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Leading to Serve, Serving to Lead: A Conceptual Review of Servant and Instructional Leadership in Malaysian Education

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Abstract

This manuscript presents a conceptual review of Servant Leadership and Instructional Leadership within the Malaysian education system. The analysis highlights the unique contextual factors in Malaysia that shape these leadership frameworks, especially under the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025, which emphasizes the need for effective leadership to enhance educational quality. This review synthesizes existing literature, revealing that while instructional leadership focuses on high academic standards, servant leadership promotes holistic educational environments that prioritize personal growth and collaborative decision-making. Furthermore, it aims to elucidate the interplay between these two leadership styles in addressing contemporary challenges within Malaysian educational institutions.

Keywords: Servant Leadership; Instructional Leadership; Leadership Practices

Introduction

The topic of leadership within the Malaysian education system warrants significant attention due to its complexities and the distinct contextual factors that shape educational practices in the

country. The education sector in Malaysia is governed by the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025, which outlines strategic plans to enhance educational quality through effective

leadership frameworks, including instructional, distributed, and transformational leadership models. A systematic review of the existing literature indicates that leadership practices in Malaysian schools are influenced by contextual and cultural dynamics unique to the nation, while also aiming to align with best practices derived from global contexts (Hallinger et al., 2017)(Harris et al., 2017)(Bush & Ng, 2019; .

Research conducted by Hallinger et al. highlights the expansion of higher education in Malaysia and emphasizes the relevance of instructional leadership, showcasing a noteworthy shift towards prioritizing educational leadership training within graduate programs. This shift reflects a broader recognition of the vital role that principals play in shaping teaching and learning within schools (Hallinger et al., 2017). Harris et al. further elucidate that principals in Malaysia engage in leadership practices that are culturally defined and responsive to the specific needs of their educational environments (Harris et al., 2017). This perspective is crucial, as it underscores the necessity for leadership models that accommodate local cultural nuances while fostering effective educational outcomes.

Moreover, the MEB explicitly endorses distributed leadership as a mechanism to democratize leadership practices within schools, promoting a collaborative environment where various stakeholders, including teachers and middle managers, participate actively in leadership roles (Bush & Ng, 2019; (Adams et al., 2020). This approach seeks to enhance the capacity of schools to improve student outcomes by leveraging diverse leadership styles within the educational framework (Bush et al., 2018). Adams et al. emphasize that the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) is a vital component that equips school leaders with the necessary competencies to address these challenges effectively (Adams et al., 2020).

A substantial body of work has emerged that examines how different leadership styles operate within Malaysian schools, particularly focusing on instructional leadership. Studies suggest that instructional leadership practices directly correlate with school performance and teacher motivation, illustrating a clear need for leaders to balance administrative responsibilities with a focus on instructional quality (Ismail et al., 2021; Ghavifekr et al., 2019; Faizy & Ahmad, 2023). Additionally, findings by Abdullah et al. reinforce the assertion that instructional leadership should integrate the contributions of middle managers to facilitate transformative practices in teaching and learning (Husin & Mohamad, 2019).

The evolution of leadership theories in the Malaysian context continues to challenge traditional paradigms, as seen in the exploration of teacher leadership by Tahir et al., which advocates for elevating the role of teachers in leadership positions to drive educational transformation from the ground up (Abdullah et al., 2019; Tahir et al., 2021). This body of work reflects a growing acknowledgment that effective school leadership in Malaysia must move beyond hierarchical structures to embrace more inclusive and participatory approaches (Tahir et al., 2020; Abdullah et al., 2022).

In summary, the leadership landscape in the Malaysian education system is marked by a strategic push towards integrating varied leadership theories, emphasizing the importance of contextual relevance while improving educational standards. As Malaysia advances towards safeguarding the quality and effectiveness of its educational system under the MEB, a cohesive understanding of

leadership dynamics will be essential for addressing contemporary challenges and fostering sustainable growth within the sector.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership has emerged as a significant practice within the Malaysian education system, fostering a supportive and collaborative environment for educators and students alike. This leadership style, which emphasizes serving others first, has garnered attention for its impact on teacher performance, organizational behavior, and the overall health of school environments.

Key Characteristics of Servant Leadership

In Malaysian educational institutions, servant leadership entails several core characteristics. Qualities such as humility, empathy, and a focus on the growth and well-being of staff are essential. According to Dierendonck and Nuijten, servant leaders prioritize the needs of their team, thereby enhancing performance and commitment to organizational objectives (Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2010). The study by Purwaningtyas et al. further emphasizes that successful servant leaders make decisions collaboratively with their subordinates, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability in the educational setting (Purwaningtyas et al., 2023).

