SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN MALAYSIA

CHAPTER ONE

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY REFORM – GLOBAL AND MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

Many countries are seeking to improve their education systems to compete more effectively in what is increasingly a knowledge-based economy. Globalisation means that governments are well aware of how other economies and education systems are progressing and they may wish to emulate what appears to have succeeded in other countries, despite the well-established view that the effectiveness of such 'policy-borrowing' is limited by contextual and cultural differences (Burdett and O'Donnell 2016, Harris, Jones and Adams 2016). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), for example, shows that there are stark variations in student outcomes in language, mathematics and science, leading education systems to seek ways to enhance the quality of their provision. Similarly, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) show marked differences across countries.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education, 2013) provides one Asian example of an ambitious reform plan. However, there is evidence in Malaysia (Bush et al 2018), and in Thailand (Hallinger and Lee 2014), that reform initiatives may falter because school-level implementation is flawed. The complexity of managing top-down initiatives in large systems, with very many 'zones of implementation', thousands of schools and classrooms, means that ambitious reforms may rarely be more than partly successful (Bush et al 2018). Leadership is one of the most significant aspects of the Blueprint, which acknowledges that the quality of school leaders is the second biggest school-based factor in determining student outcomes, after teacher quality. It also advocates instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the linkages between different levels of education systems to explore how they support, or may inhibit, school leadership policy in Malaysia. It will also report findings from two research projects. The first, funded through the Ministry of Education's

Fundamental Research Grants' Scheme (FRGS), examined the relationship between the Blueprint and leadership theory (Bush and Ng 2019). The researchers adopted a multiple case-study design in two Malaysian states, Sarawak and Selangor.   The second, funded by the HEAD Foundation, assessed the implementation of educational policy reform (Bush et al 2019).   The research team adopted a qualitative research design, focused on interviews with 49 'key informants'; senior national government officials, state and district leaders, and school principals. Data collection was preceded by a systematic literature review, including policy documents ('grey' literature), in a sequential research design. The review included both English and Bahasa Malaysia literature. A major source was the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MoE 2013), particularly shift five, Ensure High-Performing School Leaders in Every School.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint

As noted earlier, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MoE 2013) is the major contemporary policy document underpinning educational reform. Shift five focuses on school leaders, with several policy initiatives designed to contribute to school improvement:

> 'The international evidence clearly shows that strong school leadership is . . . required to produce slgnificant improvement in school achievement . . .   The effect of an effective principal is significant.   Research shows that replacing an average principal with an outstanding one can improve outcomes by up to 20 percentile points' (MEB: 5-13).

This comment reflects international research on the importance of effective school leadership for school and student outcomes.   Leithwood et al's (2006) widely cited study in England reaches several conclusions about the impact of leadership on student achievement:

1. School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning (Ibid: 3).
2. There is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership (Ibid: 5).
3. Total leadership accounted for a quite significant 27% of the variation in student achievement across schools (Ibid: 12).

The global and Malaysian evidence both reinforce the need to give a high priority to leadership when addressing policy reform.   However, establishing the importance of leadership is only the starting point for reviewing policy and practice.   The Blueprint identifies four specific strategies:

1. Principal selection.
2. Principal training.

3. Instructional leadership.
4. Distributed leadership.

Principal selection

The Blueprint notes that 'a rigorous, clear and transparent selection process is critical for building and sustaining effective schools' (MEB 2013: 5-13), but adds that 'the selection criteria for new principals in Malaysia are more linked to tenure than competencies' (Ibid). In 2011, newly appointed Malaysian principals had an average tenure of 23 years as teachers, compared with 10 in Finland, and 13 in Singapore, two of the most successful education systems, according to PISA criteria (Ibid: 5-13). Chay (2020) shows that appointing principals who are close to their retirement age inhibits innovation and strategic planning. The Blueprint also notes an aspiration to 'enhance the professional criteria required for selection' (Ibid).

