or bad or excellent will affect the headmaster only. Even the*
20 *parents, education department officers, and public won't blame the teachers. They will blame*
21 *the headmaster. Either way, good or bad the headmaster is responsible. If the results drop,*
22 *the headmaster will be blamed. If the results go up also the credit goes to the headmaster. In*
23 *the terms of teaching and learning the principal is 100 % accountable. (R 20)*
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29 Principals in the study also reported feeling the pressure of meeting particular targets.
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32
33 *I am given my targets from the Ministry through the District and then I tell the teachers.*
34 *There are 20 targets this year for student achievement. (R 25)*
35
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38 *I stick to the Ministry goals, how many A's etc then I tell the teachers and the students. I am*
39 *pressured with examination performance and the amount of A grades we achieve. (R 27)*
40
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43 *The Ministry wants us to follow standard operating procedures (SOPs) – this means we must*
44 *follow the SOPs, we must do everything according to the procedure. We cannot deviate from*
45 *the rules and regulation. (R 21)*
46
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49 *The actual autonomy given to headmasters in Malaysia is quite restricted. You can implement*
50 *something new but it depends on whether the headmaster is willing to face the challenge,*
51 *dare to face the challenge. (R 22)*
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56 Despite the pressure of the role, the data also showed that principals in the study wanted to
57 practice their leadership in alignment with deeply held personal norms and values.
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5 *I don't want to be popular, I'm a very humble person. I don't like to use harsh words because*
6 *I don't do that. Mine is a more friendly style of administering. (R 14)*
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10 *I do not react as a boss. I am friendly with the office staff. When we are friends we can get*
11 *along. (R 23)*
12

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14 *I am like a friend to them, we work together to achieve our aims we achieve outcomes by*
15 *being like a family. If you ask the teachers about me they would say that I am like their sister*
16 *or their friend. (R25)*
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21 *Above all what I want for my school is harmony. I am trying to achieve team work so that the*
22 *teachers understand that although I am the principal, I do not want to be alone. (R27)*
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26 The findings from this study suggest that principals in the sample are keen to deliver the
27 outcomes expected by the Ministry and the District but also feel some tensions in achieving
28 this in ways that accord with their personal core beliefs and values.
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31 32 33 **Implications** 34

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36 There are four implications for future research and empirical investigation arising from this
37 small-scale, exploratory study. Firstly, more detailed, fine-grained empirical work is
38 necessary to test the exploratory findings, particularly concerning role tensions and the
39 practical enactment of instructional leadership in a Malaysian context. Secondly, the
40 aspiration from the the Ministry of Education for the leadership base 'to be strengthened with
41 assistant principals, subject heads and department heads being developed as instructional
42 leaders in their own right' would suggest a view of instructional leadership that is shared or
43 distributed (Harris, 2015). Therefore it is perfectly possible, that at other leadership levels
44 within the school, there are not only more examples of authentic instructional leadership in
45 action but also a broader representation of instructional leadership practice. The views of
46 other school leaders, it is suggested, are worth probing and exploring in future empirical
47 studies.
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Thirdly, the data from this study highlighted that the principals, in the sample, spent a large proportion of their time monitoring and supervising instructional practice, as well as promoting the professional development of teachers. It could be argued, therefore, that the practice of these principals' is heavily congruent with instructional leadership. In light of the evidence about the positive impact of principals participating in, and leading the professional learning of teachers, (Robinson *et al*, 2009) further empirical investigation into this particular aspect of the work of Malaysian principals would be both important and timely.

In summary, the evidence from this study points to the fact that principals in Malaysia are engaged in some of the core work of instructional leaders. Where the instructional dimensions, or functions are viewed as a natural part of the designated principal's role and in line with their particular set of leadership responsibilities, they tend to be fulfilled. Conversely, if the instructional practices or functions are not considered to be part of the principal's role, then the evidence suggests that they are not undertaken. The final implication from this study therefore concerns the importance of factoring in contextual and cultural factors into any explanation of leadership practices (Harris and Jones, 2015). While research suggests that there are some core leadership practices that transcend cultural boundaries (Leithwood *et al*, 2008) there is also evidence showing that principals' leadership actions and behaviours are culturally defined and contextually bound (Harris and Jones, 2015a; 2015b; Hallinger, 2016). In the case of Malaysia, the role specification and the expectations set by the Ministry of Education, and the District, play a huge part in how principals view and enact their role.

At present, the leadership practices of Malaysia principals are deeply influenced by their formal job descriptions and their KPIs. Therefore, to foster deep, authentic and extended instructional leadership, across all 10,000 principals in Malaysia, will necessitate some change. Firstly, some reduction in the routine, administrative tasks that principals in Malaysia undertake, on a daily basis, could provide more time to focus on instructional improvement. Secondly, some redefinition of roles and responsibilities to align more with the functions associated with being an instructional leader might help to expand and deepen this form of leadership practice.

The findings from this study, along with the evidence from the indigenous literature and international assessments, would suggest that principals in Malaysia are enacting many of the

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3 functions of instructional leadership. Through their supervision, monitoring, guidance of
4 professional learning and practice, principals are actively shaping and improving instructional
5 practice. The remaining challenge, however, is to ensure that all principals in Malaysia fully
6 embrace all aspects of instructional leadership in ways that contribute directly to school and
7 system improvement.
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10

11 12 13 14 **Acknowledgements**

15 We wish to acknowledge and thank the other members of the research team: Dr. Bambang
16 Sumintono, Dr. Corinne Jacqueline Perera and Lee Suit Lin (University of Malaya),
17 Associate Professor Mabel Tan – and Margaret Soo Boon Yoke – (UCSI) Oh Siew Pei
18 (University Malaya) and Vasu Muniandy – Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB)
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