

ASPIRING FOR SCHOOL EXCELLENCE: A MALAYSIAN CASE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe a successful school leader from the perspective of educational leaders. It is part of a larger study on the attributes of successful school management in Malaysia. The larger study is a project on "Improving School Management in Asian Countries", and it was first initiated by the Asian Network of Training and Research Institutions in Educational Planning (ANTRIEP) and supported by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), Paris, France in 2000. Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB) which held the chair of ANTRIEP for 2002-2004, agreed to contribute to this larger study, which will be in the form of case studies of successful headteachers. These successful headteachers were selected based on the results of the Aspiring School Award recipients from 1998 to 2002. The data used in this exploration was collected through in-depth interviews. For the purpose of this seminar, this paper presents findings and analysis of only one case. The major themes that emerged from the study include visionary, creative problem solving, continuous learning, having a passion for quality and caring. This paper also calls on the education authorities in Malaysia to re-examine the selection, promotion, training and staff development opportunities for educational leaders in order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of educational leadership in their position and roles. With the challenges and demands of the ever-changing school environment, more effective principals equipped with leadership and management competencies are required to lead schools.

Background To Study

This case study is a collaborative project undertaken by Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB) with eight other member institutions of Asian Network of Training and Research Institutions in Educational Planning (ANTRIEP). ANTRIEP which has formed in December 1995 is now made up of 19 member institutions from 10 countries in Asia, in addition to the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), Paris, France (Appendix 1).

Collaborative research for mutual benefit and sustained inter-institutional linkages is one of the main activities of ANTRIEP. A collaborative project on "Improving School Management in Asian Countries" was initiated in 2000. This project was undertaken in two phases. Firstly, a

series of national diagnoses on the management of headteachers was undertaken by several members including Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB). These were presented and discussed at the Shanghai Seminar in 2000. A comparative analysis was prepared, and both the analysis and case studies have been published by the IIEP for ANTRIEP (International Institute for Educational Planning, 2004).

In the second phase, the project moved to the school level, where case studies on particular successful schools were to be carried out. IIEP in consultation with NIEPA, the Focal Point prepared the broad outline of the research proposal covering scope, objectives and important research questions to be examined in the case study of schools. The proposal was then sent to all member institutions requesting them to prepare detailed research proposal considering their own country's educational context. Nine member institutions from seven countries sent in their specific proposals (Appendix 2). The research proposals including methodology, structure and organization of the case study were finalized in a workshop organized in Bangladesh during April 2003. Another workshop was organized in Nepal in December 2003 to discuss the draft case studies.

Introduction

There have been various concerted attempts by the Ministry of Education Malaysia to rediscover ways of identifying and developing excellent and successful schools. One such effort is the introduction of the National Aspiring School Award (NASA). This paper presents an investigation of a school which has been given this recognition indicating that it is a successfully managed school. It is also part of a larger study on the attributes of successful school management in Malaysia. This paper discusses NASA and subsequently followed by a description of the study (focus, purpose, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion).

National Aspiring School Award (NASA)

Over the past decade, the Malaysian education system has experienced increasing pressure to raise standards of learning and academic achievement in schools. In the quest for excellence and assurance of quality in schools, a number of programs and awards aimed at quality improvement have been introduced. One such effort is the introduction of the National Aspiring School Award (NASA). NASA was introduced in 1991. It is presented annually at the National Teachers' Day celebration on 16th May, initially to four categories of schools that exhibit overall excellent quality management. These include the Urban Primary School, Urban Secondary School, Rural Primary School and Rural Secondary School. For the last 13 years up to 2003, 52 schools have been awarded champions among the four categories. Starting from the 1999, the Federal Inspectorate of Schools (FIS) has created one additional category for the National Aspiring School Award, which is Remote Area Schools category. In 2001 FIS created two extra categories: Technical Schools and the Special Education Schools categories (Jemaah Nazir Sekolah, 2003).

The NASA is awarded to government schools, which are under direct administration of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE). The award is a form of recognition and appreciation of schools towards the development of education (Wan Chik Rahmah, 2002). This award recognizes the model school in the current school contexts which can be emulated by other schools to self-evaluate their own achievements, challenges and obstacles encountered by them

in implementing their responsibilities and functions as educators. The champion school recipient for each category would receive a certificate of appreciation, plaque, and RM 15,000 as monetary rewards for school development. The first runner-up is awarded RM 12,000 whereas the second runner-up is awarded RM 10,000 (Federal Inspectorate of Schools, 2002).

Selection Process for NASA

Normally, potential schools vying for the award are recommended by the individual State Education Department. These schools would then participate in the competition at national level and are evaluated by the Federal Inspectorate of Schools. A written report of the evaluation together with supporting documents as evidence is compiled and submitted to the NASA coordinating committee to determine the winners.

The evaluation criteria are divided into four main areas. They include areas assessing: (1) headteacher leadership (school management, curriculum management, organizational development management, and leadership style); (2) school climate; (3) learning activities; (4) quality outcome (Federal Inspectorate of Schools, 2002).

Headteacher leadership refers to the creative ways of planning, utilizing, implementing and monitoring of resources to achieve specific educational objectives. School climate is evaluated based on the willingness and determination of the school community to work together. The next component of learning activities looks at the actual teaching and learning activities and processes that take place inside or outside the classroom. Lastly, quality outcome evaluates the achievement of curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

Focus of The Study

Although schools that have won the NASA are considered successful schools, the meaning of successful schools and successful school management are perceived differently by headteachers. It could range from improved instruction, new teaching and learning activities, improved materials, reorganization of the school, involvement of the community, to new roles and relationships and a different organizational climate. There are also many inter-related factors or determinants that contribute to achieving successful school management. No single factor contributes to all these outcome measures. For the purpose of this inquiry, we will focus on two aspects of school management. The first is the roles and functions of headteachers, and second a discussion on the internal management of the school.

Roles and Functions of Headteacher

Since the late 1990s, the trend of school management in Malaysia has substantially changed to the 'effective school movement'. The movement to define, identify and promote the purposes and practices of effective schools took shape by emulating Mortimore's (1995) conceptual paper. Other related ideas of successful schools were also used (Lane & Walberg, 1987; Beare, Caldwell, & Millikan, 1989; Fullan, 1992; Silver, 1994; Dalin, Ayono, Biazen, Dibaba, Jahan, Miles, & Rojas, 1994; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2000; Day, Harris & Hadfield, 2001; Englefield, 2002); and Keys, Sharp, Greene & Grayson, 2003). Thus, we see that to date, there has been a good deal of conceptual work on the role of the headteacher in tomorrow's schools.

