

Review

Enhancing Quality Appointment, Preparation and Support System for Malaysian Principals

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Abstract: Educational leaders in the 21st century are under increasing pressure since they need to consistently upskill and reskill themselves so that they can adapt to rapid changes and be prepared to improve the quality of future education, as well as meet the demands of diverse stakeholders. Previous studies in the Malaysian context mostly focused on leadership training for newly appointed school principals, but there has not been much emphasis on continuous professional development for school leaders. This article provides an in-depth analysis of the appointment, preparation, and support system for Malaysian principals. In this study, a qualitative methodology has been applied, which involves document analysis based on policy documents, media, and previously published journal articles. The findings suggest that internal and external supports are currently being provided to principals. However, it proposes a wider framework of support for principals comprising internal and external support, including smart partnerships with diverse stakeholders such as industries, non-profit organizations, and international counterparts. The results provide insights to policymakers on the importance of consistently supporting school leaders to upskill with multifaceted skills to perform multiple functions, such as technological, economic, social, cultural, political, and learning leadership.

Keywords: appointment; internal support; external support; leadership; Malaysia



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1. Introduction

The development of education in Malaysia has witnessed a continuous change covering various aspects, such as pedagogy, teaching technology, leadership transformation and a more competitive education system. This demand for change is necessary to prepare for education that is contemporary and capable of producing competent human resources in line with the development of human civilization. Therefore, educational organizations play an important role in the development of a nation, as well as the production of a society that is knowledgeable and aware of the skills necessary for the 21st century.

Among the main elements that need to be paid attention to is effective leadership for the mobilization and development of educational organizations. The educational leadership of the 21st century requires leaders who have special characteristics that will bring added value to the main attributes of educational leaders, such as the ability to influence followers, skills in dealing with various problems, having a clear vision and mission, and more. These future education leaders should be ready to transform their leadership style in line with the country's aspirations that require leaders who are futuristic and ready to build world-class education. The fourth Sustainable Development Goal in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to offer quality education globally [1]. Regarding this, the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (MoE) has the main responsibility to ensure that the education system in Malaysia functions effectively to achieve the fourth SDG goal [2]. For that, the MoE has already implemented the appropriate education policies according to the needs of the times.

Among the main concerns for educational leadership development nowadays is the appropriateness of traditional leadership ways in leading current school organizations.

Competence in classical leadership does not have sufficient capacity in the context of the new world, especially to meet the ever-changing environment of the educational world [3]. The speed of technology and digital progress also demands school principals to have competencies in various aspects of leadership to bring about a new transformation in the school climate. With reference to the Comparison of Competence Levels and Training Needs by the Institute of *Aminuddin Baki*, the principalship training institute in Malaysia shows that the level of competence of principals in Malaysia, in several dimensions of leadership, is still moderate and requires immediate training [4]. This includes aspects such as strategic management, law and policy compliance, curriculum-based instructionals, and several other important administration aspects.

In producing future high-performing leaders, the Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013–2025 has outlined an action plan based on three waves [5]. The first wave (2013–2015) aims to improve the selection standard of principals and head teachers and create a support system that can produce competent school leaders. The second wave (2016–2020) sets targets to dignify the teaching profession through the improvement of new career paths and a shift towards distributed leadership. Distributed leadership will open opportunities to empower other leaders in schools, such as Senior Assistant and Head of Department, to lead the school collectively towards achieving the targeted objectives. Next, the last wave, which is the third wave (2021–2025), will strive to create a culture of professional excellence as an example to colleagues. This effort will ensure that each school leader acts as a guide to other teachers to both meet the professional standards of teaching and further drive school improvement through continuous progress and innovation.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the specific training and development, systematic selection, and continuous professional development of principals in Malaysia to ensure a high-quality school leader. The need for the formation of future school leaders is also illustrated through several requirements for leadership competence. In the proposed principal/headmaster performance evaluation framework, the leadership domain will cover aspects of policy and direction, teaching and achievement, people and relationships, resources, and operations, as well as change and innovative management. The aspects of change and innovative management outline the need for the competence of school leaders in the 21st century through the ability of leaders in: (i) solving problems; (ii) changing management; (iii) making informed decisions; (iv) managing school improvement and (v) creativity and innovation [5]. Clearly, school leadership is expected to be able to face the changes and transformation of education in the future as well as technological development as the vehicles of management and decision-making.

In the context of education in Malaysia, leaders were highly inspired to build the character attributes of being open to change and improvement [5]. This includes the leader's competency to focus on dynamic problem-solving abilities, teamwork for achieving the organization's goals, and leading with motivation, as well as a high desire and tendency towards knowledge and the education of the entire organization's members. In addition, the power possessed by a leader should also be used to increase his or her influence on all members. Leaders also need to be professional in appreciating the work of the organizational members, empowering them, and encouraging a culture that produces creativity and innovation among the members of the organization.

Overall, it can be concluded that the world of education today needs educational leaders who can transform and mobilize all members of the organization to jointly drive excellence. Educational leaders in the 21st century need to understand the need for changes in the current educational context, the challenges in improving the quality of future education, as well as setting a clear vision and being able to inspire teachers and students. This article will describe how school leaders in Malaysia undergo specific training and development, systematic selection, and continuous professional development to ensure a high-quality school leader. In addition, the process of preparation and appointment as a school leader will also be discussed to understand the procedures that have been taken by superiors to ensure the appointment of quality leaders in each school. This article provides insights to

society worldwide on the appointment process, preparation, and support system for school leaders, especially principals. It also proposes a wider framework of support that includes internal and external support, and smart partnerships with diverse stakeholders.

2. Literature Review

Leadership is a two-way process that is intertwined between leaders and followers to achieve a goal or objective [6]. The initial concept of leadership was defined by Cowley (1928) in the 1920s. He associates the leader with his official position. The statement refers to a specific individual or group of individuals who hold a position based on accepted power and authority [7].

Starting from that era, researchers in the field of leadership have continued their studies by using more recent and systematic research methods. Stogdill [8] described the statement by stating the implications of using research methods that are more extensive in sample size as well as recent mathematical methods, in which the researcher has found an accurate definition and concept of leadership. They define and give the concept of leadership as the art of persuasion to ensure that subordinates obey the instructions given by the leader.

According to Peter Drucker, leadership is a situation where an individual has followers who want to work with him [9]. Warren Bennis, in another book, states that leadership is the ability to produce reality from vision [10]. The statement of Bill Gates, a successful billionaire, about leadership, has also been used in many books such as by [11], stating that the concept of leadership occurs when there is an individual or a leader who can empower other individuals to jointly achieve a goal. There is no doubt that leadership is an ability that appears in an individual that allows him to be called a leader and directly or indirectly lead an organization or group.

Mamat [12] has listed the concept of leadership as follows: (a) the process of encouraging subordinates to work towards a goal, (b) the process of influencing the activities of individuals or a group of individuals to achieve a goal, and (c) the action of influencing individuals or a group of individuals in an organization so that they work voluntarily to achieve the organization's goals. In explaining the statement, Daft [11] divided the concept of leadership into six important elements, namely focus, responsibility and integrity, change, common goals, followers, and influence. Since its inception centuries ago, the concept and theory of leadership has often changed with time. The paradigm of leadership is no longer something new. It is a sharing of minds and ways of thinking that change the concept and theory of leadership over time. Table 1 presents the movement of the old paradigm of leadership to a new one.

Table 1. Leadership paradigm.

The Old Paradigm of Leadership	The New Paradigm of Leadership
Competition	Collaborative
Control	Division of power
Self-focus	High ethical values
Informality	Diversity
Stability	Change

In a technologically driven, rapidly evolving, culturally diverse, and globalized environment, principals are under increasing pressure, since there are great expectations and demands from various parties such as Ministry officials, parents, teachers, students, the community, and international counterparts [13]. Tintoré, Cunha, Cabral and Alves [14] contended that previous studies on principals' leadership challenges consistently pointed out inadequate job preparation, the severe shortage of qualified educational leaders, weak leadership practices, changing and stricter standards and procedures, increasing accountability, difficulties in handling school-based operations (such as financial management, addressing teachers, students, and parents' concerns) with limited resources, managing

change, ensuring equity while maintaining efficiency, maintaining good relationships with teachers and staff, and poor professional development programs.

Educational leadership in the twenty-first century requires more than a set of skills—leaders should lead and empower others, while being together in the implementation process, addressing implementation challenges, and conducting proper monitoring to ensure schooling is meaningful. In the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, school leaders are encountering various challenges in making sure that learning losses are recovered. In many instances, principals need to make concrete decisions based on their school context. Principals need to refine the curriculum, teaching and learning materials, oversee pedagogy to overcome learning loss, readjust learning objectives, and prioritize students who are left behind [15]. In this case, we need effective and well-trained leaders who can focus on instruction and meeting the needs of all students.

In proposing an effective program for principals, scholars [16,17] have outlined several measures for an effective professional development program: the program should be more practical, allow for the reflecting on and providing of feedback on past experiences, able to incorporate research-based elements, cater to principals' needs, and ensure continuity and sustainability. Such programs should be able to employ group-based activities through coaching sessions [18].

3. Methodology

This study aims to explore how school leaders in Malaysia undergo specific training and development, systematic selection, and continuous professionalism development to ensure a high-quality school leader. To achieve the aims of this study, a qualitative methodology has been applied which involves document analysis, especially on important documents in the development of principal leadership in Malaysia, as well as some other secondary data. A literature review was also conducted to examine the findings of previous studies as well as discussions involving educational leadership. Document analysis is a method that involves the analysis of documents and written sources that can help in achieving the objectives of the study [19]. Finding material that is relevant to the question and purpose of the study is the first step in the process of using documents. It is also a systematic procedure that develops from the topic of study.

The use of documents involves a specific analytical approach called content analysis. According to Merriam [20], this analysis interprets document materials, including written texts and artifacts, and requires consideration of the definition of context and time. When a text is read in a different context, it will be given a new meaning and interpreted according to the social background where the text is read. Qualitative researchers can also use secondary data in building concepts and placing the study in a local and global context. These data can also contribute to the process of initial discussion and exploration of a matter in depth, comprehensively and systematically.

For the purpose of this study, the documents involved are the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, the Education Development Plan 2001–2010, the School Partnership Improvement Programme: Interim Report, and several more important documents. The documents involved are analyzed according to the objectives of the study that have been set. The main instrument is the notes of the document, to record the important content of each document and the main information of each document involved. The decisions about obtaining data, managing, and analyzing include the following; (i) the process of text search, text management, and program analysis, (ii) decisions about analytical procedures, (iii) decisions about when to use data and in what form and (iv) how to combine data (triangulation) with other data [21]. Table 2 shows the content of specific documents analyzed in this study.

Table 2. Data Analysis Based on Documents.

Documents Selected	Data Analyzed
Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025	Leadership program for Principals, NPQEL
Education Development Plan 2001–2010	Training for educational professional leadership
School Partnership Improvement Programme: Interim Report	Specialist Coach
Professional Meeting No. 7/2007	Professionalism Enhancement Training in Teaching and Learning and Leadership
Malaysia School Leaders Competency Standard 2.0.	Quality of school leadership

4. Results

The findings from the document analysis, such as policy reports and the previous literature, point out that there are three phases of school leadership that have been consistently emphasized in the policy documents. The following section will provide insights on the process as well as the challenges encountered.

4.1. School Leaders Preparation Process

The teaching and learning process can be improved through strengthening school leadership and increasing the supply of qualified teachers. This requirement is in line with the findings of UNESCO [22] and VVOB [23], which stated that two main factors contribute to the significant impact on student learning: leadership factors, such as the leaders' style, and teacher factors (teaching method).

For decades, the Malaysian government has emphasized strengthening school leadership, and this has been carried out with a particular focus to identify potential leaders. This statement is illustrated further by Circular 175 in the 1979 Cabinet Committee Report to review the implementation of the education policy. The report stated that a school leader such as the principal or head teacher is selected based on a 'time-based' approach. This means school leaders are appointed for leadership positions based on seniority. However, there was a change in policy commencing January 2007, and individuals who are interested in holding the position of school leader need to have leadership experience, such as being the Senior Assistant and Head of Department [24].

Before appointing a school leader, potential leaders will go through a continuous competence development process. This is because teacher institutes just prepare them with fundamental knowledge related to specific disciplines and pedagogy to equip the teachers with the competency to teach [25]. Currently, teachers are encountering great challenges due to rapid technological changes and the insistence of stakeholders such as the superiors from the Ministry, parents, and the community. Teachers should develop their competence to lead the challenge by applying leadership skills. This effort is consistent with the requirements of the Education Development Master Plan 2006–2010, which has six main strategies to strengthen the Malaysian education system, namely: Building a Nation; Building Human Capital; Empowering the National School; Bridging the Education Gap, Elevating the Teacher Profession and Boosting the Excellence of Educational Institutions [26].

To achieve these goals, based on the Ministry of Education's meeting report, Professional Meeting No. 7/2007, dated 21 November 2007, has approved the proposal paper for the Operation Concept of Professionalism Enhancement Training in Teaching and Learning and Leadership for Education Service Officers. The Ministry of Education emphasized its operation on a 'school-based' basis, in line with the concept of "let manager manage". Some operational guidelines for In-Service Training have been issued to ensure successful implementation. The In-Service Training Program is a competency development program implemented to improve the professionalism of an organization's civil servants. The program differs from the Pre-Service Training for civil servants who are already in

service. In-service training is a place for school leaders, teachers, and support staff to gain knowledge related to their professional careers. The focus of the partnership is related to the needs of the field of leadership, curriculum, co-curriculum, and support for their career development. The program is usually held outside teaching hours, usually during weekends. Every civil servant must attend 7 days of training in a year. The training is conducted on the school's premises and a total of 6 h is considered one day of the training.

Table 3 shows a basic guide to handling the program that can be organized by the school and/or teachers can attend those types of programs to obtain yearly performance marks.

Table 3. Credit Allocation for Continuous Professionalism Development Programs.

No.	Discipline	Maximum Credit (Mark)
1.	Training/Workshop/Seminar/Colloquium, Convention/Symposium/Forum/Conference/Counselling Clinic	15
2.	Knowledge Discourse, Briefing, Professional Talk, Knowledge Sharing/Dialog Session/Talk	15
3.	Coaching and Mentoring	10
4.	Academic Improvement	20
5.	Professional Learning Communities	20
6.	e-Learning/e-Teacher Portal	15
7.	Research	20
8.	Creative Writing	20
9.	Benchmarking	10
10.	Book reading	20
11.	Ministry Internal and External Attachment Program	10
12.	Other Professional and None-Professional Contributions	10
13.	Innovation	20

Note. Guidelines for the Implementation of Continuous Professionalism Development Credit Points for Education Service officers, Ministry of Education Malaysia (https://splkpm.moe.gov.my/bahan/Surat_Siaran_MyPPB.pdf (accessed on 23 February 2024)).

4.2. School Leaders Appointment Process

Quality education begins by improving the quality of all stakeholders involved within the school community, starting from school leaders, and including middle leaders, teachers, and support staff. The quality of education has a relationship with the competence and performance of a leader within an educational organization. Therefore, efforts to produce quality leaders must start from the selection stage up to the continuous development stage. This process begins with an application to join the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) training. The NPQEL training is a program to train potential leaders, organized by the Institute of *Aminuddin Baki* under the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. The NPQEL program includes face-to-face programs and e-learning (e-NPQEL). The study period is for fifteen (15) weeks, which is virtual (online) for three (3) weeks, face-to-face sessions for six (6) weeks, and an Apprenticeship session for seven (7) weeks. The apprenticeship session is divided into two (2) namely Apprenticeship 1 for one (1) week and Apprenticeship 2 for six (6) weeks. The prospective principal/head teacher (PGB) will then receive a certificate that qualifies him to apply for the position if there is a vacancy. The detection of post vacancies is carried out through the School Leader Replacement Module (MPPS) dashboard. Candidates will apply and will sit for the P-PGB assessment, which is an assessment specifically designed to evaluate the ability of the candidate to become PGB.

A holistic assessment in selecting future education leaders is important to achieve the goal of quality education in line with current and future education demands. The school leader's personality and core competencies need to be emphasized to fill today's educational needs [5]. An assessment for PGB Selection (P-PGB) under the new conditions is important in the effort to select competent and high-performing PGBs through a more comprehensive assessment process. P-PGB emphasizes core competencies and personal

qualities to select high-quality leaders. Personality and high imperative values are the basis for quality leadership and high achievement. Referring to the Core Competency Framework for School Leaders, there are 10 competencies based on six (6) domains that need to be fully mastered and possessed by a person before leading a school. The six (6) domains are the (i) domain of policy and direction (strategic thinking competency), (ii) domain of instruction and achievement (development of curriculum-focused instruction competency), (iii) domain of managing change and innovation (analyzing, problem-solving competency and decision-making competency), (iv) domain of resources and operations (managing finances competency and comprehensive monitoring competency), (v) domain of human relations (developing capacity competency and communicating effectively competency) and the last one is the (vi) domain of personal quality (value and professional behavior competency, and realizing and managing oneself competency).

There is a specific process in the PGB appointment method. It started with a reference to the *e-Pangkat* school leader replacement module and continued with advertisements about acting PGB positions through *e-Pangkat*. Candidates who meet the new requirements will make an application, which will then be certified by the Head of Department. The next important process is the PGB Assessment, and candidates who pass this assessment will finally be certified by the Division or State Education Department and their names will be sent to the Human Resource Management Division, Ministry of Education, Malaysia. The assessment for the PGB selection under the new conditions involves three assessment methods. The three (3) methods are Portfolio, Unguided Group Discussion, and Structured Interview to assess the core competencies of school leaders based on the framework, instruments, and assessment procedures that have been set. A portfolio is written documentation based on experience and evidence of the implementation of projects/innovations/improvement programs to assess the candidate's competence and performance in managing and leading the organization/school. Unguided Group Discussion is a method of assessing a candidate's communication skills and strategy-making based on the discussion of the given situation/stimulus. A Structured Interview is an interview using a set of open-ended standardized questions that are organized face-to-face to all candidates to assess the candidate's competence and performance through the actions and achievements that have been implemented.

After receiving confirmation, the candidate will attend the Principal Residency and Immersion Programme (PRIme) for 1 month before taking over the duties as principal/headmaster [27]. The Residency Program refers to the new induction program that requires them to follow a mentoring program for one (1) month under the guidance of the PGB who will move or retire. After that, the candidate then will act as a PGB and implement the Immersion Program with the principal coach for 7 days (42 h) during the first six (6) months. It is a period of guidance and mentoring from an experienced PGB or School Improvement Partner (SIPartner+) of the district as soon as they start their new duties officially as a PGB. Opportunities for Continuous Professional Development will continue to be obtained by the PGB throughout their services. This training will be provided by the Institute of *Aminuddin Baki*, the same institute that provides NPQEL training to the PGB.

4.3. Support System for School Leaders

In this 21st century era, school leaders are expected to embrace multiple school functions such as technological, economic, social, political, cultural, and learning at various levels (individual, institutional, community, international) [28]. Despite diverse challenges encountered in terms of the pandemic, technological innovation, economic downturns, and global, regional, and societal demands, the school principal remains the most important individual who drives the school for excellence. Though the principal works collaboratively with other subordinates in school, it is important to realize that principals are the heads of schools who spearhead transformational change for school effectiveness. Leadership is a crucial element of an effective school and school leaders will lead their subordinates to be more effective [29,30]. Thus, principals need to be consistently supported not only

at the early stage of their career but throughout their service. Support systems need to be comprehensive, not just as a mentor to help them with their daily routines, but extending to assist principals in carrying out the responsibilities that come with these multiple school functions.

In the Malaysian context, there has been a lack of studies on the need for in-service or continuous professional development programs for principals. Previous studies on principals' professional development in Malaysia mostly focused on pre-service NPQEL programs for principals. However, there has been evidence that Malaysian principals requested more courses on financial management and school law [31,32]. NPQEL's mandatory training program for principals has been criticized as a training program to ensure compliance with national policies [33].

In addition, a nationally representative study that involved 570 principals showed that most principals demanded planning and administration skills ($n = 79$) followed by skills on the improvement of the school's curriculum ($n = 55$), coaching and supporting subordinates ($n = 50$), assessment of school performance ($n = 23$), budgeting ($n = 23$) and engaging parents and the community ($n = 13$). On the other hand, time management and work-life balance tend to be topics that are of less interest ($n = 3$) [1]. Recent evidence showed that principals are more receptive towards technology-based learning such as online and hybrid sessions [34–36]. They also preferred delivery methods that are non-formal, practical and involve group discussions.

Lokman Tahir [37] proposed a conceptual framework that involves internal and external support for school principals. He has categorized the internal support as support from deputy principals in completing school-related tasks, decision-making that adheres to school culture, values, norms, and visions, mid-level leaders in department-related matters, and senior teachers in dealing with teachers' attitudes and performance. On the other hand, the author has conceptualized external support in terms of knowledge and skills in managing and leading, professional identity, and information on the school's policies and procedures from various stakeholders, such as The SIP Partners+, State Education and District Education officers, other principals, and former principals.

4.3.1. Internal Support

Principals regarded their school deputies and mid-level leaders as their closest friends who assisted them with internal tasks in leading and managing the school. Deputies and middle leadership teams act as intermediaries for principals to comprehend the school's culture, norms, and teachers' attitudes, as well as ensure the completion of school-related tasks. Through mid-level leaders, principals were regularly updated on subject-based performance, financial resources, and teacher performance. Senior teachers are commonly referred to when challenges are encountered in the school system.

