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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Instructional Leadership Among Principals in Sabah, Malaysia: A Quantitative Study on Teachers' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership among school principals in Sabah, Malaysia. A total of 63 teachers from two primary and four secondary schools in Sabah were required to respond to a questionnaire on Google Forms. Results from Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed nonsignificant differences in teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership in relation to age and job experience, while those of Mann-Whitney U test showed nonsignificant differences in terms of gender and type of school. Results from Wilcoxon signed rank test indicated significance in six of the items at $p < 0.001$, while another six items were significant at $p < 0.05$. Additionally, 90.5 percent of teachers indicated that principals protected classroom instructional time from outside interruptions. Another 87 to 89 percent agreed that principals were visibly present at school for teachers and students, ensured that all students were present in class during lessons, and ensured that teachers taught the required curriculum. However, low percentages of teachers agreed that principals (1) recommended resources to them, visited classes regularly to observe teaching and learning, (2) planned faculty meetings for professional development, (3) met them individually to discuss student progress issues, (4) provided them with verbal or written feedback, and (5) met them to get reports about curriculum development. Lastly, in light of the findings, some recommendations were made to enhance instructional leadership among principals in Sabah, Malaysia.

Contribution/Originality: This research offers a valuable contribution by examining teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership among principals in Sabah, Malaysia. It

also contributes to the extant literature by bridging theory and practice in the current Malaysian educational landscape by providing fresh insight into its existing instructional leadership practices, patterns, and attributes.

1. Introduction

Instructional leadership is one of the approaches proposed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to enhance students' intellectual development (Ministry of Education, 1982). A preliminary report of the Malaysia Educational Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2023) emphasized that students' performance can increase up to 20 percent if instructional leadership is practiced, while suggesting that it should be extended to assistant principals, department heads and committee heads, besides principals. It is a relevant model that enables educational institutions to boost students' academic, mental and social performance to yield quality human capital (Hassan, Ahmad, & Boon, 2018a).

While conceptualizing instructional leadership in the Malaysian context, Hassan, Ahmad, and Boon (2018b) summarized the definitions of instructional leadership by Hallinger and Murphy (1985; 1987) and Drake and Roe (2002). Hallinger and Murphy (1985; 1987) postulated that instructional leadership comprises any activity executed by the school management to improve teaching and learning as well as organizational development. It encompasses various actions taken by educational leaders to improve the learning conditions that can augment students' intellectual, emotional, and psychosocial development. On the other hand, Drake and Roe (2002) reiterated that instructional leadership is any endeavor toward motivating and supporting staff who are engaged in teaching and learning to successfully attain educational goals, while establishing an equitable social system. Since it influences the learning environment, staff enthusiasm and student motivation, instructional leadership is regarded as one of the primary contributors in improving the overall performance of an academic system, thus contributing to more favorable staff performance and improving students' intellectual development (Hassan, Ahmad, & Boon, 2018; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008).

Instructional leadership has gained increasing attention in educational leadership in Malaysia in terms of research, policy and practice. Hallinger et al. (2018), who assessed the conceptual models, research methodologies, and foci of instructional leadership in Malaysia, found that 90 percent of the instructional leadership studies have been conducted since the early 2000s, mostly by graduate students. However, relatively few were published in refereed journals since they had used lower order conceptual models (bivariate, direct effects) that relied mainly on descriptive and simple correlational statistical tests. Moreover, research design limitations and quality also tended to yield inconsistent results. Although the Malaysian corpus is second only to the USA in terms of instructional leadership publications, limitations in the research models reflect a need for stronger methodologies among Malaysian researchers to transform graduate research into reality.

Hallinger (2011) maintained that instructional leaders often strive to improve the teaching and learning process that involves academic staff, parents, and students with a mix of planning, organizational facilities, and school culture that requires them to ensure that all individuals cooperate and assist one another in implementing the most effective educational programs. Additionally, Sisman (2016) stated that instructional leadership includes the authority exerted by educational leaders, supervisors, and teachers to

influence students, parents, and other stakeholders in the educational milieu. Nevertheless, the principal dimension of instructional leadership is that it focuses on the teaching and learning process whereby leaders are expected to identify and share educational objectives, oversee the curricular and teaching process, evaluate the teaching process and students' academic performance, and support teaching staff while improving their work quality to create a positive organizational climate and working environment.