To implement this, the MOE has outlined ten focus of roles and functions of school management for headteachers to improve the performance of their schools. It is believed that headteachers are the key players in developing the school and thus unlocking the full potential of students (Abdul Shukor, 1998). The ten focus for educational management outlined are: effective headteachers; effective schools; professional teacher; relevant curriculum; examination and evaluation system; development of teaching and learning support infrastructure; development of planning and research institute; development of an effective implementation and monitoring institute; educational administration system; comprehensive staff development and development of external and societal relations.

Believing that these elements are important and relevant to the current situation, the present Director General of Education (Abdul Rafie, 2001), continues to emphasise on. These roles and functions are intended to aid in the development and progress of headteachers. They provide the basis for a more structured approach to helping headteachers to be focus-oriented, to set relevant targets, to assist in the monitoring and evaluation progress, to identify development priorities, and to attain success.

Besides the conceptual work, the researchers are interested to study what headteachers actually do in their daily interventions and problem solving situations. In other words, they are interested in studying how the every day intervention behaviour of the headteacher influences school improvement in general. We believe that there is still a need for more studies focusing on what is really going on at the school level.

Internal Management of the School

Schools are under pressure and expected to change and improve the quality of education. They are confronted with numerous improvement projects of a different nature: namely curriculum changes, classroom management changes, and educational structure. The headteacher is basically responsible for the internal school management and leadership. He or she is both the administrative and instructional leader in the school. Owing to the continuous evolving changes, it becomes increasingly difficult for headteachers to make right decisions and to develop long-term local policies. It means that the headteacher is no longer a "routine manager" carrying out a set of routinised school improvement practices designed by policy makers outside the school. Although Malaysia practices a centralized education system, headteachers are still very much expected to redefine public expectations in terms of local capacities. They have to use their creativity to develop within organizational members the ability to solve problems locally.

The headteacher is assisted by four assistant headteachers namely, Assistant Headteacher for Administration and Curriculum (AHAC), Assistant Headteacher for Student Affairs (AHSA), and Assistant Headteacher for Co-curriculum (AHC). However, for schools with double sessions: morning and afternoon sessions, they have one extra assistant in the name of Afternoon Supervisor (AS) (refer **Appendix 4**).

Generally, the AHAC assists in the administrative aspects of school organization like proper management of school funds, accounts and resources, planning timetables and schemes of work for teachers. For effective coordination of teaching and learning of the various subjects taught in schools, a senior teacher is appointed as key resource teacher for each subject. The AHC handles the planning, implementation, and monitoring of all extra-curricular activities.

The AHSA assists in all matters related to student welfare, such as textbooks loans, discipline, student health and nutrition. Besides this, he or she handles complaints and also liaises with parents and the community on matters relating to student well being. The AS is responsible for assisting the headteacher in supervising the daily administrative and instructional activities of the classes held in the afternoon sessions.

In summary, internal management and leadership implies a vision and a set of social skills to establish a school which is able to formulate and implement appropriate answers to internal and external demands (Vandenberghe, 1995).

Purpose Of The Study

Since the introduction of NASA in 1991, 28 primary schools would be chosen from over seven thousand schools to receive the highest award every year (Jemaah Nazir Sekolah, 2003). Thousands of Malaysian Ringgit are spent every year for the award (Federal Inspectorate of Schools, 2003). Schools, that have been awarded NASA, have shown indications of improvement in students' academic achievement. These schools are also experiencing increase in student enrollment as more parents clamor to send their children to such schools. This indicates that the public is happy with the schools' development and progress.

Despite the achievement of these schools, the high costs incurred in implementing NASA and recognition given by the public, little is known about them especially with regards to the management style of the headteachers. Basically, no study thus far has been conducted on such schools. Also, it has been observed that schools with NASA are experiencing deterioration in quality. This happens when a headteacher responsible for getting the award for the school is transferred to another school or educational institution. Therefore it is pertinent to systematically conduct scientific enquiries on these schools so as to understand what makes a school successful and the kinds of management practices that lead to its success. This research can contribute towards the development of local indigenous knowledge on management practices appropriate to the Malaysian context, hence strengthening NASA. It could also contribute to policy review and implementation for Ministry of Education.

Research Questions

The objective of the study was to uncover the characteristics of successful school managers in the Malaysian context.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study was limited to primary schools in urban areas, which had received the NASA. Although 13 urban primary schools qualify, only three schools fit this scope of study where the existing headteacher are still the incumbent heads. However, this report covers only one school. As secondary schools are administered differently with different teacher academic qualifications as well as remuneration schemes, they are not included in this current study.

'Effectiveness' and 'successful' are elusive terms, which must be clarified before we can understand the significance of what is meant by 'effective or successful schools'. For the purpose of this research, successful schools were defined as those, which were awarded NASA. It was assumed that the schools had been under good management practices.

A Qualitative Study: Method and Design

This section started with a discussion on the research design and the selection of schools for the study. In addition, data collection, management and analysis would also be described.

A Qualitative Approach

The methodology used mainly consisted that of a qualitative case study. Data was collected using mainly interviews. Observation and document analysis were used to provide understanding regarding the context and background information of the schools. The qualitative case study was deemed appropriate because the nature of the study called for detailed examination of these schools (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Selection of Schools for the Study

A list of recipients of NASA was obtained from the Federal Inspectorate of Schools. The following criteria were used to select the schools as samples of the study:

1. Urban primary schools.
2. Schools with headteachers who led their school to success and were still incumbent heads.

Data Collection and Management

Approval to conduct the study was sought from the individual State Education Department in which the school was located. Once approval was granted, the school was contacted in February, 2003 and was given an explanation about the study. Prior to the actual data collection a preliminary data collection was conducted. The purpose for such an exercise was to develop and enhance the question guide to be used in the study. In addition, this exercise was also meant to develop the competency of the researchers since the researcher is an instrument in qualitative study (Creswell, 1998). For this purpose, one school was selected from the list of recipients of NASA. Interviews were conducted with the headteacher and other schoolteachers.

