
Malaysian educative leadership: interim research findings

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Summarizes the policy context, the methodology and the interim findings of a research project intended to produce an indigenous theory of educative leadership in Malaysia. Reports the findings from the first phase of the project. Focuses on the forms of leadership service values in Malaysian school communities as adjudged by exemplary principals and head teachers.

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Yusro Abdul Haddad passed away on 14 January 1995. This article and the MELP are respectively dedicated to the memory of this fine educator.

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Introduction

This article summarizes the policy context, the methodology and the interim findings of a research project intended to produce an indigenous theory of educative leadership in Malaysia. Educative leadership services were defined as the forms of leadership that help improve the quality of teaching and learning. A practical theory was needed to develop leadership considered appropriate in the Malaysian context of rapid economic and social development, national unity and Islamic revivalism. The practical outcomes of the study will include a validated diagnostic instrument that will measure the perceived extent to which school communities are receiving educative leadership services and implications for professional development, school development and management education. The findings from the first phase of the project are reported here, and specifically the forms of leadership service valued in Malaysian school communities as adjudged by exemplary principals and headteachers. They were assembled using iterative, qualitative and quantitative methods.

Context

Malaysia's educational policy has been heavily influenced in the 1990s by its national economic and social development policy: "Vision 2020" [1]. Vision 2020 was, in turn, developed from a Prime Ministerial proposal that Malaysia become an industrialized and fully developed country by the year 2020. Vision 2020 has become the most influential policy statement in Malaysia since independence (1957), generating intense local, regional and national discussion and attracting widespread public support. All materials related to the implementation process are being archived at the Institute of Vision 2020. This radical agenda has accommodated both

the need for national unity[2] and Islamic revivalism.

Each portfolio of government has been expected to develop a contribution to the process of implementation. Education is no exception, both anticipating and helping to lead in the process – Dr Mahathir and his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, are both ex-Ministers of Education. For example, the National Conference on the Educational Vision in 1993, led by the Director General of Education, Dr Wan Zahid Mohammed Noordin, affirmed the alignment of education policies with national economic and social aspirations. The central ideas in the Educational Vision of Malaysia were expressed as knowledge culture, reading culture, culture of excellence, caring culture, empowerment and zero defect. Similarly, all educational institutions have articulated the practical implications of Vision 2020 and the Educational Vision. In educational administration, the Director of the Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB, the National Institute of Educational Management) provided a comprehensive analysis[3] of the nation's needs and concluded that:

The new generation of educational administrators are expected to be self-confident leaders with competence, a sense of belongingness, and self-worth. Their thirst for knowledge will allow them to cross intellectual boundaries and acquire new languages for interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary discussions ... Among other objectives, the new staff development program aims to develop educational managers whose leadership actions are based on principles of justice, equality and other democratic ideals ... [as well as] ... managers knowledgeable in economics, finance and the law, with a deep pragmatic grasp of today's new realities, technological competences, research orientations, high moral and ethical principles, effective communication skills, competence as curriculum and instructional leaders and with the abilities to be management counsellors. The new generation of managers must have the capacity to analyze and

synthesize and recapture the sense of history while being able to anticipate future changes. They are also expected to be culturally refined, with the will, drive and passion for excellence.

Hence, the long-term purpose of the research programme at the IAB is to develop an improved causal story that links quality learning, effective teaching and educative leadership in Malaysian schools with a view to serving national priorities. Most educational research in Malaysia has tended to focus on the links between teachers, students and learning outcomes rather than on teachers as learners and on the educative role of leaders.

The exploratory research conducted in 1992-1993 at the IAB suggested that a range of conditions created by leaders help teachers learn how to improve the quality of learning in Malaysian classrooms. The IAB decided to focus its research effort in 1994-1995 in order to:

- develop an indigenous and practical theory of educative leadership, educative in the sense that it seeks to raise the quality of teaching and learning;
- provide a means by which school communities can identify the forms of educative leadership services that their school needs to develop further;
- add Malaysian research findings to the material taught in the IAB's programmes; and
- contribute to the international corpus of literature on leadership in education.

Approach

The Malaysian Educative Leadership Project (MELP) was established at the IAB in March 1994. Preliminary qualitative data were collected from 140 secondary principals. In July 1994, three members of the MELP research team visited the University of Tasmania to develop the conceptual base of the project further[4,5]. A challenging interim objective was then agreed; by the end of 1995, the MELP would provide a validated diagnostic instrument for Malaysian school communities so that they might:

- self-map the extent to which they are receiving educative forms of leadership;
- plan the development of leadership services in their school communities related to teaching and learning;
- mount collaborative action research with the IAB;

- integrate new understandings with their prior and existing knowledge of effective leadership practices.

