



Unleashing the Veil on Inclusive School Leadership Practices in Malaysia

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Abstract

Recent inclusive education policies have increased accountability to leadership in schools. Inclusive leadership is concerned first and foremost with inclusion, both in its processes and the ends for which it strives. However, there is a lack of scholarly literature that addresses the ways in which school principals are engaged in the implementation of inclusive education in schools, particularly in the ASEAN context. This research draws on emerging findings from a qualitative phenomenological case study approach with six principals at selected secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur. Qualitative data analysis rendered a contextualization of inclusive school leadership practices attributes such as establishing and conveying principals' vision; connecting with external communities; creating a supportive learning organization; involve in students' learning; and facilitates high-quality learning experience. This study provides insight into enacting inclusive leadership practices in Malaysia. The research also highlights ways in which leaders provide educational direction towards a more inclusive school system that may be applied in other parts of the world and in different cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Inclusive Leadership, Inclusive Education, School Leadership, Malaysia*

1. Introduction

Inclusive education requires quality school leadership practices that bring an impact to the school performance, how teachers work and students' outcomes [1]. To do so, attention is needed on types of leadership that is best suited for an inclusive education [2]. This is essential as studies have shown that principal's leadership are pertinent key factors for the successful implementation of inclusive education in schools [3]. Malaysia is committed to the implementation of inclusive education model and moving more students with special needs toward inclusion and that by 2021 to 2025, 75% of students with Special Education Needs (SEN) will be enrolled in inclusive programs.

Hence, this requires effective inclusive leadership practices among principals in Malaysia. Such contention is supported by study a conducted by DeMatthews, Serafini and Watson [4] who found that inclusive leadership practices among principals have undoubtedly been a factor in the growth of inclusive schools over the past decade. The participation and representation of every school leader, teachers, and members of the school community are crucial towards successful inclusive practices in schools [5]. Therefore, this study answers the following research question: What are principals' inclusive leadership practices at selected secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia?

2. Literature Review

Inclusive Education

The United Nations [6] defined inclusive education as a process that necessitates a continuing and pro-active commitment to the elimination of barriers impeding the rights to education, together with changes to culture, policy and practice of regular schools to accommodate all students. Adams, Harris and Jones [7] found that inclusive education increases social and academic opportunities for both children with and without disabilities, as well as significantly increases the likelihood of children with disabilities enrolling in higher education and thus, have better employment and life outcomes.

Inclusive Leadership Practices

Choi et al. [8] defined inclusive leadership as words and acts by a leader or leaders that express an invitation and gratitude for others' participation. This idea was initially presented and thoroughly



explained by these researchers. They view an inclusive leader as a person who welcomes thoughts and opinions from all levels of employees while yet holding them accountable for the group's decisions. Principal plays a significant role in creating inclusive schools. The principals' responsibilities in creating inclusive school include outline budgets, provides suitable facilities and resources, provide professional development, hire, and evaluate teachers, and set expectations [5]. Principals' ability in creating quality and effective inclusive leadership practices provides great influence on teachers, students, and school community.

3. Methodology

This study used qualitative phenomenological case study approach. Creswell [9] mentioned phenomenological case study approach is a method of inquiry derived from the research participants about their personal knowledge and experiences. In this study, six principals from different secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur were inquired about their inclusive leadership practices. Principals with a minimum of three years' experience and above was chosen for this research as they are able to provide better insights on the effectiveness of their inclusive leadership practices in the school.

Interview and sampling

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data from the school principals. Such a contention is supported by Creswell [9] who stated that semi-structured interviews consist of a series of open-ended questions based on the research topic areas. The open-ended nature of the question defines the topic under investigation while also allowing both the researcher and the research participants to discuss some topics in a greater depth. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech [10], two to ten research participants are suitable in achieving redundancy or saturation of the data. Table 1 shows the total number of years principals led their schools and the number of years they were in principalship respectively.

Table 1. Number of years of attachment and principalship

Principal	Number of years leading the school	Number of years in principalship
Principal 1	4	4
Principal 2	3	8
Principal 3	7	13
Principal 4	4	12
Principal 5	4	4
Principal 6	3	11

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were transcribed and ATLAS.ti 22, a qualitative data analysis software was used to code the data. The data analysis adopted a thematic analysis approach by employing both open coding and axial coding. Data was analyzed by identifying distinct concepts and themes for categorization [11]. Themes were then generated.

Validity and reliability

This research study used multiple validity procedures to ensure the findings of this study is authentic and accurate. Firstly, we used the member checking approach [9]. A follow-up email with the school principals was done to confirm the final data script during the transcribing process. Next, the transcriptions and coding were checked by two researchers to ensure there were no mistakes in the transcription [12].

Ethical Issues



A permission letter to conduct this research study was gained from both the State of Education Department Kuala Lumpur and the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Then, a consent form was drafted for the secondary school principals to participate in this study and that their identities will be kept confidential during the research. Therefore, in the results section, each principal will be identified using the pseudonyms (P-1 to P6).