In the actual data collection, a meeting between the researchers and teachers of the schools was sought before the commencement of the study. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the research team to the teachers, to explain the purpose of the study, and to lay the groundwork for good rapport. The receptiveness of those being studied would ensure that data could be collected in a setting as natural as possible (Wolcott, 1973; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

The in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with various personnel of the schools. They included the headteacher, assistant headteachers and teachers of the schools. Except for the headteachers, all others were randomly selected. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Besides interviews, the researchers also conducted non-participant observations and document analysis. The data from these techniques was used to provide the background information and other contextual elements of the study.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was guided by the research questions. The data analyses that the researchers had done manually could also be done with a computer program on qualitative data analysis such as NUD*IST or NVivo. The researchers decided not to use NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing) Version Six or QSR N6 program, which was available later on, as the analyses for this one case was already in its final stages then.

The procedure used was primarily descriptive in nature. Data from the semi-structured interviews, field notes and related documents were analyzed using content analysis technique. The data was analyzed for themes and patterns that would reflect the research questions. The researchers began with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which allowed the researchers to focus on the participants' own words and sentences. After open coding had been completed, the researchers axial coded within the interview, which allowed the researchers to focus on understanding the participants' stories. The final coding level allowed for the emergence of the theoretical categories and properties.

In responding to the issues of validity and reliability, the researchers carried out cross checks at the end of interviews, through member checks and audit trails. Validity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation, and whether or not a given explanation fits a given description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before ending the interview, the researchers had asked one or two questions for 'reliability checks'. When deemed necessary, follow up interviews were carried out to pose additional questions and to obtain corrective feedback on previously obtained information to eradicate any confusion or disagreement.

Presentation Of Results

Results were discussed and presented in two sections. The first section presents findings of the study whereas the second section covers discussion, conclusions and implications.

Findings of the Study

The overall findings reflect the research question which focuses on the characteristics of successful school managers in the Malaysian context. Quotations derived from the semi-structured interviews were used to describe, illustrate and justify the findings.

The Characteristics of Successful School Managers

The major themes or characteristics of a successful school manager which emerged from the interview data included visionary, creative problem solving, continuous learning, having a passion for quality and caring. Details of the main themes and sub-themes are presented below.

VISIONARY

Clarity of focus

Sharing of vision

Generating ideas and providing direction

CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Risk Taker

Contextualized Action

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

PASSION FOR QUALITY

CARING

To provide further background about the participant in this study, the section begins with a brief biographical description of the participant. However, to preserve the anonymity of the interviewee, he has been categorized as Ahmad and his school as Beringin Primary School.

Biographical Profile of the Participant

Ahmad. Ahmad is 48 years old and in his third year as the headteacher of Beringin Primary School. He started his service as a teacher and currently has 27 years of experience in the education field. Ahmad was appointed headteacher in another urban school before his appointment in Beringin Primary School. Before becoming headteacher, he had held positions such as assistant headteacher for student affairs and assistant headteacher for curriculum and administration. He is also a committee member of the Primary School Headteachers' Council. His reasons for entering leadership role were to help create fair and just learning environments for children and teachers. Ahmad described himself as an approachable instructional leader, with a passion for teaching and innovation, whose task is to work with teachers to develop a vision. He claimed that 'I see myself as someone who really wants to be involved with teachers and children on a daily basis.' Ahmad believes that effective and open communication is of utmost importance in solving problems. He believes that his teachers are invaluable assets to the success of the school and his role is to motivate and inspire them. As a result of his belief, he works to empower people and to 'nurture within each person a sense of commitment, responsibility and passion' for doing things that will help their schools to become successful. He concluded that his vision for leadership is to help and support everyone in the school to make a contribution to their school, community and the world at large.

Profile of the School

Beringin Primary School is an urban co-education primary school located at the periphery eastern side of the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. The school is relatively new as it was established only on 22nd June 1993. Now it has an enrolment of about 2,400 pupils and has 52

classes. Most of the pupils live nearby the school in the housing area with the same name as the school. There are altogether 90 teachers and 4 support staff. Being an urban school, most of the parents work in government sectors (60%), private sector (25%) and others are self-employed (15%). Based on these figures, it can be concluded that the majority of parents are educated middle-class community. The community is fairly homogeneous and consists of mainly urban Malay citizens.

Visionary. Vision is more than just coming up with an image of an ideal future condition and then sharing or explaining it to the members of the organization. At the same time, headteachers are expected to convince followers to do what is necessary to achieve it. For long term success and attainment of a vision, headteachers have to have a clear focus. It means that they have to think really hard in order to plan well. They have to possess the right thoughts of how things will work and perspectives necessary to deal with complex problems and also to think of the causes and outcomes of their plans. Successful leaders will have to learn to use their cognitive power effectively. At the same time, they will have to further develop followers' cognitive abilities as in most cases, long-term ideals that leaders come up with are often derived from followers' ideas.

Clarity of Focus. Ahmad said that successful leaders have got to be very clear of what they want to do and what they have to do. He added, "for instance, in teaching and learning, what is excellence in teaching and learning? For me, firstly teachers have the ability to teach well and make learning fun. Secondly, all students can read and write. I would not want teachers in the secondary schools to say that our students cannot read and write....what have we been doing in the primary school? I want to see all students literate with the exception of those who have disability problems. Thirdly, I want to develop students with character, like being brave. When people interact with this school's students, they will be able to recognize that they come from this particular school."

He further illustrated that he wanted to see students who are brave to interact and offer any kind of assistance to visitors to the school. "They can become examples to students of other schools." He also wanted the school not only to receive the National Aspiring Schools Award but also to be the benchmark for other schools at state level. Thus far, other schools have visited the school and had begun to use the same ideas in managing their schools.

Sharing of vision. Ahmad would share his ideas and vision with his Assistant Headteachers to get their views and support first. Next he would have a staff meeting to disseminate and communicate the ideas to the teachers.

They may be my ideas but they should not become what I want alone. They should be what my Senior Assistants and the staff want to do. We need to make the decision together to go on or not with the idea. I need their support to implement the ideas.

In order to get Assistant Headteachers and teachers to be in line with my vision and thoughts, meetings at the beginning of every week will be held with them to share the vision. Ahmad would also ask for the teachers' opinions on how the details of the vision can be worked out. Teachers are also encouraged to give their ideas or asked if the ideas suggested by the headteacher can be modified. In the meeting, consensus would be obtained from all the teachers.