Kwan and Walker (2009) capture this dichotomy in their distinction between experience and credence. Identifying and measuring the appropriate competencies is not straightforward but this may occur through national training programmes, for example in Singapore, where selection and preparation are closely aligned (Bush 2008). Malaysia also has a compulsory principal training programme, the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL). According to an education minister cited by Ng (2017: 1009), selection 'is based on meritocracy'.

Even when a mandatory training programme ensures that only qualified leaders can be appointed as principals, there remains a challenge in matching candidates to specific vacancies. This links to the notion of 'fit' between school context and the background of potential principals. Blackmore et al (2006: 297) describe this as 'homosociability, the tendency to select people just like oneself'. A linked problem is that political considerations may be more significant than professional capability, for example in China, where principals must be active members of the Communist party (Xue and Bush forthcoming). This issue is not addressed in the Blueprint but may be 'the elephant in the room', as anecdotal evidence suggests that the selection process is not always transparent.

Principal training

As noted above, Malaysia requires its potential new principals to undertake the NPQEL. A major focus of this qualification is instructional leadership. 'Principals need adequate training prior to appointment throughout their service, particularly on the key dimension of instructional leadership' (MEB 2013: 5-14).

The decision to make NPQEL mandatory for new principals is a major step and brings Malaysia in line with several other countries, including its neighbour, Singapore. The Ministry of Education focus group (Bush et al 2019) reported that this policy was underpinned by research which showed that aspiring principals required knowledge and skills to improve their leadership capabilities, rather than relying only on experiential learning. One senior official (MoE 1) stated that principals should have a qualification to match that required of teachers, which is specified in law. The NPQEL is managed by a specialist school leadership centre, Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), which increased its training capacity three-fold in one year to 1,000 graduates, following the decision to make it mandatory for new first-time principals (Bush et al 2019).

Bush et al (2019) report that state and district views on NPQEL varied. In Johor, for example, officers believed that school leaders, equipped with the mandatory NPQEL, would be able to carry out activities and programmes connected to national policies. The district education officers believed that they have empowered school leaders to use their own creativity to implement the policies. However, the need to follow instructions in respect of activities and programmes, and the empowerment given to school leaders to use their creativity to implement policies, seems to be contradictory and has left schools leaders confused. Through the NPQEL, school leaders believed that they have been accorded the knowledge and skills to lead the school but have not been given the space to interpret the policies according to their school context. However, Ng (2017) reports that some principals still feel unprepared for headship even after completing NPQEL.

Instructional leadership

The Blueprint is unambiguous in advocating the need for principals to be, or to become, instructional leaders. 'In high-performing school systems, principals are more than just administrative leaders – they are instructional leaders who focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning in their schools' (MEB 2013: 5-13). This view is reinforced by international evidence which shows the significance of instructional leadership. Hallinger and Lee (2014: 6) show that 'a growing body of international research suggests that instructional leadership from the principal is essential for the improvement of teaching and learning in schools'. However, they add that 'in many parts of the world, the practice of instructional leadership remains both poorly understood and outside the main job description of the principal' (ibid). Robinson al's (2008) meta-analysis of published research shows

that the closer leaders are to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to make a difference to students.

The recent emphasis on instructional leadership is based largely on practice in decentralised and partly decentralised contexts, where principals have substantial scope to decide how to lead and manage their schools (Bush and Glover 2014). However, there is emerging evidence (e.g. Bush et al 2018 in Malaysia, Gumus and Akcaoglu 2013 in Turkey, Hallinger and Lee 2014 in Thailand, and Kaparou and Bush 2015 in Greece) that governments of centralised systems, which encourage or prescribe instructional leadership, may be disappointed, as principals are reluctant to move away from their traditional managerial approaches (Bush 2019).

Participants in the HEAD Foundation research (Bush et al 2019) also stress the significance of instructional leadership, one describing it as 'very important' (MoE2). The MoE focus group shows how instructional leadership is addressed by the IAB. New cohorts are encouraged to enhance their professional autonomy, develop their problem-solving skills, and understand the policies. Training is designed to develop knowledge and skills and emphasises on the job training or 'hands on' learning, with a lesser focus on formal learning.

