An Analysis of Effectiveness of Individual Competences in Strategic Leadership among Principals of Excellent Secondary Schools in Malaysia

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Abstracts

The study examines the effectiveness of individual competences in strategic leadership among principals of excellent secondary schools Malaysia. The study used the purposive sampling in order to select the secondary schools in Selangor which have demonstrated excellent performance in academic achievement particularly in the Lower Secondary Assessment or *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR) from 2008 to 2010. The respondents involved 175 school leaders including the principals, senior assistants, coordinators and heads of departments. Questionnaires have been used as a research instrument for the data collection purpose which was developed and assessed by Davies and Davies (2005). The analysis of the result shows that the component of restlessness is the most effective practice with the highest mean score of 4.5278 and standard deviation of 0.44633. This is followed by the component of adaptive capacity with a mean score of 4.4167 and standard deviation of 0.48714. The third most effective practice is represented by the component of absorptive capacity with a mean score of 4.3981 and standard deviation of 0.49002. On the other hand, the principals have identified the component of wisdom as the least effective practice of individual characteristics with mean score of 4.3667 and standard deviation of 0.46965. It is hoped that

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this study would effectively benefit leaders and educators in schools towards in realizing the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025, and, teacher professional development all over the world.

Keywords: principals of excellent schools; individual competences; strategic leadership

Introduction

In view of the challenges for the Malaysian educational leaders particularly the school principals and headmasters to uphold and demonstrate the strategic leadership processes and approaches in order to meet the objectives of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. The study will indeed serve as an important tool to examine and measure the extent and impact of the strategic leadership practices on school achievement as perceived by the school leaders including the principals, senior assistants, head of departments, and coordinators.

Literature Review

Cheng (2010) states that the context of school leadership has been rapidly changing since the late 1980s, which is reflected particularly in numerous past and ongoing educational reforms and school restructuring movements not only in western countries such as Canada, the Unites States and the United Kingdom but also in the Asia-Pacific Regions such as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia.

Bush and Glover (2003) defined leadership as a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. It involves inspiring and supporting others towards the achievement of vision for the school which is based on clear personal and professional values. As such, it would appear that the term strategic leadership is even more nebulous term and subject to as many different explanations as leadership itself (Mohd.Bustamam, 2007). Apart from that, Jantzi and Leithwood (1996) defined six dimensions critical in the practice of leadership including identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, providing individualized support, intellectual stimulation, providing an appropriate model, and high performance expectations.

Davies (2005) in his introductory note mentioned that leadership is often distinguished from management. Leadership is about direction-setting and inspiring others to make the journey to a

new and improved state for the school. Meanwhile, management is concerned with efficiently operating in the current set of circumstances and planning in the shorter term for the school. Leadership is not the provenance of one individual but a group of people who provide leadership in the school and, by doing so, provide support and inspiration to others to achieve the best for the children in their care. In other words, leadership is not set in isolation but is set in the context of organizations and the wider society.

Davies and Davies (2005) developed a model suggesting a framework for identifying the components of the strategic dimension for leadership development. The model is built as a framework of understanding of what strategic leadership might comprise. The following discussion identifies characteristics of individuals who are successfully undertaking a strategic leadership role or skill, based on individual characteristics comprises of 'restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and, leadership wisdom.

Restlessness

Senge (1990) describes 'restlessness' as 'creative tension' which emerges from seeing clearly where one wishes to be, one's vision and facing the truth about one's current reality. Strategic leaders are able to envision the 'strategic leap' that an organisation wants to make, while acting as passionate advocates for change. Besides, strategic leaders have the ability to live with the reality that the organisational culture may not be as forward-thinking as they are. They have the ability to live with the ambiguity of not being able to change the organisation fast enough, with the ability to maintain the restlessness for change and improvement. In addition, individuals who are able to do this challenge current ideas and processes to seek better ideas and processes.

