LEADERSHIP AS A PRIORITY AREA OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This concept paper aims to present ideas on the developments of leadership program as one of the important areas related to school improvement from the perspective of education systems as an open system. There is interconnectedness among all the sub-systems of the school system including leaders, teachers, parents and communities whom are the educational stakeholders that affect or effected by the school improvement efforts. School leaders frequently act as a bridge between teachers, students, parents, the educational system as a whole and the community at large. Taking a comparative approach, this paper analyses trends identified for leadership preparation programme in the USA, England, Singapore and Malaysia. The comparison is useful to guide Ministry of Education as the policymaker in making direction for school improvement specifically in leadership development program in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Areas of school Improvement, aspiring leaders, leadership and management, leadership preparation and professional development*

INTRODUCTION

The history of school improvement started as a focus to develop professional capacity of teachers. At the beginning, school improvement was seen as an approach that was used at the teacher level in order to develop teachers' characteristics, attitudes and behavior in promoting effective student's learning. In other words, the studies used the teacher effectiveness literature as an instrument for teacher improvement and development (Harris, 2000). Later, school improvement research moved to the level of the classroom and the school because it was recognized that change and improvement should be focused not only on the teacher level, but also the classroom and school level. Researchers and educators realized that improvement should involve all areas of a school system. Nowadays, it is recognized that any school improvement should encompass approaches for system-wide organizational and cultural change, involvement of all levels of school and outside agencies, focus upon classroom and student learning, as well as upon the organizational learning.

PHASES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The existing research literature distinguishes five main phases of school improvement. According to Hopkins and his colleagues, a review of the last two and a half decades of school improvement suggests that the field has evolved in a number of distinctive phases as practitioners and researchers have gained expertise in implementing and studying educational change (Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll, & Mackay, 2014).

The evolution of school improvement field started with focus on small-scale teacher development projects or teacher action researches often targeted to special groups of students, then moves to classroom and school level which supported the idea of school as the unit of change. The next phase is the reinforcement of the idea of school as a unit of change by giving greater attention to transferable comprehensive reform model that addressed both organizational and classroom improvement. The fourth phase of school improvement is largely

concerned with system level changes through collaboration and networking across schools and districts. For the final phase, there is a global spread of the school improvement knowledge base and then the concern on the impact of international benchmarking studies and professional learning community. The table below shows the five phases of school and system improvement and the key features of each phase.

Table 1: The Five Phases of School System Improvement

Phase of school and system improvement	Key feature at each phase
Phase 1 Understanding the organizational culture of the school	• The legacy of the organizational development research • The cultures of the schools and the challenges inherent in change
Phase 2 Action research and research initiatives at the school level	• Teacher research and school review • Research programs such as the Rand Study, Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement (DESSI), Special Strategies and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) International School Improvement project
Phase 3 Managing change and comprehensive approaches to school reform	• Managing centralized policy change • Comprehensive approaches to school reform, such as: Success for All, New American Schools, High Reliability Schools and Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA).
Phase 4 Building capacity for student learning at the local level and the continuing emphasis on leadership	• Professional learning communities and networks • Recognizing the continuing importance and impact of leadership
Phase 5 Towards systemic improvement	• The influence of the knowledge base and the impact of national and international benchmarking studies • Differentiated approaches to school and system reform

(Hopkins et al., 2011)

The evolution shows that school improvement is the field of study affected by the force of globalization, nationalization and localization as experiencing by many other fields in the world. One pressing challenge for the policy makers, researchers and practitioners is to conceptually incorporate all of the areas of school improvement in a framework so that it will benefit the people who need to consider all of the interconnected subsystems. A differentiated approach to school improvement which is based on the context is highly applicable.

Although previous empirical studies on school improvement have, collectively, provided useful explanations on the effects of different areas of school contexts on the quality of school system, however, these effects tend to be discussed in isolation. It is highly depending upon the variables and research design perceived by researchers as essential in establishing the significance of particular aspects of school contexts in improving students' educational outcomes.

Most commonly researched contexts include human resource capacity such as school leadership and teacher (Mincu, 2015; Schleicher, 2012) adoption and implementation of changes in curriculum and instruction (Johnson, 2013), involvement of community in schools (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2013;) organizational culture (Kisumo, Osman, & Ongeti, 2013) and adoption of technology in school system (Tosun & Baris, 2011).