Most state and district participants also note the importance of instructional leadership. However, the definition of what constitutes instructional leadership differs. One Kuala Lumpur principal (KLP1), for example, comments that principals as instructional leaders should protect teachers' instructional time and observe and support teachers in their classrooms. Several Sabah participants address the dichotomy of principals being both administrative and instructional leaders.

> 'Administrative work is taking up too much time . . . principals should prioritise instructional leadership' (SABP).

> 'Principals should be aware of the teaching and learning processes in schools, as well as focusing on administration . . . some principals do not play a role in classroom teaching but focus more on administration' (SABD1).

The promotion of instructional leadership is the key feature of shift five (leadership) of the Blueprint. It is explicit in exhorting heads and principals to modify their practice to switch their focus from administration to instruction. However, as civil servants, they are part of the administrative hierarchy and this aspect of their work, with vertical accountability, is likely to continue. Hallinger and Lee (2014)

show that a similar initiative in neighbouring Thailand largely failed. Bush et al's (2018) systematic review of the English and Bahasa Malaysia literature shows partial adoption of this model, mainly focused on control aspects, such as monitoring, rather than empowerment dimensions, such as modelling and mentoring.

Distributed leadership

The Blueprint makes several references to the significance of distributed leadership in achieving the Ministry's aims, stating that 'in line with international best practices, the Ministry will move towards a model of distributed leadership where effective, high quality school leadership permeates the entire organisation of all schools' (MEB, 2013: 5-18). It adds that 'the aspiration is to create a peer-led culture of professional excellence wherein school leaders mentor and train one another, develop and disseminate best practice, and hold their peers accountable for meeting professional standards' (ibid: E28).

However, this model, and most of contemporary leadership theory, was developed in Western contexts, raising questions about its suitability for Asian contexts, including Malaysia, where education systems are highly centralised. This prompted the author to conduct research on whether, to what extent, and in what ways, distributed leadership is practiced in Malaysian schools (Bush and Ng 2019). Their study focused on 14 schools in the contrasting settings of Sarawak and Selangor.

Distributed leadership has become the most fashionable leadership model in the 21st century, with numerous books and journal articles focusing on this theme (Bush 2020, Harris, 2010). The rationale for this model is that leadership is too complex to be handled purely through solo leadership. By increasing leadership density, through empowering more leaders, there is potential for enhanced learning outcomes (Bush and Glover, 2014). Gronn (2010: 70) notes that 'there has been an accelerating amount of scholarly and practitioner attention accorded [to] the phenomenon of distributed leadership'.

Leithwood et al's (2006: 12) important English study shows that multiple leadership is much more effective than solo approaches and distributed leadership features in two of their widely cited 'seven strong claims' about successful school leadership. Hallinger and Heck (2010) also found that distributed leadership was significantly related to change in academic capacity and, thus, to growth in student learning.

Bush and Ng (2019) asked their 14 principals whether or not their leadership practices have changed since the Blueprint was published in 2013, and whether or not they regard themselves as distributed leaders, with probes about how, and to whom, leadership is distributed. The other participants were questioned about whether they regard their principals as distributed leaders, with probes about how, and to whom, leadership is distributed.

The Blueprint links distribution firmly to the hierarchy in two ways. First, the focus is firmly on middle and senior leaders holding formal roles in the structure. Second, the scope of distribution is circumscribed; leaders will be prepared to fully utilise the decision-making flexibilities *'accorded to them'* (MEB: E28) (present author's emphasis). This cautious approach to distribution is consistent with the notion of allocative distributed leadership (Bolden et al, 2009). It suggests an uneasy compromise between the free-flowing assumptions of distributed leadership theory and the rigid requirements of the hierarchy. There is evidence of allocative distribution, predominantly to senior leaders, in most of Bush and Ng's (2019) case study schools.

Allocative distribution has several similarities to the management concept of delegation. The head teacher of school six, for example, delegates tasks to her senior assistants, a form of allocative distribution. They carry out duties as instructed by their head teacher. When asked about distributed leadership, participants in several schools referred to delegation. In school seven, a middle leader mentions 'delegating tasks', a 'top-down' process. The evidence from the Malaysian schools is that distributed leadership is almost indistinguishable from delegation, not least because principals remain in control and have firm reporting requirements (Bush and Ng 2019).