Absorptive capacity

According to Cohen and Levinthal (1990), absorptive capacity can be defined as the ability to absorb new information and assimilate it, learn from it and importantly, to apply it to new ends. Meanwhile, Hambrick (1989) argues that strategic leadership occurs in an environment embedded in ambiguity, complexity and information overload. It is important therefore for strategic leaders to recognise new information, analyse it and apply it to new outcomes; leaders need the ability to learn. In other words, strategic leaders should create an organisational context in which learning can take place. It is also important for the strategic leaders to filter out the unimportant and make sense of the important for themselves

and their organisations. The critical nature of their position often means that their interpretation of reality determines patterns of action within the organisation.

Adaptive capacity

The 'adaptive capacity' has been defined by Black and Boal (1996) as the ability to change. Furthermore, Sanders (1998) supports this view that strategic leaders need the ability to change and learn through asserting that 'mastering chaos, complexity and change' requires new ways of 'seeing and thinking'. At the same time, Whittington (2010) suggests that 'leaders need an enduring sense of purpose and a continuous sense of motivation'. In an era of innovation and continuous learning, this is particularly important and may favour the emergent strategy or strategic intent approach. In addition, leaders position themselves to take significant opportunities as they adapt to new information in a responsive and proactive way. Leaders can adapt and lead new strategic directions for the organisation if they have cognitive flexibility linked to a mindset that welcomes and accepts change.

Leadership wisdom

Wisdom can be defined as the capacity to take the right action at the right time. Stenberg (2002) articulated that leaders need wisdom because they need creative abilities to come up with ideas and analytical abilities to decide whether ideas are good ideas. Apart from that, they need practical abilities to make their ideas functional and to convince others of the value of their ideas. In addition, they need wisdom to balance the effects of ideas on themselves, others and institutions in both the short and long run. Further, he established that for successful intelligence there is a need to combine practical intelligence, analytical intelligence and emotional intelligence. This provides an insightful and challenging set of criteria for leaders to develop in order to deploy strategic choices with wisdom and effectiveness.

The major trends consist of ensuring education quality, standards and accountability in educational institutions; implementing decentralisation and school-based management; and enhancing teacher quality and lifelong professional development. These trends of educational changes at different levels have changed nearly every key aspect of most educational systems in the region and had tremendous impacts on the context of educational leadership and its practice.

Research Methodology

The study examines the effectiveness of individual competences in strategic leadership among principals of excellent secondary school Malaysia. The study used the purposive sampling in order to select the secondary schools in Selangor which have demonstrated excellent performance in academic achievement particularly in the Lower Secondary Assessment or *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR) from 2008 to 2010. The respondents involved 175 school leaders including the principals, senior assistants, coordinators and heads of departments (Keyton 2006). Questionnaires have been used as a research instrument for the data collection purpose which was developed and assessed by Davies and Davies (2005). The data collected from the survey was analysed using the most commonly used statistical software package in the social sciences which is the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 17.0. The findings were presented in frequency, percentage, mean, and, standard deviation.

Objective and Questions of the Study

The study aims to examine the effectiveness of the individual characteristics of strategic leadership practices among the school principals as perceived by the principals.

The study intends to seek answer the following research questions:

1. Do the principals demonstrate all the four individual characteristics of the strategic leadership practices?
2. How is the Principals' effectiveness of Restlessness as Perceived by the school leaders?
3. How is the Principals' effectiveness of Absorptive Capacity as Perceived by the school leaders?
4. How is the Principals' effectiveness of Adaptive Capacity as Perceived by the school leaders?
5. How is the Principals' effectiveness of Leadership Wisdom as Perceived by the school leaders?

The study is significant particularly in pushing their schools to a higher level in tandem with the Malaysia Educational Development Plan (2013-2025) which was developed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia.

Result of the Study

The results of the study are presented in the following sections.

Research Question 1: Do the principals demonstrate all the four individual characteristics of the strategic leadership practices?

There are four components of individual characteristics which are restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity and wisdom (Davies and Davies, 2005).