For instance, on Monday mornings when the students are having their morning prayers during assembly, I would use the time to discuss any problems that arise with my teachers.

The teachers are given the opportunity to tell me if there are any problems. If there are,, I'll be there to listen and to try to help them solve the problems. If there is none, we'll carry on with our own responsibilities.

Generating Ideas and Providing Direction. Although teachers could do the work and should be entrusted with the work, Ahmad said that it was important for leaders to provide the direction. He would show the various committee what was needed, how to do it, the resources to do it and also provide the time frame for it. When the headteacher felt and observed that the teachers are ready, he should then let go and empower the teachers to complete the project.

For instance, drawing and painting a school mural, a cat should look like a cat and not a tiger. I understand that not all teachers are experts in drawing cats but I want to make sure a cat looks like a cat so I will advise the teachers to use their creativity like projecting an image of the cat onto the wall and then trace it onto the wall.

Ahmad believed that some ideas can come from the teachers but the headteacher should provide the direction. The objective may still be achieved without the direction but the result may not reflect the desired purpose.

Creative Problem Solving. Creativity in problem solving requires not only coming up with ideas but first of all knowing when a problem exists. The leader also needs to know how to identify and define a problem, how to allocate resources to solve the problem, and how to evaluate the value of potential solutions. In addition, he also needs to know whether the solutions are good ones. When Ahmad first stepped into the school, he found that the school was burdened with a RM 38,000 debt which was not paid off. Having identified the serious problems, Ahmad knew that the first thing he had to do was to plan and allocate resources stringently to solve the debts of the school. He tried to discuss with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) members, yet fearing that they will not cooperate as the previous headteacher did not get along well with the PTA chairperson. However, the PTA chairperson was willing to help after knowing the dire needs of the school. Aiming for the appropriate solutions, headteachers require a certain amount of calculated risk and a thorough understanding of the situation and environment.

Risk Taker. To be a successful leader, one has to be brave and needs to take risk at times. For many of the programs, Ahmad would tell his teachers to concentrate on planning and implementation whereas he would be responsible in searching for funds. He does not believe that the staff should go through a long process of lengthy discussion or deliberation to get a detailed view and solution of the problem especially financial problems at hand. Once the decision is made, he would look for the money while his teachers begin to take charge in implementing the activities. He would not stop the improvement projects on the basis of lacking in funds. Thus, many specific changes in the classrooms and the school can be noticed.

Although he does not practise risk avoidance, for him circulars regarding finance should be adhered to but one can exercise some creativity in adapting academic circulars to cater for the school's needs. What Ahmad practised is not just taking any kind of risk, but rather, it is calculated risk.

He also demonstrated that he is an innovative person with many new ideas. For instance, in the school remedial program, students weak in reading, writing and arithmetic are selected

from standard two classes and placed in the remedial class. This room is not called remedial room but *Nur Kasih* (Beloved One). This is to avoid other teachers or students themselves labeling them as weak students. A teacher is also specially selected to teach this class.

Besides curriculum innovativeness, Ahmad also showed innovativeness in school environment improvement projects. He wanted the school to take part in the 3K (Cleanliness, Beautiful & Safe School Environment) competitions at state and national level for the year 2002. He wanted the parents to assist in getting trees for the school grounds but trees are very expensive and parents might not be able to afford to donate a tree each. At the PTA committee meeting, it was suggested that parents donate RM10 each instead, and they managed to obtain RM15,000 a year in donations.

Contextualized Action. Successful leaders have to firstly understand the context and environment they are working in. They should be able to create a feasible working relationship with the political and economic environment. They have to establish, build, and nurture relationships with the community and the larger environment first to gain their trust and confidence before involving them in improvement projects. Headteachers have to take into consideration the community's expectations. At the same time headteachers have to demonstrate their initiative and power over their environments to achieve organizational effectiveness and efficiency. The headteacher has to create time as it is very time consuming to play a more prominent public role interacting with people in the community, forging links between the school and the environment.

For instance, Ahmad indicated that they had been calling and inviting parents in his area to come to school to contribute their energy towards the many improvement projects for the betterment of the school. But very few would turn up. According to him, the headteacher has got to understand not only the parents but he has to understand also the working style of the PTA chairperson.

We cannot just apply our own former style of communication or leadership with the PTA chairperson. He cannot immediately accept us...he has to be given time to adjust to us... the style changes with time, situation and current happenings. It is not easy and it is very time consuming.

He added that although very few parents turned up for the improvement projects, they did not stop following closely the changes made in the school. Besides the community, the teachers in the school should also be given time to adjust to the headteacher. The headteacher cannot carry out immediate changes in the school without a thorough study of the school environment. Ahmad added that he had to take about a year's time to win the teachers' trust. Besides that, he also had to take time to understand the needs of the students, the expectations of the parents and the community. Later, he discovered that the community may not be able to contribute their time and energy but they would not hesitate to offer school-based support through fund provision and collection. Here, it can be observed that the relationship with the external support structure is efficient but less focused on bodily involvement.

To do that, he had to firstly, forge relationships with the other administrators, namely his senior assistants. He said that he had to practice "*turun padang*". In the literal sense, "*turun padang*" means that one is willing to soil one's hands and feet working in the field together with his teachers, to be in the shoes of another. By experiencing exactly what his teachers are

experiencing, the joy and difficulties encountered, he would then be able to understand the efforts of his teachers. By this conscious and visual act of participation, he would be able to convince all others of his commitment and serious involvement in the school projects. Successful leaders do not manage by staying in their rooms but need to lead from outside the room.

A successful leader has to be with his staff. He has to go down to the field to actually see and experience what his staff are doing. It would be easier to see the strengths and the weaknesses. We can then address the problem immediately.

It can be observed that a successful leader is characterized by interaction. The headteacher creates opportunities for frequent deliberations and consultations among the staff as well as with the community through the PTA chairperson. The successful leader focusses on the involvement of the entire staff, including himself.