Despite its references to senior and middle leaders, the main focus of the Blueprint is on school principals and how they should be developed to lead their schools more effectively. Accountability in centralised systems is through the hierarchy and Malaysian principals are civil servants employed by the government and this inevitably limits their scope for individual agency. Their centrality means that they also act as 'gatekeepers' (Tian et al, 2016), who can choose to facilitate or inhibit distributed leadership. The evidence from the 14 Malaysian schools is that principals have chosen to use their authority to limit distribution to senior colleagues and to retain overall control of all major decisions. As Hartley (2010) indicates, distributed leadership does not fit easily within school hierarchies. The implication for policy-makers is that 'big picture' announcements, such as advocating distributed leadership through the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013), may have limited impact at school level, particularly where it contradicts existing cultural assumptions, which privilege hierarchical leadership (Bush and Ng 2019).

Policy Making in Malaysia

Education in Malaysia is managed at four distinct levels; federal, state, district and school (UNESCO Bangkok 2011).   The federal level Ministry of Education (MOE) takes overall responsibility for developing policies and regulations, with the leadership of the Director-General of Education. The State Education Department (SED) coordinates and monitors the implementation of national education programmes, projects, and activities, as well as providing feedback to the MOE on overall planning. In most states, there are additional administrative units at the district level called District Education Offices (DEO). The DEOs provide links between schools and SEDs by coordinating and monitoring the implementation of programmes, projects, and activities at grass-roots level. At primary and secondary school level, principals and head teachers are responsible for providing professional and administrative leadership. All four levels were included in the research conducted by Bush et al (2019).

Policy Implementation

Bush et al's (2019) participants at all levels are very aware of the complexity of implementing educational policy reform, and the potential for an 'implementation gap' (Becher 1989) between policy intentions and implementation in schools and classrooms, described as 'extremely significant' by one Sabah participant. There remains a strong emphasis on 'top-down' processes in this centralised system, described as 'cascading' by participants in contexts as diverse as Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur and Sabah.   This leads to information being 'diluted', or being understood differently, from that intended by policy makers. This may also explain what Fullan (2001) describes as the 'implementation dip'.

Several key points emerge from Bush et al's (2019) data. First, top-down expectations are reflected in the comments from Johor (disseminating 'mandates') and Selangor (not questioning top officials). These perspectives suggest weak potential 'for feedback loops', as shown in the Johor data, to advise policy-makers about the practical implications of policy reform.   There is also evidence of the limitations of the cascading process, notably in two states, with information being 'lost' between administrative levels (Kelantan) and lack of consistent messaging (Kuala Lumpur). This may underpin teachers' feelings of helplessness, and lack of trust in policy makers, as shown in the Sabah data. Finally, some participants, for example those in Johor, mention the 'disconnect' from reality in implementing policy, notably in respect of infrastructure limitations or teacher attitudes. These issues need to be addressed if policies are to be 'successful' (Honig 2006) in the ways outlined in the Blueprint, notably in raising student outcomes to the top third in international league tables.

Stakeholder understanding

Aida Suraya's (2001) view that policy reforms 'falter at lower levels' is supported Bush et al's (2019) data, which indicate weak understanding of policy initiatives by principals, teachers and other stakeholders, including state and district officials. This is illustrated most starkly by a Sabah official's admission of limited awareness of the content of the Blueprint. Developing awareness through cascading is criticised by principals, for example in KL, who say that this leads to teachers being informed 'indirectly', an example of policy 'filtering'.

A more profound problem may be teacher attitudes to policy reform, described as 'apathy attitudes' in KL, being 'resistant' (Selangor), or being 'too comfortable in their comfort zone' (Sabah). While this may be partly due to weak professionalism, there is also an issue of the extent and nature of professional trust (Jahnukainen et al 2015: 162). Bringing about attitudinal change is an even bigger challenge than enhancing stakeholder understanding.