Table 1: Principals' Effectiveness of Individual Characteristics as Perceived by the School Leaders (*n*=175)

Components	Mean	Standard Deviation
Restlessness (Item 19, 20, 21)	4.5278	.44633
Absorptive Capacity (Item 22, 23, 24)	4.3981	.49002
Adaptive Capacity (Item 25, 26, 27)	4.4167	.48714
Wisdom (Item 28, 29, 30, 31, 32)	4.3667	.46965

Scale: 1-Not effective, 2-Rarely effective, 3-Quite effective, 4-Effective, 5-Very effective

Table 1 provides the mean scores and standard deviation of components. The component of restlessness is the most effective practice with the highest mean score of 4.5278 and standard deviation of 0.44633. This is followed by the component of adaptive capacity with a mean score of 4.4167 and standard deviation of 0.48714. The third most effective practice is represented by the component of absorptive capacity with a mean score of 4.3981 and standard deviation of 0.49002. On the other hand, the school leaders have identified the component of wisdom as the least effective practice of individual characteristics with mean score of 4.3667 and standard deviation of 0.46965. As shown in the table, this component employs more number of items than others.

Research Question 2: How is the Principals' effectiveness of Restlessness as Perceived by the school leaders?

Table 2 provides the answer scales as responded by the school leaders on the effectiveness of restlessness.

Table 2: Principals' effectiveness of Restlessness as Perceived by the School Leaders (n = 175)

Item	Mean SD	Scale	Percent (%)
I always motivate members of the school organisation to continuously work hard for school excellence.	4.4722 .50631	Effective	52.8
		Very effective	47.2
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I always enlighten my desire to continuously increase my school development together with all members of the school organisation towards better level of excellence.	4.5278 .50631	Effective	47.2
		Very effective	52.8
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I always open room to all members of the school organisation to put forward their suggestion and comment in order to develop and increase efforts for school excellence.	4.5833 .60356	Quite effective	5.6
		Effective	30.6
		Very effective	63.9
		Total (175)	**100.0**

SD: Standard Deviation
Scale: 1-Not effective, 2-Rarely effective, 3-Quite effective, 4-Effective, 5-Very effective

Table 2 shows that the most effective practice is represented by the item *I always open room to all members of the school organisation to put forward their suggestion and comment in order to develop and increase efforts for school excellence.* This item contributed the highest mean score of 4.5833 with a standard deviation of 0.60356. It is supported by the rating given by the principals who identified the item as 'very effective' (63.9%), 'effective' (30.6%) and 'sometimes' (5.6%). Although this item has

been rated as 'sometimes' which the other two items have been not, the percentage of those who perceived it as 'very effective' is still the highest.

Research Question 3: How is the Principals' effectiveness of Absorptive Capacity as Perceived by the school leaders?

Table 3 presents the Principals' effectiveness of Absorptive Capacity as Perceived by the school leaders.

Table 3: Principals' Effectiveness of Absorptive Capacity as Perceived by the School Leaders
(n = 175)

Item	Mean SD	Scale	Percent (%)
I am always concerned with the latest information to increase my school excellence.	4.3611 .54263	Quite effective	2.8
		Effective	58.3
		Very effective	38.9
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I always analyse the latest information received from various sources to increase my school achievement.	4.2778 .61464	Quite effective	8.3
		Effective	55.6
		Very effective	36.1
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I always attempt to learn from previous mistakes.	4.5556 .55777	Quite effective	2.8
		Effective	38.9
		Very effective	58.3
		Total (175)	**100.0**

SD: Standard Deviation
Scale: 1-Not effective, 2-Rarely effective, 3-Quite effective, 4-Effective, 5-Very effective

As shown in Table 3, there are three items associated with the component of absorptive capacity. The most effective practice is displayed by the item *I always attempt to learn from previous mistakes* with mean of 4.5556 and standard deviation of 0.55777. This item was rated as 'very effective' by 58.3% of the principals,

while the other 38.9% of them opted for 'effective'. 2.8% of them perceived it as 'quite effective'. Basically, the item has left behind the other two items with its greater score of mean and higher percentage of those who perceived it as 'very effective'. These could be the strength of this item to be declared as the most effective practice though it was rated by the principals with a three answer scale which include 'quite effective'.

