

Perceptions of Teachers In Government and Private Schools on Principals' Roles As An Instructional Leader

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Abstract

This survey aims to investigate the difference in perceptions between teachers in government and private schools on principals' roles as an instructional leader. Four dimensions of principal's roles as an instructional leader were identified, i.e instructional management, instructional supervision, instructional support and staff development. A questionnaire was administered to 213 teachers (96 from government and 117 from private secondary schools) in the district of Johor Bahru. Analysis of difference between the two types of school was conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test. Results indicated that the principals in the government school was actively involved in staff development. On the other hand, the private school principal emphasised more on instructional management. Significant differences were found between the government and private school principals on the four dimensions of the principal's role as an instructional leader. The result implies that there is a "room for improvement" for the school principals to play an active role as an instructional leader.

Keywords: Instructional leader, school principal, teachers' perception, government school, private school

BACKGROUND

"Show me a good school, and I'll show you a good principal."

(Barth, 1990, p64)

The above statement of Barth indicates that the school principal is a key to an effective school. The quality of the educational program as well as the teaching and learning process in a school is mainly depended on the school principal. Research evidences have shown that a principal, as a strong instructional leader, is a fundamental characteristic of an effective school (Edmonds, 1979; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Hallinger & Heck, 1996).

Many researchers (Brookover & Lezotte, 1982; Flath, 1989 & Edmonds, 1979) have stressed the importance of the instructional leadership role of the principal. However, Fullan (1991) and McNally (1992) pointed out that effective school instructional leaders are distinctly in the minority. Stronge (1988) reported that 62.2% of the elementary principals' time is focused on school management issues, and only 6.2% of their time is focused on teaching and learning issues. He added that:

“A typical principal performs an enormous number of tasks each day, but only 11% relate to instructional leadership”

(Stronge, 1988, p32)

Flath (1989) outlined what most researchers have to say concerning this dilemma. Mentioned is made of the lack of education, training, and time for the instructional leadership role; of leadership activities being set aside for more immediate problems; and the increasing volume of paper work. Also, public expectations for the principal's role are mainly the managerial and, to a principal, this is a safe and comfortable role.

In recent years, most published studies have directly examined teachers' perspectives on principals' instructional leadership characteristics in government schools. However, few studies examined principals' instructional leadership in private schools in Malaysia. Private schools strive hard to attract customers and offer them the best possible value. School choice is transforming the face of education in Malaysia. Recent trends indicate that private schools will continue to be an important alternative to traditional schools. Thus, this survey aims at investigating the difference in perceptions between teachers in the government and private schools on the principal's role as an instructional leader.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to investigate the difference of perceptions between teachers in the government and private schools on principal role as an instructional leader.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

There are a number of potential contributions that this study makes, both theoretical and practical. In theory related issues, the key areas where this study makes a contribution are:

1. **Principal Leadership:** There are certain attributes of school principals that are considered important – personal and professional. If principals are able to identify with the vital links associated with instructional leadership, instructional management, instructional support, instructional supervision and staff development they will be better prepared to be leaders. In the school improvement and development process, the leadership roles of principals are highly important. Without the changes of their perceptions of their leadership roles, changes will be minimal and difficult (Stronge, 1988). Principals' understanding and perceptions of their own roles in facing new demands in school restructuring are essential for these will affect the outcomes of reforms, as their interpretations may shape their role taking behaviour.

2. Policy Makers: This study is also helpful in providing policy makers with certain suggestions to improve the government and private education sectors. The introduction of a certification scheme for private school principals could be considered. Among the criteria to be considered are qualifications and experience of the principals. Thus, the principal has to become not only a chief administrator but also an instructional leader.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Often times, principals seem so busy with all the day-to-day responsibilities of running their schools that they do not seem to have enough time to practice instructional leadership. Concerning this situation, two researchers wrote:

“Instructional leadership is often conceived of as a blend of supervision, staff development and curriculum development that facilitates the school improvement”

(Smith & Andrews, 1989, p34)

Reitzug (1994) listed some attributes of the principal, which constitute the instructional leadership. They included providing staff development, encouraging risk taking, requiring justification of practices, and so on. The ultimate goal of schooling is learning on the part of the students. What they learn, however, depends on the teachers' performance, which is a product of many factors, such as their commitment, professional growth, school environment, prevailing culture and teachers' innovativeness. All these factors have connections directly or indirectly with the principal's actions or inactions.