As yet, those previous studies have failed to provide an adequately conceptualized analytical framework which encompasses comprehensive aspects of schools' internal and external contextual conditions. Thus, this paper will explore the extensive areas of school improvement pertaining to the Malaysian education system, specifically, the focus on leadership as the priority areas of school improvement.

The task of developing a high-quality school system in a changing society is far from simple. People have quite different views about how schools should be organized and operated. Governments are pushing change in particular directions without necessarily having

a good understanding of what the results will be. Many educational stakeholders especially school leaders and teachers are feeling overwhelmed by all the changes that seem to be pressing on them. Stakeholders do not appreciate the needs to make changes in school system without giving benefits to the students.

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

School improvement processes have been described as complex, multidimensional, and dependent on the relationship between the school, its community, and its cultural context. Conceptualizations of school improvement, therefore, must go beyond adopting an innovation, changing a structure, copying the practices of successful schools or implementing new management systems. Making lasting improvements in an organization can be very difficult even when people in the organization agree on what the changes should be. People who are afraid of change expect more and more threatening disturbance, condemning it in advance and, do not support the change. Many reform proposals may be mandated without enough thought given to whether they will work in practice (Fullan, 2009). When new ideas or changes introduced and collide with the everyday reality of schooling, it turns out to be unworkable or not worth the trouble.

Based on school improvement literature, there is now an established body of findings from studies conducted in many contexts. A report by the international consulting firm McKinsey and Co. (Mourshed et al., 2010) identifies characteristics of school systems around the world that have demonstrated consistent improvement. One trait that all of the systems studied have in common is that teachers share and work on their practice together by becoming learners of their own teaching. According to (Barber & Mourshed, 2007) , they have identified the three factors behind world class school systems, "getting more talented people to become teachers, developing these teachers into better instructors, and ensuring that these instructors deliver consistently for every child in the system".

Similarly, (Fullan, 2011) identifies collective capacity built through planned collaboration as the hidden aspect that many school systems have neglected to cultivate. In the Stanford Social Innovation Review (Leana, 2011) claims the highly focus on the skilled individual teacher generates undervaluing the benefits that come from teacher collaborations that strengthen skills, competence and a school's overall social capital. She asserts that there is a missing link in school reforms whereby current focus on building teacher human capital which is often associated with paper credential will not yield qualified teaching staffs. Instead, the more important thing is the practices of collaboration and information sharing among teachers are greatly needed for school improvement.

As suggested in the (Education Improvement Commisison, 2000), student performance improves when teachers use curriculum-delivery strategies which specifically address the needs of their students, when the school environment is positive, and when parents are involved in their children's education. In planning improvements, therefore, schools should establish one priority in each of these three areas which are curriculum delivery, school environment, and parental involvement.

There are several significant themes of school improvement, currently under active investigation including school structure and management, classroom organization, school leadership, teacher training and staff development, curriculum and assessment, community involvement, lifelong learning and special provision for students with special educational needs (Yiasemis, 2008). Similarly, Stoll also claims that a large body of school improvement literature highlights generic features such as: a focus on teaching and learning; using data to help guide improvement efforts; high quality professional development, embedded within

professional learning communities; leadership and community involvement; and external support (Stoll, 2009).

Townsend in his article suggested that if we are concerned about improving students to learn in school, then there are three major areas of improvement for educators to think about. The first is having an appropriate curriculum for a rapidly changing world, the second is the pedagogy we use to engage every student in this curriculum and to enable them to build a positive relationship to learning, so that they can become a lifelong learner, and the third is the way in which we assess the level of success (Townsend, 2009). In other words, if we accept the premise that to improve student achievement, changes must be made in curriculum, engagement and relationships, and measuring success, then perhaps the greatest task in is to manage the changes that are necessary in the hearts and minds of teachers, since it is here that true improvement in student learning lies.

One of the largest empirical studies to demonstrate the impact of school conditions and school improvement was the massive seven-year study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. It was summarized in the book Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago about the five essential supports for school improvement; leadership, parent-community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, and ambitious instruction. The framework of essential supports for school improvement stemmed from the project is utilized in this paper. Hence, the five essential supports which were merged from previous studies together with an additional area of Information Communication and Technology (ICT) aspect collectively will be the main framework for this study (Bryk, 2010; Chapman & Mahlck, 2004; Hoque et al., 2012; Abdullah et al., 2013; Sebring et al., 2006; Cheng, 2001). From that framework, the researcher has precisely defined the specific areas of school improvement in Malaysia.

