

Managing Public Preschool Education: Links between School Leadership and Provisions of Service Quality

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Abstract

The ultimate objective of this study is to identify the links between roles of school leadership in and the provision of service quality in Malaysian preschool education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four officers from four government agencies providing preschool education namely (1) Community Development Department (KEMAS), (2) National Unity Department (PERPADUAN), (3) Ministry of Education (MOE) and (4) State Islamic Religion Department (SIRD). The findings showed the roles of school leaders that were providing facilities, designing environment, recruiting qualified teachers, applying good communication; and cultivating values and culture could improve the service quality of preschool education.

Key words: preschool education, school leadership, service quality

1.0 Introduction

Preschool education in Malaysia developed since 1950s and was institutionalized into national education through Educational Act 1996. The increase number of preschools in Malaysia since 1970s until now is the sign of awareness of various stakeholders on the importance of early childhood education. The aspiration from the Malaysian National Education Philosophy indicates all levels of education in the country are essential and meaningful to develop individuals with certain quality. With their own objectives and agenda, a number of government agencies offer the preschool education.

In Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015, the government plans to adopt an integrated human capital and talent development work to nurture and develop Malaysians across their entire life-cycle, from early childhood education, basic education, tertiary education and all the way to their adult working lives. It is stated that poor quality performance in education brings negative consequences for the country's future as the education levels are consistently correlated with the economic growth. This government plan focuses specifically in revamping the education system to significantly raise student outcomes.

The public preschool education in Malaysia is a unique industry of education as there are four different government agencies with their own objectives providing the education:

- 1) *Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat* or Community Development Department (local acronym is *KEMAS*) under Ministry of Rural and Regional Development,
- 2) *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara* or National Unity Department (local acronym is *PERPADUAN*) under Ministry of National Unity and Social Integration,
- 3) Ministry of Education (MOE); and
- 4) State Islamic Religion Department that is located at every state in Malaysia.

1.1 Public Preschool Providers in Malaysia

1.1.1 *Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS)* or Community Development Department

Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS) or Community Development Department was established as an initiative after the development of Adult Lesson Division in 1961 that focused on illiterate eradication program.

The division was renamed to *Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat* or (*KEMAS*) after the launch of Malaysian New Economic Policy (*NEP*) in 1970.

The management of *KEMAS* preschools involves the cooperation of many stakeholders. The preschool teachers or known as Community Developers are responsible in teaching and learning programs, co-curriculum management and maintenance of relationships with parents. The assistant teachers are obliged to prepare the meals, maintain the cleanliness and assist the teachers. As *KEMAS* preschool is usually a small preschool with one or two classrooms, it does not have specific school leader or head master. A Preschool Supervisor supervises preschools that are located in one parliament area of a district. The Preschool Supervisors have to ensure the preschools are running smoothly and they are responsible to be the middlemen between the teachers and organization of *KEMAS*. They are obliged to supervise and observe teaching and learning process in *KEMAS* preschools and are usually are conducted on the first and final weeks of learning terms.

1.1.2 Jabatan Perpaduan Negara (PERPADUAN) or Department of National Unity

The Preschool Unit which is under the Division of Community Development holds roles to (1) plan, manage preschool programs as well as open new classes (2) oversee and supervise the preschools including the premises and facilities, (3) manage and coordinate teaching and learning resources and facilities; and (4) supervise and observe reports and data related to *PERPADUAN* preschools. The preschools were first established in 1976 and were widely accepted by parents and community. The preschools are opened in housing areas, low-cost apartments, villages and suburban areas based on the demands of the community.

Jawatankuasa Penyelaras Tabika PERPADUAN (JPTP) or *PERPADUAN* Preschools Coordinator Committee is developed in preschools that have two or more classes. This committee that consists of parents, teachers and community leaders hold important roles in *PERPADUAN* preschools. The roles of the committee include planning the preschool activities in order to ensure the welfare, safety and health of the students; assisting the teachers with teaching and learning facilities; and bounding the networking between public preschools and local community.

1.1.3 Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education implemented annex preschool education programs that involved 1131 classes as a pilot project in 1992 (MOE, 2012). Based on Cabinet of Ministers Meeting in June 2001, it was decided to enlarge the number of preschools starting year 2002. The Education Act 1996 allocates important aspects of preschool education such as the preschool establishment, the authority of minister to establish the preschools, preschool curriculum, medium language and religious teaching. Preschools that are managed by MOE are placed in primary schools and supervised by the school's headmaster.