Factors Facilitating Effective Implementation of Policy Reforms

Policy delivery units

Wongwanich et al (2015) examined policy delivery strategies in Thailand and concluded that 'it is highly recommended for Thailand education reform to establish policy delivery units'. They also argue that policy delivery units are required at every level, and form part of the organizational structure under the Ministry of Education (ibid: 1371). The Malaysian MoE established the Education Performance and Delivery Unit (PADU) in 2013. Its primary role is to facilitate, support, and deliver the Ministry's vision in transforming Malaysia's education system.

PADU's work is commended by national officials, and by some participants at state level. However, 'delivery' is a concept linked to top-down processes and seems less well-suited to the 'contextualised' implementation supported by participants at all four levels. The appointment of school improvement partners (SIPs), who work at the district level to support principals, seems to be more appropriate for a contextualised model.

PADU has a major role in monitoring the implementation of policy reform, and was established for that specific purpose. Many participants in Bush et al's (2019) research welcome the clarity of the processes introduced by PADU. However, it is clearly an example of the new public management (NPM), discussed by DeGroff and Cargo (2009), with its focus on measuring performance using

standardised instruments. Given the aspiration for a 'step-change' in student outcomes, to achieve much higher places for Malaysia in PISA and TIMSS, a strong focus on outputs may be inevitable.

Factors Hindering Effective Implementation of Policy Reforms

Several Malaysian researchers, including Ibrahim et al (2015), identify the hierarchy as a major factor inhibiting effective policy implementation. The MoE at federal level is perceived to be controlling, following a top-down highly centralised approach. Centralised policy making poses challenges for teachers, who perceive the teaching policies from the top management to be unrealistic. According to research conducted by UNESCO, centralised policies cannot be easily disseminated to all schools as officials at federal, state and district level are incapable of monitoring or evaluating the process of implementation at all schools (Ibrahim et al., 2015). In addition, teaching policies overly emphasise the obligation to follow execution guidelines, not encouraging variety in implementation based on the school context, which results in failure at school and classroom level (Ibid).

Bush et al's (2019) research participants identify two main barriers to the effective adoption of policy reform. First, participants at all levels expressed concern about teacher and leader attitudes towards change.   Education is a complex public service to lead and manage because implementation takes place in thousands of schools serving very different communities. National officials were inclined to berate teachers for their attitudes to policy reform, but the latter perceive that teaching policies are unrealistic (Ibrahim et al., 2015). The Ministry needs to consider how to respond to 'inappropriate attitudes', beyond expressing its disappointment.

Second, concern was expressed about the centralised, and 'mandated', nature of policy reform and the need to contextualise implementation.   While district-level initiatives, such as the appointment of SIPs, address this issue, it seems that this is insufficient to satisfy the concern that change is being imposed rather than being 'owned' by schools and teachers.   This connects to Wallace and Rogers's (2001) view that central government policies are often insensitive to the range of contexts in which they are to be implemented.

Requirements for Effective Adoption of Policy Reforms

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) envisages the empowerment of the State Education Department and District Education Offices (MoE, 2013; Ibrahim et al. 2015), as a partial response to the critique of top-down decision-making. They have both gained more autonomy in making key operational decisions in budgeting and personnel matters (MoE, 2013; Ibrahim et al. 2015) but these

changes may be regarded as 'deconcentration' of central power rather than decentralisation and genuine empowerment.

Three main points emerge from Bush et al's (2019) data on policy adoption. First, the intention to decentralise the implementation of policy, for example through the work of SIPS, is welcomed at all levels because of recognition that diverse school and community contexts require customised, rather than standardised, responses. National officials, in particular, colleagues recognise that top-down policy making and implementation have limited effect and that a more nuanced approach is required. Second, limited resources, including weak infrastructure in some contexts, and mixed teacher quality and commitment, are impediments to effective adoption. Third, the need for teacher professional learning was stressed by some participants. National officials recognise that all staff, including head teachers, principals, and teachers, need to understand and 'own' new policies if they are to be implemented enthusiastically and successfully. The challenge is how to promote teacher professionalism with a prescriptive curriculum, policed through PADU and other delivery monitoring mechanisms (Bush et al 2019).