TWELVE AREAS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

After analyzing all the relevant literatures, finally, the twelve areas of school improvement were uncovered. The following table provides the twelve areas of school improvement that will be the focus of the school improvement in Malaysia.

Table 2: The List of School Improvement Areas from the Literature

Areas of SI	Descriptions
Leadership and management	• Selection of headmasters based on merit system rather than seniority • Training program for potential school leaders • Innovation in leadership • Succession planning for school leaders
Community involvement	• Financial and expertise • Committed Parent Teacher Association • Smart partnership • Congeniality • Motivation of parents for students
Quality of teacher	• Outstanding professional value • Global knowledge • Standard for selection of teachers • Performance based career development • Profession of choice for excellent graduates
Teachers' professional development	• Content and pedagogical knowledge • Professional body to certify teachers • Support and initiative to further study • Performance of teachers based on merit • Professional learning community
Support for learning	• Remedial class • One session school • Appreciation for students' success • Active learning

	• Learning from mistakes
School culture	• Design of schools and classrooms
	• Landscape of schools
	• Safety of schools
	• Wellbeing of teachers
	• Wellbeing of students
School facility	• Counseling room
	• Canteen
	• Sick-bay
	• Sports ground
Curriculum relevancy	• Racial integration
	• Knowledge exploration
	• Students' marketability
	• Most-up-to-date curriculum in science and non-science discipline
	• Prepare for the globalization challenges
Instruction	• Reflective dialogue among members
	• Various instructional approaches
	• Student's center and project based learning
	• Develop social interaction
	• Stimulate higher order thinking
Students' assessment	• Multiple assessments
	• School based assessment
	• Formative
	• Quality of exam's questions
	• Quantity of public exam
Learning outcome	• Academic achievement
	• Literacy of civics and moral
	• Co-curriculum accomplishment
	• Multiple languages skill
	• Racial Integration
ICT	• Literacy of ICT among students
	• Literacy of ICT among leaders
	• Literacy of ICT among teachers
	• Hardware and software infrastructure
	• ICT learning materials

Source: Adapted from (Bryk, 2010; Bryk et al., 2010; Chapman & Mahlck, 2004; Hoque et al., 2012; Abdullah et al., 2013; Sebring et al., 2006; Cheng, 2001)

NEED FOR THIS STUDY

Schools are not simple places that many people may see from inside or outside. The unique challenge and opportunity of the school is that; it is the laboratory of our future society. What goes on there should not only prepare students for today, but for their lives in a challenging future society. The challenges posed by globalization, new developments in science and technology and diffusion of information and communication technology in society have impacted tremendously on every aspect of the Malaysian's development including the educational changes. School improvement is generally recognized not as a single activity but rather as a series of overlapping processes involving various factors, people and processes that take place within a collective effort. We have learned much about how to improve individual schools, but successful efforts at systemic improvement have been less common particularly in Malaysian education system.

Thus, the body of knowledge in the school improvement field is an important aspect that should be focus on to a varying extent, so that students are able to meet the challenges of the new landscape and the well-being of the school community such as teachers, parents and other stakeholders. Extensive coverage of school improvement areas will ensure the more efficient improvement efforts can be done. The twelve areas of school improvement emerged from previous studies and supported by reliable literature reviews will be a good framework to establish understanding about school improvement in Malaysia.

The next section will review about leadership as one of the important areas of school improvement. The discussion will delineate and critically evaluate the fundamental characteristics and principles underpinning major leadership program among the countries.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

School leadership and management is a broad concept where individuals to lead does not reside only in one person, but can be disseminated among different people within and beyond the school. School leadership can encompass people occupying various roles and functions such as headmasters, deputy and assistant headmasters, head of panels, leadership teams, school governing boards and school-level staff involved in leadership tasks.

In view of the important roles that school leadership and management can play in creating school improvement, there is a widespread belief that the quality of school leadership and management makes a significant difference to schools and students' outcomes (Barber et al., 2010). The training of future and current school leaders thus is high on the agenda of government in various parts of the world.