1.1.4 State Islamic Religion Department

There are only twelve preschools offered by SIRD in nine districts of Selangor: Petaling, Hulu Langat, Klang, Gombak, Kuala Langat, Sepang, Kuala Selangor, Hulu Selangor and Sabak Bernam. Therefore, only one or two SIRD preschools are located in each district of Selangor. In one SIRD preschool, there are six to eight classes that cater education for children between four to six years old. There is one head master, teachers and assistant teachers working together in the school. The number of students could reach 150 depends on the number of classes offered.

Most of the SIRD teachers were *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) holders and had not received any training in early childhood education. The course is only conducted twice a year for the preschool teachers and organized by one of training centres in SIRD that is Islamic Education Management Training Centre. Besides, she mentioned that the modules should be standardized and reviewed by the experts in the early childhood education to ensure the inputs delivered were correct and accurate. Thus, one of the initiatives done by SIRD was by dealing with the private colleges that offer early childhood education to get fees reduction to undergo six months certificate course. Knowing the various providers of public preschools the objective of this study is to identify the linkage between school leadership and the provision of service quality in public preschool education.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 School Leadership

Bush and Glover (2003) explain three phases of school leadership of American principals since few decades back: managerial, instructional and transformational. During 1960s and 1970s, most principals adapted managerial leadership style.

In managerial leadership, leader's focuses are on functions, tasks and behaviours (Leithwood et al., 1999). The formal position in organizational hierarchy reflects the allocation of authority and influence. At that time, principals were viewed as change agents and their roles were limited to manage the implementation of an externally devised solution to a social or educational problem.

By mid 1980s, the instructional leadership style was widely implemented. It is a style that focuses on teaching and learning and on the behaviour of teachers in working with students (Bush and Glover, 2003). The emphasis on directions and impact of influence to teachers towards effective and better teaching and learning process such as modelling, monitoring and professional dialogue or discussion are implemented in instructional leadership (Southworth, 2002).

In 1990s, a new conception of leadership which was transformational leadership emerged (Bush and Glover, 2003). Transformational leadership is about building a unified common interest between leaders and followers (Gunter, 2001). The central focus of this type of leadership is on commitments and capacities of organizational members (Leithwood et al., 1999). Leithwood (1994) conceptualizes transformational leadership into eight dimensions: (1) building school vision, (2) establishing school goals, (3) providing intellectual stimulation, (4) offering individualized support, (5) modelling best practices and important organizational values, (6) demonstrating high performance expectations, (7) creating a productive school culture and (8) developing structures to foster participation in school decisions.

Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999) identify six major leadership theories in school institutions: (1) instructional leadership, (2) transformational leadership, (3) moral leadership, (4) participative leadership, (5) managerial leadership, (6) post- modern leadership, (7) interpersonal leadership and (8) contingent leadership. In addition to these three popular leadership styles, there were few other school leadership typologies that were plausible (Leithwood et al., 1999; Sergiovanni, 1984; Bolman and Deal, 1997; Dimmock and Walker, 2002; Bush, 1995) in leading schools. Sergiovanni (1984) identifies five forces of leadership:

- Technical- is derived from sound management techniques
- Human- is derived from harnessing available social and interpersonal resources
- Educational- is derived from expert knowledge about matters of education and schooling
- Symbolic- is derived from focusing attention of others on matters of importance to the school
- Cultural- is derived from building a unique school culture

Bolman and Deal (1997) on the other hand, identify four frames of leadership: structural, human resources, symbolic and political. From the interpretation of Bush and Glover (2003), structural leadership is consistent with managerial leadership, human resources is linked to the interpersonal approach, symbolic leadership is closely linked to transformational leadership; and political leadership is similar to contingent leadership.

According to Dimmock and Walker (2002), there are eight elements of school leadership that interrelate closely with school functions such as curriculum, educational structures; and teaching and learning. They are (1) collaboration and partnership, (2) motivation, (3) planning, (4) decision-making, (5) interpersonal communication, (6) conflict, (7) evaluation and appraisal; and (8) staff and professional development.