The collective message from this data set is that large-scale policy reform is challenging and unpredictable, with uneven outcomes. Empowering states, districts, principals, and teachers is more likely to lead to policy innovation being contextualised appropriately, with an improved prospect of favourable outcomes. In this sense, the Blueprint, and similar ambitious policy documents, should be regarded as flexible frameworks, encouraging professionals and other stakeholders to embrace change, rather than a one-size-fits-all prescription for top-down reform.

Discussion

Malaysia has placed school leadership at the heart of its educational reform strategy, recognising its role in enhancing student outcomes. The Ministry of Education's commitment is encapsulated in shift five of the Blueprint and is most strongly evident in the ongoing support for the nation's specialist leadership centre, IAB. However, positive outcomes from the policy reforms, as judged through PISA and TIMSS, have been slow and uneven. The reasons for this modest progress are complex and include both generic and leadership-specific factors, examined below.

Relationships between actors at different levels

Malaysia has a multi-layered education system, with many levels, and policy is 'filtered' down through these levels, with the potential for misunderstanding and differential interpretation by the

participants at each stage.   In Malaysia, five levels can be identified; national, state, district, school, and classroom, with actors at each level having different interests and priorities.   This contrasts with smaller unitary systems, such as in Singapore, where there are fewer levels and reduced scope for misunderstanding.   The data show two problems arising from this complexity.   First, the messages received by heads, principals and teachers may be different from those intended by senior policy makers, because of the cascading approach.   Many participants in Bush et al's (2019) research attested that school-level understanding of policy often did not match national expectations.   One reason for this is that most practitioners have not read the Blueprint (see Bush and Ng, 2019), and thus rely on what are often individual perceptions of policy from more senior colleagues in states and districts, leading to inconsistent messaging.   Second, and linked to the first, weak understanding led to variability in the nature and extent of implementation and limited 'ownership' of policy initiatives (Bush et al 2019).

The influence of hierarchy

There is a contrast between strongly hierarchical and centralised education systems, such as that in Malaysia, and more devolved systems, where more decisions are made at local or school level.   The evidence from the international literature is that 'ownership' of interventions, and successful adoption, is more likely when local actors, including education professionals, are involved in policy formation and not simply implementing policy imposed by national politicians and senior officials. However, most of this literature is not based on research in centralised systems, suggesting that it may be too simplistic to assume that adopting a more distributed approach would lead to more effective implementation (Bush et al 2019).

Bush et al's (2019) data suggest emerging recognition of the limitations of implementing policy solely through the formal hierarchy.   National policy makers acknowledge that top-down policy making and implementation have limited effect and that a more nuanced approach is required.   Instead of relying mainly on circulars, the Ministry has re-balanced its staffing, with fewer people at the national headquarters in Putrajaya, and more located in states and districts.   This was done to provide more support to principals and teachers, and to monitor the implementation of key policies such as instructional leadership.   It was also recognised that all staff, including head teachers, principals, and teachers, need to understand and 'own' new policies if they are to be implemented enthusiastically and successfully.

The regional data offered a more mixed picture of the influence of hierarchy.   While the opportunity to localise policy adoption was welcomed, some participants, for example in Sarawak, still followed

the hierarchy 'strictly'. Officers were also cautious about acting autonomously, because of 'fear' (Johor) of acting inappropriately, or because they were concerned about being 'wrong' (Sarawak). (Bush et al 2019). These findings suggest that cultural change is required to facilitate ownership by education professional, especially leaders, and to enable them to initiate context-based change rather than simply responding passively to top-down policy mandates.

<u>Acceptability and feasibility</u>

Top-down approaches to policy change tend to assume a 'one-size-fits-all' adoption model, with detailed prescriptions about how policy should be implemented. The success or failure of policy reform depends on two overlapping considerations, acceptability and feasibility. First, the extent to which stakeholders, professional and lay, accept and 'own' the new policy, is critical to its successful implementation. The evidence on this point is mixed. The data show that, while the broad vision underpinning the Blueprint has wide support, school and classroom-level implementation was sometimes passive rather than enthusiastic. There are two contrasting views linked to this finding. Some participants bemoaned the poor attitudes of teachers while others argued that the policies were ill-suited to the specific contexts they represented (Bush et al 2019).

