

**LEADERSHIP PRACTICES OF AN AWARD WINNING  
HEAD TEACHER IN A REMOTE PRIMARY SCHOOL  
IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA**

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A Thesis Submitted to Asia e University in  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

Poor school performance seems to be prevalent in small rural school districts because of factors such as low income, poverty, scarcity of resources, and the unavailability of highly qualified teachers. The problem of ineffective school leadership and poor retention of high-quality teachers have been an ongoing problem in Malaysia affecting thousands of the most needy and disadvantaged primary school students. The purpose of the study was to describe the leadership practices of an award winning head teacher and to find out what it was about his leadership that had enabled him to beat the odds. The turning point for this school, leading to its amazing transformation came in 2000 when this head teacher was posted there. Unhappy with the school's *UPSR* low passing before 2000, he vowed to turn around the school. Within three years, the Head Teacher successfully led the school to the top position in the district. The school also clinched the 2003 *National Hopeful School Award for the Interior Schools Category* in the country. In 2007, the school received the Education Ministry's *Excellent School and Quality Award*. Incredibly, the school's project on '*Community Participation in Achieving Quality Education in Difficult Circumstances*' bagged the prestigious 2009 *Commonwealth Education Good Practice Gold Award*. In order to answer the four research questions put forward in this study, a research strategy which described the phenomenon in totality had been undertaken. In this regard, a qualitative case study had been adopted. In order to ensure the quality of data collected from the Head Teacher, other participants consisting of teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and community members were involved. They were specifically chosen as they would have personal

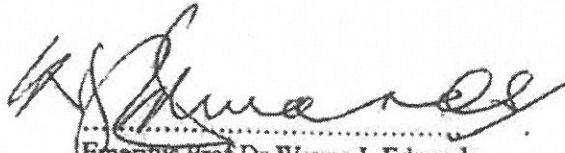
experience of their Head Teacher's leadership and practical efficiency. They had been and were participating in the transformation of this school so in terms of their eligibility, they were the most appropriate choice to ensure the credibility of the data in the study. In this study, the Process Enneagram had been used as a guide for collecting data through interviews. According to Knowles (2002), the developer of Process Enneagram, leadership is an activity so it needs to be studied with a guide that reveals the activity components. Triangulation of the data collected was established through observations and document analysis. Based on the findings, six main leadership practices had contributed to the Head Teacher's success in turning around the failing school: vision and goals; instructional leadership; administration and management; beliefs, values and attitudes; communication and linkages; and emotional engagement. These leadership practices and their interrelationships were depicted in the creation of SOLe (Self-Organizing Leadership for excellence) Framework which is the novelty of this study. One of the major conclusions of this case study was that the Head Teacher had played an effective role of bringing the community to the school and this had contributed greatly to the school's success. The implication was that effective school leadership did matter. It was found that this award winning Head Teacher had shaped the school through his synergistic power of leadership.

APPROVAL PAGE

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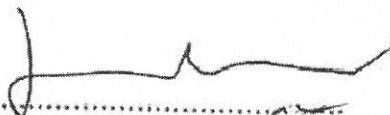
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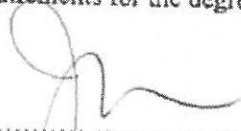


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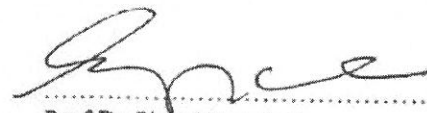


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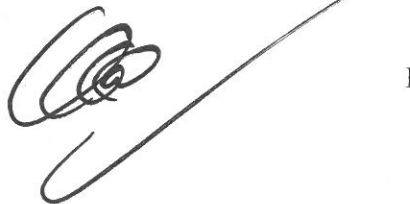
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## Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the PhD degree is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for the degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and / or exclusion from the award of the degree.

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Date: 7 September 2016

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*Time endears  
but it will never fade  
the kindness of those  
who have contributed to  
more than they receive credit for  
in making my dream come true.....(Yap, 2016).*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BOS	Blue Ocean Strategy
COMICS	Community in the Classrooms
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
EPRD	Educational Planning and Research Division
HPS	High Performing Schools
<i>IAB</i>	<i>Institut Aminduddin Baki</i>
<i>IPG</i>	<i>Institut Pendidikan Guru</i>
ITTO	International Timber Trade Organization
<i>MIG</i>	<i>Muafakat Ibu Bapa dan Guru</i> (Collaboration between Parents and Teachers)
MNS	Malaysia Nature Society
MoE	Ministry of Education
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PEMANDU	Performance Management and Delivery Unit
<i>PIPP</i>	<i>Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan</i> , (National Educational Development Blueprint) 2006
<i>PPPM</i>	<i>Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia (2013 - 2025)</i>
PTA	Parents – Teachers Association
<i>SIB</i>	<i>Sideng Injil Borneo</i> (a religious association)
SIPartner+	School Improvement Partner
SK	<i>Sekolah Kebangsaan</i>
SMK	<i>Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan</i>
STAM	<i>Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia</i>
STPM	<i>Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia</i>
UPSR	<i>Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah</i> (Primary School Achievement Test)
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