One consistent factor in most of the effective school researches is an emphasis on strong, instructional leadership (Purkey & Smith, 1983). The instructional leadership construct is defined in terms of principal behaviours that lead a school to educate all students to high student achievement. In the current research, instructional leadership incorporates behaviours which define and communicate shared goals, monitor and provide feedback on the teaching and learning process, and promote school-wide professional development. Defining and communicating shared goals encompass activities that focus attention to the technical core of schools. These goals increase the effort exerted by school members, increase persistence, and increase the development of strategies (Locke & Latham, 1990). Instructional leaders consistently make decisions with these goals in mind. The shared goals of a school foster group unity and help provide for a climate characterized by academic press, trust and commitment.

Principal activities may include being visible throughout the school, providing praise and feedback to teachers about classroom and professional growth activities, providing praise and feedback to students about classroom performance or behaviours, and

ensuring uninterrupted instructional time. Instructional leaders that monitor the teaching and learning process do so for the purpose of professional growth for the teacher and administrator, not evaluation (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001). Instructional leaders focus on ways of improvement to obtain the shared goals of the school. Promoting school-wide professional development embraces activities that encourage life-long learning. The educational field consistently evolves and changes as research on learning and child development emerges. It is paramount that educators continue to learn and keep abreast of advances and issues in education. Instructional leaders play an essential role, as they can either stifle or enhance professional development of staff members.

Hallinger and Murphy's instructional leadership model (1985) consists of three dimensions: defining the mission, managing instructional program, and promoting school climate. Encompassed within these three dimensions are eleven specific job descriptors: framing school goals; communicating school goals; supervising and evaluating instruction; coordinating curriculum; monitoring student progress; protecting instructional time; promoting professional development; maintaining high visibility; providing incentives for teachers; enforcing academic standards; and providing incentives for students.

Blase and Blase's (1998) conducted a study on 800 principals in United States elementary, middle and high schools. He suggested that effective instructional leadership behaviour comprises three main aspects. They are talking with teachers, promoting teachers' professional growth, and fostering teacher reflection.

Murphy (1990) provided a systematic and comprehensive review of instructional leadership in his synthesis of research findings from the effective schools, school improvement, staff development and organizational change literature. Using this review, he built an instructional leadership framework which incorporates studies and findings. The framework consists of four dimensions of instructional leadership broken down into sixteen different roles or behaviours. The four dimensions of the instructional leader, developing mission and goals; managing the educational production function; promoting an academic learning climate; and developing a supportive work environment, are describe below and indicate the different instructional leader roles or behaviours that make up that dimension.

Developing a mission and goals is fundamental to creating a sense of shared purpose and linking efforts within the school around a common vision (Murphy, 1990). Murphy broke down this dimension into two major roles or behaviours of the principal: framing school goals and communicating school goals. Framing school goals encompasses setting goals that emphasize student achievement for all students, incorporating data on past and current student performance and including staff responsibilities for achieving the goals. Communicating goals frequently, and formally and informally, to students, parents, and teachers stresses the importance that school goals guide the activities of the school.

Managing the educational production function of the school is the second dimension of Murphy's (1990) framework. This dimension emphasizes management behaviours of the principal. The instructional leader promotes quality instruction by conducting teacher conferences and evaluations, visiting classrooms, providing specific suggestions and feedback on the teaching and learning process, and determining teacher assignments in the best interest of student learning (Murphy, 1990). Additionally, the principal allocates and protects instructional time with school policies and procedures. The principal works with teachers to coordinate the curriculum through aligning school goals and objectives with state standards, assessments and district curriculum. The instructional leader monitors the progress of students frequently. An instructional leader models how to use assessment data to set goals and evaluate instruction (Murphy, 1990).

Promoting an academic learning climate refers to the behaviours of the principal that influences the norms, beliefs, and attitudes of the teachers, students, and parents of a school (Murphy, 1990). Murphy stated that:

“Principals foster the development of a school learning climate conducive to teaching and learning by establishing positive expectations and standards, by maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers and students, and promoting professional development”

(Murphy, 1990, p174)

The final dimension of Murphy's (1990) framework, developing a supportive work environment, denotes how an instructional leader establishes organizational structures and processes that support the teaching and learning process. The principal that exemplifies this dimension creates a safe and orderly learning environment, provides opportunities for meaningful student involvement, develops staff collaboration and cohesion, secures outside resources in support of school goals, and forges links between the home and school.