Continuous Learning. Ahmad believes in continuous learning and that successful leaders should be active learners. He said that as teachers, they need to keep reading throughout their lives to keep up with the current happenings especially news. Through the Teachers' Club, he also subscribed to the New Straits Times, Star and Utusan Melayu for the staff to encourage the teachers to read. The newspapers are placed in the staff room. The teachers are also encouraged to widen their reading through the internet. For the committed teachers, he would provide the moral support and encouragement for them to further their studies through various distance-learning programs or full time basis at university degree levels. If he has the capability he would provide the opportunity and support for his teachers. However, he added that the teacher has to demonstrate commitment towards his or her work first.

He believes that whatever it is, teaching and learning should be given priority. He encourages teachers to generate new ideas and methods of teaching. He has set up a think tank group among the teachers. The think tank group consists of the *ketua-panitia* (subject heads) where they would meet to plan for curriculum projects and ways of improving teaching and learning strategies. For instance, *panitia* heads meet for Mathematics and Science programs. They would do the thinking, planning, incorporating ideas from the English Language programs as well as implementing new ideas. He acknowledged that there are many experts among the English Language, Mathematics, Science and other subject teachers. He tried to learn from them as he admitted that he is not yet well-versed with every subject. When he needs information on a particular subject he will enquire from the various subject teachers.

There are many ways one can learn from. He said that the state education department officers often come to visit his school. He would take the opportunity to ask them how he and his teachers can improve and develop themselves. He would also try to keep an open mind and observe as well as understand things from their perspectives.

My principle in life is learning. I need to keep learning and relearning, again and again. Although my school has achieved the Aspiring School Award status, there is always room for improvement and learning.

In order to encourage teacher learning, he would provide the means for his teachers to learn. He would arrange and organize trips for his teachers to visit other schools in other states to learn and benchmark best practices from the successfully managed schools. From such visits, they can learn and see for themselves how other schools achieve excellence in academic, co-

curriculum and other aspects. They would compare and contrast with their own standard and way of doing things. They are so determined to learn that they arranged flights across the South China Sea to Lohan and Pedawan in Sarawak, East Malaysia. Teachers would naturally love these trips as many West Malaysians have had a chance to visit East Malaysia in their entire life.

For him, learning is also sharing of knowledge with others. When he attends courses, at various levels, he would make it a point to share what he has learned with his teachers. He would inform teachers of current trends and issues to (1) foster innovation in teaching (methods, materials, technology) and (2) increase student learning. He also expects his teachers to give in-house training when they come back from courses. The sharing of professional knowledge among teachers have produced positive effects which increases teacher motivation in teaching and learning.

Passion for Quality. For Ahmad, to achieve quality, the teachers need to be clear about their roles and functions. Work has to be divided according to the teachers' expertise. All teachers have to be fully involved in the achievement of school goals. He maintains full confidence and trust in his Assistant Headteachers.

Leaders and teachers need to adhere to rules and regulations. For teachers who are problem creators, he would not hesitate to take strict actions against them.

Rules are rules. If we do not follow rules and make sure teachers and students follow rules, why create them in the first place? For instance, one of my teachers cancelled a co-curriculum meeting with the students on the day of the meeting without consulting the school administrators...students have already been informed that there was a meeting.... the excuse that the field was not ready with lines cannot be accepted...he could have used other alternatives to carry out the activity...for this, I gave him a show cause letter (disciplinary note or memo)...as leaders we have to correct and explain the rules to him...we have to take action or else he would not respect the rules...teachers can't make their own rules or change rules whenever they like...cancel class just because they watch the Rosalinda show (a popular TV drama series).

Successful leaders also need strategic planning. They need to have short term and long term plans for the school. Ahmad believes that any school improvement implementation efforts should be co-ordinated by means of a plan. "When I first came to this school in 1998, I have already started planning strategies and programs for the next five years in order to achieve the National Aspiring School Award. The team of five administrators, teachers and even parents were encouraged through talks held at PTA meetings to work hand in hand with the school if they want the school to make a difference for their children and in the community". The headteacher also needs to systematically and frequently communicates this plan as well as the changes he would like to see implemented among his staff. This communication occurs during staff meetings and during many informal conversations.

With the teachers, at the beginning of the year, he would announce the amount of allocation for the various budgets, for instance, for Science, for Mathematics, Bahasa Melayu and others. The teachers are given the empowerment to cater for their needs including equipment they require, additional stock of teaching material and so on. Although teachers are given some freedom to decide, they have to inform and discuss with him first. Should there be any funds left, they can also make suggestions to use the money, such as for Mathematics Week, or

Science Week and so on. Teachers and students are also allowed to propose fund raising activities for instance making and selling greeting cards to other students for 10 to 20 cents, in order to carry out their activities for the Subject Week. However, approval from the parents has to be sought through the PTA meetings for the suggested fund raising activities. Teachers are also required to keep accounts of the allocation, expenditure, and balance of the budget which are monitored by him.

Systematic planning alone is not enough, but planning has got to be effective too. To illustrate that effective planning has got to be carried out from the very beginning, Ahmad said that they started planning when they were sharing another school's premises while waiting for their school building to be completed. They have to do so as this current school was planned to be a Smart school in the Federal Territory.

Besides effective planning, successful leaders also need to practise successful monitoring of the school programs, teachers and students. It is observed that Ahmad has a plan and the importance of the plan is also communicated frequently through planned activities. Ahmad would also have frequent meetings with his Assistant Headteachers to monitor the development and progress of the various programs.

Successful school managers must always push for excellence by getting feedback from not only his teachers, higher authorities, parents but also any other visitors to the school. Ahmad recalled:

"The school was often visited by school inspectors monitoring teaching and learning.... even though they are satisfied with the overall school performance, I would often asked them for additional feedback. My concept in life is... to keep on learning...I can always learn something new."

Caring. Ahmad felt that successful leaders should care, be concern, and respectful to those working for them and with them. The leader should also demonstrate care, empathy and understanding. The leader should be genuine and warm in his love for the students and staff's well being. For him, when a child or the staff's child is sick, he would send the child immediately to the clinic and pay for the medication. He would then inform the parent (or his own teacher) about the child's well being and also the money used for medical services. If the parent (or teacher) returns the money, he will accept it. However, if the parent (or teacher) did not reimburse him, he would not ask the parent (or teacher) further but would then withdraw the sum from the Student Welfare Fund which he has established in the school. The parent (or teacher) can choose to return the money to the Student Welfare Fund in his own time.