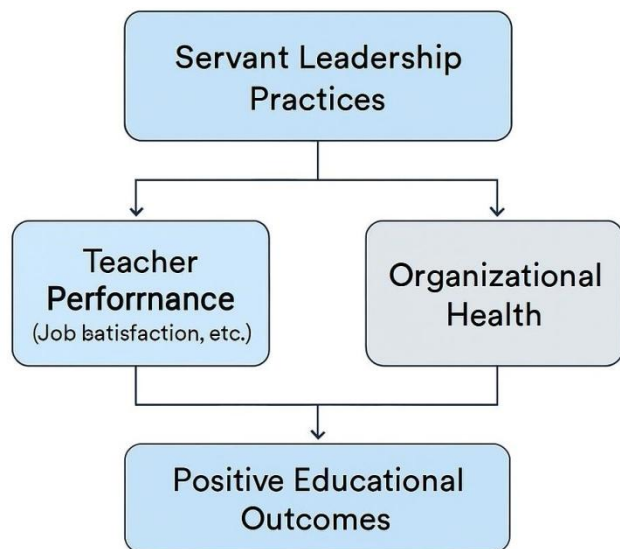
Effects of Servant Leadership on Teacher Performance and Well-being

The relationship between servant leadership and teacher performance is particularly significant. Findings suggest that schools led by servant leaders experience less emotional exhaustion among teachers, which in turn enhances job satisfaction (Wu et al., 2024). This correlation underscores servant leadership's role in alleviating stressors associated with the teaching profession, promoting a healthier organizational climate (Almanza-Cabe et al., 2023). A study highlights that servant leadership boosts teachers' morale and positively influences their organizational citizenship behaviors, which are vital for cultivating a collaborative school environment (Bahari, 2023).

Implementation and Challenges in the Malaysian Education System

Despite the clear benefits, the implementation of servant leadership practices in Malaysia faces challenges. According to Gill and Berezina, the autonomy of schools is often limited, which can impede the effective application of servant leadership principles (Gill & Berezina, 2020). The nuances of Malaysian governance structures, including the limited authority of Parent-Teacher Associations (PIBGs), further complicate the landscape for servant leadership practices (Thien, 2020). Moreover, Hallinger et al. argue for a stronger emphasis on leadership training to equip principals with the necessary skills to implement servant leadership effectively across schools (Hallinger et al., 2017).

Figure 1.0 : Framework of Servant Leadership Practices in Malaysian Education



The framework 1.0 illustrates how servant leadership practices positively influence both teacher performance and organizational health, culminating in improved educational outcomes, which is particularly crucial in the dynamic context of the Malaysian education system.

In conclusion, servant leadership is fundamental to enhancing the educational experience in Malaysia by fostering a culture of collaboration, engagement, and mutual support. Continued research and focus on developing effective servant leadership models for principals can further advance the effectiveness of educational institutions in Malaysia.

Instructional leadership

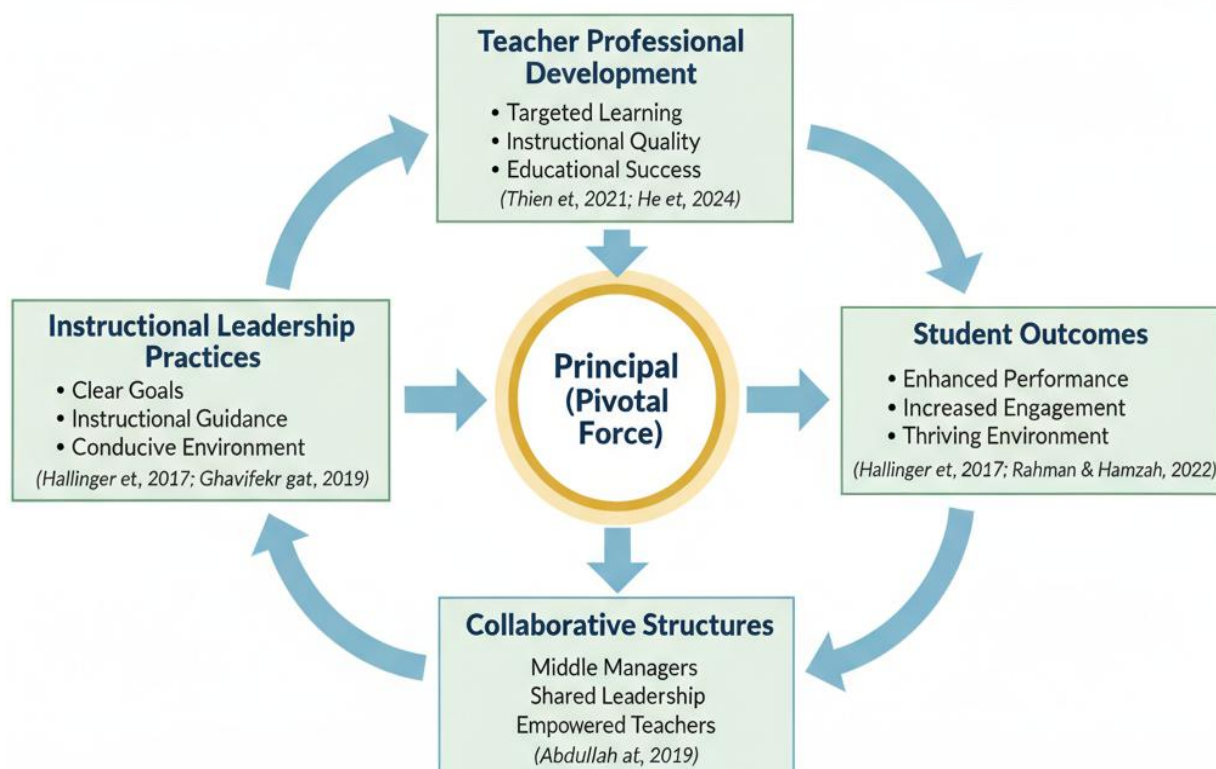
In recent years, the role of instructional leadership within Malaysia's education system has gained significant traction,