Lastly, according to Hoque and Raya (2023) instructional leaders often develop and supervise curriculum and instruction, while setting high expectations among teachers and students. Moreover, they reinforce teachers' prosocial behavior to establish high expectations toward students and their psychometric/cognitive behavior to effectively implement curriculum and instruction. They focus on content, instruction and evaluation, besides positively impact on teachers' emotional and psychological needs. Further, they encourage teachers to demonstrate higher levels of job satisfaction, enthusiasm and efficacy, while lowering their stress and burnout. Since they often focus on developing a sound curriculum and equipping teachers with the tools and autonomy to provide effective instruction, they make teachers feel that their efforts are making a meaningful impact on students and on themselves.

2. Review of Literature

To close the research gap and explore the theoretical framework on instructional leadership among Malaysian principals, a review of literature was conducted, covering the roles of instructional leaders and their impact on staff.

2.1. Roles of Instructional Leaders

In their extensive review, Sukarmin and Sin (2022) summarized that instructional leaders implement staff development to improve staff's knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable them to face the unpredictable future. First, by coordinating the school curriculum and cocurricular programs can help increase teacher commitment, for example, they also coordinate the curriculum by equipping staff with information and resources to facilitate the teaching and learning process. Second, by prioritizing activity-based teaching in science subjects, they equip laboratories with sufficient apparatus and chemicals to ensure that teaching and learning is managed with few distractions, which in turn, will enhance teacher efficacy and academic achievement. Third, besides appraising staff, instructional leaders also monitor and evaluate student progress to ensure that students will achieve all learning outcomes and generic attributes. Additionally, monitoring and evaluation will yield useful information needed for staff's follow-up, thus making them feel obligated, but appreciated for their contributions. Lastly, instructional leaders often use incentives to motivate students and increase staff commitment of teachers. Students who are incentivized will become more enthusiastic in their learning, thus inspiring staff to become even more committed to executing their responsibilities. Similarly, when staff are rewarded and appreciated, their commitment to improve student academic performance will increase accordingly.

Munna (2023), who examined the relationship between instructional leadership and role of module leaders in higher education, found that program/module leaders tended to experience a feeling of role empowerment, while also enjoying the opportunity to engage and shape the curriculum. However, they also appeared to be overloaded with responsibilities, reflecting that their paradoxical role as being accountable without any

authority. Besides, they were found to be constrained in their contribution to student engagement and departmental development, with little opportunity to contribute to resource allocation. Overall, they tended to view instructional leadership as an artificial distinction, often making them feel powerless with their seemingly powerful title.

2.3. Impact on Teachers

Ismail et al. (2018), who examined the relationship between school leaders' instructional leadership and teacher functional competency, found that instructional leadership and functional competency tended to be significantly related; school leaders tended to exhibit a high level of instructional leadership, while teachers appeared to demonstrate a very high level of functional competency. On the other hand, in a study that examined the relationship between instructional leadership and teacher job performance, Wahab et al. (2020) found a significant relationship between instructional leadership and job performance, regardless of gender, age, teaching experience, and post grade. Findings also showed that, besides strongly encouraging career development among teachers, instructional headmasters also tended to vividly define school goals and efficaciously manage curriculum and teaching, while maintaining a collegial environment to scaffold teaching excellence and intellectual development. Lastly, their vision and strategy tended to provide a strong direction for staff monitoring staff, student assessment, and follow-up initiatives.

The impact of instructional leadership on teacher commitment was reviewed by Sukarmin and Sin (2022). First, effective instructional leadership only occurs when the vision and mission of the school are fully disseminated by the principal to all members of the school, including students, parents, and other stakeholders. Having a vision and mission provides the way forward that encourages all staff to organize and devise strategies to achieve academic and extracurricular goals. Staff become more committed when the principal regularly explains what is to be achieved. Second, organizational commitment increases when leaders provide a productive environment that motivates staff to go the extra mile. One way to achieve this is by protecting instructional time to ensure that the teaching and learning process remains uninterrupted, thus making staff feel that their instructional autonomy is ascertained. Third, instructional leaders often focus on enhancing school effectiveness which is an important element of staff commitment. They provide an orderly and structured environment to ensure that teaching and learning occur smoothly, uninterrupted by any unwanted elements. Moreover, they conduct regular classroom observations to provide personalized formative feedback that can promote staff commitment and enthusiasm. Lastly, instructional leaders tend to be prospective rather than retrospective, focusing on what can be done in the future rather than regretting about the past. Their constant supervision often elevates teacher efficacy that contributes to greater commitment.