Hence, this area is a prominent and critical concern area in school improvement. The acknowledgements are substantiated in the previous literature reviews by scholars at global and local contexts such as (Bush, 2009; Gurr & Huerta, 2013; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Hussein Ahmad, 2013; Ng, 2015; Ronald H. Heck, 2010). Strong leadership and management is an important area for school improvement. However, on its own is not sufficient. It is a binding agent that makes all of other areas of school improvement (such as curriculum, quality of teacher, community involvement, school facility and others) create necessary synergy among the variables to ensure enhancement in quality of teaching and learning activities for the students.

Around the world today, much emphasis is being given to leadership development programs as an element to enhance quality of educational systems. Hallinger and Snidvongs (2008) assert it as the following: "The current focus on school leader preparation reflects the importance societies around the world are placing upon the goal of improving their educational systems. The investment of substantial new resources into leadership preparation and development activities is based upon the belief that school leaders make a difference in both the effectiveness and efficiency of schooling."

CRITIQUE ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

School leaders play a critical role to play in establishing goals and cultivating a healthy school culture including a proactive mindset and enhancing staff motivation and commitment, all of which are necessary for school improvement and promote success for schools. Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid in his article asserts that "the ultimate challenge for school leaders is to ensure that their students and staff become achievers and that everyone develops with dignity, strength and positive self-concept." As for him, it is critical to comprehend the functions of reflective practitioners through life journeys not only in the learning organization (2004). In many countries, the careers of school leaders begin as teachers. Then, they professionally grow and progress to headship via various roles and tasks they have completed. Their professional developments also enhance by various management courses they have attended.

One of the critiques about school leadership and management in Malaysia is the role of school leaders is currently more focused on administrating schools than on leading learning. Many previous research specifically encouraged school leaders to emphasize activities that would enhance or benefit of classroom instruction and learning (Day & Sammons, 2013; Quah,

2011; Sufean Hussin, 2014). Standard competency of Malaysian school leaders also emphasizes domain instructional focusing on teaching and learning activities as one of the domains should be acquired by all school leaders (Rosnarizah Abdul Halim et al., 2009). However, majority of the school leaders are unsuccessful to play their main role as instructional leader in the classroom as most of their times are dedicated general routine administrative works (Maimunah Muda, 2005), which is not directly relate to teaching and learning activities (Azlin Norhaini Mansor, 2006). Still, there are some researchers such as (Jamelaa Bibi Abdullah & Jainabee Md. Kassim, 2011; Quah, 2011) show that school leaders in Malaysia successfully performs their roles as instructional leaders.

Based on the multiple cases study conducted by Azlin Norhaini Mansor (2006), she reported that school leaders are passive, lack of creativity, lack of innovation and easily distracted from focusing to the core objectives of school leadership and management roles. School leaders are also reported lack of openness towards change and spending most of their management time not for instructional purposes such as teaching or instructional supervision. This means that, as managers of organizations with core functions are instruction and learning, school leaders are responsible and accountable for teaching and learning activities. In particular, proponents of instructional leadership suggest that school leaders are the most effective of all potential instructional leaders because they are situated within the school context, unlike other officers in the Ministry of Education.

In many parts of the world, leadership development programmes are no longer an optional. Rather, all new school leaders must obtain certification before they can start their practices, so that teachers, parents, school communities and governments are confident that their schools will be headed by qualified individuals. More importantly, they need to obtain various different skills and competencies require for performing professional roles of school leaders before officially appointed to the headship position. Many countries invest heavily on the preparation of school leaders' programs as school leaders are considered decisive change agents who are able to block or advocate school improvement.

COMPARISON OF LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAMMES

In general, school leadership development programme is seen as a national, regional or state government role, with varied degrees of supervision. Analysis of commonalities and variations of pre-service leadership development programs in high-performing education systems demonstrates that the "overall trajectory of leadership preparation programs has converged across different societies in terms of three interdependent components of leadership programs which are framework, content and operation" (Walker et al., 2013).