reflecting a shift in leadership paradigms aimed at enhancing educational outcomes. Instructional leadership, as emphasized in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), is fundamental in facilitating educational reforms and promoting professional learning among teachers. This blueprint signifies a commitment to developing effective principals who can navigate the complexities of modern educational demands (Thien et al., 2021; Bush et al., 2018).

The emphasis on instructional leadership is not just theoretical but is supported by empirical evidence showcasing its critical role in improving teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. Hallinger et al. noted that principals' instructional leadership practices are perceived as essential for fostering an environment conducive to teacher professional learning and student achievement (Hallinger et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2017). Moreover, research indicates that Malaysian principals are deeply engaged in improving educational practices through structured leadership models, which highlight their responsibilities in curriculum implementation, teacher support, and the establishment of a positive school culture Ghavifekr et al., 2019)(Abdullah et al., 2019).

An important finding surrounding instructional leadership in Malaysia is the necessity for collaboration among educational leaders at different levels, particularly between principals and middle managers. This collaboration is crucial for the effective enactment of instructional strategies, as middle managers can play a pivotal role in bridging gaps between top-down directives and classroom implementation. This, in turn, reinforces the cultural and operational frameworks of instructional leadership within schools (Abdullah et al., 2019)Yaacob & Ishak, 2023). Notably, Thien et al. demonstrated the value of shared leadership in fostering teacher learning, suggesting that a collective approach can enhance capabilities far more than isolated efforts by principals alone (Thien et al., 2021)

Figure 2.0: Framework of Instructional Leadership in Malaysian Educational



This figure 2.0 outlines the interrelations among instructional leadership, teacher professional development, and student outcomes, with the principal acting as the pivotal force connecting teachers and administrative practices.

1. Instructional Leadership Practices:
 - Principals are tasked with ensuring effective instructional leadership behaviors, such as establishing clear educational goals, providing instructional guidance, and fostering a conducive learning environment (Hallinger et al., 2017; Ghavifekr et al., 2019).
2. Teacher Professional Development:
 - The relationship underscores the importance of targeted professional learning opportunities for teachers that align with the instructional vision of the school. This focus is intended to elevate instructional quality and educational success (Thien et al., 2021; He et al., 2024).
3. Student Outcomes:
 - Improved practices and teacher efficacy are anticipated to translate into enhanced student performance and engagement, indicative of a thriving educational environment (Hallinger et al., 2017; Rahman & Hamzah, 2022).
4. Collaborative Structures:
 - The role of middle managers should not be underestimated as they can facilitate the implementation of shared leadership practices, allowing for a more distributed approach to

instructional leadership that empowers teachers (Abdullah et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the Malaysian education system underscores the essential nature of instructional leadership as a transformative driver of educational improvement. The evolution of these practices reflects a broader contextual need for reform and increased academic performance, aligning with global educational standards.