Ahmad also emphasized, "If a teacher has to send the child to the hospital for treatment and fetch him back to school using his or her own car, I will also use some money from the Student Welfare Fund to reimburse him or her for the petrol". Ahmad continued that the money from the Student Welfare Fund is also used to replenish the items needed in the First Aid box.

Ahmad prefers to use the 'celebrate success' approach to leadership. He believes in giving recognition to teachers' contributions. He maintains that staff (including teachers and support staff) should be rewarded for their effort. If there is no existing award, the leader of the organization should create rewards. He said that there are many ways to show appreciation for teacher for instance through the PTA.

Last year, there were 10 awards for the teachers,...Creative Teacher, Innovative Teacher and so on. On Teachers' Day last year, at the school level, the PTA presented Appreciation letters. We celebrated success together. You could really see the teachers' faces lit up.

For Ahmad, in this people-centred approach, the most important element is work happiness, enjoyment and satisfaction. He believes that a successful leader, no matter how busy, should make himself available, and accessible besides being approachable. If one is approachable but does not have time at all with the staff, it defeats the purpose altogether. He availed himself at all times to give a listening ear to his teachers and staff.

Sometimes I am so busy with meetings at the district and state level that I don't have time to even step into the school grounds...I will then go to school at night. I will always remind my clerk that should there be any work that requires my immediate attention, just call me and I will come.

Ahmad elaborated that at night even on Saturdays, teachers, especially the single and young ones would come to school to play games. If he was around he would join them for a drink after their games. He would also pay for the drinks. For Ahmad gestures of informal socialization were extremely important in winning the staff's loyalty and communicated his acceptance of them and sense of oneness or sense of belonging to the same team. Through these informal gatherings, it is also easier to give critical feedback to the teachers in the form of advice and through amusing anecdotes. For more difficult cases, Ahmad would call the teacher into his office and have a 'slow talk' with the teacher.

I would not openly scold any teacher in an open meeting. By talking to the teacher in the privacy of my office, it is easier to convey the message to the teacher. In our society, we have to practice 'jaga air muka' (save face)... we can give corrective feedback to the teacher more effectively... especially informally and indirectly...after a drink...while having a good time....for instance, just now I observed that you were using this approach with the student, perhaps this other approach is more appropriate.

Ahmad believes that in our society, saving face is an extremely useful and important skill for headteachers in confronting issues pertaining to staff's work performance or inappropriate teaching practices. This does not mean that the leader cannot chastise the staff but rather, has to exercise a high degree of sensitivity and *face saving*.

He also shared that caring for teachers include protecting the teachers from parents when they demand to settle their problems with the teachers concerned. He would not allow the parents to directly express their anger or dissatisfaction with the particular teacher. The parents would have to settle the problem with him first. If the need arose, he would go to the extent of apologizing on behalf of the teacher. He confessed that in order to settle problems satisfactorily for all parties, sometimes it is necessary for the leader to be humble and to remove one's ego.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, conclusions and implications are discussed. The discussion centred on the focus of the study namely, internal school management and roles and functions of headteacher.

The purpose of this study was to uncover the characteristics of successful school managers in the Malaysian context. The data used in this exploration was collected through in-depth interviews with headteachers from among recipients of the National Aspiring School Award. Due to time constraints, only one case would be reported at this juncture. The main themes: visionary, creative problem solving, continuous learning, passion for quality and caringness, which emerged from the study were discussed in relation to the perspectives of effective school leadership characteristics.

Internal School Management

This study demonstrated that leadership experience of previous specific posts had helped the development of the current headteacher. Before assuming the position of the current headship, the headteacher in the study had already learned how to work in teams, delegate work and manage conflict and other roles. In other words he was well-prepared with a wide range of experience in different schools before embarking on leading this current school.

There was a strong emphasis upon teamwork and participation in decision-making (although the headteacher reserves the right to have the last say and make the final decision). Within the study, there was ample evidence that people were trusted to work as autonomous professionals, within clear collegial value frameworks which were common to all. These collegial cultures were maintained, however, within contexts of organizational and individual accountability set by external policy demands and internal aspirations. In this case it appears that morality, emotion and social bonds provided powerful stimulants to motivation and commitment of the staff.

Goals were clear and agreed upon resulting in a shared understanding and responsibility so that the school worked together and moved forward as a whole unit. Firstly, the headteacher had a very clear and single-minded focus on what he wanted to achieve for his school. In addition, before embarking on any new project, the headteacher had frequent (weekly) meetings with all the assistant headteachers to get their perspectives and support. Next, with the support of his assistant headteachers, he had meetings with his teachers to communicate his ideas as well as to garner their support and involvement. Staff felt that they were involved and shared the identity of the school. They are proud to be associated with the school. Most of the staff sent their primary school going children to the school.

Communications were good and everyone had high expectations of themselves and others. The feedback system was effective despite the existence of a hierarchical organizational structure and information transmitted both ways between the headteacher and the staff. This is also due to the fact that this school has a very supportive and hardworking staff. Most of the problematic staff were gradually and eventually transferred out of the school or was 'forced' to leave their comfort zone.

The leadership quoted in this study was centrally concerned with developing the teachers in order to develop the organization. In Sergiovanni's (1998) analysis they developed social capital by encouraging collegiality and collaboration. The data provided by the participants emphasized 'building community' as an important dimension of the leadership role.

Another dimension of leadership which we are proposing is that successful leaders must have the ability to read and adjust to the particular context or set of circumstances they face. In this respect, their leadership behavior is dependent on context and situation. The choices they

make relate directly to their own beliefs, values and leadership style within the contextualized situation. Different contexts will present different challenges and will require different responses.

The homogeneous culture where most of the teachers and students are Malays ensure the clear understanding of one another's way of life and practices makes it relatively easy for the school management team to lead the school.

The success of the school management was also largely due to the immense support and funding of the State Education Department as well as the middle-class community. The school was given a variety of resources to enable it to compete aggressively with other schools.