Thus, effective instructional leaders offer schools a process to become more effective at the teaching and learning process. The current research study both synthesizes the predominant models of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 1990; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Weber, 1996) of the last ten years, and encompasses current research to propose a model of instructional leadership that meets the needs, expectations and government mandates for the next generation.

METHOD

The study is a survey, carried out in Johor Bahru, Johore, Malaysia. The sample of the study comprises 213 teachers (96 teachers from a government school and 117 teachers from a private school) in the district of Johor Bahru. The instrument for the study is a questionnaire titled “*Questionnaire on Instructional Leadership*”, based on Murphy (1980). The preliminary version of the instrument was field tested

by 30 teachers from private and public schools. The data was collected by the researchers who distributed the instrument to the teachers and collected each batch on the same day.

The alpha reliability coefficients were computed for each of the four dimensions of the instructional leadership, i.e. instructional management (alpha .94); instructional support (alpha .90); instructional supervision (alpha .89) and staff development (alpha .90). Since the alpha values are above .65, the questionnaire is reliable to be used as the instrument of this study.

A parsimonious conceptualization of instructional leadership was developed and tested. The framework for the pilot instrument consisted of 33 items representing four dimensions of principal as an instructional leader were identified, i.e. instructional management, instructional support, instructional supervision and staff development. Respondents of this study were asked to indicate the extent to which their principal demonstrated the specific behaviours. A five-point Likert scale was employed for a response system: ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree.

Since the scale of measurement of the data is ordinal, the comparison between perceptions of government and private teachers was analysed using the non-parametric independent two-sample test, that is, the Mann Whitney U test.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Comparison between Perceptions of the Government and Private School Teachers on the Principals' Roles as an Instructional Leader

Table 1 depicts the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests for perceptions between teachers in the government and private schools on principals' roles as an instructional leader on the four dimensions of instructional leadership.

Table 1: The Mann-Whitney U Test for perceptions between teachers in the government and private schools on principals' roles as an instructional leader

Dimension	School	N	Mean Rank	Sum of	U	Z	Sig.
Instructional Management	Government	96	115.93	11129.50	4758.500	-1.924	.054
	Private	117	99.67	11661.50			
Instructional Supervision	Government	96	121.69	11682.50	.002		
	Private	117	94.94	11108.50			
Instructional Support	Government	96	125.41	12039.50	.000		
	Private	117	91.89	10751.50			
Staff Development	Government	96	127.17	12208.00	3680.000	-4.340	.000
	Private	117	90.45	10583.00			

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Table 1 shows the differences in perceptions between teachers in the government and private schools on principals' roles as an instructional leader. Teachers in the government school perceived principal as placing a higher priority on the practice of staff development management (Mean rank = 127.17). Teachers in private school perceive principal as demonstrating more instructional management role (Mean rank = 99.67). Significant differences ($p < .05$) were found between the government and private school principals on all of the four dimensions of instructional leadership (instructional management: $z = -1.924$, $p = .054$; instructional supervision: $z = -3.164$, $p = .002$; instructional support: $z = -3.965$, $p = .000$; and staff development: $z = -4.340$, $p = .000$).

The results show that significantly, there are differences between perceptions of the government and private school teachers on the four dimensions of instructional leadership.

Difference in Perceptions between the Government and Private School Teachers on Principals' Roles as an Instructional Leader

Table 2, Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5 present the descriptive data collected from the two groups of teachers. It presents the difference in perceptions of the government and private school teachers on the principals' roles as an instructional leader in four dimensions of instructional leadership.

Table 2: Descriptive data - ranking of principals' roles in dimension of instructional management in the government and private schools

Item	Statement	School			
		Government		Private	
		Mean Rank	Rank	Mean Rank	Rank
1	Alignment with the school's mission	123.52	1	93.45	8
2	Uses school goals when making academic decisions	112.68	4	102.34	5
3	Recognizes the importance of internal influences that impact upon the school classroom teaching	111.16	6	103.59	3
4	Knowledge to collaborate with staff to develop the academic program	113.14	3	101.96	6
5	Delegate tasks clearly and appropriately to accomplish organizational goals	114.97	2	100.46	7
6	Knowledge to create and ability to empower a school leadership team that shares responsibility for the management of the learning organization	112.50	5	102.49	4
7	Visit the classroom to ensure classroom instruction aligns with school goals	110.01	7	104.53	2
8	Uses data on student achievement to guide school discussions on the instructional program	107.28	8	106.77	1

The findings in Table 2 show that there is a difference in the rating of the principal roles in dimension of instructional management in the government and private school.

In the government school, teachers rank “Principal alignment with the school’s mission” and “Delegate tasks clearly and appropriately to accomplish organizational goals” as two most important roles of a principal. It is in line with Murphy (1990) that developing a mission and goals is fundamental in creating a sense of shared purpose and linking efforts within the school around a common vision.

Teachers in the private school rank “Use data on student achievement to guide school discussions on the instructional programs” and “Visit the classroom to ensure classroom instruction aligns with school goals” as two most important of principal roles. The instructional leader uses data and data analysis to make decisions and collaboratively develop goals this is in line with Murphy (1990). According to Murphy (1990), principals need to frame school goals emphasizing student achievement for all students by incorporating data on past and current student performance.

The above data shows that principal from the government school is expected to emphasize more on school mission, while principal from the private school is expected to focus more on student achievement and classroom improvement.

Table 3: Descriptive data - ranking of principals’ roles in dimension of instructional support in the government and private schools

Item	Statement	School			
		Government		Private	
		Mean Rank	Rank	Mean Rank	Rank
9	Ensures that curricular materials are consistent with school goals	111.84	8	103.03	2
10	Ensure every class have teacher	113.03	6	102.06	4
11	Coaches to improve teaching and learning	111.95	7	102.94	3
12	Evaluates teachers to improve instructional practices	114.32	4	100.99	6
13	Ability to lead and motivate staff	126.56	1	90.95	9
14	Help teachers to build up lesson plan	117.85	2	98.09	8
15	Help teachers to manage classroom control	113.97	5	101.28	5
16	Help teachers for professional development instead of evaluation	115.85	3	99.74	7
17	Help teachers to improve classroom management	107.61	9	106.50	1

However, private school teachers choose “Help teachers to improve classroom management” as the most important for principal roles. This finding supports Sergiovanni (1996) and Ogbodo and Ekpo (2005). It is in line with Leithwood’s statement (1994) that linked principal’s instructional leadership to improvement in teachers’ classroom behaviours, attitudes and effectiveness.

For a government school, the principal as well as teachers are provided instructional supports by the state education office and the Ministry of Education, and the school teachers and the principal are well-educated as instructors. However, in private school, instructional support comes from the school management itself, and some of

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the teachers are untrained instructors. This difference is perhaps the reason for the private school teachers to choose “improve classroom management” as the most important aspect for a principal’s roles.

Table 4: Descriptive data - ranking of principals’ roles in dimension of instructional supervision in the government and private schools

Item	Statement	School			
		Government		Private	
		Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
18	Improving school discipline	111.39	7	103.40	2
19	Ability to use external resources as sources for ideas for improving student achievement	109.70	8	104.78	1
20	Provides opportunities for teachers to think, plan, and work together	122.88	5	93.97	4
21	Sets high but achievable standards for all students	125.04	2	92.20	7
22	Provides private feedback of teacher effort	126.83	1	90.73	8
23	Ability to create a personal need / professional development plan for his/her own continuous improvement	123.00	4	93.87	5
24	Solve internal influences that impact upon the school classroom teaching	112.09	6	102.82	3
25	Provide high-quality professional development activities to ensure that teachers have skills to engage all students in active learning	123.83	3	93.20	6

Supervision provides direct assistance to teachers as it continuously focuses on improvement of classroom instruction. The findings show that there is a difference in the rating of the principal’s roles in dimension of instructional supervision between the government and private schools. In the government school, teachers rank “principal provides private feedback of teacher effort” as the most important role.

This result is in line with Locke and Latham contention (1984), that feedback is crucial to maximize the motivating force of the goals. To provide this feedback, the principal needs to monitor and provide feedback about the teaching and learning process. To accomplish this, the principal should be visible throughout the school, should talk with students and teachers about academics and progress toward goals, and should visit classrooms to ensure alignment of instruction to the school’s academic goals. In actual fact, the finding of Blasé & Blasé (1998) indicated that teacher who has principal that monitors and provides feedback about the teaching and learning process is more reflective, focused on the instructional process, motivated, and confident.

On the other hand, teachers in the private school rank “Ability to use external resources as sources for ideas for improving student achievement” as the most important aspect of principal roles. This finding is different from the perception of

the government school teachers. The difference might be the result of the difference of focuses between the two types of schools. As a government school principal, the internal and external resources are the most important aspects that associated with the school effectiveness. However, the success of a private school is mainly depended on external resources.

Table 5: Descriptive data - ranking of principals' roles in dimension of staff development in the government and private schools

Item	Statement	School			
		Government		Private	
		Mean Rank	Rank	Mean Rank	Rank
26	Plans professional development around teacher needs and wants	121.31	5	95.26	4
27	Plans professional development in-service with teachers	127.77	1	89.96	8
28	Provides for in-house professional development opportunities around instructional best practices	111.68	8	103.16	1
29	Supports individualized professional development plan	113.31	6	101.82	3
30	Encourage teachers to do action research	125.19	3	92.08	6
31	Encourage teachers to have professional discussion	123.80	4	93.22	5
32	Encourages teachers to attend professional development activities out side the school that are aligned to school goals	126.83	2	90.73	7
33	Establish mentor programs to orient new teachers and provide ongoing coaching and other forms of support for veteran staff	112.66	7	102.36	2

Educators need to be continuously educated if our goal is to improve the quality of education. The findings in Table 5 show that in the government school, teachers rank “Plans professional development in-service with teachers” as the most important role of principal in the dimension of staff development. This is in line with Sheppard (1996) and Obi (2002). Obi noted that to be a successful instructional leader, the principal must give primary attention to the programme of staff improvement, which comprises leadership techniques and procedures designed to change the teachers’ role performance. He stated that the principals’ roles in this include: classroom visitation, observations, conferences, seminar, and workshop, professional associations, as well as in-service educational programmes.

On the other hand, teachers in the private school rank “Provides for in-house professional development opportunities around instructional best practices” as the most important aspect for principal roles. This finding is different with the perception of the government school teachers because to conduct an in-house professional development course will reduce the financial burden of the private school.

However, for both types of schools, professional development is needed to meet the needs of adult learners and school leaders as they progress over time - from a

beginning leaders to a professional leader, and ultimately toward becoming an exemplary leader. Therefore, professional development is a long term process and embodies the value of life-long learning. As a consequence, professional development must represent a range of carefully organized experiences focused on a leader's current needs, with an understanding that such needs will evolve over time. These professional learning opportunities work best among a cohort of school leaders in order to promote networking and varied perspectives. Additionally, the professional development activities will emphasize collaboration (face-to-face, electronically, or other technological means) with experienced school leaders (and teacher-leaders) who serve as mentors, coaches, or critical friends.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study imply that there is “room for improvement” for principal in private school to be involved in instructional leadership. Private school principals should be encouraged to take up training courses to improve their level of competencies to manage the schools properly and have higher sensitivities towards teachers and students. A certification scheme for private schools principals should be considered to raise the professionalism of principals in Malaysia. Moreover, the school principals need to increase their own knowledge base on instructional leader, in order to respond to new challenges. Principals should move away from school-centred education to learner-centred success and from teaching subjects to teaching learners. The principals should develop a school improvement evaluation plan. Program evaluation plans must be developed and implemented parallel with the action plans and improvement goals. Regular monitoring and assessment need to be introduced to provide a detailed, systematic and ongoing profile of the progress of all students.

The results show that principal's role as an instructional leader in both the government and private schools is still not enough. School principals should institute a sense of empowerment, growth and self-development for staff. They should use evaluation methods for improvements of staff, and not for fault-findings. The principal needs to motivate staff so that they share the vision and mission of the school. They should learn to apply human development and motivational theories to the learning process. It is important to draw attention to high expectations and targets as characteristics of effective schools.

More supervision should be given by the Ministry of Education to deter errant players from tarnishing the image of private schools especially. The Ministry of Education should also be more accommodative to private school principals who dare to think “out-of-the-box”, taking risks and breaking new grounds. The advantage of private schools as compared to the government schools is that business decisions can be made quicker and with less bureaucracy. However, the implementation of such business decisions may often be delayed by the regulatory approvals given by the Ministry of Education.

Future researches could focus on larger samples of the government and private schools in the country from a wider variety of backgrounds. It would be interesting to interview parents and students from different schools to gain more insights into principals' roles as an instructional leader.

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