2.2 Links between service quality and school leadership

The educational setting in process and structural features are the crucial parts in preschool education in order to build up the quality. Therefore, the right management and leadership in preschools are expected to play important roles to ensure the high-quality outcomes for children and families (Bloom, 1996; Kagan and Bowman, 1997; Sergiovanni, 2009). According to the researchers, without an appropriate management and systems, high-quality interactions, learning environments; and performance at the classroom level cannot be sustained.

Kagan and Bowman (1997) in their book *Leadership in early care and education*, list five faces of leadership in early childhood education which mention the types of roles of the leaders in managing preschools:

Administrative leadership: involves in the operational, day-to-day running or management of services. The jobs include preparing rosters, newsletters, excursion forms, budgets and compliance issues.

Pedagogical leadership: ensures the quality of the day-to-day lives of participating children, as well as supporting and enhancing their growth, development and learning.

Community leadership: involves demonstrating to the community that early childhood education and care is an important issue, and can determine a child's future success in life.

Conceptual leadership: revolves around the creation of new ideas to advance the profession. The leader needs to be prepared to think forward and 'outside the box'.

Advocacy leadership: improves the landscape for children and families. The leader has to seize strategic opportunity to move any issue (such as licensing requirements, salaries, and affordability of childcare) forward.

Focusing on the importance of leadership in schools, Sergiovanni (1984) introduces theory on five forces of educational leadership in school which are the technical, human, educational, symbolic and cultural forces. In his book *Principalship: A reflective practice perspective* (Sergiovanni, 2009), he discusses the leadership forces can be thought of as the means available to administrators, supervisors, and teachers to bring about or preserve changes needed to improve schooling.

The report from Ofsted (2003) on *What inspection tells us* summarises the inspection on the link between leadership and management; and the quality of work of the school. It looks at the importance of leadership and management in dealing with particular aspects of the life and work of schools such as the teaching, the curriculum and its management, and school improvement. The school inspections and surveys conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) evidence that there is a strong link between the quality of leadership and management of the head teacher and key staff in a school and the quality of teaching. It confirms the good management and leadership could ensure a broad and balanced curriculum in primary schools and good subject teaching in secondary schools.

Furthermore, a study on preschools in Turkey that identifies physical conditions as a crucial matter mentions school leadership plays significant roles. Therefore principals are to be hired depending on their skills and experience in teaching and administering with the purpose of providing on-the-job training to teachers (Kalkan and Akman, 2009).

Othman and Rauf (2009) claims public sector in Malaysia put performance measures as very important so that the public can have better services at greater level of efficiency. They align four main categories in school performance index in public primary schools - (1) leadership, (2) measurement, analysis and knowledge management, (3) strategic planning and (4) examination results. The leadership factor is seen as one of the important elements in measuring the performance of one school. In leadership part, the organization's senior leaders are examined by measuring four dimensions: vision and values; communication and organizational performance; governance and social; and responsibilities and ethical behaviour.

According to Othman and Rauf (2009), "vision and values" refer to the vision, mission, and values statements that were publicised to everyone at school. The second dimension gives meaning of the communication of the school with the various stakeholders in disseminating the performance in the school, such as teachers' performance and students' performance. The third dimension is the measurement on how safe and conducive the environment of the school to the students and staff. The last dimension indicates the adequacy of mechanisms in handling students' disciplinary problem or problematic teacher. In addition, school principals in Malaysia that enhance spiritual values are able to improve the school performance through understanding different emotions at work, expressing empathy and motivating the staffs (Abdullah et al., 2009).

The successful or the failure of one school depends on the head master or the principal (Ramaiah 1993). According to him, since the head masters and principals in Malaysia are appointed also from teaching background, they do not own much knowledge and skills in educational administration. Hence this leads to dissatisfaction among teachers, staffs and parents.

The researches on management and leadership in preschool education have been widely discussed in other developed countries such as United States and Australia. Over the past decades numerous studies have reported the effective leadership and management as contributing to quality programs and services in early childhood field (Rodd, 1997; Lower and Cassidy, 2007; Vu et al., 2008).

According to Rodd (1997), many practitioners in early childhood education perceived the leadership potential needs skills such as goal setting, decision making and problem solving. In her study, she states in today's society the autocratic leadership style is no longer acceptable and should adopt cooperative and consultative style.

She identified that the early childhood professionals see their work with children and parents and management of the centre as their primary responsibilities. Thus, due to the growing concerns of parents and other stakeholders about quality provision, it is important how the preschool education providers in leadership positions understand how their roles could impact upon the quality.