Dorukbaşi and Cansoy (2024) investigated the relationship between school principals' instructional leadership and teacher instructional practices among teachers. Findings revealed that instructional leadership tended to significantly predict teacher instructional practices and teacher professional learning, while underscoring teacher professional learning as a significant mediator between instructional leadership and teacher instructional practices. On the other hand, Ahmad et al. (2024), who assessed the impact of instructional leaders on teacher motivation, found that instructional leadership tended to significantly impact teacher motivation and performance. Additionally, both teachers and instructional leaders tended to concur that educators' dedication could foster

respectful interactions between students and teachers and boost staff morale. Besides, both groups also tended to perceive that instructional leadership could significantly affect students' learning outcomes.

The impact of instructional leadership on teachers' professional learning community was investigated by Hua et al. (2024). Findings revealed that the development of teachers' professional learning communities and principals' teaching leadership tended to be significantly related. Besides, findings implied that principals' leadership in developing a learning-centered atmosphere could directly affect teachers' involvement and professional learning, implying that school leaders should promote trust and information exchange to create a collaborative school climate that increases teacher engagement and strengthens professional learning communities. Further, Thien and Adams (2024) who examined the impact of instructional leadership on collective teacher efficacy and teachers' affective commitment, revealed that instructional leadership tended to have a significant direct impact on teachers' affective commitment, and a significant but indirect impact through collective teacher efficacy. Findings implied that instructional principals might guide and focus on teaching and learning to stimulate a positive learning climate, which in turn, could increase teacher commitment and academic achievement.

In their investigation on the impact of instructional leadership on teacher self-efficacy, Alai and Abdullah (2024) unveiled that that instructional leadership tended to exert a significant impact on teacher self-efficacy, implying that an increase level of instructional leadership would correspondingly increase teacher self-efficacy in relation to such educational outcomes as classroom management, student engagement, and instructional strategies. Additionally, Andriadi and Sulistiyo (2024) researched the impact of instructional and transformational leadership on teacher performance, motivation, and job satisfaction, besides student achievement. Findings showed that instructional leadership tended to significantly improve teacher performance and job satisfaction by providing structured support and guidance. The synergy between the two leadership styles was found to enhance educational outcomes, with principals effectively juggling between both approaches. Findings implied that both instructional and transformational leadership might intersect to impact both teachers and students, thus offering deeper insight into their complementary roles in various educational contexts.

In their study on instructional leadership on teacher professional development, He, Guo, and Abazie (2024) discovered a significant relationship between instructional leadership and teacher professional development. Additionally, the provision of professional learning opportunities tended to be the most effective instructional sub-dimension supporting the professional growth among teachers. Findings implied that, as the vanguard of schools, instructional principals might hold significant influence over staff professional growth trajectory with their robust leadership strategies. Further, in their capacity as engaged and proactive school administrators, instructional principals might wield considerable impact on the quality of teaching and learning by skillfully coordinating curriculum implementation, while providing effective teacher supervision and feedback. Lastly, by galvanizing staff and establishing achievable academic benchmarks, instructional principals might cultivate a symbiotic relationship, thus encouraging teachers to critically evaluate their pedagogic methodologies, refine their approaches, and strive for continuous improvement.

2.4. Significance of the Study

This study aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership among school principals in Sabah, Malaysia. Instructional leadership can provide a framework that can be used to evaluate current approaches and practices of leadership. It can also be utilized to inform possible changes in direction so that leadership practices may be introduced to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Moreover, research on instructional leadership helps align regular leadership tasks with research-informed practices that promote effective educational leadership and academic excellence. It can also reveal the different strategies of instructional leadership and inform aspiring leaders on how to prioritize leadership time and tasks to gain sufficient focus and momentum for student improvement and organizational success. Findings from this study can yield new insights into principals' instructional leadership practices, while providing a basis for further, in-depth investigation that can enrich the research base on leadership practices in Malaysia. Additionally, findings can potentially benefit educational practitioners in planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating professional development programs to sustain and enhance leadership excellence among educational leaders in Malaysia.

