

## Principal's Coalition Building and Personal Traits Brings Success to a Struggling School in Malaysia

Mohammad Noman, Rosna Awang Hashim, and Sarimah Shaik-Abdullah  
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia

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*This paper presents findings from a single site case study of a school in a rural part of Malaysia. Based on data collected through semi-structured interviews of the principal, teachers, students and parents, and observations, document scanning and field notes, the study attempts to identify the context under which the school operates, the core practices of the school principal and the enactment of these core practices. The data analysis was carried out through data reduction resulting in initial themes which were further refined several times until consensus was achieved. The themes were then discussed under the light of theories resulting in the final categories. The findings reveal that personal traits of the principal and her strength of building strong coalitions enabled her to successfully meet her contextual challenges. In conclusion, we argue that leadership practices are multidimensional and although successful principals draw from the similar repertoire of core practices, they enact these core practices in response to their own unique contexts to bring success. The findings would provide important insights for principals and future researchers who might be interested in conducting similar studies to enrich the successful school leadership literature from Malaysian context. Keywords: Case Study, Successful Principal, Malaysia, School Leadership, Successful School*

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The study of successful school leadership practices of school principals has gained momentum during the last 15 years. The efforts of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, & Harris, 2006), which began investigating the context-based practices of successful school principals in several countries around the world in 2001, has so far conducted a number of pathbreaking studies and has produced large number of reports, books, book chapters, special issues of journals, and reports. To this date, there are active researchers in over 20 countries who have produced more than 100 case studies, numerous research papers, seven special journal issues, chapters in books and four complete books (Gurr, 2015). Apart from ISSPP, several other researchers have also conducted similar studies, adding to the evergrowing literature on the subject (e.g., Okoko, Scott, & Scott, 2015; Raihani, 2008).

Although there is a spurt in the studies being conducted in the field of educational leadership, a large majority of such studies are dominated by English-speaking western scholars and researchers (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger, 2011). ISSPP studies are not an exception to this fact. In a systematic review of published articles on educational leadership in eight top journals between 1995 and 2012, Hallinger and Chen (2015) concluded that Asia is significantly behind its peers in such studies and is in the early stages of development since only 13% of the articles emanate from this region. Among the already sparse studies, Malaysia, for some reasons, has yet to take off with studies in this field. The Malaysian government is in the midst of implementing its ambitious plan of revamping the Malaysian education system in order to transform it into a regional hub of education and is emphasizing the crucial role of school leaders in improving the quality of education in its schools (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012).

During the past decade, there have been a spate of studies on the role of educational leaders in school improvement, however a majority of these studies focus on studying the leadership style of the principals (e.g., Lai, Luen, Chye, & Ling, 2015; Tajasom & Ariffin Ahmad, 2011) or their practices in the light of established educational leadership models like transformational leadership (e.g., Ghavifekr, Sok Hoon, Ling, & Ching, 2014; Ling & Ibrahim, 2013), distributed leadership (e.g., Harris, 2013; Jones, Adams, Tan, & Harris, 2015) or instructional leadership (e.g., Ail, Taib, Hazlina, Wan Aida, & Nawawi, 2015; Sim, 2011). There are substantial recent empirical studies that indicate significant indirect influence of school leadership on school effectiveness and success. Teacher quality has the greatest direct effect on student motivation and achievement among all the school-related factors, however the indirect effect of school leadership is also paramount (Fullan, 2001; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Hallinger and Heck, in their large-scale reviews of the effects of leadership on academic achievement conclude that while leadership directly improves 5 to 7 percent of academic achievement in schools, it is significantly higher if all school-level variables are considered (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b, 1998).

Malaysia is a diverse country consisting of people with different religion, race, ethnicity, and linguistic background (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016). As a result, schools in Malaysia are not all the same in terms of their population mix; differing significantly from one place to the other. If we add socio-economic background of the student population and the geographical location of the school, the diversity among schools becomes even more complex. Empirical evidences emanating from studies conducted on leadership practices during the last 2 decades have pointed towards apparent weaknesses in theoretical models of educational leadership that have completely ignored the influence contextual settings (Dimmock, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1996a; Hofstede, 2001; Walker & Dimmock, 2002). According to Leithwood et al., (2004), "There is a rich body of evidence about the relevance to leaders of such features of organizational context as geographic location (urban, suburban, rural), level of schooling (elementary, secondary), and both school and district size" (p. 10).

Thus, it becomes apparent that school principals in Malaysian schools need to adapt their practices according to their own school context to be successful. While empirical studies are being conducted in several countries around the world, there has been a scarcity of such studies in Malaysian context which necessitates the need for similar studies to be carried out in Malaysian context as well.

This case study is an attempt to provide an indepth analysis of the context-based leadership practices of a successful school principal in a rural school in Malaysia. It is expected that the findings expand the existing literature and provide insights from Malaysian perspectives on the successful practices of school principals. School principals will benefit from the insights provided by these findings and will be encouraged to be consciously aware of their immediate contexts and make adjustments to the enactment of their practices for effectiveness. This study may also be able to provide important insights to various school leadership programmes which might include elements of contextual awareness for practices in their programmes.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual model that frames this study begins with the conceptualization of "School Leadership" that is derived from a number of empirical studies. This will be followed by a discussion focused on how recent authors have moved from studying the styles of leadership based upon established leadership models to studying the context-based

practices of successful school principals. In the end we will discuss how successful practices of a school principal were modelled in this study.

The literature on school leadership is an astounding collection of a large array of models and theories that claim success for a school. Some of the widely used models in research are instructional leadership, transformational leadership, moral leadership, servant leadership, cultural leadership, and primal leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Although some of these are empirically tested theories, a vast majority of these are simply a cacophony of fancy slogans; prominent among them being “instructional leadership” which is also called as “learning-centered leadership” (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 7). This state of confusion has been created due to the fact that most of these theories and models do not give due importance to the actual practices of school leaders, all the while focussing on the styles, beliefs, skills, and knowledge of the school leaders which purportedly would draw appropriate positive results. However, contrary to this notion, there is rich empirical evidence that demonstrate that none of the leadership theories are universal; they might work in one context but might not in another (Bush, 2007; Dimmock, 2002; Gronn & Ribbins, 1996; Hofstede, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2004; Walker & Dimmock, 2002)

In this study, we conceptualise school leadership as a set of practices that are contextual in nature. While a majority of school leadership studies focus on a particular leadership style, there is an emerging rich body of recent studies which indicate that successful school leaders do not necessarily focus on one particular leadership model or style; instead they possess a set of core practices that are enacted according to their immediate contextual environment which is unique in nature (Day & Gurr, 2014; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Moos, Johansson, & Day, 2011; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011). Leithwood et al., (2006), in a meta-analysis of literature on successful school leadership identified a set of four core practices that were common: (a) setting directions, (b) developing people, (c) redesigning the organization, and (d) managing the instructional (teaching and learning) program. They claim that “core practices are not all that people providing leadership in schools do. But they are especially critical practices known to have significant influence on organizational goals” (p. 19). These studies have initiated a debate among scholars on the efficacy of moving beyond a “cause-and-effect” approach to the study of the effects of leadership on learning as evident in a majority of studies (Parkes & Thomas, 2006), towards a more multidimensional study of enactment of core practices in a school’s own unique contextual environment.

Proponents of successful school leadership practices, most notably led by Professor Christopher Day of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) suggest that the core leadership practices, as identified by Leithwood et al., (2006), themselves do not bring success to a school but it is the context-based enactment of these practices that bring in the desired outcomes (Gurr, 2009; Day, 2007; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Day, Leithwood, & Sammons, 2008; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Considering this, we examine the context-based leadership practices of a successful school principal in Malaysia through data drawn from multiple sources, including the principal; this provides the conceptual rationale behind the study’s central construct of successful school leadership practices.

## **Methodology**

### **The Role of Researchers**

This study emanates from the constructivist belief of the researchers that learners construct knowledge out of their own personal experiences. Proponents of constructivist ideas claim that truth is relative and is dependent upon the perspective of the researcher (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). This paradigm “recognizes the importance of the

subjective human creation of meaning, but doesn't reject outright some notion of objectivity" (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 10). The meanings are constructed by individuals; hence, researchers construct the realities of the phenomenon they experience and also "their interpretation of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 187). An important advantage of constructivism, which espouses the social construction of reality (Searle, 1995), is the close proximity between the participants and the researcher, which enables the participants to freely describe their views and opinions through their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) which facilitates a better understanding of the phenomenon for the researcher (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993).

Creswell (2003, 2013) believes that while conducting a qualitative research, the researcher "builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (p. 15). Qualitative researchers have been considered to be the most important research instrument by several scholars (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). The primary researcher of this study has a Master's degree in Educational Administration and has been working as a school principal for more than 15 years in three different schools in two countries. He also has worked in two other schools as a teacher for several years. Thus, through his own experience and through his interactions with several school principals during his career, he has experienced that there is no definite model or method for school leaders to be successful. What works in one context may not work in the other or what works with one leader may not work for the other. The second researcher is a Professor of Educational Psychology and has served in educational leadership positions for more than 2 decades. She is a teacher trainer and has mentored numerous educators aspiring to be school leaders. The third researcher has a Ph.D. in Education, is an expert in qualitative research and an experienced teacher educator. The common interest all three researchers hold for conducting this study is driven by their desire to identify how successful principals in Malaysia enact their leadership practices in response to their own contexts.

In recent times, qualitative research methods have shown "an almost unprecedented popularity and vitality" and have become "indisputably prominent, if not pre-eminent" (Bennett & Elman, 2010, p. 499). The ontological assumption for this study is that successful principals align their leadership practices with their own immediate contexts, which would make it difficult to identify the practices quantitatively. Since the basic objective of this study was to understand *what* and *how* aspects of the leadership practices of a successful school principal, a qualitative study was best suited for the purpose. Case study is used for the study of a contextualized, phenomenon within a specified boundary (Yin, 1994). Merriam (1988) states that a bounded system in education can be "a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group" (p. 13). Thus, studying the practices of the principal in her natural environments would be able to provide a clear insight of her practices. According to Creswell (1998), a case study allows a researcher to conduct an in-depth study of a bounded system which uses the researcher as a research instrument. Thus, for this study, qualitative case study methods were employed to investigate the practices of a successful school principal in a school located in a rural area of Northern Malaysia. The study sought to seek answers to the following primary question:

1. How does the successful principal enact her core practices in response to her own unique context?

Since the primary question was dependent upon identifying the context and the core practices as well, the study further sought to answer the following two additional questions:

2. What are the contexts under which the successful principal operates?
3. What are the core practices of the successful principal?

### **Data Collection**

Before this study was undertaken, written permission was sought from the Education Planning and Research Division (EPRD), which is a unit of Ministry of Education, Malaysia, that approves all research work carried out in Malaysian educational institutions. The successful principal for this study was selected based upon purposive sampling. An initial list of successful principals was provided by local education office which was further refined on the basis of the criteria set for this study which was as follows:

1. The school has shown significant, tangible progress under the leadership of the current principal and has been recommended by the local education office for the study.
2. The school meets the criteria of success, as stipulated by the Ministry of Education guidelines and has moved up by at least one school band (Malaysian public schools are allocated a quality band based upon several academic and non-academic factors set by the Ministry of education. The most successful schools are in Band 1 while the least success schools are Band 7 schools).
3. The principal has worked for at least 3 years in the school.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Mertens (1998) suggests that ethical issues are “an integral part of the research planning and implementation process, not viewed as an afterthought or a burden” (p. 23). Although it is difficult to predict all the potential ethical issues that may arise during a qualitative study, steps were taken to ensure that the suggestions of an “informant’s rights” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 90) and “do no harm” (Tisdale, 2004, p. 30) were always a primary consideration of the researchers throughout the process. Upon approval of the research proposal, the EPRD instructed the local education office to cooperate with the researchers. The local education office assisted in the site selection and gave written instructions to the school principal for cooperation. This was the time when the researchers made first contact with the school principal. The school principal was very cooperative and provided all the inputs to enable the researchers to select the respondents. The primary criteria for selecting the respondents were based upon the condition that they must have been at the school for at least 3 years. Written consent was obtained from the teachers and the parents who were given an explanation of the nature of the study, ensured confidentiality, and given the assurance that they could pull out of the study at any point of time if they wish so. The students were permitted by the school principal who had been given permission by their respective parents. A pseudonym was used instead of the real name of the school and the participants were not identified during the writing process with their names.

The case study took a little under 6 months to complete. The investigation was carried out through data collected from a variety of sources, utilizing a protocol that was adapted for this study from the one used by researchers for conducting numerous similar studies for ISSPP. Use of multiple data sources is not only an important hallmark of a case study but also provides data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). A total of 11 initial open ended interviews were conducted which were recorded and later transcribed. The participants were

3 teachers, 3 parents, 3 students, and 1 administrator who was also a part of the school leadership team and the principal herself. Appointments were fixed with each of the respondents so that they had ample time to respond to the questions. A typical interview lasted between 25 to 45 minutes, until no new information on the practices of the principal was forthcoming which has been termed in literature as data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Morse, 1994, 1995, 2007). The interview with the principal lasted for 60 minutes. The central part of an interview is asking questions (Punch, 2011, p. 151), however interviews are “social acts, intersubjective and thereby often unpredictable” (Franklin, 2012, p. 191). Through the social interactions, researchers are able to follow up on issues at a later stage “without imposing any prior categorisation which might limit the field of enquiry” (Punch, 2011, p. 147). Thus, for this study, critical feedback from the participants over the emerging interpretations was sought at every step to ensure that the meaning was co-constructed. Data analysis began as soon as the interviews were transcribed and the respondents were contacted for further clarifications if required. Each of these participants was at the school for at least 3 years and had witnessed the school moving up the rankings under the current principal, based upon the success criteria set by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Several observations and document scanning was also carried out in order to substantiate the claims made by the principal and other respondents. For example, the principal claimed that upon her arrival the school hardly had any displays or decorative plants to make the school environment attractive, and that she made sure that within a short time, the school building was repainted, flowers were planted and new boards were installed around the school which depicted important messages, the school’s vision and mission, notices, and announcements. The claims of the principal were also substantiated by other respondents which were confirmed by the researcher’s own observations. Similarly, the claims regarding the academic achievement, school functions, and co-curricular activities were substantiated by scanning the relevant documents.

### **Data Analysis**

The researchers individually read and reread the transcripts for familiarization. This was followed by a line-by-line coding of data individually. Patton (1990) opines that “the analysis of the empirical data aims to make sense of the massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (p. 377). Coding is an iterative cycle of induction and deduction which compares the findings with new results and assists in further data collection. Strauss and Corbin (1998) claim that the emerging results at the initial stages of data collection enable researchers to answer, “What are the actors’ definitions and meaning of these phenomena or situations?” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 77). Thus, the notes of observations and document scanning and interview transcripts were analyzed concurrently through data reduction which led to the emergence of initial themes (Patton, 2002, 2008). The respondents were contacted for clarifications and additional information was sought if required. During this process, a codebook of common themes was updated throughout the coding process by individual researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2009). The researchers then compared their analysis and discussed discrepancies, reviewed the data again, and repeated the process until consensus was achieved. The common themes were further analysed in the light of the theories that emerged during the analysis and thus a shorter list of final categories emerged consisting of common themes. For example, the initial themes like “friendly,” “approachable,” and “caring” were all put together into a common theme of “interpersonal skills” which was later merged along with another common theme called “people-centered” into the final category of “Interpersonal Skills.”

## **Trustworthiness**

A qualitative study is validated through the rigor associated with it using credibility, auditability, and fittingness (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). The data were collected through multiple sources which included interviews from multiple sources, observations, field notes, and documents scanning to ensure triangulation (Patton, 1999), which also ensures credibility (Guba, 1981). After transcribing the interviews, member checks were carried out to ensure that the essence of the responses was captured correctly. The methodology was illustrated carefully to enable future researchers to carry out similar evaluate and use them and were related with the literature in the discussion section, which ensured the fittingness.

Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) advise qualitative researchers to honour the voices of participants: “Today. . .voice can mean not only having a real researcher—and a researcher’s voice—in the text, but also letting research participants speak for themselves” (p. 123). Chandler, Anstey, and Ross (2015) also claim that the interpretive qualitative approach requires honouring of the participants’ voices and claim that

Decisions about the representation of voice raise questions about the subjectivity of the “knower” and the process of sharing research findings. Negotiating the voice of the researcher with the voice of the participant in the dissemination process is an important part of qualitative research. (p. 2)

Taking the above advice into consideration, we will attempt to discuss the findings purely from the participants’ perspectives and the observation and interpretation of the researchers to enable readers to be as close to the participants’ views as possible. The next section will present a thorough discussion of the findings of this study under the light of recent studies and theoretical underpinnings. While it is not possible to present the enormous amount of data that were collected during the course of this study, attempts will be made to present as much relevant data as is required.

## **Findings**

### **The School Context**

“Model School” (not the real name) is located in a remote part of northern Malaysia, bordering the south of Thailand. It is situated in an impoverished section of an economically backward state, somewhat isolated from the economic and social development in a relatively prosperous nation. The total population of the school district is 60,000 people and is situated among a valley with arduous mountains surrounding it on three sides. The inhabitants have limited local employment opportunities and are almost entirely dependent upon farming which is the major source of employment and livelihood in the area. Fortunately, the area also is the home of one of the largest man-made lakes in Malaysia and is served by one large and several small rivers that prove useful for irrigation purposes. The school was established in 1997, spread over seven hectares of land and consists of furnished classrooms, science laboratories, a large playground, music room, language room, and library and history/geography room. There is a newly built dormitory and a semi-covered hall which is used for most of the school’s functions. Out of a total of 608 students, a large majority are Malays with a significant number of Siamese and a small number of Chinese students. These

students are served by a team of 55 teachers and 17 non-teaching staff members. The principal, Mrs Noor (not her real name), is a seasoned educator with more than 30 years of experience in the field, both as a teacher and in various leadership positions. Before becoming the principal of this school, she worked as a deputy principal in another school for 6 years. She is warm and friendly, a self-proclaimed nature lover, and an avid reader. The school is currently ranked among the top 50 percent of all the public schools in Malaysia which does not look too bad considering the fact that the school was languishing among the bottom 10% of all the schools in Malaysia, just 3 years ago.

The findings of the study of the Model School revealed a list of seven major contexts under which principal Noor operated for the last 3 years. The contexts can broadly be divided into three major groups, each of which are explained in the following sections.

**Internal context.** The first four of the seven contexts were found to be internal to the school. Each of these are discussed below.

**1. Physical environment.** Upon her arrival in 2013, Principal Noor found the school to be “sorrowful” which is the term she used for describing a school which was painted several years ago and had faded, had no display boards, no garden with flowers and decorative plants, no curtains in the classrooms and offices and no outdoor areas for students to sit in their free time. “How could anyone like to come to such a sorrowful looking school?” she commented. All the respondents were unanimous in claiming the sad look of the school. While going through some of the old photographs, which were not many, the shabby physical outlook of the school building was striking.

**2. Academic and co-curricular activities.** In 2013, the school was languishing at 1997<sup>th</sup> rank among a total of 2203 schools in Malaysia. There was hardly any achievement to show in co-curricular areas as well. One of the students pointed out: “before nobody could score straight A’s here.” A teacher, lamenting upon the poor academic record of the school, reasoned, “Before this, the focus was only on the co-curricular activities, not on the academic (achievement),” which was similar to what other teachers and parents claimed. However, while going through the records, it was apparent that with all the alleged focus on co-curricular activities, there was no major achievement in that area as well. In fact, one of the students was quite forthcoming when he revealed, “Before this, for athletics and sports, out of 9 schools (in the region), we didn’t even achieve 5th place in any tournaments.”

**3. Teacher development.** In 2013, principal found that the school had a great team of teachers who simply went about their job in a routine manner without any inspiration and motivation. Principal Noor explained: “Before this, they had teamwork, however, they did not know how to. . .how to (manage) the students to achieve the target.” There was hardly any personal interaction between the previous principal and the teachers and there was no system in place to improve their skills.

**4. Demography.** She inherited a school which was situated in a rural area where most of the parents were either uneducated or had limited education. It was reported that, as a result, tardiness was high and students were not interested in learning. There were issues with discipline and the school received negligible cooperation from the parents.

**External context.** There were two major external contexts under which the school operated which are as under.

**1. Expectations of the ministry of education.** The ministry of education expects its schools to show consistent improvement, which was not the case until 3 years ago. Principal Noor believes that the ministry showed indifference towards the school: “It was like the JPN (The office of Education) didn’t know about it. . .but not really, they did know, it (was) just (that) this school did not really stand out before, especially in terms of academics and there was not any involvement in state levels.” As a result, there was little support from the ministry in terms of funding with continuous demands for improvement.

**2. Parents and community engagement.** There was negligible involvement of the parents and the community, depriving the school of valuable resources. The parents who were interviewed felt that they were “unwelcome” at the school and were “kept at bay.” They reported that their job was limited to dropping off their children at the school and then picking them up after school. They were never consulted and involved in school affairs.

**Personal traits.** All the respondents were unanimous in reporting a huge contrast between the earlier principal’s personal traits and the current principal. Previous principals were authoritative and kept a power distance which alienated the school community. In contrast, principal Noor was an overtly friendly person who treated everyone as her own family member; students called her Mom! One of the parents informs that “she is so humble and down to earth, she never brings her high position to anywhere she goes.” “She is kind,” “caring,” and a “positive thinker,” and “has a personal touch” were other comments on her personal traits by different respondents.

### The Core Practices and Their Context-Based Enactment

A thorough analysis of all the context-based practices of principal Noor revealed that she has a repertoire of 5 distinct core practices which she uses routinely. This section will lay down each of these 5 core practices and how these are enacted by the principal.

**1. Providing specific goals and targets:** The first major change that principal Noor made in the school was to display the school vision and mission prominently around the school and communicate it with the school community. According to her, this is important since it creates a proper learning environment. She came out as a person who is goal-oriented and lets the teachers know what they are expected to achieve, “I explained clearly about the objectives to the teachers, the mission must be clear, I explained that our mission should be to get quality teaching for the students.” Given the circumstances, she set short-term goals, achieved them and moved on to another short-term goal. Going through the records, it was revealed that her previous goals of improving attendance to above 90 percent, lowering discipline issues, improving academic achievement, and improving school ranking had all been successfully met. She involved parents in identifying areas of improvement and then set goals for them as well, as one of the parents explained, “She has target, her own target, we have our own goal and target, and the effort to achieve the target.” One of the students informed that she encouraged students to set their own targets and encouraged them to achieve them: “The principal always tells us her target to achieve Band 3 next year, and she also tells us what we should do. We will put our effort to achieve that. We want to get bai’ah (award) 3 times consecutively.”

**2. Improving academic achievement:** Principal Noor believed that improving academic achievement of every student in the school is the only way the school can progress. One of the member of the leadership team claimed that “Her main focus, of course, is academic” which was confirmed by other respondents as well. Her focus on academic achievement is in contrast with the practices of previous principals, claimed one of the teachers, “focus on academic is 100% . . . all the previous principals did not focus on academic performance.” She prepared a conducive physical environment for the students and teachers to function optimally. Her actions were data-driven; the achievement facts and figures were at her finger tips as was evident during our interactions with her. One of the teachers pointed out, “Principal Noor used to be a science teacher, so she is so efficient with numbers and statistics. . . (she) knows everything as a whole.” Principal Noor elaborated upon how she used data to study the situation and the teachers to identify areas of improvement:

when I came here, I needed to see how was the teachers' and students' situation at that time. I studied them first for 6 months. I had meetings with all members, studied the students and did everything. First was the meetings, the teachers must know the headcounts of the students for the class examination.

She grouped students according to their ability and assigned a teacher as the supervisor of each "batch," who constantly monitored their progress. She herself continuously monitored the progress made by each batch. She began preparing students for high-school board exams, called SPM in Malaysia, two years in advance. Teachers and parents were equally glad on her focus on exams and one of the teachers could not stop from the inevitable comparison with the previous principals:

Since she put her 100% focus to improve examination, the teachers were so happy. This is because the all previous principals didn't put focus on the academic performance. When she came here, our students' performance in the academic has increased.

Principal Noor provided an array of extra classes for weaker students beginning early in the morning before the school opened to very late in the evening, during breaks and other vacations. Students praised her wholeheartedly for the extra classes, as one student stated, "she provides us with many useful programmes, extra classes especially for us." She herself monitored these extra classes and made sure that she was around, especially during the late evening classes. To set example for other teachers, she herself taught some of the science classes to secondary students. However, one of the teachers claimed that she needed to give some attention to co-curricular activities as well as "she puts more focus on the academics but co-curriculum is conducted as always." She sought outside help for extra tuitions from NGOs and involved parents in participating in academic affairs by requesting them for guard duties and picking up and dropping off students for early morning and late-evening classes.

**3. Developing teachers and staff members:** Principal Noor believed that for the school to succeed, teachers need to play a crucial role. She utilized her previous experience of being a curriculum leader to train and supervise teachers in the matters related to teaching and learning. She claimed that the school was blessed with a great team of teachers, however lack of effective leadership failed to develop them. She claimed, "Actually all of them are quality teachers, but before this, they could not see clearly any target they want to achieve; they did not know the future direction of the school." Her claims were corroborated by a senior teacher who commented on the previous principals, "their management was not quite efficient, teachers had teamwork but there was no strong support from the administration." Principal Noor invited teachers for discussions, both individually and in groups. She made them aware of using achievement data to set further course of action for improvement, taught them analysis of achievement data and planned for improvement. She constantly coached them to refine their teaching skills through latest methods, which made teachers more confident about their capabilities. Teachers were appreciative of her coaching and mentoring while principal Noor herself claimed that "teacher's acceptance was very positive because they could see what we (school) wanted to achieve." She motivated teachers to improve upon their educational qualifications and gave importance to professional development activities for further development which she had made compulsory for seven days in a year for all the teachers. She presented herself as a role model and taught science classes as an example for others to follow, even though she was not required to teach as a school principal.

Principal Noor followed a "family oriented" approach towards the school community, and claimed, "I am not fierce; I can just touch anybody, by being friendly." She remembered

special days for the teachers and made it an occasion for celebration. One of the teacher confirmed her claims, “she always WhatsApps us when we have birthday celebrations, gives cards fresh flowers and cakes.” She believed that using her “personal touch” helps her get work done out of even those teachers who tend to drag their feet. The member of the leadership team corroborates, “She has a different approach; her management has more family-based approach.” She never forgot to praise teachers when they accomplish something and rewarded them occasionally which kept them motivated, as the admin informed, “she likes to give rewards to the teachers, either verbally or (gifts).” One of the teachers added, “Usually, she gives us support, inspiration to do something, she also gives us appreciation, compliments verbally.” Principal Noor often visited their homes to meet their family members on special occasions or when someone was unwell, as a teacher informed “When one of our family members is sick, she would come to my house and pay a visit, because she says to us, ‘family comes first’.”

**4. Creating meaningful coalitions:** The findings reveal that one of the most effective practices of principal Noor was her ability to build meaningful coalitions with parents, members of the community, NGOs and governmental agencies. She inherited a school which was isolated in a sense that there was no involvement of these in the school’s affairs. She made conscious attempt to involve them for the benefit of the school. Efforts have given positive results, as she claimed: “The committees in PTA are very supportive and close to me. They are very helpful to our school. Some of them shared to me, before this they were not very helpful, but now they are supportive.”

She sought and gained help from the parents in matters like volunteering for school activities or raising funds to improve upon its facilities. One of the parent reported that parents were now active members of the school community and help in a variety of ways:

we recognize every people in this area. We know who their families’ members are. We can call for them to help teachers in the school, for example extra classes during night time. The parents or community volunteered to guard the school and make sure that the students are safe. We have special committee to make sure of students’ safety, they will bring students who don’t have transport to the school and also bring them back when the session has finished. We might not help our children in academic, but we can help their learning process.

Another parent added that the principal invited few parents to work with the counselors to organize various programs for the students that helped them understand the value of learning and inspire them to be successful. Since the school was low on funds, she turned towards the parents for monetary contributions for various facilities in the school. Parents contributed generously towards giving a fresh coat of paint to the school building, buying curtains and installing them in the classrooms and building areas in the school like “learning hut,” “English zone,” and “ASEAN corner” where students could sit in their free time and learn.

Parents even donated money to support various extra academic programs that the school organized, as one of the parents informed, “Yes, parent. . .we donate some money to the school so that the school can have supporting programs and tuitions for the students” while another parent added that they pay the school fee for those who are unable to pay on time “If they have financial problem, it is OK. We can help them; the school can allow the students to come and learn.”

Principal Noor has also developed a strong coalition with several NGOs and prominent members of the community who have provided valuable assistance to the school.

RISDA (Rubber Industry Smallholders' Development Authority) contributed towards providing free tuition classes while the local government representative also supported few extra classes. Principal Noor was also able to convince the department of agriculture, through the help of prominent people in the locality, to contribute lime trees for the school which provided a continuous source of extra income for the school.

**5. Creating a Positive and Conducive Overall School climate:** Principal Noor's asset, her excellent personal traits, can be observed all around the school in the form of a warm, welcoming and positive environment. Apart from concentrating on creating a conducive physical environment, she had been able to create a cordial atmosphere all around the school where members of the school community are welcomed, appreciated and valued. One of the respondents could not stop from gushing, "This place is wonderful, this place has positive feeling. . .you feel very peaceful when you come here." She improved the 'sorrowful' physical look of the school to a more colorful and lively physical environment which provides a peaceful environment for all. Students were unanimous in claiming that the physical changes have brought in a new 'spirit' to the school which enables them to learn well. One of the students informed, "she repainted the school and changed everything, she sponsored new curtains for all classrooms and the table cloth," which had positive effects on the students and "we became more spirited to study" while the other added, "the environment of this school is beautiful, colourful, (for example) we have ASEAN aisle where we can learn about the countries." Similar sentiments were resonated while speaking with other respondents as well.

Principal Noor used her excellent interpersonal skills to make others feel important and treated everyone equally, irrespective of whether they were young, old, senior or junior. This had resulted in the whole school community working as one team, where everyone worked for the same common goal for the school. One of the younger teachers informed, "Even the newly transferred teachers or newly assigned staffs here are close to each other. It doesn't matter whether you are a senior teacher or new teacher, we can sit together." The principal sought opinion from everyone while making a decision and encouraged open discussion on all matters. One of the teachers commented that "she is good in approaching people; she has human touch, she has no gap with students, teachers and anyone," while one parent added "since she is good in leadership, she has no gap between the parents and the management people."

Principal Noor welcomed new ideas, even those that were contradictory to her own ideas. One of the members from the leadership group elaborated appreciatively:

she is open-minded; she can listen to us and accept whatever we suggested to her. She can tolerate other people's opinion. She would never reject anyone's idea just like that. So, she uses this approach to manage this school. . . even how small the decision is, she will consider the management's decision.

She was caring and constantly supported her students, so much so that students call her 'mom' and she seemed to love it! One of the students explained how she has supported the students:

She always spends her time with us whenever she has free time. She always gives us motivation and advises us to be more inspired in studying. She shares her experience in university and the working environment. If we failed, then we couldn't get better job in the future.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the context based leadership practices of a successful school principal in Malaysia. A thorough analysis of data collected through multiple sources reveal that most of the practices of principal Noor were in line with the core practices of other successful school principals identified in similar studies conducted in other countries.

Leithwood and colleagues claim that providing vision and setting goals is one of the core practices of a successful school principal (Leithwood et al., 2006), which they reemphasize even strongly, 2 years later (Leithwood et al., 2008). "Establishing goals and expectations" was also identified by Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) as one of their eight dimensions of an effective principal. The findings demonstrate that Principal Noor's practices were in line with these claims. She set goals for everything and believed that the school will go nowhere unless it is driven by a clear mission. However, she preferred to set short term-goals, for example increasing the attendance above 90 percent or improving the school ranking by 300 places which enables her in gaining acceptance from her teachers. She involved teachers and parents in setting goals and made extensive use of data. Although principals are considered to be the ones directly responsible for the academic performance of students, there is ample empirical evidence which is contrary to this notion (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Kaplan, Owings, & Nunnery, 2005; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). On the other hand, there are numerous studies that strongly establish significant, indirect effects of principal's practices on improving academic achievement (Bastian & Henry, 2014; Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson, 2007; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Principal Noor used achievement data and its analysis for improving achievement (Fullan, 2005; Guskey, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005) and organized numerous enrichment classes, often termed as "double dosing" (Hanley, 2005), which effectively led to improvement in academic achievement (Lauer, et al., 2006). As a result, the number of students scoring A grades has significantly increased which has led to improvement in school rankings as well. She has created a conducive physical environment which has reversed the negative academic outcome due to poor physical environment (Filardo, 2008).

Quality teaching is considered to be the single most effective way to improve student achievement (e.g., Hanushek, 2011; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005) which can be defined as "instruction that enables a wide range of students to learn" (Darling-Hammond, 2012, p. 3). Principal Noor constantly strived for developing teacher's skills and coached them to improve their teaching skills. She focused on professional development activities for all teachers and she herself taught to act as a model and lead by example which is related with models of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Locke and Latham (2002) assert that others tend to follow easily if best practices are modelled through one's own practice, while Harris and Chapman (2002, p. 6) claim that successful principals "modeled behaviour that they considered desirable to achieve the school goal."

A strong relationship between a principal and teachers define the role of teachers within a school (Price, 2015). Principal Noor built an excellent relationship with all the teachers which is an important trait of emotional leadership. She not only worked towards developing teachers professionally but also provided emotional support to them. Supporting employees through personal attention has been found to enhance employee's enthusiasm and optimism and increases productivity while reducing frustration (McCull-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002).

The most remarkable finding of the study was the way principal Noor was able to consciously build a strong coalition with the community, especially the parents. Parental involvement is crucial for a school's success (Muller, 2009), which helps in raising funds,

volunteering, assisting teachers and management, assisting in organizing school events and participating in decision-making process (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Principal Noor was welcoming and considered parents as one of her most important assets. Studies have demonstrated that if school principals are welcoming, parents are more likely to participate in school affairs (Robinson & Harris, 2014; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000) which leads to positive contributions from them (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010; Jeynes, 2017; Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Involving parents in the school affairs has also shown indirect positive effects on learning outcomes (Castro, et al., 2015; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Perkins & Knight, 2014), and students' social and emotional development (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, & Clark, 2010; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010). Parents at the Model school contributed towards school facilities, they volunteered in various school activities, raised funds and participated in decision-making process. She has also been successful in attracting contributions from various NGOs, local government representative and governmental agencies.

It was also found that almost all the respondents were happy when they were at school since they found the school climate and the environment positive and warm. School climate is defined in terms of relationship between teachers, staff, parents, students, community and the principal, various school activities, and the physical environment of the school (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009), which is reported to improve learning (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Wang, Selman, Dishion, & Stormshak, 2010), personal attitude of students and staff (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995). Through her excellent interpersonal skills, Principal Noor created a "family atmosphere" all around the school which added to the positive atmosphere. Parents perceive positive school climate as one of the important quality dimensions (Noman & Kaur, 2015) which affects their attitude towards the school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Principal Noor ensured that the physical environment was pleasing with well-painted walls, colourful displays, and well-maintained plants and flowers which is in line with studies that claim that physical environment of schools effects academic attainment, and behaviour of students and creates conducive environment (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009; Herman et al., 2008).

### **Conclusion**

We conclude that successful principal practices are not unidimensional; they do not solely rely upon one leadership model only. The core practices draw from several leadership models and are enacted according to the unique contexts of the school. The findings show significant efforts from the part of the principal to increase the performance of the students resulting in improvement in the school ranking. People-centered leadership with strong emphasis on building coalition with parents and the community was the key to success as these practices contributed heavily, albeit indirectly, towards the academic performance of the students. The leadership practices of the principal emanated out of her personal qualities and consisted of short term goals that were achieved with the involvement of all the stakeholders. Even though working towards improving the academic achievement was the focal point of the schools' practices, she used a variety of methods to achieve her goals. Although we found that leadership in the school was centred around the principal and not consciously distributed, given the context in which the principal began her work perhaps this was the best approach. There are signs of teacher leadership development but it is still in a nascent stage. Also, while the principal focussed on academic achievement, the researchers felt that the co-curricular activities had taken a backbench. That too can be attributed to the contextual demands of reviving the academic achievement of the school first. It is apparent

that successful school leadership should be viewed in relation to the context under which the school operates, not what is generally viewed as ideal for any school. Also, successful leadership practices depend heavily upon the personal traits of the leader and the personal values of friendship, empathy, trust, care and relatedness.

Even though this was a comprehensive study, it was still concentrated on just one school in a rural area in Malaysia, which limits the findings. Although we do not claim the findings to be a general phenomenon in other successful schools in Malaysia as well, it still provides significant insights for other principals on how successful practices are enacted in response to school's contexts. Similar studies in other schools might be able to elicit a much stronger pattern of the practices of successful principals in Malaysia. Researchers might be encouraged to expand this study both in terms of numbers and type of schools in order to expand the findings to a larger area.

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#### Author Note

Mohammad Noman was born in India and currently works as the School Principal in an International School in Malaysia, owned by Universiti Utara Malaysia. He has an extensive experience in K-12 education, both as a teacher and as a school leader. He holds a Master degree in Education, majoring in educational administration and is currently giving finishing touches to his PhD thesis in Educational leadership. His research interests are in educational leadership and management, K-12 education, motivation, qualitative research and assessment. He has published several research papers in reputable journals. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [mdnoman@yahoo.com](mailto:mdnoman@yahoo.com).

Prof. Dr. Rosna Awang Hashim is a fulltime professor in School of education and modern languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia. Prof. Rosna was born in the northern state of Kedah from where she did most of her schooling. She completed her Bachelor degree in English and French from the University of Texas. She did her Masters from the same university in TESL and secondary education. She then moved on to the University of Southern California from where she completed her Ph. D. in educational Psychology. She has been associated with the Universiti Utara Malaysia for last three decades and has served several high profile positions. She was the deputy vice-chancellor of UUM for two-year tenure. Her research interests include Educational Psychology, School Engagement, Adolescent Motivation, Teacher Education, Learning & Instruction, Project-based Learning, Quantitative Methodology, Psychometrics and Structural Equation Modelling.

Dr Sarimah Shaik-Abdullah was born in Malaysia and currently works in School of education and modern languages, Malaysia as a senior lecturer. She received her bachelor and Master degrees in ESL from the University of Texas, USA. She then moved on to the University of Birmingham, UK for her Ph.D. in Education, which she completed in the year 2005. Her research interests include Learning as a Social Practice, Adolescent Literacy, Action Research, Reflective Inquiry and Qualitative Research. She has conducted several researches and published articles in several journals.

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