In her study, teachers, coordinators and head teachers are asked to identify their main roles and responsibilities in leading preschools (Rodd, 1997). The results reveals the respondents ranked the roles accordingly as follows: managing and supervising staff (34.2%), contact with parents and other professional agencies (22.4%), staff support and development as well as mentoring new staff (15.8%), managing the budget and organizing financial resources (10.6%) and co-ordinating what is happening in the centre (10.8%). The study concludes it is important for the leaders in early childhood education to understand their roles due to the growing concern on the quality provision for children less than eight years. Another study by Dora (2006) shows vision building, collaborative relationships and quality of communication and participation are factors in effective leadership which lead to school improvement.

According to Lower and Cassidy (2007), the leadership and management practices of program administration are considerable to be a variable when attempting to raise quality in early childhood programs by building a competent workforce. Directors have an intangible role in setting the tone for the program. The vision and goal-setting role of directors provides the support system that teachers need to create quality educational settings for the children in their classrooms.

The introduction of *Program Assessment Scale* or PAS (Talan and Bloom, 2004) is beneficial to measure the overall quality of administrative practices of early care and education programs. PAS is designed to assess the leadership and management practices towards quality of early childhood education in ten areas: (1) human resources development, (2) personnel cost and allocation, (3) center operations, (4) child assessment, (5) fiscal management, (6) program planning and evaluation, (7) family partnerships, (8) marketing and public relations, (9) technology, and (10) staff qualifications. The seven-point scale generates guide and complement the widely used environment rating scales ECERS-R (Harms et al., 1998). This scale supports the notion that the leadership functions help the preschool organization to affirm values, articulate vision and achieve the vision in order to carry out the organizational mission and achieve quality expected (Bloom, 2003).

Rao et al. (2003) use revised version of Program Assessment Scale (PAS-II) to evaluate structural, management and process quality. This scale evaluates 30 items (the original version is 58) following 10 domains: (1) Curriculum, (2) Teacher-child interaction, (3) Physical environment/setting, (4) Health/safety, (5) Food/nutrition, (6) Staff-parent interaction, (7) Staff qualifications and development, (8) Staffing patterns, (9) Evaluation and (10) Management/administration.

3.0 Research Methodology

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with four government officers in this research. In addition to the questions list, new questions would arouse when the respondents mentioned some interesting points or had to explain in more details.

Content analysis was conducted to analyse the text from the interviews. It is a process of identifying, coding and categorizing the primary patterns in the data (Cavana et al., 2001). According to Lasswell, Lerner and Pool (1952), cited in Neuendorf (2002), content analysis is a technique which aims at describing, with optimum objectivity, precision, and generality, what is said on a given subject in a given place at a given time. It is a useful technique for discovering and describing the focus of individual, group or social attention (Weber, 1990). From the analysis, the roles can be divided into two: government agencies and school leaders.

4.0 Data Analysis

The followings are the statements from administrators of government agencies (persons in charged of preschool education): MOE, *PERPADUAN*, *KEMAS* and *SIRD* regarding the responsibilities of preschool providers in providing quality educational services.

Roles Of Preschool Leaders In Providing Quality Preschool Education	Statement From The Officers Of Four Government Agencies Providing Preschool Education
Providing facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We aware on the essentiality of basic facilities and teaching equipment in providing quality education. However teachers should be patient waiting for their turns to get the fund. (PERPADUAN) • Suitable facilities are important to provide service quality. SIRD will always try to improve them for students. (SIRD) • We received many applications for new facilities. However have to look at the priority. We need to support more on schools that are very poor and located in rural areas. (KEMAS) • Students nowadays must be exposed to the use of technology because a lot of latest learning methods now are using computers and internet. (MOE)
Designing environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School quality also is evaluated based on the indoor and outdoor activities held. But due to the choice limitation, some schools are located at low-cost apartments and intermediate terrace houses that have no outdoor spaces. (PERPADUAN) • We offer many classes all over the country. We understand sometimes the choice of building is not suitable. But, we have to utilize whatever resources we have whenever there is a need to open a class. (KEMAS) • The school ambiance shows the preschool's educational quality as it reflects the overall service provided by the school such as academic and art activities, and interesting indoor and outdoor games (MOE)
Recruiting qualified teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The high academic qualified teachers learn all important elements in preschool such as pedagogical skills, psychology and lots more. These teachers could perform better in class and contribute to quality service of the school. (KEMAS) • We are now in the process of upgrading the teachers' qualification, which is purposely aiming to increase the skills and quality of teaching among teachers. (PERPADUAN) • Although we don't sponsor teachers to further studies, we encourage them to do so because we believe the knowledge they gained could increase the teaching quality of the teachers. (SIRD) • It is our policy to hire preschool teachers with diploma and above in education. (MOE)
Good communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure the quality of teaching and learning, full commitment from teachers is essential. The children should be guided and monitored (PERPADUAN)
Cultivating values or culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We admit that our preschools do not offer subject on Islamic education or moral education same like primary schools. However, we realize that the subject is very important to be taught at the early age and has a high demand among parents. (MOE) • Balance between academic and Islamic knowledge is important. That is also clear in our religion, which we are commanded to master knowledge about Islam and other knowledge. (SIRD) • Even though there is no formal learning on Islamic education aligned in the curriculum, we highly encouraged the teachers to find alternative with the cooperation of local community to offer class on Fardhu ain and Quranic learning. (KEMAS)