Despite the fact that many countries have put into practice formal school leaders preparation programs, Malaysia has commenced the policy relatively recently in the year 2014 (MOE, 2013) through the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders course (NPQEL). Prior to 2014, principalship qualification was not required, and many of senior Malaysian headmasters or principals merely had a general teaching certificate. Many of these school leaders were selected during a time when the sole requirements for principalship were seniority, teaching performance, and approval from the state and district offices. There were cases reported that some school leaders was offered the principalship training two weeks after their appointment as principals (Jamilah Ahmad & Yusof Boon, 2011). In contrast, Huber (2004) and Walker, Bryant & Lee (2013) claimed that in countries such as England, Singapore and the USA, formal programs of principal preparation have been in place for some time and was offered before the school leaders begin their duty.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In the USA, education is a decentralized system whereby schools are under the individual state's responsibility. Universities and program providers play a significant role in the preparation of school leaders. "Most of the states require prospective principals to have a Master's degree and pass a knowledge and case study exam. This process can take up to four years for part-time traditional programs although there are new models emerging that take less time and require more field-based experiences" (Huber, 2004). Some programs require full time field experiences and candidates have to leave their current teaching jobs to fulfill that requirement. Some programs integrate the field experiences with current full-time employment.

For example, the Danforth Educational Leadership Program at the University of Washington has acquired and maintained a reputation for excellence in the preparation of educational leaders for Washington State (Huber, 2004). The Danforth Educational Leadership Program is an intensive, one-year program for educators who are pursuing principal certification. The internship, which is supervised by an experienced mentor principal, is a key component of the programme. During their involvement in the programme, all participants work as interns at least one internship location. Participants are encouraged to serve as intern in two different districts, community settings or school levels in various situations. The internship is the program's applied component and it is closely linked to the content knowledge and skills gained through the learning strand modules and reflective seminars. Participants create a detailed internship plan and keep an internship log throughout the year to track their hours and experiences. Prospect school leaders participate in the actual application of theory through their internships. Through their internships, they engage in the practical application of theory and learn about the problems, opportunities and dilemmas of educational leadership.

Candidates who do not have a Master of Education degree must enroll in extra coursework concurrently to earn the Master's degree, which is mandatory for principal certification in Washington State (Scott, 2018). The programme timetable follows the public school calendar and differs from the typical organizational structure of the university's academic year in order to make the curriculum as relevant and feasible. Case studies, reflection on experience, simulation, role playing and interactive conversations are among the instructional methods employed in the leadership development programme. Problem-based learning, a strategy based on individual instances is well suited to integrate participants into cooperative problem-solving processes. Besides, theoretical perspectives about adult learning have been incorporated in the delivering of the program. The school internship placement is the practical component which is very important in providing concrete leadership tasks that can link back to what they have learned in classroom.

The New York City Leadership Academy executes Aspiring Principals Program (APP) to recruit, prepare, and support aspiring New York City public school leaders. Supovitz (2014) views APP as one of a high profile model of school leadership training in the USA. "APP is a standards-based, 14-month leadership development program that uses problem-based and action-learning methodologies to prepare participants to lead instructional improvement efforts in the city's high-need public schools especially those marked by high poverty and low student achievement" (Corcoran et al., 2009, 2012). APP chooses a diverse and brilliant group of educators, including former assistant principals, teachers, coaches, and guidance counsellors, who are strongly committed to bridging the achievement gap, through a rigorous application process. The program is designed to expose the aspiring leaders to solve real school-based problems through the internship. Mentoring and internships in schools receive substantial time and attention, allowing aspiring leaders to develop and sustain leadership skills and confidence in their professional practice. Each participant collaborates with actual mentors to explore

actual learning concerns, then shares what they've learned with a group of people working on comparable difficulties in their schools.

In general, to hold a principalship position in the USA, principals are required to have a Master's degree, to have some number of years of relevant experience in an educational setting, and to pass a state certification exam (Supovitz, 2014). Leadership development programs in the USA illustrate various choices of programs with the involvement of professional associations, unions and non-governmental agencies as program providers alone or in partnership with universities and as contributors to state leadership frameworks (Huber, 2004; Walker et al., 2013). They have a strong connection to practice due to substantial internships and the use of participatory and application-oriented methodologies like problem-based learning, coaching, shadowing and mentoring. Beyond initial certification, school leaders' continuous development is generally left to school districts and self-motivated, curious individual learners.