#### 1.1 Introduction

Education in Malaysia has evolved and it has come under scrutiny and pressure with the demand for schools to make an effective contribution on the student outcomes. The Malaysia Education Development Plan (*Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia*) 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013) has spelt out eleven shifts to further improve the quality of education towards achieving the national goal of making Malaysia an academic hub in the Asian region by the 21st century. In particular, the fifth shift focuses on grooming high performing school leaders which include not only principals of the secondary schools or head teachers of the primary schools but also senior assistants and heads of subject departments.

This responsibility of training the school leaders is being shouldered by *Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB)* whose niche is on educational leadership training. The Ministry of Education has recognised that leadership has always been a key organisational concept in terms of defining the management and administrative system within any institutions as organizational effectiveness and leadership are inextricably interwoven (Sheppard, 1996, p. 325). According to Beare, Cadwell, and Millikan (1989), leadership has generated a plethora of empirical evidence suggesting that “outstanding leadership has invariably emerged as a key characteristic of outstanding schools” (p. 99).

This chapter provided an initial introduction to the study. It examined six fundamental elements of the study.

- (a) The purpose and the intersecting areas of research;
- (b) The Malaysian educational context;
- (c) Review of the Malaysian education system;
- (d) Educational reforms on school leadership in Malaysia;
- (e) The problem statement, the research questions and their aims; and
- (f) The significance of the study.

This chapter closed with a summary of the ensuing chapters. The appendices to this thesis gave primary evidence to support some of the key statements made on the aspects of the study in the body of the text.

## **1.2 The Intersecting Areas of Research**

The intersecting areas of research in this study described the ability of the Head Teacher to create and maintain effective rural school focusing on his leadership practices. It also involved examining research from the rural schools context as well as involving research on the interrelationship with the community.

This study sought to examine whether effectiveness in this award winning rural school was the result of a function of different leadership practices or a combination on interrelationships that had facilitated the Head Teacher to transform the school.

It is generally understood that the effectiveness of small and rural schools depends not only on the leadership abilities of the head teacher alone but also on the relationship between the head teacher, the students and their families, the parents-teachers association (PTA), and the wider community in which the school is located (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Kilpatrick, Johns, Milford, Falk, & Prescott, 2002). School leaders need to be contextually literate because context does matter (Mulford, 2008).

For very small and rural schools, successful leadership characteristics need to be taken into consideration the embeddedness of the schools within their local community, and the concomitant communication skills required to build the relationships requisite for developing and sustaining relationships.

In order to understand the local school culture and to be in an effective position to implement change, rural school leaders are expected to have experience both of regular classroom teaching, and of various positions of responsibility in schools (Clarke & Wildly, 2004). Herzog and Pittman (1995) observed that “for rural schools to be successful in combating their problems, they will have to capitalize on the community and family ties that are rated as so important by rural students” (p.118).

It is these intersecting areas of leadership and interrelationship within the community that provide the underlying basis for this study as it attempts to identify the key leadership practices attributing to the success of the leader in transforming the school. A particular focus on the influences of leadership and the community context would then draw thematic conclusions based on what was found at the school studied.

### **1.3. The Malaysian Educational Context**

The Malaysian education system continuously strives to ensure that every Malaysian child has an equal head start to education, regardless of his or her ethnicity, socio-economic status, or geographical location. The education journey consists of five phases overseen by the Ministry of Education (MoE) which are preschool, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, and post-secondary/tertiary. Malaysian students in the national system undergo 12 to 13 years of formal schooling prior to entering tertiary education which excludes preschool education. The extra year of schooling depends on the type of post-secondary or pre-university programme that

they choose. Students who take the two-year *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM)* require 13 years to complete their studies while students who take the *Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia (STAM)*, or the Matriculation programme require only 12 years. Students with special needs also have the option of an additional two years to complete their schooling. This 13-year time frame to STPM completion is comparable to other developed systems, for example, the A-levels.

Formal schooling in Malaysia begins with entry into primary schools at the age of 6+ years. This starting age of 6+ for primary education<sup>6</sup> is in line with the high performing school systems, such as Singapore or Ontario in Canada. At present, only primary education is compulsory. As early as 1980, the Malaysian federal government's spending on primary and secondary education, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was the highest in East Asia. The education system in Malaysia is an important national agenda. At the time of Independence, over half the population had no formal education, while only 6% of Malaysian children had been educated to the secondary level, and a sparse 1% to the post-secondary level. Five and a half decade later, access to education in Malaysia recorded near universal enrolment at the primary level at 94%, and the percentage of students who dropped out of the primary school had been significantly reduced from 3% in 1989 to just 0.2% in 2011. Enrolment rates at the lower secondary level (Forms 1-3) had risen to 87% and the greatest achievement was undoubtedly in the secondary school level (Forms 4 to 5), where enrolment rates had almost doubled, from 45% in the 1980s, to 78% in 2011. The enrolment rates are even higher in the private schools which recorded 96% at primary level, and 82% at the upper secondary level. There has been some rapid expansion in preschool education and around 77% of students are now enrolled in some form of preschool education, either public or private. In 2011, approximately 3%

or 145,000 students aged seven to seventeen were enrolled in private and other education systems like international schools, religious schools or independent Chinese schools. These schools are governed by their own independent school boards but they must meet certain standards in order to be registered. These schools charge fees and they do not receive any subsidy funding from the government. The above mentioned information and data was extracted from the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

The quest for academic excellence in Malaysia under the Government Transformation Plan in 2010 was to widen the access to quality and affordable education and to improve student outcomes. Undoubtedly, Malaysia has made great strides in its education system over the past fifty years in terms of youth literacy rising from 88% in 1980 to near universal literacy of 99% today, while adult literacy has increased from less than 70% to 92% in the same time frame. Furthermore, the proportion of the adult population (aged 15+) with no schooling has declined from 60% in 1950 to less than 10% in 2010, while the proportion (aged 15+) that has completed secondary school has risen from around 7% in 1950 to almost 75% over the same period of time (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). These are achievements of which Malaysia can be proud of but she cannot be complacent as our student outcomes has deteriorated when compared to other countries like Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea. Sadly this implies that the academic gap of the student outcomes is widening in Malaysia as about 20% of the students failed to meet the Trends In International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) benchmarks for Mathematics and Science in 2007 when compared to the previous results (5-7%) in 2003 (Government Transformation Program, 2010). This academic decline has raised the cause for concern in the Ministry of Education as higher education levels correlate consistently

with long-term economic growth. Unless the Ministry of Education pushes itself to raise the bar, Malaysia risks being left behind, especially the small and rural schools. This pressing need to enhance student achievement and to raise the country's aspiration to be internationally comparable has emphasized on the importance of head teachers' leadership (Sub-NKRA No.4, Government Transformation Program, 2010). School leaders are now looked upon as the new generation of educational leaders to transform the traditional top-down leaders to collaborative instructional leaders to promote effective schools for student achievement. Quoting the former Minister of Education, Muhyiddin Yassin, head teachers and teachers are seen "as the primary agents in improving student outcomes as they also play a big role in steering their schools' success" (The Star, 2011, July 17).

This implies that school leaders today are subjected to intense pressure to deliver the achievement of the students in their schools (Bajunid, 2008). This emphasis sees the school heads being evaluated through performance-based assessment in which 10,173 schools (EMIS Data on Jan 31, 2016 retrieved from [www.moe.gov.my](http://www.moe.gov.my)) will be ranked and published on a yearly basis. In view of that, the performance-based management of the school heads not only looks into the teaching of the basic core academic but is also responsible in improving student outcomes. As the accountability requirements of the Ministry of Education have posed challenges to all school heads and teachers, this implies a transformation of the roles of 21st century educational leaders. In other words, the issue of the growing pressures on head teachers has demanded a rethinking of their characteristics, roles and responsibilities on what school leadership entails. The focus on standards and accountability has now driven decisions and policies in ways that are unprecedented (Leithwood et al., 2004). For schools now to focus on increased student learning and achievement in this era of

accountability, the objectives for teachers and students need to be clear and comprehensive (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990). In order to actualize the Ministry's of Education New Deals (*Bai'ah*), a review of leadership practices, knowledge, skills, strategies, tools and responsibilities of head teachers must be brought into focus (Waters et al., 2003). The changing expectations for the role of school heads create a challenge which requires a deeper understanding of leadership responsibilities as it is important that they understand what it takes to become effective in managing and transforming their schools. Such changes in responsibilities have widespread implications, particularly for the head teachers and principals in the rural schools.

Poor school performance seems to be prevalent in small rural school districts because of factors such as low income, poverty, scarcity of resources, and the unavailability of highly qualified teachers (Smith, Patterson, & Dogget, 2008). The problem of poor retention of high-quality teachers has been an ongoing problem in Malaysia affecting thousands of the most needy and disadvantaged primary school students. Disparities between urban and rural schools are most serious in poorer states like Sabah, Kelantan and Malacca (World Bank, 2012). A previous report further describes that although Malaysia has succeeded in providing universal access to basic education since the 1980s, this documented urban-rural disparity may derail Malaysia's trajectory to achieve Vision 2020, Malaysia's 30-year target of becoming a high-income, developed nation by 2020 (World Bank, 2010). In primary schools in Malaysia, it is becoming clearer that equality of access does not equate to equality of student outcomes, particularly for rural students (Rahman, Nor, Mokhtar & Halimi, 1993).

The Malaysian national standardized test, Primary School Achievement Test or *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR)* confirmed the World Bank's findings