Roles and Functions of Headteachers

This study focuses on a people-centered model of leadership. Clearly, the findings demonstrated that successful leadership is defined and driven by not only emphasizing 'strong leadership' in which strength is equated with single-mindedness in managing and aligning people to the vision and mission of the school. Rather, it should be balanced with the 'soft skill competencies' of nurture, care, listening and "*face saving*". Face and "*face saving*" are important cultural dimensions in the Malaysian school. It refers to maintaining a teacher's or staff's pride and dignity by not publicly embarrassing or humiliating him or her (Asma & Low, 2001). When sharing ideas and views, a leader would have to put them forward in a non-threatening but conciliatory manner. Making demands and stating expectations in an explicitly aggressively manner and with pressures would not be well received by the staff. A leader who makes the staff lose face in public can be perceived as arrogant and rude.

The headteacher in this study demonstrated a remarkable relationship and networking with the community and the higher authorities in both the State Education Department as well as the Ministry of Education.

The headteacher in this case, also communicated his personal, vision and belief systems by direction, words and deeds. Similar to the findings of Starratt (1991); Blasé & Anderson (1995); Blasé, Blasé, Anderson & Dungan (1995); and Blasé & Blasé (1998), through a variety of symbolic gestures and action, headteachers were successful at realigning teachers to achieve particular visions of the organizations.

There was clear delegation of work and duties. The headteacher perceived himself as the main or key strategist in planning for the school's direction, programs and activities despite emphasizing several times that he did not perceive himself as the sole decision maker. Rather, he would share the responsibility with other staff at all levels of the school organization. This finding supported the notion that not all leadership functions need to be carried out by the headteacher. Instead, they can be shared (Wilby & Dimmock, 1993; Weber, 1997; Amer & Khuan, 2004). Although, this study revealed that there was evidence of shared decision making, the leader still maintained the last say on the actual decision made. Furthermore, leadership follow-up is expected through the provision of technical and personal support, professional direction and the monitoring of the responsibilities delegated. Weber (1997) warns that:

Shared decision making does not mean an absence of leadership. What research has been showing conclusively, it should be noted, is that where teachers are brought into more

decision making roles, only a fully collaborative effort between headteacher and teachers will produce effective instruction. Where headteachers give teachers full administrative responsibilities (decision making) in a school, without the benefit of information, active participation, or cooperation, mistakes will be made and wheels reinvented.

It can be interpreted, therefore, that the headteacher is still the leader of the school and must be held responsible for ensuring that support, direction and guidance are given to teachers. The warnings of Weber seem to point out that it is essential that headteachers provide resources to nurture teachers, communicate expectations, give technical and personal support, and supervise, recognize and reward high quality teaching and leadership performance.

In many respects, the headteacher in this study has truly demonstrated a continuous desire to learn. He is alert, hard working, and seizes every opportunity to learn. He wants to achieve excellence and success and did not bypass the opportunity to learn. He has recognized and made learning a priority as well as has taken advantage of it in any way possible. He is always determined to encourage people to improve themselves. Besides, he seeks expertise in people better than himself to learn and share their knowledge because he revels in the talents of others. It requires a high degree of self-confidence not to be threatened by people perceived as 'better' than himself, but the strength to acknowledge it is the very quality that enhances leadership in the eyes of others (Macbeath & Myers, 1999). Teachers cannot fail to perceive such strength of character and respect him who sees opportunities to learn from others.

Implications

The environment in which education is taking place in Malaysia in the 1990s and into the new millennium, is different from that which existed in the previous decade. Malaysia now needs more effective school principals with visions, as creative problem solvers, with a desire for continuous learning, having a passion for quality and be caring. They are expected to be well-equipped with organizational knowledge and skills, a knowledge of change and innovation, the ability to initiate, invent and adapt and a sense of direction, as well as the skills to motivate and provide appropriate leadership styles to meet the challenges and demands of the changing educational environment.

As a result, informed educational leadership has been identified as a critically important dimension for realizing many of the current goals for educational reform. Using the data from this study, we have provided a profile of the major characteristics, aspirations and possibilities for current practitioners and students of educational administration studies. Such findings, if translated into educational leader recruitment criteria would themselves act as primary recruiters for attracting the next and brightest of teachers to leadership positions in schools including women. These findings could also act as sources for the current leaders to understand their roles as leaders better, and not merely task-oriented managers.

Our findings also suggest implications for selection, promotion and training headteachers as well as for research on headteacher professionalism.

Since, the nature of school leadership is undergoing significant changes, headteachers would need new kinds of knowledge, attitudes and skills to perform their work effectively and efficiently. A major finding that emerged from this study was that headteacher behaviors which enhance the successful implementation of school programs can be identified, categorised into skills sets, and integrated into preservice and inservice leadership

development curricula. It is essential that beginning as well as practising headteachers are well-prepared with appropriate and relevant administrative and leadership knowledge, skills and attitudes to face the practical demands and challenges of roles they perform in schools.

Given the importance of leadership role(s) of school headteachers and the number of projected administrative vacancies, it is important to examine the primary resource pool from which aspiring headteachers emerge. This means that the selection and promotion procedures for headteachers in schools need to be re-examined. This study calls for more qualified and experienced personnel to be promoted to occupy headship positions when vacancies exist. Selection and promotion of headteachers based on seniority alone is inadequate. This is because those selected and promoted through seniority may not be coping well with the heavy responsibilities entrusted to them. Competencies in leadership as expressed in this study as well as organizational knowledge and skills should also be included among other appropriate qualities to be considered as criteria for selection and promotion. This is to ensure that the selected headteachers have sound knowledge and skills in educational administration.

In gathering data for this study, it became evident that research into the role of the school headteacher had not been adequately researched. There is still a need to conduct further research on this intriguing and important area to foster better understanding and appreciation of the demands and challenges headteachers encounter within the demanding and challenging domain of the emerging educational environment. It is advisable that further case studies be conducted for other categories of the National Aspiring School Award or this study be expanded to a national study to find out if similar results would emerge. To enable the research to not only draw hitherto untapped and highly fruitful sources of evidence, the adoption of a multiple perspectives approach would be even better for comparing data collected from different perspectives and sources for the purposes of triangulation (Gill & Johnson, 1991). The analysis from multiple perspectives would reveal patterns within the expectations of different groups of 'stakeholders' (parents, students, community et. cetera) who have a tendency to give greater significance to certain leadership characteristics because of their position within the school and its broader community.

Leadership effectiveness as a cultural aspect should be looked into as this aspect is extremely important for a multicultural society like Malaysia. An organization's leader is the creator of the organizational culture (Zhang, 1994; Ibrahim, 1996). The personal characteristics and leadership attributes have a direct influence on various elements of a school culture such as the surroundings, atmosphere, environment and so on.