Previous research on instructional leadership usually linked school effectiveness with instructional leadership in relation to academic achievement, instruction, curriculum development activities, and teacher commitment. A study on teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership will provide a new perspective on educational management and administration within the Malaysian context. Several studies on instructional leadership have been conducted in Malaysia; however, most were qualitative, linking principals' instructional behaviors with urban students' academic achievement and teacher performance. To see if their practical utility and application can be generalized to the educational milieu in Sabah, there is an urgent need to assess teachers' perceptions of principals' instructional leadership in the island state. Additionally, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 has documented that instructional leadership is still relevant in ensuring excellence at learning institutions. Instructional leadership among principals can act as a key driver to promoting innovative evidence-based practice at Malaysian schools. While research on instructional leadership is extensive, there is still a lack of studies that explore its extent and impact on primary and secondary schools in Sabah.

Three research questions were formulated to guide the study at 0.05 level of significance:

i. Were there any significant gender, age, and experiential differences in teacher's perceptions of instructional leadership among principals?
ii. Were there any significant instructional leadership items based on a hypothesized value of 3.5?
iii. What were the descriptive statistics of teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership among principals and their implications?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design, Approach, and Location

Quantitative analysis was conducted in this study, which is consistent with, and feasible in, addressing phenomena and issues associated with educational leadership. The research design aligned with the purpose of the study, which was to examine teachers' perceptions of participative leadership at Malaysian schools. It offers an organized

evaluation and comparison of participative leadership practices among a diverse group of teachers. Besides, significant differences in teachers' perceptions by way of gender, age, qualifications, and job experience can be adequately analyzed via SPSS 26.0. Besides, this research technique is particularly effective for deriving logical conclusions and supporting recommendations for school leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders in educational leadership. Lastly, the structured Likert-scale questionnaire allows for more convenient data collection from a reasonable number of teachers, which in turn, increases the representation of the sample, while enhancing the generalizability of findings.

The study was conducted in Sabah, one of the Bornean states of Malaysia, where empirical research on participative leadership in education is minimal. The exact research location was Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of the state. Since the study aimed to examine the perceptions of participative leadership among principals in Sabah, the location was deemed sufficiently representative of the teacher population in the island state.

3.2. Sample and Justification

A total of 63 teachers (22 primary, 41 secondary) participated in the study. All of them have completed their professional teacher training before being posted in the schools. They were recruited through partial systematic random sampling, whereby their schools were selected for inclusion because they are in close proximity with the first author's workplace. In brief, partial systematic random was practiced because of geographical proximity, availability at the given time, and principals' willingness to participate in the research. First, a list of 10 primary and 10 secondary schools in Sabah was obtained online. Subsequently, principals of every second school on the list were contacted via email; henceforth, five from primary and five from secondary schools were requested to share the survey link with their teachers and encourage them to respond to the questionnaire. Two weeks later, the principals were contacted again via phone for confirmation; however, only two primary and three secondary school principals agreed to help conduct the survey.

Teachers completed the questionnaire on Google Forms and were informed that its completion would indicate consent to voluntarily participate in the study. All respondents were anonymized, while responses were kept strictly confidential. Teachers who participated in the survey come from diverse ethnic and suburban communities with middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds. While their medium of instruction at school is the Malay Language, they are also fluent in English as it is their second language.

The sample size of this study appears small (n = 63). Nevertheless, according to Roscoe (1975), a sample size greater than 30 is suitable for survey studies; the argument behind this rule of thumb is derived from the central limit theorem (CLT), which states that the distribution of means will reach a normal distribution as the sample size increases. Roscoe's (1975) logic was supported by RUBIKTOP (2023), a market research company committed to delivering high-quality, actionable data. First, the CLT provides a good approximation of the sampling distribution of the mean for sample sizes of 30 or more, which means that the normal distribution can be used to calculate confidence intervals and p-values for the results. Second, for most statistical tests in education, the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true (Type I error) is controlled at a level of 0.05, which means the current researchers are willing to accept a 5 percent chance of making a Type I error (rejecting the null hypothesis when it is actually true). With a sample size of 63, this level of control for most statistical tests can be achieved. Third, the power of a

statistical test is related to the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis when it is false (Type II error). Since power can be adequately derived from a minimal sample size of 30, the current sample will yield reasonably high power. Lastly, the current sample size can help achieve a reasonable level of power for most statistical tests; for example, it can indicate sufficient difference for non-parametric tests, such as Kruskal-Wallis H, Mann-Whitney U, and Wilcoxon signed rank tests, which were used to analyze data in the current study.