The Malaysian Educative Leadership Questionnaire (MELQ) was designed to measure the extent to which the leaders in a school community are providing educative leadership services. Design proceeded on the assumption that such measurement would generate feedback and organizational learning[6,7] and further improve the instrument and its use. The development of the MELQ also assumed that the leaders in a school community may include the principal, the senior assistants, senior subject teachers, members of PTA boards, staff in positions of responsibility, and other people with influence.

A draft 60-item MELQ was built from qualitative data provided by two groups of Malaysian secondary principals. The first group of 110 were principals of award-winning schools invited to the IAB from the 12 peninsular states. The second group of 30 was a stratified sample representative by state, size of school and years of experience. Both groups were asked to respond to an open question in week-long, structured and experiential workshops: what leadership services improve the quality of teaching and learning? Supplementary data were drawn in March from "situation reports" prepared by 20 principals from the first group.

The research team examined the type of activity implied by each response. Actions explicit in responses or implicit in "best practices" were converted into items. Simultaneously items were clustered into forms of service activity. The broad categories of activity (philosophical, strategic, political, cultural, managerial and evaluation) were drawn from an Australian practical theory of educative leadership[3]. However, both the content of the items and the definition of the six subscales were developed using the views of the Malaysian participants. Put another way, while the items could yet be reclassified using different conceptual frameworks, the items and the six subscales of the MELQ were determined using the language and sentiments of practitioner-respondents.

The process of validating and improving the draft MELQ began by surveying an opportunistic sample of 86 from the first group of 110 secondary principals. The accuracy of data entry was checked using a 20 per cent sample. An error rate of 0.0016 was found. Feedback from the 86 respondents helped raise the face validity of items further by suggesting subtle improvements to the trans-

lations in the bilingual MELQ. One item proved irreparably ambiguous. It was eliminated from analysis and from the MELQ. Five new items were suggested. The refined 64-item instrument was then trialled with a third stratified sample of 102 primary school headteachers randomly selected from the 14 states and the two federal territories of Malaysia.

All respondents to the draft MELQ were asked to respond to each item with reference to *all* leadership services given to their school community, not just personal contributions. For each item, respondents were asked to circle one option on a Likert scale that best reflected the *actual* situation in their school community, not what they believed it should be. The average time taken to complete the 64 item MELQ was 22 minutes, with the longest time taken being 28 minutes.

Responses were scored 5 for Strongly agree, 4 for Agree, 3 for Not sure, 2 for Disagree and 1 for Strongly disagree. These scores were analysed using the Rasch procedures[8] for item analysis. This analysis is based on a probabilistic model for scale construction and on iterative estimation procedures seeking convergence[9]. The variable in this case was Educative Leadership Services as defined by the first group of secondary principals and the third group of primary headmasters. The Rasch analysis resulted in the items in the MELQ being calibrated and the respondents being measured on the same scale. The analysis of items provided “fit” statistics for both items and respondents.

Commonly, “misfitting” persons are removed from data sets and the analysis repeated[10, p. 202]. In the first (secondary principals’) sample, the highest outfit standardized mean square was 6.44. In the third (primary headteachers’) sample, the highest outfit standardized mean square was 8.55. In both cases, the mean squares were judged to make no significant difference to the item statistics. This meant that the few outlying respondents could be retained without affecting the capacity of the MELQ’s items to measure Educative Leadership Services.

Items with infit and outfit standardized mean squares larger than 3.00 were investigated. While a level of 2.5 has been shown empirically not to disturb item calibrations[10, pp. 202-3], 3.0 was considered to be equally rigorous because of the six distinct dimensions in the MELQ. As noted above, one item was found to be irreparably ambiguous in the first (secondary principals’) responses and was set aside. Three other items were

modified and in all subsequent analyses their mean squares were well below 3.00.

The distribution of item difficulty for the first (secondary principals’) set of responses and the third (primary headteachers’) set of responses both ranged from – 4.5 to 4.5 with adjusted standard deviations of 0.63 and 0.58 respectively. This minor difference of 0.05 meant that the two scales were virtually identical. This meant that the construction of the educative leadership services scale could have been achieved using either of the two samples or both. To maximize the acceptability of the MELQ to both primary and secondary school personnel in future, it was decided to combine samples for final calibration.

Interim findings

The MELQ will have to undergo field trials before claims can be made concerning its capacity to measure the extent to which the leaders in a school community are providing educative leadership services. There are, nevertheless, some strengths to the research strategy used. Many of the practices recommended in items are already mandatory, common or reflect long standing norms of “best practice”. This outcome also reflects the iterative methods that accommodated both emic and etic perspectives.

Initial qualitative data were triangulated with documentary data from the “Situation Reports” and with the subsequent quantitative responses, both manually and statistically. The third sample of 102 primary school principals were not able to suggest additional appropriate items. Rasch analysis identified high consistency of responses. On the other hand, it is not possible to identify the balance between compliance behaviours and deep commitment with respect to the items. Other professional and community perspectives have yet to be incorporated. Caution is therefore appropriate. With these limits to interpretation in mind, an interim summary of the content of the items and the definitions of the subscales now follows.

The first form of leadership service identified was distinctively philosophical in nature. The principals and headteachers involved in this research described leadership that:

- helped school communities develop clearer ideas about teaching and learning;
- clarified purposes;
- generated shared values;
- promoted the gaining of wisdom;
- developed people’s characters; and

- deepened knowledge about problem solving.

The relevant items in the MELQ specifically identified the need for leaders who could help others clarify their ideas about education and key values to be served. They also suggested that it was important for leaders to help everyone in the school community to become more open minded, to develop a collaborative philosophy (*muafakat*) and to acquire wisdom. Special mention was made of the need for leaders to help people live by religious principles, to cultivate a love of learning and to develop the characters of the teachers and students. Three final items noted the need for leaders to develop problem solving capacities, to encourage the growth of knowledge about teaching and learning, and to stress moral principles.

The second form of leadership service recommended in the responses was strategic in nature. It was defined by the participants in terms of helping a school community to conduct strategic appraisals, identify strategic options, analyse the consequences of options, make informed strategic decisions, and make longer-term plans.

The related items in the MELQ noted the need for leaders in the school community to provide strategic analyses of the policy context. There was a strong preference for leaders to use collaborative strategic planning processes; for example, to develop programmes, a clients' charter, etc., and for them to bring wider knowledge to strategic planning. The items made it clear that leaders were expected to identify strategic options for the future and help identify the consequences of each option. It was also suggested that leaders should be able to create new knowledge about teaching and learning; for example, through lateral thinking, research and development, etc. There were a series of pragmatic strategic services expected, such as managing the key decision making processes; for example, to set school goals and objectives, ensuring that specific programme plans and the overall school development plan were integrated, and helping teachers take responsibility for the management of teaching and learning. Special note was made of the need for leaders in school communities to help teachers and students develop an ownership of school objectives.

The need for political leadership service was defined in terms of helping a school community to accommodate the interests of stakeholders, legitimizing policies, mobilizing resources for its purposes, sustaining implementation, gaining the support of influ-

ential people who help protect what is valued, while ensuring that participants in schooling use their powers responsibly.

More specifically, respondents suggested that the leaders in school communities had to find ways of accommodating the views of legitimate stakeholders and to gain support for school policies in the broader context. They noted the need for leaders to lobby for the resources needed to achieve school purposes. They valued an emphasis on team building when implementing plans, by, for example using local project groups (e.g. *gotong royong*), task forces, subject expert teams, etc. Another recommended political role for leaders in school communities was to encourage teachers and students to use their powers responsibly. Other items noted the need for leaders to empower teams with the freedom to innovate in teaching and learning and to encourage collegial teaching and learning. Respondents also valued leaders who could create support structures for teachers and students; for example, in welfare programmes, regular informal meetings, self-supporting groups, etc. Three other forms of political service widely appreciated were:

- 1 leaders motivating teachers and students to improve teaching and learning;
- 2 helping teachers and students to become proactive; and
- 3 celebrating quality teaching and students' achievements.

Cultural leadership services were defined as those that help each school community to identify its unique identity in a national context, review its ethos, build new norms, generate a sense of shared culture and boost commitment.

It was seen as important that leaders in school communities relate local aspirations to national education goals when creating a sense of identity in each school. The need to build a school culture that features collegiality, respect, trust and rapport between teachers, students and community was noted. Items identified the need to orient new teachers into the life of the school in a planned way, to promote the goals of the school; for example, at assemblies, teachers' days, prize-giving days, school publications, etc., and to provide ceremonies for people to commemorate what the school believes to be important. Stressed in some items was the need for leaders to provide clear disciplinary guidelines and for them to be concerned about the social and emotional wellbeing of teachers and students. Other cultural leadership services valued included enhancing the readiness of students to learn, ensuring that students know about

learning objectives and creating a caring environment; for example, through guidance, counselling, mentoring, etc. Such services were to be provided by the leaders of school communities by working with others in a practical way.

Valued managerial services were defined as those that help a school community to:

- manage its day-to-day operations;
- organize its site and plant;
- supervise its human resources;
- solve problems;
- acquire resources;
- organize communications; and
- co-ordinate teaching and learning.

More specifically, the items requested that leaders make sure that schools operate smoothly, that leaders are firm in implementing decisions and that they distribute workloads fairly. Other management services valued include the leaders' capacities to maximize the use of limited resources, to provide problem-solving processes, and to promote the growth of knowledge about teaching; for example, by encouraging self-supporting groups to form, staff development, professional development, human resource development and in-house training. The role of good communications was emphasized in two items concerning the need for leaders to have good internal communications; for example, with an open-door policy, two-way informal discussions, peer support groups, etc. and to maintain good external networks; for example, with other agencies and community groups and through excellent public relations. Special reference was also made to managerial services through which leaders in school communities encourage collegial teaching and promote co-operative learning about teaching.

Evaluation services were defined as those forms of leadership that help a school community to monitor outcomes, compare outcomes and achievements to objectives, develop new objectives, revise goals and strategies, and those that can lead to a review of the basic purposes of the school. It was stressed that valued forms of evaluation services can be summative or formative in nature, depending on the situation and purpose.

The related items in the MELQ referred to the need for leaders to monitor student achievements and the quality of teaching personally. Items also suggested that leaders should collect information about the quality of teaching from students and/or parents, and similarly, collect information from teachers about the quality of leadership services.

Respondents made it clear that they believed that leaders in school communities should evaluate all areas of students' and teachers' performance. Other items suggested the need for leaders to organize learning development programmes for students – for example, coaching, homework, clinical services, etc. – as well as teaching development programmes for teachers – for example, mentoring, peer appraisal and feedback, classroom and school visits, etc. Three final suggestions valued:

- 1 the use of information on teaching and learning to revise teaching programmes;
- 2 the use of information on teaching and learning to revise overall school development plans; and
- 3 leaders using information on teaching and learning to revise school goals.

Interim conclusion

An indigenous theory of educative leadership is being built using the webs of belief held by leading educationalists in Malaysian schools. Their ideas of "best practice" have been synthesized into a practical theory and converted into an instrument, the MELQ. The next phase of the project will involve improving the MELQ for use in school communities to understand more about how this theory of leadership service relates to the quality of learning and teaching.

Postscript

The third version of the MELQ has now 67 items, with item separation reliability (measured using Rasch procedures) exceeding 0.96 in all subscales. The instrument has proved extremely robust in school community settings. Training in its use for school community purposes has started. More detailed accounts of both methodological and substantive matters are being prepared.

Notes and references

- 1 Mahathir, M., "Malaysia: the way forward", paper given to the Malaysia Business Council by the Prime Minister, Kuala Lumpur, 28 February 1991.
- 2 Malaysia is a poly-ethnic society stratified by geographic location, incomes, occupations and employment sector. About 60 per cent of the population are defined by the Government of Malaysia (1986) as *Bumiputras* (sons-of-the-soil). This classification includes ethnic Malays (about 55 per cent) and the local peoples of Sabah and Sarawak. The other major ethnic groups are Chinese (31 per cent) and Indians (8 per cent). The Malaysian Govern-

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ment also estimated that 70 per cent of *Bumiputras*, 40 per cent of the Chinese and 56 per cent of the Indians live in rural areas and that the ratio of average incomes of Chinese, *Bumiputras* and Indians is 100:73:57 (see Government of Malaysia, *5th Malaysia Plan 1986-1990*. Government Printers, Kuala Lumpur, 1986 (Tables 4.4 and 3.4)). In 1990, 29 per cent of registered professionals were *Bumiputras*, 55.9 per cent Chinese and 13 per cent Indian. *Bumiputras* were employed mainly in agricultural, forestry and government services. Chinese people were found more in the wholesale and retail trades, hotel and restaurant sectors while Indians tended to be employed mostly in the agricultural, forestry and manufacturing sectors (see Government of Malaysia, *6th Malaysia Plan 1991-1995*, Government Printers, Kuala Lumpur, 1991 (Tables 1-9, 1-10 and 1-11)).

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