Research Question 4: How is the Principals' effectiveness of Adaptive Capacity as Perceived by the school leaders?

Table 4 provides the finding on three items associated with the component of adaptive capacity.

Table 4: Principals' Effectiveness of Adaptive Capacity as Perceived by the School Leaders (*n*=175)

Item	Mean SD	Scale	Percent (%)
I am capable of making important changes on strategies to enhance the school excellence.	4.2222 .5909	Quite effective	8.3
		Effective	61.1
		Very effective	30.6
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I am always ready to receive new ideas that can enhance the school excellence.	4.5556 .5039	Effective	44.4
		Very effective	55.6
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I am always flexible in enhancing the school excellence.	4.4722 .6541	Quite effective	8.3
		Effective	36.1
		Very effective	55.6
		Total (175)	**100.0**

SD: Standard Deviation
Scale: 1-Not effective, 2-Rarely effective, 3-Quite effective, 4-Effective, 5-Very effective

The most effective practice is displayed by the item *I am always ready to receive new ideas that can enhance the school excellence.* It had a mean score of 4.5556 and standard deviation of 0.50395. To discuss further, 55.6% of the principals identified the item as 'very effective' and 44.4% perceived it as 'effective'. None of the principals has decided on other scales including 'quite effective'. This is a strong indication that the item as mentioned above was the most effective practice among others representing the component of adaptive capacity.

Research Question 5: How is the Principals' effectiveness of Leadership Wisdom as Perceived by the school leaders?

Among other individual characteristics, the component of wisdom employed more items as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Principals' Effectiveness of Wisdom as Perceived by the School Leaders (n=175)

Item	Mean SD	Scale	Percent (%)
I always demonstrate my intellectual wisdom.	4.1667 .6095	Quite effective	11.1
		Effective	61.1
		Very effective	27.8
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I am reasonable in balancing the individual interest of all members of the school organisation with school interest.	4.3056 .5249	Quite effective	2.8
		Effective	63.9
		Very effective	33.3
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I can tolerate the implementation of period of strategy but I am strict towards its achievement.	4.4722 .6088	Quite effective	5.6
		Effective	41.7
		Very effective	52.8
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I always hold on the values created together with the members of the school organisation.	4.4444 .6068	Quite effective	5.6
		Effective	44.4
		Very effective	50.0
		Total (175)	**100.0**
I always apply my knowledge for the benefit of the members of the school organisation and for school as a whole.	4.4444 .6068	Quite effective	5.6
		Effective	44.4
		Very effective	50.0
		Total (175)	**100.0**

SD: Standard Deviation

Scale: 1-Not effective, 2-Rarely effective, 3-Quite effective, 4-Effective, 5-Very effective

Table 5 shows that the most effective practice is represented by the item *I can tolerate the implementation of period of strategy but I am strict towards its achievement*. It contributed the highest mean score of 4.4722 with a standard deviation of 0.6088. 52.8% of the principals identified this item as 'very effective', 41.7% as 'effective' and 5.6% as 'quite effective'.

In this regard, it is also worth to highlight that the findings of the study will trigger for further research in the field of strategic leadership, especially in discovering the component of restlessness which has been classified as the most outstanding element in this research.

Conclusion

The analysis of the result shows that the component of restlessness is the most effective practice. This is followed by the component of adaptive capacity and third most effective practice is represented by the component of absorptive capacity. On the other hand, the school leaders have identified the component of wisdom as the least effective practice of individual characteristics. It is hoped that this study would effectively benefit leaders and educators in schools towards in realizing the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025, and, teacher professional development in the Muslim world.

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