The second consideration relates to the feasibility of the policy. While there is broad support for the Blueprint's vision, as noted above, it is becoming clear that achieving a position in the top-third of PISA and TIMSS rankings, is unlikely. Given the centrality of this commitment, the lack of feasibility is a serious weakness, as this provides much of the rationale for this far-reaching reform. An alternative interpretation is that this is a legitimate aspiration and that setting the 'bar' high is better than accepting the current modest position of Malaysia in the international league tables. Indeed, this is described as an 'aspiration' in the Blueprint.

School leadership: Prescriptions meet Reality

The Blueprint offers a clear diagnosis of the limitations of pre-2013 leadership practice and policy in Malaysia. As noted above, four main strategies were advocated to address these problems. First, it seeks to appoint principals based on their competence rather than their experience, a 'time-serving' model. In practice, however, tenure remains a major factor in the appointment process. Chay (2020) shows that a significant element in differentiating successful and less successful schools in Selangor is that the latter had several consecutive principals appointed within a few years of retirement. Making appointments on this basis illustrates the wider problem of decision-making in a multi-layered system. State and district officials appear not to be acting in line with national expectations.

Second, it seeks to professionalise the principalship by requiring that all first-time principals are qualified with the NPQEL. This is an important development, not least because it reduces the possibility of appointing principals based only on experience. However, the NPQEL itself needs to be reviewed. Research by Ng (2017) indicates that some graduates of the programme argue that it is too theoretical and does not address leadership practice. The balance between theory and practice in leadership preparation is subject to debate internationally (Bush 2008, 2013) but this seems to require further consideration in the Malaysian context. Establishing IAB, and making NPQEL mandatory, are important steps but they are insufficient to ensure enhanced leadership quality.

Third, the drive towards principals focusing on instructional leadership, rather than administration, is entirely consistent with international research, but the evidence is that such an ambitious shift has been slow to materialise. Bush and Ng's (2018) research in Sarawak and Selangor shows that some aspects of instructional leadership have been adopted, notably enhanced monitoring, including classroom observation. However, other key themes identified in the literature, such as modelling, mentoring, and targeted professional development, are barely evident. Hallinger and Lee's (2014) conclusion that adopting instructional leadership in centralised contexts is problematic appears to be relevant to Malaysia.

Fourth, the intention to encourage distributed leadership is also widely supported by international literature, although much of this is normative. The Blueprint notes that the idea of one 'heroic' leader is being replaced by notions of multiple leadership. However, Bush and Ng's (2019) research in two Malaysian states shows that distribution is limited and is overwhelmingly allocative in a process indistinguishable from delegation. Given the high power-distance in Malaysian society, it seems unlikely that 'emergent' distribution, as advocated in western literature, can be achieved.

The chapter began by noting the influence of policy borrowing on educational reform in Malaysia. The Blueprint is quite explicit in benchmarking student outcomes in Malaysia with those in other countries and in seeking to improve the nation's position in international league tables such as PISA and TIMSS. There are clear dangers in such comparisons because it can lead politicians and officials to 'borrow' the policies and practices of apparently more successful nations without regard to contextual and cultural variations (Burdett and O'Donnell 2016). However, policy learning can be valuable if careful adaptation is undertaken before major changes are introduced. A central question for Malaysia is whether sufficient contextualisation was undertaken before the Blueprint was implemented. The evidence in respect of instructional and distributed leadership is that cultural factors have modified

the ways in which these concepts were introduced and implemented, changing their meaning from that expressed in the international literature.

The Blueprint was intended to foreshadow long-term change, so immediate results were always unlikely. The introduction of a mandatory leadership qualification, with the beginning of a shift away from purely administrative leadership, provides the potential for enhanced leadership quality. However, it requires a paradigm shift and widespread support and engagement throughout the education system.

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