Traditionally, researchers have spent little time looking at issues of how people become school administrators. Instead, most research has more typically been directed towards an exploration of what practising school administrators do, or at least, are supposed to do, on the job (Daresh, 1994). There is a need perhaps to study the development of process skills which are viewed as more critical than learning about traditional managerial skills in future. This is due to the fact that in the next few years, we will see the arrival of a large number of new individuals who will be assuming their first headship role as many current headteachers throughout Malaysia begin to leave their positions through retirement. While there will be a high turnover rate in the school headteachers soon, there are few clues currently available to guide the development of policies or programmes which might be directed towards the needs and interests of novice administrators.

It is also recommended that longitudinal studies that investigate on effective leadership be conducted. This is because the development of effective training programs for headteachers requires an expanded research base. Not only would this help in designing more effective training programs, but would also help redefine effective conceptions of the role of headteachers. This research could benefit training programs by identifying strategies to encourage lifelong learning and change.

In conclusion, the dynamics of leadership is continuously changing and evolving through time. Effective leaders need to be those individuals who are not only highly adaptable and resilient but those who continue to learn throughout their lives. Otherwise, effectiveness will turn to become ineffectiveness. Perhaps, leaders can learn from the lowly cockroach (Scarnati, 1999). The cockroach has been around for millions of years. It quickly learns, changes and adapts to a myriad of situations and environments. It is unlikely that cockroaches will ever become extinct. The cockroach innately knows that the only constant means of survival in the world is change. If it is incapable of change, it is more unlikely to survive. The moral of this tale is to model the behavior of the cockroach so that you and your organization will never become a dinosaur; it is a tried and true method for avoiding extinction.

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Appendix 1

ANTRIEP Member Institutions

1. Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Bangladesh.
2. Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), Bangladesh.
3. National Academy of Educational Management (NAEM), Bangladesh.
4. Shanghai Institute of Human Resource Development (SIHRD), China.
5. International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), Paris, France.
6. Centre for Multi-Disciplinary Development Research (CMDR), India.
7. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), India.
8. National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), India.
9. State Institute of Educational Management and Training (SIEMAT), Allahabad, India.
10. Balitbang Dikbud Centre for Policy Research, Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia.
11. Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), Ministry of Education Malaysia.
12. National Centre for Educational Development (NCED), Nepal
13. Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID), Tribhuvan University, Nepal.
14. Academy of Educational Planning and Management (AEPAM), Pakistan.
15. Aga Khan Education Service (AKES), Pakistan.
16. Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), Pakistan.
17. Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI), South Korea.
18. National Institute of Education (NIE), Sri Lanka.
19. South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Regional Centre for Educational Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO-INNOTECH), Philippines.

Appendix 2

ANTRIEP Member Institutions Taking Part in This Research

1. Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Bangladesh.
2. National Academy of Educational Management (NAEM), Bangladesh.
3. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), India.
4. State Institute of Educational Management and Training (SIEMAT), Allahabad, India.
5. Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), Ministry of Education Malaysia.
6. Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID), Tribhuvan University, Nepal.
7. Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), Pakistan.
8. National Institute of Education (NIE), Sri Lanka.
9. South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Regional Centre for Educational Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO-INNOTECH), Philippines.

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Appendix 3

Ministry of Education, Malaysia: National Philosophy of Education and Mission Statement.

National Philosophy of Education states that:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society, and the nation at large.

Vision 2020 initiated in the early 1990s is to enable Malaysia to make a quantum leap towards becoming an industrialized nation by the Year 2020. The progression into a knowledge economy meant that the country needed to build a world-class education system dedicated to producing a world-class workforce.

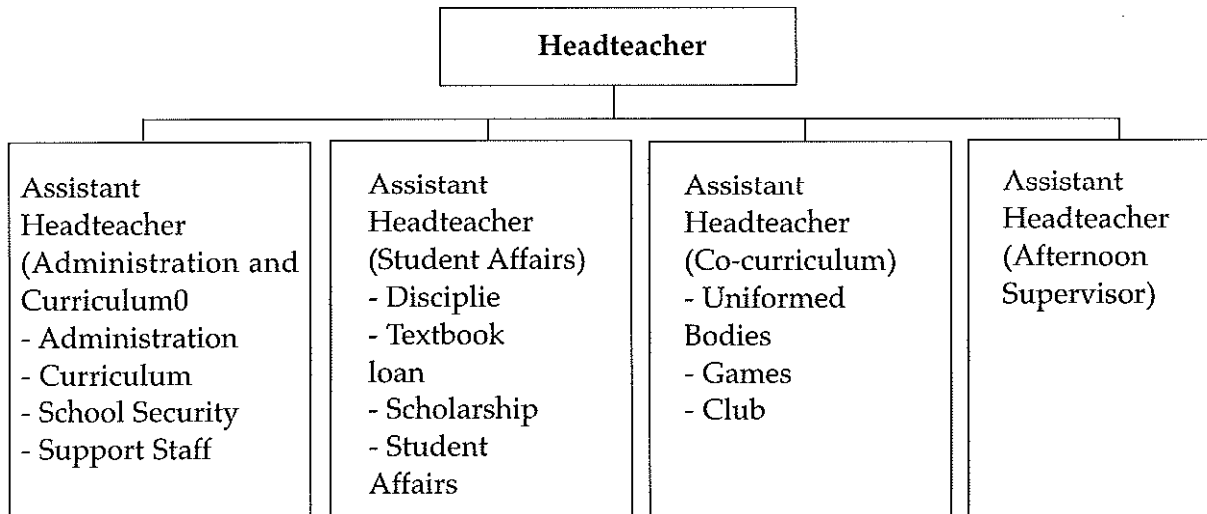
The national aspiration is reflected in the **mission statement of the Ministry of Education**, which is:

“To develop a world class quality education system which realise the full potential of the individual and fulfils the aspiration of the Malaysian nation.”

Source: Educational Planning & Research Division (2001a). *Education in Malaysia: A Journey of Excellence*. Kuala Lumpur: Educational Planning & Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia.

Appendix 4

Internal Management of the Primary School



Source: Adapted from Educational Planning & Research Division (2001a). *Education in Malaysia: A Journey of Excellence*. Kuala Lumpur: Educational Planning & Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia.