

Problems Faced by Novice Principals in Malaysia: An Exploration Study

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Abstract

This study explores the problems faced by novice principals and their impact on work performance. Based on a qualitative research design, we adopted an exploratory design and applied in-depth interview method through purposive sampling for which eight novice principals were interviewed. The findings indicate that novice principals faced various problems such as isolation, time management difficulty, lack of position-related knowledge, failure to integrate theories with real practices, lack of experience in decision-making and problem solving, and inability to adapt to the culture at the new school. Such situations assert undue pressure on the novice principals to the extent of affecting their performance in the initial stage of their appointment as school administrators. These findings suggest that novice principals should attend the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leader course for exposure to theories of school leadership and management. In addition, the findings further suggest implementing socialisation and induction programs for novice principals prior to their appointment.

Keywords: Novice principal, exploratory study, Malaysia, qualitative design.

1. Introduction

Education in Malaysia does not only have high social accountability to serve the best interests of the public and is geared toward serving as the medium to spur progress towards the development of the nation. Thus, on the shoulders of each principal, he/she carries the trust and responsibility as the manager of education in order to realise various government policies and to ensure that the school plays its role as an effective agent for socialisation and acculturation in applying positive values among students (Muhyiddin, 2010). Simultaneously, people also place very high expectations in schools in the effort to produce knowledgeable, moral, and highly skilled citizens (Donaldson, 2006). These goals can only be achieved when the entire system, beliefs, climate, spirit, and excellent culture are practiced by every school, student, support staff, teacher, and administrator.

To realise these expectations, schools need to be effectively governed by credible and competent principals in order to produce generations of qualified individuals equipped with the knowledge and skills to advance the nation (Muhyiddin, 2010). Accordingly, principals are required to diversify strategies in order to enhance the creativity and innovation aspects of academic excellence, curriculum, discipline, moral, and personality to generate excellent human capital who will inherit the future leadership of the country. Qualified principals would be able to realise the goal of shaping generations who are able to move towards personal, people, and nation excellence (Alimuddin, 2010).

In line with the development and drastic changes in the era of globalisation, the duties and responsibilities of school principals expand and become ever more challenging. According to Rahimah (2002), the position of principal is a very demanding responsibility nowadays and the tasks associated with this position are becoming increasingly complex (Sorenson, 2005) due to changes in the community and the standard of living of people who have various demands and requests (Daresh, 2004). The failures and successes of a school are often associated with the factors such as whether

the school is managed or governed well or vice versa (Sergiovanni, 1991; Simieou *et al.*, 2010). In other words, effective leadership of the principal has a significant impact on the effectiveness and success of a school (Hussein, 2008; Weinstein *et al.*, 2009). Effective schools are produced from effective leaders, as stated by Davis (2007), "great schools have great principals" and echoed by Buck (2009), "to make a great school, you need a great principal."

1.1 Background of the Problems

School excellence is closely related to the capacity and quality of principals and headmasters. Principals are regarded as the key individuals who can transform ineffective schools into more effective schools (Edmonds, 1979). At present, the roles of the principal are changing in accordance with the demands and changes of the world, much of which are due to the pressure of globalisation and the rapid progress in the field of education (Shariffah Sebran Jamila & Mohammed Sani, 2010). In view of such rapid developments, novice principals must be willing to prepare themselves by establishing their qualities in terms of skills that are appropriate to face the changes and challenges of an increasingly complex field of education in this 21st century.

Shariffah Sebran Jamila and Mohammed Sani (2010) and Cheung and Walker (2006) also found that many novice principals face many challenges when first appointed. The previous studies by Lashway (2003), Blackman & Fenwick (2000), Lovely (2004), Villani (2006), and Yirci & Kocabas (2010) found that most novice principals faced many difficulties in the initial stage of their services. They often feel alone in addition to shouldering heavy workloads and responsibilities. In the early years of their appointment, novice principals are usually left alone and must either 'sink' or 'swim' without being given a 'safety jacket' (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2003). Such conditions cause novice principals to feel isolated from the school members, especially when their subordinates do not provide any guidance or support (Lashway, 2003). In addition, novice principals do not have peers in schools to serve as a reference point unlike novice teachers who have easy access to peers who can help them overcome problems. Novice head administrators often feel alone and are given heavy workloads as well as responsibilities (Saunders, 2008). According to Yirci & Kocabas (2010), although the novice principals are already prepared and cannot wait to perform their duties as principals, they nevertheless still feel the pressure and are nervous and hesitant to perform their tasks in the new school environment. They are also likely to face problems in managing the school's financial matters, staff, students, community, and generally have problems in implementing their responsibilities. In addition, they face the dilemma of trying to implement the directives from the Ministry of Education and to meet the needs of parents and the community (Azlin Norhaini & Roselan, 2007).

In this sense, Bullock, James and Jamieson (1995) stated that novice principals who recently resigned from their positions are usually hesitant and indecisive when faced with making decisions. They try to avoid conflict, and have problems connecting and communicating with staff, community, and other stakeholders. These outcomes were supported by Cheng (1996). According to Cheng (1996), most novice principals feel less confident in making decisions and ultimately allow themselves to make mistakes when handling any crisis that may arise. According to Azlin Norhaini and Roselan (2007), newly appointed novice principals normally face problems when dealing with crisis due to a lack of experience and lack of formal training in management skills, particularly in terms of dealing with crisis. Accordingly, Cheng (1996) has put forward three important elements that should be acquired by every novice principal, namely skills, knowledge, and experience, so that they will feel more confident to manage schools, especially when dealing with any kind of crisis.

Nevertheless, high quality principals will help create outstanding schools. Therefore, as the major catalyst for school excellence, novice principals should be given early exposure to various approaches and improvement programs directly through self and career development programs (Lee, 2008). In this way, the professionalism of novice principals can be increased beginning from the initial stage when they are newly appointed and placed in their new schools for the first time. The development programs that use mentoring approach aimed to guide novice principals have already been implemented in developed countries. These practices should be implemented in Malaysia in order to enhance professionalism in education. Furthermore, the dynamic and global nature of education indeed requires principals who are always willing to improve the standards and quality of education.

1.2 Research Questions

The focus of this study is to explore the problems faced by novice principals in the field of school leadership and management.

- i. What are the problems faced by novice principals newly appointed as principals for secondary schools?

- ii. To what extent do these problems affect their performance as principals?

2. Methodology

2.1 Design

This study adopts an exploratory design by using a qualitative approach through interviews to obtain detailed information from the research participants.

2.2 Participants

We used purposive sampling to select the participants, which means that the samples were selected for specific purposes. Our employment of purposive sampling is based on the belief that the selected samples could provide the required information. The selection of participants for the study consisted of novice principals who had recently served (one to three years) and used to attend mentoring programs, as they are best suited to provide the information necessary for an accurate overview of the issues that need to be studied (Merriam, 2001). Accordingly, eight novice principals were interviewed.

2.3 Instruments

This study used a semi-structured interview because of its suitability to explore and explain the factors and sub-factors in the study (Schensul *et al.*, 1999). This involved personal interviews where the researcher and the participants interacted with each other. This method was used to facilitate the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews through purposive sampling in order to obtain more information and an accurate overview of the study from the participants (Merriam, 2001). The protocol of the semi-structured interview was drafted in advance as a guide so that the proposed items form the subject of focus. However, the order of questions, how the questions are posed, and the forms of the questions can vary depending on the reactions or responses given by the research subjects (Robson, 2002). Pilot study protocol interviews were conducted with the help of three novice principals and are not involved in this research. The pilot study was conducted to determine the validity and reliability and to determine the best method of administering the instrument, known samples, and methods of analysis.

2.4 Analysis Data

The qualitative data analysis and interviews involved several levels, namely transcription, data organisation, data conditioning, coding, categories of data, and the creation of themes and patterns.

3. Findings

Based on the results from interviews with the participants of the principalship mentoring program, the researchers found that the novice principals faced several similar problems, namely isolation, difficult to manage time, lack of principalship knowledge, inability to integrate between theories (knowledge) with actual situations, and difficulty to adapt to the management culture and administration in the new schools. These situations are critical to the novice principals who lack experience in the field of school management and leadership. The problems faced by the novice principals were discussed in accordance with the main themes of isolation, difficulty managing time, lack of knowledge principalship, failure to integrate between theory (knowledge) with the actual situation in the school, inability to adapt to a new culture in a new school, and lack of experience in decision making and problem solving.

3.1 Isolation

From the interview, novice principals admitted that they often feel alone when managing and leading schools, as they have no friends to talk to, coupled with a heavy workload and many responsibilities.

"... initially I felt isolated at the new school. The school is located in a remote area, far from the previous school (in the city) and the students are also different. Furthermore, I knew no colleagues and the school culture is very different. I worked on my own at first..."

This leads to a sense of alienation among novice principals who take a long time to adapt to the culture of the school which exerts additional pressure on them.

3.2 Difficulty of Managing Time

Based on the results of the interviews, it appears that this problem is due to the effect of heavy workloads such as managing curriculum activities, managing offices, managing co-curricular activities, attending departmental meetings, and at the same time they have to carry out directives from the top management. Such problems occur because they do not have the skills and experience for effective time management.

"...the problem that I am facing is difficulty to manage time. When I came here, I have to manage my own time, staying alone, a lot of work that I have to take care of myself, I feel isolated for being away from my family and then I have to adapt to the new culture. Furthermore, as a novice principal, I lack knowledge in principalship. As a result, it is difficult for me to make decisions when I face problems."

Heavy workload, administrative tasks, as well as lack of experience in leading and managing schools make it difficult for novice principals to effectively manage time. This somewhat affected the quality of their leadership and management in the early years of their appointment as school principals.

3.3 Lack of Principalship Knowledge

The next problem is the lack of principalship knowledge such as management of an organisation, human resources, and financial management. All of the interviewed novice principals claimed that they had never participated in any principalship program whether organised by the Aminuddin Baki Institute or school management courses organised by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia prior to their appointment as principals.

"...as a novice principal, I still lack principalship knowledge and I have never attended any course on principalship. This has caused me difficulty when making decisions when faced with difficult problems. Although I have graduated with management education (Master), the difference between the theories and practice is significant. It is difficult for me to manage and administer the school without knowledge."

The problem of lack of principalship knowledge has led to distress, fear, and guilt among novice principals because it is assumed they are less competent to administer the school.

3.4 Fail to Integrate between Theories (Knowledge) with Practical

The next challenge faced by the novice principals is that they are not able to integrate theories and practice when leading the schools. This situation occurs due to cultural factors and different school systems. This anger was expressed by one of the novice principals during the interview:

"...my challenge is how to apply the theories that we learned such as the Theory of Leadership and Management for us to practice in real situations. Are all these theories appropriate or is there a theory that is suitable for our use? Sometimes, I had to do trial and error. It was a headache in the first place. The theory says something like this, but when I tried to implement it, various constraints and problems arise."

3.5 Inability to Adapt with a New Culture in a New School

The interviews with the novice principals also found that they faced the problem of adapting with the culture in the new schools. This problem is caused by the differences in background factors of the students, school location, work culture, environment, individuals, and the different personalities. One of the complaints or expressions pertaining to this problem is as follows:

"...I am also having the problem of managing this school. My previous school was in a remote area and most of the students are farmers' children. Well, now the school that I am managing is in the city. With different students, the community is also different and the factor that causes most problems is the different management system. This is because this school is a mission school and there is a Governing Board. It was indeed quite a headache to manage the school initially."

3.6 Lack of Experience in Decision Making and Problem Solving

The results of the interviews also found that the novice principals also felt uncomfortable when dealing with certain situations that require them to make decisions and to solve problems associated with the staff, students, community, and the stakeholders. One of the novice principals complained:

"...I am having the problem of cultivating the subordinates with the right work culture. Not all school staff can accept me as the novice principal. Due to the lack of experience and the need to make important decisions, this factor has become a problem for me."

This situation becomes more serious when the novice principal is inexperienced in terms of managing financial matters, school infrastructure, and planning of personality development programs, as well as the excellence of the students. Based on the above findings, it can be concluded that among the major problems faced by the novice principals is a sense of isolation, difficulty in managing time, lack of principalship knowledge, failure to integrate theory with the actual situation in schools, failure to adapt with the culture in new schools, and the difficulty to make decisions and solve problems during the initial stage of administering the schools.

3.7 Impacts of the Problems of Novice Principals

The findings of this study showed that most of the novice principals expressed a sense of isolation, difficulty in managing time, lack of principalship knowledge, and their failure to adapt to the culture in new schools have exerted additional pressures on them. Such situations have also affected the performance of the administration in the initial stage of their services. The evidence is visible from the analysis of the interview results as follows:

"...to some extent, it has affected my work performance. This is because, at the initial stage of being the school leader, many issues needed to be referred to others in order to ensure that correct decisions are made."

"...so, when all problems arise, I feel that my work performance is slightly affected."

"... to some extent the problems have affected my work performance and I have tried to overcome them. It takes some time to overcome them as well as possible."

In summary, the problems faced by the novice principals have somewhat affected their performance in the initial stage of their school administration. In addition, it was also found that the novice principals were also under a lot of stress when managing and administering the schools, especially when they were required to manage financial and human resources. The failure to adapt to the culture in the new school also caused them to suffer from cultural shocks. This ultimately led to their dilemma to decide whether they need to carry out the directives from the Ministry of Education or they should meet the requirements of the parents and the community.

4. Discussion

The problem of isolation is the major problem faced by the novice principals. On average, they faced the problem of isolation in the initial stage after reporting for duty at the new school. This could be due to that some of them are probably not ready to assume the position of principal. In addition, they also faced the problem of heavy workload, lack of interaction with staff, and not having attended an orientation program as principals. Indirectly, the findings of this study are very consistent with the findings of previous studies that showed that most novice principals faced many difficulties in the initial stage of their services as principals. The previous study by Villani (2006) found that novice principals often felt alone because they are not ready to take the position as instructional leaders. The situation is exacerbated by the attitude of some teachers who consider the principals as the boss, which resulted in communication gaps between them and the novice principals. It is also similar with the previous study conducted by Bloom Barrett and Strong (2003), who also found that newly appointed principals also face problems of adapting with their colleagues because much of the time is focused on administrative and office management tasks. However, some of the interviewed novice principals denied they suffered from the problem of isolation. This situation could be due to the fact that they were placed in the new schools that were closer to their previous schools and also served in the same area, had long held the position of senior assistant at the same school or nearby schools, had held the position of temporary principal, and possibly they also used the approach of

building good relationships with the school community since the beginning.

The second problem faced by the novice principals is the problem of lack of principalship knowledge especially in the areas of financial management, office management, instructional management, human resources, and student affairs. Among the factors that can be identified with regard to this issue is that most newly appointed novice principals are inexperienced and have never attended principalship courses such as NPQEL (National Professional Qualification for Educational Leader), which is organised by Aminuddin Baki Institute, Ministry of Education. This situation is likely to originate from the weakness of the principal appointment system that has long been implemented based on the seniority factor regardless of the principalship knowledge or their knowledge in the field of school leadership. In addition, some who were appointed had never been given any formal training in the field of school management (Azlin Norhaini & Roselan, 2007). The findings of this study are indeed consistent with the facts presented by Zaiton (2010). Zaiton (2010) stated that the problem of management in planning is the key issue of novice and newly appointed principals. Consequently, the novice principals are under a lot of pressure because they are having problems of managing financial matters, which are due to lack of school management skills (Daersh & Male, 2001). The findings of this study are able to help strengthen the findings of previous studies conducted by Slater, Garcia and Gorosave (2008). Slater *et al.* (2008) found that novice principals also suffer from the stress caused by lack of mastery in paperwork preparation skills and the skills of making the strategic planning of the schools, which caused them additional stress.

The third problem faced by the novice principals is that they are having difficulties managing their time. This situation occurs because most of them are indeed inefficient in managing time properly. This is due to lack of experience and they are still looking for the appropriate strategy to manage the school. In addition, a heavy workload has also caused a work-home imbalance. This time constraint affects their role to carry out their duties as instructional leaders in order to implement the observations of the teachers and monitoring students' learning and teaching in schools. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of previous studies conducted by Quong (2006) and Cowie & Crawford (2008). They stated that a heavy workload caused novice principals to fail to balance the time for principalship duties such as managing school finances, managing curriculum, managing human resources, and attending meetings at the District Education Office and also at the State Education Department. This has caused some of the novice principals to feel somewhat stressed, and they failed to play active roles as instructional leaders in schools.

Qualitatively, most of the novice principals also faced the problem of inability to integrate between theories and practice when administering the schools. This is because they are less exposed to the actual practice of the school management before being appointed as the real principals. This condition pressures them in the effort to adjust their understanding on the theories of leadership that they had learned previously either through reading management books or the knowledge learned at the university with the actual situations on school management. Although there are efforts from the novice principals to balance between theories and actual practice, however, there was the problem of time constraint to practice these theories (Dunning, 2000; Villani, 2006; Weingartner, 2009). In this case, Chan (2003) stated that the inefficiency or ineffectiveness of the principals or the headmasters in the initial stage after their appointment is due to the lack of experience as a senior assistant, the absence of comprehensive professional training, and the absence of a process to take over those duties effectively. Gettys (2007) also stated that novice principals also require training, knowledge, and skills to adapt to their changing environment and to help them to develop leadership skills in school. Many previous researchers suggested that novice principals should be provided with professional training that is particularly related to the exposure of the differences between theories and actual practices in schools because these efforts are able to help prospective principals before being appointed as real principals (Daersh, 2004; Barnett, 2005).

Subsequently, the novice principals are also found to have problems in decision-making and problem solving, which stemmed from the lack of experience and not having been given formal training in school management and leadership skills, particularly in terms of dealing with crises. The novice principals also felt uncomfortable when confronted with situations that require them to make decisions to solve the problems associated with staff, students, community, and stakeholders. This condition can become more serious due to lack of experience. At the same time, the findings of this study support the findings from Norashimah (2008), Azlin Norhaini & Roselan (2007), and Villani (2006). According to Norashimah (2008), Azlin Norhaini & Roselan (2007), and Villani (2006), the problems of decision-making and problem solving occurred due to the lack of experience of novice principals and they have never been given formal training in school management and leadership. In addition, they are also found to lack confidence in decision-making, which is probably could be due to the fear of making mistakes when dealing with crisis.

The final problem faced by the novice principals is that they are unable to adapt to the culture in new schools. This situation arises from their failure to assimilate themselves quickly into the culture and the environment of the new schools. This is because every school should have cultural differences in terms of the background of the students, school location, work culture, environment, individuals, and different personalities. In addition, some novice principals have situations in

which they are still overshadowed by the styles and works of the previous principals when they are leading the schools, which make it difficult to undertake the school management and leadership. The findings of this study proved to be consistent with the statement. Rooney (2000) stated that the first few months of leading the school are critical because of a clash between perceptions of the principals with the reality that happens in school. In this case, Weindling & Dimmock (2006) and Walker & Qian (2006) also agreed with the statement and they said that most novice principals experience cultural shocks during the transition to carry out duties as principals at the new schools. Accordingly, Norashimah (2008) suggested that induction and mentoring programs should be extended as a useful medium of sharing the experience during the process of socialisation of the novice principals at the new schools.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study clearly showed that many novice principals face a dilemma and are worried over their duties as principals. As the principals of schools, they need to have the knowledge and expertise to manage the organisation, as well as having great character, be energetic, proactive, assertive, enthusiastic, and accountable. We recommend that every novice principal should be given exposure to principalship knowledge before they are appointed as principals. Prospective principals are required to attend NPQEL courses in order to obtain exposure to theories of school leadership and management training as enforced in the principal appointment system in Singapore and the United Kingdom.

In addition, socialisation and induction programs for novice principals should also be implemented. Given the findings, were are convinced novice principals who are newly appointed need hands-on guidance in the field of management and education leadership in schools from senior principals. This exercise will not only help them improve their knowledge and skills in management and leadership, but also help them to adapt to heavy and challenging responsibilities as the number one leader in schools.

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