SINGAPORE

Singapore has a program known as Leaders in Education Program (LEP) which is conducted by Singaporean MOE in collaboration with National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore. The LEP is a six-month full-time program for specially selected vice-principals and MOE officers to prepare them for school leadership (Pak Tee Ng, 2008). In line with the government policy, the LEP's structure is based on worldwide models that have been updated to promote creativity, innovation, diversity and distributed leadership. To provide a coherent framework to deliver these aims, Singapore, draws on previous work by Sergiovanni and also Gardner to identify key competences and attitudes that are needed to perform the school leader's roles. The participants are selected by the MOE based on their good performance and potential for school leadership, and after passing a series of situational tests and interviews. In the context of Singapore, there is only a single pathway to the headship through the LEP which is executed by NIE. The participants receive full salary during their full-time program at the NIE and their fees are fully borne by the MOE. Such is the commitment by the Singaporean government to develop outstanding school leaders (Huber, 2004) .

ENGLAND

In England, there are three stages to the leadership development program (Huber, 2004). First and foremost, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) is a training programme for future leaders. Second, the HEADLAMP (Headteacher Leadership and Management Program) is designed to meet the needs of newly appointed school leaders. the leadership development model is comprised of three phases (Huber, 2004). Firstly, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) is a preparatory program for aspiring heads. Secondly, the Headteacher Leadership and Management Program (HEADLAMP) addresses the needs of newly appointed school leaders. Finally, the Leadership Program for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) is a programme for school leaders with more than six years of experience. This three-phase of training and development opportunity for school leaders, as well as the material design within each phase, are excellent examples of a multi-phase leadership development programme.

The National College for School Leadership responsible to create a leadership framework and qualification system not just for head teachers, but also for all kinds of other leaders, such as aspiring leaders and middle-level leaders for England's schools. OECD report cited that a set of research-informed leadership competencies that define effective school leadership was developed in England for leadership development framework (Schleicher, 2012). The knowledge and skills necessary to lead are refined into a high quality curriculum to

build the capacity of leaders to competently perform at each level. The curriculum brought together a rich set of blended learning experiences that culminate in an assessment for a nationally accredited certification for each leadership level. According to the OECD report on Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century, England was one of the countries cited as having strong pre service, induction, and in-service systems (Schleicher, 2012). Furthermore, the report noted evidence of greater improvements in England's schools whose leaders had participated in the national leadership development program compared with those who had not.

Learning from the experience of England, Supovitz (2014) pointed out some important lessons for leadership development program for the USA as well as other countries. The lessons are:

"The formalization of multiple leadership positions within schools, going beyond the principal to include senior leaders and middle-level leaders. These positions deepen support for the improvement of teaching and learning while also creating chances to identify potential leaders, career pathways for promising and interested teachers to become leaders, and opportunities for current leaders to continually refine their professional skills;

- The identification of a set of leadership competencies at each of the leadership levels;
- The development of a robust system of learning opportunities to build the capacity of leadership at each level;
- The creation of a nationally recognized qualification for school leadership;
- The stimulation of rich networks of schools and leaders to collaborate on both leadership development and grounded problems of practice; and
- The creation of high profile incentives as well as appropriately targeted pressure to encourage ongoing leadership development and promote its role in the urgency for school improvement" (Supovitz, 2014, p. 6)

MALAYSIA

Recently, Malaysian Education Blueprint has mapped out an agenda which prioritizes the development of the principal (MOE, 2013). It promises that the Ministry will increase its investment in support for principals and will ensure individualized professional development support for every school leader. In Malaysia, the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) is a mandatory government funded program before taking over the leadership post. The concern to prevent bad investment is met by a rigorous application and selection process that has to be gone through successfully by the participants. Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB) is a central institution working out and setting up universal frameworks to develop a preparation program for school leaders in Malaysia. This programme is started prior to applying for a post as a school leader. It has significant professional validity because it is a requirement for such roles. The stringent screening process for participants aims to keep out individuals who are not yet qualified or who do not have the capacity to lead. The government offers full financial support until the course is completed. As a result, individuals who are motivated as well as those with a strong potential to develop educational leadership qualities are chosen.