4. Findings

a) Establishing and conveying principals' vision

In the interview, most of the principals mentioned that they establish their inclusive vision based on the Ministry of Education (MoE)'s vision which is to produce quality education for students with special needs. P-4 explained *"We do not have the specific vision for our school. We just follow the MoE's vision"*. P-5 added *"Our vision and mission are the same with other schools. It is under MoE. We have a standardized vision and mission."* P-2 mentioned that principals have a specific guidebook provided from the MoE. This guideline indicates the vision and mission of inclusive education. Hence, it can be concluded that principals did not establish their own inclusive vision in schools. Instead, the inclusive vision is derived from the MoE. However, the inclusive visions in the guideline book are still being conveyed by principals to the school community such as teachers, students, and parents in ensuring the implementation of inclusive education.

b) Connecting with external communities or parties

Findings indicate principals connect with external communities through parents' involvement, working with the district education officers and state education officers. Parents were regarded as a significant factor in the implementation of inclusive education. P-2 shared that parents are also involved in the meeting or discussion *"Well, normally parents involve themselves in the meeting or discussion, parents here have no problem in supporting inclusive practices in the school."* Hence, it can be concluded that principals' inclusive leadership practices can be seen when principals connect with parents from both the mainstream parents and inclusive parents. Both parties are needed in ensuring the success of inclusive education in school.

c) Creating a supportive learning organization

Principals create a supportive learning organization through various strategies. P-1 shared that she formed a committee to ensure inclusive education can be implemented successfully. This committee members involved the administrators, teachers, and parents *"First thing I setup a committee involving all the teachers, two parents, counselors, disciplinary teachers and the school management team"*. P-3 mentioned that it is also important for principal to have a good relationship among teachers He further emphasized that good teamwork and communication skills are another important aspect in supporting each other in school *"I take good care of the relationship with my other senior assistant as we are working together in achieving the school vision. Good communication and teamwork are very important"*. Apart from that, P-4 emphasized that providing motivation to teachers was also an important element in supporting a learning organization *"Motivating the teachers that the students also have the rights to get equal education, get them to fully understand what inclusive education is."* P-3 mentioned motivation for students are important too in achieving quality education *"I always believe that when they teachers tell their students that they too can perform and excel in the exam, the students will have inner motivation and learning can definitely take place"*. Therefore principals' play a crucial role in terms of creating a supportive learning organization by motivating teachers and students in the implementation of inclusive education.

d) Involve in students' learning

Principals also involve themselves in students' learning. When they are in the know about what is taking place in the inclusive classrooms, they are able to identify issues and come up with solutions in order to ensure effective teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms. P-4 shared *"As a school leader, I involve myself indirectly in the progress of my students especially when they are put in the mainstream classroom. When I know about the problems or issues that they are facing, at least I will be able to come up with a plan on how to deal with those problems or issues."* On the contrary, P-2 and



P-3 believed that every teacher has their own teaching style, and they know better about the way to teach these students. Hence, they have faith on their teachers and let them do their duty without any disruption. P-2 explained *“to be honest, I have never interrupted my teacher’s way of teaching because I strongly believe that they know what’s the best approaches or strategies that are suitable for inclusive education”*. Hence, principals in this study know what their teachers are doing in the inclusive classroom, and they provide constructive feedbacks whenever necessary.

e) Facilitate high-quality learning experiences

P-1 mentioned that he introduced a buddy system as an initiative to help students with special needs feel comfortable to study with their abled peers and seek guidance from the teachers. An inclusive student is paired with another mainstream student, often one who is older and more intelligent. This system encourages camaraderie, improves academic support, addresses behavioural and social problems, and can help students feel more a part of the school community. Other principals such as P-3, P-5 and P-6 imposed a similar inclusive leadership practice which is providing more opportunities that involves all students so that they can interact and get along with each other well without any discrimination. As such, it can be concluded that principals’ facilitating high-quality of learning experiences in the implementation of inclusive education by ensuring students with special needs are paired with their abled peers to ensure they have friends in the school.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore principals’ inclusive leadership practices at selected secondary schools in Malaysia. Based on the findings, most of the principals followed the MOE’s vision of inclusive education which is to produce quality education for students with special needs. Although the MOE has its own vision, principals should be able to create their own inclusive vision as different schools have different set of goals and expectations. Pedaste et al [13] argues that principals should establish and convey inclusive vision themselves. This is essential as it is the most fundamental aspect in creating a successful inclusive education in school.

Principals in this study were found to have positive relationships with parents. The findings are in line with the study conducted by Billingsley et al [14] who stated that one of the key elements in promoting inclusive education is the support of parents and family partnerships. In addition, most of the principals showed they initiated collaboration among teachers in implementing inclusive education in school. As Bush [15] suggested, an effective school leadership required positive relationship between school leader and teachers. Hence, in this study, principals had built up good rapport with the teachers by giving an on-going motivation to both teachers and students.

Interestingly, the findings of this study indicate principals immerse themselves in their students’ learning and that principals provided high-quality learning experiences for students with special needs. Various strategies and approaches had been done by principals in making sure both teachers and students have a quality and impactful teaching and learning in the inclusive classroom. As stated by Schuelka [16], inclusive education is an on-going process of educational transformation. These complements previous findings conducted by Day et al [17] that successful school leaders have the ability to improve or transform their schools in the long term as they understand their school’s needs and articulate shared educational values among the school community.

6. Limitations and recommendations

The research setting of this study is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Findings from the selected six secondary schools cannot be generalized to other secondary schools in Malaysia. Therefore, future studies could include more schools and principals in the study.

7. Conclusion

The study aimed to explore principals’ inclusive leadership practices at selected secondary schools in Malaysia. There were various initiatives that was enacted by the school principals in enacting their inclusive leadership practices in schools. This study provided insight into inclusive school leadership



practices in Malaysia. Overall, the current study has extended the knowledge base of school leadership literature from an inclusive leadership perspective. It is hoped that the findings from this study could provide educational direction towards a more inclusive school system that may be applied in other parts of the world and in different cultural contexts.

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