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Clear vision planning and values are essential in achieving good school performance (Othman & Rauf 2009). From the researchers' observations, it was true that the school values i.e. religious values or cultural values implementation needed careful and clear planning to achieve preschool's objectives and aims. For instance, the preschool's plan in preparing the input to students and readiness of teachers would lead to the successful achievement. Furthermore, Othman and Rauf (2009) mention on the aspect of 'governance and social' that explains the need for leaders to provide safe and conducive school environment. Planning by the leaders could lead to better achievement in the quality of health and wellbeing. In the case of Malaysian public preschools, an appropriate plan to place a preschool in suitable building is very important to make sure the safeness and security. The need of planning is also supported by Prestine and Nelson (2005) that claim leaders to consider three plans of actions: the individual, the interpersonal and the educational institution.

A good communication quality of preschool heads with parents and subordinates is a key factor of school improvement (Dora 2006). The quality of parents-teachers interactions could be improved when the leaders managed to plan meetings and provide adequate information. Furthermore, by discussing the whole plan of school to parents, this would avoid misunderstanding among parents and community when activities that involved religious or cultural matters.

Kalkan and Akman (2009) prove a good school leadership plays great roles in assuring comfort and adequate infrastructures in school. This study addresses the quality of school atmosphere is related with good leadership character of preschool leaders. Findings by Muda Ismail (2013) also indicate the leaders that were sensitive with students' and teachers' needs would concern more on providing adequate facilities and comfort environment.

Rodd (1997) mentions through the management and supervision teachers during teaching and learning process, quality in education can be achieved. Leaders that emphasized on learning and teaching was seen as contributing to the quality of teachers. Since teaching and learning are the core services in preschools, the continuous observations and the encouragement for teachers to further studies could improve the quality of teachers. Qualification is seen as important factors to contribute to learning and teaching quality (Barnett, 2004). This research shows preschools that had good management of teaching and learning would assure the adequacy and suitability of teaching and learning facilities. Thus, sufficient teaching materials, technological equipment, playing facilities and toys are the crucial needs the leaders should be alert at.

Othman and Rauf (2009) emphasizes that preschool leaders should cultivate school culture in order to provide quality of educational experience for students. From the research, the implementations of cultural and religious values were best done during group activities in classroom. For instance, by putting students in groups of different cultural backgrounds, they will be encouraged to understand and respect each other. As majority of classes in MOE, *KEMAS* and *SIRD* preschools are Muslim students; it will be easier to teach *du'as* (prayers) for student before the class begin and during mealtime. The action taken by the school leader or preschool supervisor through promoting school culture is fundamental for change in educational context (Dora, 2005). Indirectly, it influenced the quality of school atmosphere. Through the influence of leaders, the cultural or religious values could be implemented.

Supervision and support from school leaders may improve the quality of education provided (Rodd 1997). It is confirmed from this research when the teachers concern on the importance of planning on teacher selection. Proper planning that is made at department or school levels of management will ensure the quality of teachers when the academic qualification and appearance are taken into account.

In conclusion, leader's roles in planning school programs, managing teaching and learning process, cultivating school culture and possessing leadership quality have significant relationships with the quality service provided in preschool education.

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