In Malaysia, National Qualification for Headship (NPQH) was introduced by the Ministry of Education since 1999 to prepare school leaders for the contemporary challenges of managing and leading schools (Gurcharan Singh Bishen Singh, 2009). The Malaysian NPQH originated from the England's NPQH which was introduced in 1997 (IAB, 2013). Since then, the program has undergone various evolutions in content, structure, delivery method and evaluation to suit contemporary demands. This national professional qualification is aiming at aspiring school leaders and was only regarded as the mandatory qualification for all newly

appointed principals in 2014. The NPQH in Malaysia was re-branded to the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) in 2008 and was offered as a specialized school leadership course for teachers aspiring to be school leaders. The stated aim of the NPQEL is to prepare the next-in-line educational leaders to lead the school towards excellence. This course also provides a professional growth plan for educational leaders to develop their leadership strategies. The program employed blended learning approach involving face-to-face learning, e-learning and internship. The central objective of the NPQEL is to ensure that all participants are able to display effective management and leadership practices and apply them to their schools. Module development for NPQEL is mainly based on the national Competency Standards for Malaysian School Leaders or Kompetensi Pemimpin Sekolah Malaysia (KOMPAS) which outlines all the necessary competencies for Malaysian school leaders (IAB, 2013).

KOMPAS is a set of national standards for Malaysian school leaders. The high impact competencies for Malaysian school leaders consists of twenty-six core professional leadership and management practices in 6 key domains (IAB, 2013; Rosnarizah Abdul Halim et al., 2009). This standard is used as a benchmark for school leader's competency rating and training development needs for school leaders. It outlines that the Malaysian school principal must be competent in six dimensions which are; policy and direction; instructional and achievement; managing change and innovation; resources and operation; people and relationship; and personal effectiveness (IAB, 2013).

The purposes of KOMPAS is to strengthen the professional level of the school leaders; to provide guidance and documents that must be understood and followed by school leaders in implementing their duties and responsibilities; to open the minds of the community in understanding the duties and responsibilities of school leaders; to provide training and professional development of school leaders and as a reference or guideline for school leaders to implement self- assessment and reflection for school management. The figure below shows domains and core competencies in KOMPAS.

Figure 1: Malaysian School Leaders' Competencies (IAB, 2013)

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In some countries like, Malaysia, USA and England, the preparatory training for school leaders clearly exceeds a minimal orientation program. In Singapore, for example, policy-makers clearly subscribe to the belief that school leadership is the key to system transformation and put this into practice through well-designed and centrally implemented programme (Harris et al., 2015). Singapore has a distinctive and well-established leadership preparation and development programme that is effective (Ng, 2008)

According to Huber, the aim is to prepare aspiring school leaders before they actually suffer from the practice shock. Additionally, "it is to provide the necessary training and development in advance, since in the first year of headship there is not sufficient time for being away from school taking part in any professional development activities" (Huber, 2004). Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) suggest that excellent leadership programs demonstrate positive relationships between universities, districts, program providers and/or the governments. More specifically, Sanzo et al. (2011) reported that when courses are taught in an integrated fashion involving university faculty and district leadership, participants seemed more capable to connect theory to practice. Many of the above developments reflect a swing towards learning through practice. This development has been reinforced in many countries by the involvement of professional associations, unions and non-governmental agencies as program providers alone or in partnership with universities and/or as contributors to state leadership frameworks (Bryant et al., 2012; Huber, 2004).

As for Malaysia, NPQEL programme which started back in 1999 is the main school leadership development program. Until now, the programme has gone through many changes in terms of recruitment and selection of candidates, content emphasized, instructional strategies employed in the programme, assessment method used and the procedures developed to certify and select school leaders. The changes are adopted to create visionary leaders, learning leaders and leaders who lead systematic changes that are envisaged to impact upon the school excellence through self-professional enhancement and organizational development.

Given that, school leaders should be able to navigate schools in a more challenging and complex situations, Institut Aminuddin Baki as the training provider for the school leaders in Malaysia is now at a right time to create more innovative programmes that focus on developing leadership skills in dealing with the many problems facing urban, rural and suburban schools. The school leaders should have a striking the balance between the practice of education and the theoretical aspect of the programme.

School leadership has evolved well beyond that of a simple administrator to a more multifaceted role. Developing school leaders clearly requires for defining their roles, offering appropriate professional development opportunities throughout their careers, and appreciating their critical role in school improvement. Thus, a review on the development of leadership program in other countries is significant to be part of school improvement direction. Such comparison investigations may result in cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences, revealing information on career trends and leadership growth, preparedness and direction of school improvement.

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