Finally, 63.8 percent of the sample are males and 31.7 percent are female teachers. Age-wise, 17.5 percent are 26 to 36 years old, 41.3 percent are 37 to 47 years old, 33.3 percent are 48 to 58 years old, and 7.9 percent are more than 58 years old. In terms of job experience, 15.9 percent have taught less than five years, 14.3 percent have taught six to 10 years, 14.3 percent have taught 11 to 15 years, 7.9 percent have taught 16 to 21 years, and 46.6 percent have taught more than 21 years. Lastly, 34.9 percent teach at primary, while 65.1 percent teach at secondary schools (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 63)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 25	0	0.0
	26-36	11	17.5
	37-47	26	41.3
	48-58	21	33.3
	More than 58	5	7.9
Gender	Male	43	68.3
	Female	20	31.7
Job experience (years)	Less than 5	10	15.9
	6-10	9	14.3
	11-15	9	14.3
	16-21	5	7.9
	More than 21	30	47.6
Type of school	Primary	22	34.9
	Secondary	41	65.1

3.3. Instrument

The Instructional Leadership Questionnaire (ILQ) developed by Akram, Kiran, and Ilgan (2017) was adapted to collect data. It is based on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, to 5 = Always. The adapted version consists of nine items that assess educational leaders in the following capacities: Providing instructional resources, maintaining visible presence, offering professional development, maximizing instructional time, monitoring student progress, providing feedback on teaching and learning and implementing the curriculum. The original questionnaire demonstrated a relatively high level of overall Cronbach's alpha reliability at 0.95 for providing instructional resources, 0.87 for maintaining visible presence, 0.86 for offering professional development, 0.82 for maximizing instructional time, and 0.80 for implementing the curriculum.

To determine the reliability of the adapted version, a pilot study was conducted on 25 teachers and data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess its reliability; results indicated that the adapted version has high covariance among the items relative to the variance with an alpha value of 0.90.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

As aforementioned, teachers were asked to respond to the questionnaire on Google Forms. Besides, they were also reminded that completion of the survey was indication of consent to voluntarily participate in the study. All responses were kept strictly confidential and only general information was required. Anonymity was also ascertained, whereby no names and other personal information was required. Data were automatically transferred onto a spreadsheet and subsequently analyzed using SPSS 26.0. First, Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if any significant differences existed in teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership in relation to age and job experience, while Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if any significant differences existed in terms of gender and type of school. Second, Wilcoxon signed rank test was utilized to determine if any of the items were significant at a hypothesized value of 3.5. Lastly, descriptive statistics was adopted to present the percentages of agreement on each item.

4. Findings

According to Kruskal-Wallis H test, nonsignificant differences in teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership by way of age and job experience existed. Similarly, nonsignificant differences in terms of gender and type of school existed based on Mann-Whitney U test (see Table 2).

Table 2: Kruskal-Wallis H and Mann-Whitney U Results

Variable	Non-parametric test	*p*-value
Age	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.500
Gender	Mann-Whitney U test	0.399
Job experience	Kruskal-Wallis H test	0.981
Type of school	Mann-Whitney U test	0.493

Based on a hypothesized value of 3.5, Wilcoxon signed rank test indicated that six of the items were significant at $p < 0.001$, while another six items were significant at $p < 0.05$ (see Table 3).

Table 3: Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test (Hypothesized Value = 3.5)

My principal	*p*-value
Encourages teachers to use instructional materials freely	0.001***
Recommends resources in areas in which teachers need	0.002*
Visits classes regularly to observe teaching and learning	0.633
Is visibly present in school for teachers and students	0.001***
Plans faculty meetings for professional development	0.055
Arranges teachers' meetings to help them grow professionally	0.008*
Ensures that all students are present in the class during class time	0.001***
Protects classroom instructional time from outside interruptions	0.001***
Meets teachers individually to discuss student progress issues	0.029*
Discusses students' results with teachers for curricular strengths	0.003*
Provides verbal and written feedback to teachers	0.007*
Reinforces teachers through staff meetings/newsletters/memos	0.001***
Ensures that teachers teach the required curriculum	0.001***
Meets teachers to get reports about curriculum implementation	0.038*

***$p < 0.001$; *$p < 0.05$

To gain a general view of teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership among principals, percentages of "often" and "always" for each item were collapsed. For example, 80.9 percent of teachers (36.5 + 44.4) perceived that their principals often/always encouraged them to use instructional materials freely. About 90.5 percent of teachers indicated that their principals protected classroom instructional time from outside interruptions, while 87 to 89 percent agreed that they were visibly present at school for staff and students, ensured that all students were present in class during lessons, and ensured that staff taught the required curriculum (see Table 4).