Methodology

This review adopts a systematic literature synthesis approach to evaluate existing studies on Servant Leadership and Instructional Leadership in the Malaysian context. The chosen articles span peer-reviewed journals and scholarly papers that investigate the operational dynamics, influences, and effectiveness of both leadership styles in schools. The search encompassed studies published from 2010 to 2023, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the evolution and impact of these frameworks. Data were extracted pertaining to key themes, including leadership characteristics, implementation challenges, and performance outcomes. The analytical process also involved cross-referencing articles to delineate the comparative strengths and weaknesses of these leadership styles, especially in relation to school governance, teacher satisfaction, and student performance.

Discussion

In the Malaysian education landscape, two prominent leadership styles have emerged: Instructional Leadership and Servant Leadership. Both styles offer unique approaches to managing educational institutions, particularly in enhancing teacher performance, student achievement, and overall organizational health. This manuscript discusses the distinctions between these leadership styles, outlining their benefits and weaknesses.

Table 1.0 Differentiation of Instructional Leadership vs Servant Leadership in the Malaysian Education System

Aspect	Instructional Leadership	Servant Leadership
Definition	Focuses on the principal's role in promoting learning and teaching through high expectations and managing learning programs Hallinger et al. (2017), (Hassan et al., 2023;.	Prioritizes the leader's role in serving others, emphasizing the well-being and development of staff and students (Raime et al., 2023; (Newman et al., 2015).
Key Characteristics	1. Emphasis on curriculum and teaching quality (Ng, 2016), 2. Data-informed decision-making, 3. Clear vision and expectations for student performance (Thien et al., 2021).	1. Building a sense of community, 2. Active listening and empathetic engagement, 3. Prioritizing staff development and collaboration (Raime et al., 2023; (Newman et al., 2015).
Benefits	1. Enhances teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Hassan et al., 2023; 2. Fosters a culture of accountability (Thien et al., 2021), 3. Provides clarity in leadership and direction (Bush et al., 2018).	1. Improves staff morale and reduces turnover (Newman et al., 2015), 2. Encourages a supportive and inclusive school environment (Raime et al., 2023; 3. Enhances collaboration and mutual respect among staff (Newman et al., 2015).
Weaknesses	1. May overlook emotional and relational aspects of leadership, leading to disengaged staff (Othman & Hamzah, 2022; 2. Can create pressure on teachers resulting in burnout Bellibaş et al., 2021).	1. Potential for lack of structure, making it challenging for decision-making (Raime et al., 2023; 2. Sometimes seen as less effective in high-stakes environments (Ghasemy & Frömbling, 2022).

Instructional leadership is strongly rooted in the academic achievement of students, with evidence suggesting a positive correlation between this leadership style and teacher effectiveness (Hassan et al., 2023;Bellibaş et al., 2021). Hallinger et al. Hallinger

et al. (2017) emphasize that principals play a crucial role in educational improvement by ensuring high-quality teaching and managing teaching programs effectively. Research within the Malaysian context indicates that instructional leadership leads to enhanced teacher motivation and improved classroom practices,

ultimately benefiting student performance (Hassan et al., 2023; , Gill & Berezina, 2020).

However, while the focus on academic outcomes is beneficial, it can also sideline the emotional and relational dynamics crucial for fostering a supportive school environment. This oversight may lead to teacher dissatisfaction and even burnout due to the high expectations and accountability associated with instructional leadership (Othman & Hamzah, 2022; , Bellibaş et al., 2021).

Servant leadership, in contrast, fundamentally emphasizes the leader's primary role as a servant to the staff and students. It cultivates an environment where staff are valued and respected, leading to higher collaboration and a sense of belonging within the school community (Raime et al., 2023; , (Newman et al., 2015). This leadership style has been particularly noted for its ability to enhance well-being and job satisfaction among educational staff, thereby reducing turnover rates and fostering a positive school culture (Newman et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, servant leadership may lack the decisiveness and structure required to satisfy the rigorous demands of educational management. The emphasis on consensus-building and collaboration can sometimes result in slower decision-making processes, which may hinder timely responses to pressing educational challenges (Ghasemy & Frömbing, 2022).

Conclusion

In summary, this conceptual review underscores the critical roles that both Servant and Instructional Leadership play in the Malaysian education system. While Instructional Leadership is essential for driving educational outcomes through structured guidance and curriculum management, Servant Leadership fosters a supportive culture that enhances teacher well-being and collaboration. The manuscript highlights the importance of integrating these two models to construct an educational leadership paradigm that not only prioritizes academic excellence but also nurtures the emotional and professional growth of educators and students alike. Such a holistic approach could further improve educational standards, aligning Malaysian practices with global best practices, thus paving the way for sustainable growth in the education sector.

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