Referring to Table 4, low percentages (51 to 68 percent) of teachers agreed that principals recommended resources to them, visited classes regularly to observe teaching and learning, planned faculty meeting for professional development, met them individually to discuss student progress issues, provided them with verbal or written feedback, and met them to get reports about curriculum development.

Table 4: Percentages (%) of Agreement on Instructional Leadership

Item	1	2	3	4	5	4+5
Encourages teachers to use instructional materials freely	0.0	4.8	14.3	36.5	44.4	80.9
Recommends resources in areas in which teachers need	0.0	9.5	22.2	36.5	31.7	68.2
Visits classes regularly to observe teaching and learning	1.6	12.7	34.9	30.2	20.6	50.8
Is visibly present in school for teachers and students	3.2	1.6	7.9	28.6	58.7	87.3
Plans faculty meetings for professional development	3.2	7.9	25.4	42.9	20.6	63.5
Arranges teachers' meetings to help them grow professionally	1.6	7.9	23.8	41.3	25.4	66.7
Ensures that all students are present in class during class time	3.2	3.2	6.3	33.3	54.0	87.3
Protects classroom instructional time from outside interruptions	4.8	1.6	3.2	36.5	54.0	90.5
Meets teachers individually to discuss student progress issues	6.3	1.6	28.6	41.3	22.2	63.5
Discusses students' results with teachers for curricular strengths	6.3	3.2	19.0	44.4	27.0	71.4
Provides verbal and written feedback to teachers	3.2	0.0	33.3	42.9	20.6	63.5
Reinforces teachers through staff meetings/newsletters/memos	1.6	6.3	19.0	39.7	33.3	73
Ensures that teachers teach the required curriculum	0.0	1.6	9.5	39.7	49.2	88.9
Meets teachers to get reports about curriculum implementation	6.3	3.2	30.2	30.2	30.2	60.4

1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always

5. Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

5.1. Discussion

Findings showed that six of the items were significant at $p < 0.001$, while another six were significant at $p < 0.05$. A majority of teachers perceived that their principals often/always encourage them to use instructional materials freely, protect classroom instructional time from outside interruptions, are visibly present at school for staff and students, ensure that

all students were present in class during lessons, and encourage them to teach the required curriculum.

Current findings were partially supported by previous research. For instance, many teachers imply that principals tend to encourage them to use instructional materials freely; Ghavifekr and Ramzy (2020) found that Malaysian teachers tend to feel more confident in exploring new methods and more motivated to interact with peers when they are allowed to use innovative methods of instruction; their positive attitudes in turn encourage students to become more self-directed and self-instructional. Additionally, current findings also imply that Malaysian principals tend to be visibly present at school for teachers and students, which can promote teaching effectiveness in line with the United Nations SDG 4 Quality Education. Moreover, Ghavifekr and Ramzy (2020) posited that, as instructional leaders, principals are responsible for conducting ongoing supervision and inspection of various teaching and learning activities to ensure that staff demonstrate strong job commitment and intrinsic motivation necessary for facilitating active learning engagement, while fostering students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development. Lastly, a study by Si-Rajab and Musa (2019) concluded that the level of instructional leadership among Malaysian principals tends to be high.

Nevertheless, Harris et al. (2017) found that only a few principal-related duties and activities are aligned with instructional leadership, such as supervision of teaching and professional learning. Current findings imply that several duties and activities of principals are not congruent with instructional leadership practices; in particular, low percentages of teachers agreed that principals (1) recommend resources to them, (2) visit classes regularly to observe teaching and learning, (3) plan faculty meeting for professional development, (4) meet them individually to discuss student progress issues, and (5) provide them with verbal or written feedback, and (6) meet them to get reports about curriculum development.

Lastly, in an empirical examination on the impact of instructional leadership on teacher performance, Gading (2024) disclosed that principals tend to implement only a few instructional leadership practices, including innovations in curriculum delivery, adaptability to diverse learning styles, and alignment with educational standards. Findings imply a pressing need for instructional leadership that can provide teachers with meaningful insights for promoting professional growth, implementing coaching and mentoring programs, practicing ongoing monitoring and evaluation, and identifying areas of teacher improvement.

5.2. Implications

Current findings imply that principals often tend to deviate from their primary role in the teaching and learning process and provide insufficient teacher supervision at the designated times mainly because they are burdened by multifarious administrative tasks, thus neglecting their responsibilities as instructional leaders. Although the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2013) has a clear policy aspiration that principals serve as instructional leaders, current findings imply that 80.9 to 90.1 percent of principals are enacting only five of the functions associated with instructional leadership.

Results of the current study imply that principals tend to practice only a few components of instructional leadership. Findings were supported by previous research, for example,

Hassan, Ahmad, and Boon (2018) asserted that, although instructional leadership is one of key performance indicators, many educational leaders still do not practice it as they tend to focus mostly on administration and management. Besides being expected to be instructional leaders, principals also have to deal with numerous social and community authorities who place heavy demands and high expectations on their school, often leading to greater complexity and imbalance in the principals' school management and leadership. Although the Committee to Study Education Standard in Schools has recommended that Malaysian educational leaders transition from being administrative to more instructional to enhance students' academic achievement (Ministry of Education, 1982), principals in this study rarely visit classes to observe the teaching and learning process or meet teachers individually to discuss student progress as they tend to devote most of their time on administrative responsibilities, a finding supported by Ikrama, Ghavifekra, and Kenayathullaa (2021).

Additionally, current findings imply that that principals rarely hold meetings with teachers for curriculum development, conduct faculty meetings for professional development and provide constructive feedback to teachers. Burdened by management and administrative tasks, they have limited capacity to act as instructional leaders, especially in terms of curriculum development as well as teacher supervision and professional development. Ultimately, these responsibilities are often fulfilled by assistant principals. Therefore, most Malaysian principals have a deputy who is in charge of student affairs as well as subject heads who are in charge of curriculum and student progress (Harris et al., 2017).

Hassan, Ahmad, and Boon (2018), who appraised the challenges and issues that tend to affect principals' role as instructional leaders, found that they tend to be related to bureaucracy, social community pressure, and constant educational reforms, which tend to make them perceive themselves as educators rather than leaders. Changes in their role as school leaders since the previous few decades have not only increased their job complexity, but also require them to spend more time in execution and administration. The resulting lack of efficacy often fails them as school leaders who can adequately articulate curriculum information and professional development with teachers. Additionally, the weak practice of instructional leadership also results in many teachers adhering to the syllabus too rigidly, being highly exam-oriented without considering students' needs, while neglecting the student-centered concept or teaching without appropriate set induction.

The challenges in practicing instructional leadership among principals were also investigated by Abdul Rahman et al. (2020). Findings revealed that principals seem to encounter both internal and external challenges. While external challenges are mainly related to the negative attitudes of parents and teachers and a lack of monitoring from stakeholders, internal challenges are primarily linked to principals' limited experience and knowledge with regards to instructional leadership, which in turn, adversely affect their roles as effective resource persons. Similarly, Tan and Alias (2024) asserted that instructional leadership has long been a subject of debate in the Malaysian context of education, where gaps still exist in understanding its practice and relationship with teacher efficacy. Moreover, its implementation has not been consistent across all schools, with some school leaders demonstrating a higher level of instructional leadership than the others. This inconsistency seemingly has a negative impact on the overall quality of education and teaching effectiveness, leading to varying teaching and learning outcomes. Moreover, many Malaysian principals also find it challenging to juggle between

administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership roles. Besides shouldering heavy administrative tasks, many also lack the training and professional development opportunities that focus on augmenting instructional leadership skills.

Pitsoe and Sepeng (2024) reiterated that instructional leadership has not been thoroughly examined or fully developed within the field of educational leadership due to a fundamental misconception of the nature of instructional leadership and its influence on student and teacher performance. Besides, the absence of clarity often restricts principals' capacity to discuss and execute instructional strategies with staff, which in turn, hampers student learning. Since instructional leadership is crucial for school progress and revitalization, principals need to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the wider scope of their responsibilities, which encompasses power dynamics and the implications for social justice. Lastly, as instructional leaders, it is crucial for them to inspire and motivate staff to cultivate a positive school culture, while prioritizing collaboration, professional development, and a shared vision.

5.3. Recommendations

Brolund (2016) noted that many principals encounter obstacles to serving as effective instructional leaders. First, they have limited time to focus on instructional tasks since traditionally, they have been mostly tasked with managing the school budget and maintaining student discipline. Finding time to meet with teachers to discuss their teaching, while keeping current on best practices and curriculum is a serious constraint that they face as instructional leaders. Malaysian principals need to redefine the role by shifting from management and administrative tasks to practice more instructional tasks that can make teachers feel more supported and appreciated. Second, many principals may feel uncomfortable visiting teachers' classrooms to appraise and provide feedback since teacher autonomy is a delicate issue. Moreover, many experienced teachers believe that their approach is the most effective way to instill knowledge or inculcate values. Therefore, Malaysian principals need to create an atmosphere of openness and trust to carry out difficult conversations with teachers by establishing a positive learning community that encourages teachers to take risks or modify their classroom practices. Lastly, some principals lack subject matter knowledge and competencies to help teachers improve their practice. They should therefore become lifelong learners alongside their staff by attending professional seminars related to effective teaching and curriculum development.

According to New Leaders (2022), school principals can take several actions to become effective instructional leaders. First, they should set a vision for ambitious teaching that serves as a rudder for teachers, students and parents to be accountable to learning outcomes. Second, they should constantly upgrade curriculum and instructional materials to provide an evidence-based and culturally-responsive education by creating relevant and timely systems and structures to analyze and adapt instructional resources. Third, they should create systems to support data-driven instruction to drive instructional improvement by promptly analyzing disaggregated data, identifying key trends and pursuing a common goal for student achievement. Fourth, they can provide equitable access to individualization and interventions by identifying students with special needs to offer academic support. Fifth, they can encourage professional learning and collaboration among teachers so that they become more engaged in lifelong learning that create impactful changes for students. Lastly, they can implement schoolwide systems

for observation, coaching and actionable feedback to monitor teacher practice and evaluate the impact of coaching on student achievement.

Venter and Naicker (2024) found a significant relationship between instructional leadership of (for example, supervising and evaluating, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress) and emotional intelligence (EI). Principals who possess high EI often create a more supportive school environment with a well-coordinated curriculum, which leads to improved teaching and learning outcomes. Moreover, principals' self-perceptions of their EI are not only significantly related to their instructional practices, but can be a necessary condition for fostering an environment conducive for student achievement. With a high level of EI, principals are often better equipped to handle interpersonal relationships, resolve conflicts, and make decisions that consider the emotional wellbeing of students and staff, thus contributing to a more favorable learning milieu. In sum, professional development programs should focus on strengthening principals' EI to enhance their administrative efficacy, while selection committees and school governing bodies should incorporate EI when appointing principals to promote instructional leadership practices.

Mukhtar and Abd Razak (2024) identified several key strategies for improving school performance through instructional leadership, which are grounded in the specific context of the Malaysian educational landscape. Comprehensive strategies include (1) understanding the Malaysian educational context, (2) setting clear goals aligned with national standards, (3) ensuring adequate resources, and (4) providing professional development. Additionally, they also include (1) fostering collaborative learning communities, (2) offering effective instructional leadership, (3) utilizing data-informed decision-making, (4) engaging parents and the community, and (5) establishing continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The strategies are both pragmatic and actionable for enhancing school performance; for example, by focusing on the provision of adequate resources and professional development opportunities, instructional principals can reinforce teachers' pedagogical practices. By emphasizing effective data-informed decision-making, they can make better informed and strategic decisions.

In their discussion on the role of instructional leadership in relation to professional learning communities (PLCs), Za'aba and Alias (2024) asserted that principals should focus on strategies that highlight the best practices to promote collaborative learning opportunities for professional development among teachers, while equipping themselves with the necessary skills to foster a positive school climate by planning appropriate strategies according to the school climate and providing the necessary resources and scaffolding to promote effective collaboration within PLCs. On the other hand, educational training providers need to train principals on ways to incorporate PLC management in their instructional leadership practices, besides giving them an overview of the challenges and appropriate action in leading change and innovation.

To conclude, this study presents a notable gap in conducting a thorough analysis of potential confounding variables or alternative explanations that could impact Malaysian teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership among principals. Future research should include a more comprehensive examination of contextual factors, the robustness, and generalizability of the findings between instructional leadership by using larger, random samples from the different states of Malaysia. Moreover, future studies should

investigate the broader applicability of the findings and the extent to which they can be extrapolated to different academic settings and sociocultural contexts.

While the study introduces interesting insight into instructional leadership in education, its limited exploration of the intricate relationship between instructional leadership and the wellbeing, job commitment, work motivation, and career development among teachers opens avenues for future research. To enhance the depth and applicability of the current findings, a more rigorous investigation, accompanied by an in-depth examination of various influencing factors, is essential for a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics in real-world academic environments.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were ascertained of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly private and confidential. They were also informed that the study was of low risk and that they could stop participating any time without any repercussions.

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Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was found in this study in terms of authorship, the research, or publication of this article.

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