4.3.2. External Support

School Improvement Partners Plus (SIPartners+) was formed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) under the District Education Office to enhance the leadership and management competencies of school leaders. This is consistent with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 which emphasizes quality leadership as an important factor that contributes to students' outcomes. The SIPartners+ program aims to support leaders to manage schools more effectively [38], improve students' achievements, and bring the school to a higher performance level [39]. The mentoring process enables an education leader to discuss any issues directly with their mentors without any complicated processes or protocols [40,41]. SIPartners+ needs to be competent, mentally, and emotionally strong to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of this program [42]. The primary step of the SIP program is to assess schools and motivate and assist principals in leading and managing schools based on the school context and climate. In addition, this mentor also provides coaching for principals in low-performing schools. The SIPartners + mentoring program was introduced

in 2013 as a pioneer project in Kedah and Sabah and only extended to all states in Malaysia in 2014.

There have not been many studies that evaluate the effectiveness of this program; some studies have only focused on small samples, making it difficult to generalize findings [43,44]. There has been some evidence that the mentoring practice was less acceptable to school principals, as they viewed SIPartners+ as an outsider intervening within school management. Hence, principals do not want to disclose school issues that will lead them to be seen as inexperienced school leaders or managers [45]. However, in some contexts, principals accepted SIPartners+ visits more positively as a link to the District Education Office to solve school problems, such as insufficient teachers, infrastructures, and funds [46].

4.4. Officers from District Education Office and State Education Office

Principals also referred to the SDE and DOE officers whenever they felt undecided about obtaining clear information on recent and relevant school procedures. These officers are the individuals most often referred to by principals, as most of them have in-depth relevant information related to the Ministry's operations and policies on school leadership.

4.5. Principal's Continuous Professional Development Program

Tahir et al. [47] have proposed a framework for principal professional development for principals. For continuous professional development, mentoring and coaching, informal discussion, benchmarking visits, continuous workshops, and effective leadership are seen as potential supporting programs. In this framework, principals are to be introduced to strategies for school improvement, such as managing conflict between teachers, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, handling teachers' attitudes effectively, interpersonal skills, and managing stress and well-being.

Principals are also exposed to advanced syllabi for school-based management, such as financial management, school law, managing and developing staff, developing teacher competencies, managing conflict, managing school ICT facilities, instructional leadership and curriculum and assessment, and networking. These professional development courses can be conducted through sessions by retired/senior principals, seminars or conferences on school leadership, reflection, hands-on education, and practicality [47].

4.6. Professional Development for Multiple Leadership Functions

In a typology of leadership, principals perform multiple leadership functions [28]. Thus, support is essential for school leaders to perform these functions effectively. When carrying out the responsibility in technological leadership, principals need to be equipped with knowledge of technological planning. For instance, the leader needs to find and decide on the right technology to overcome potential difficulties or school problems. Such knowledge can help the leader to finalize the technological innovations that are appropriate for their school to ensure sustainable development and effectiveness. Recently, we have the generation of Artificial Intelligence, where school leaders need to be competent with digital literacy, since the younger generation has started using AI in education such as Chat GPT to help with their homework. In this case, school leaders need to be proficient so that they can distinguish the work that is generated by AI from what is accomplished by humans.

In addition to being a technological leader, principals need to be supported with economic leadership competencies, such as the ability to weigh costs and benefits in finalizing the best option (for instance in technological innovation) that maximizes the effectiveness of the school with the least cost. In this case, the knowledge of cost–benefit analysis, cost–effectiveness analysis, resources, and financial management becomes an important part of the knowledge needed for a principal [42,48]. As a principal, one needs to be consistently supported with financial knowledge, so that they can find alternative sources of financing for schools and be able to continuously plan to achieve the best output with the least costs.

In terms of social leadership, the principal needs to be supplemented with the continuous professional development of social skills. In daily routines, principal communicates with diverse stakeholders such as parents, students, teachers, support staff, Ministry officials, and others in the community, including international counterparts when dealing with student exchange programs and other discussions. These require communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving skills, conflict resolution skills, and more. The principal plays an important role in communicating with diverse stakeholders to promote school improvement.

As a political leader, principals encounter challenges in managing various school actors with diverse interests and power. The principal needs to be equipped with conflict negotiation skills so that a win-win situation can be created, as the principal needs to be able to resolve conflict across various competing parties. This leadership requires a lot of negotiation, struggle, and conflict management among various parties.

In terms of cultural leadership, the principal needs skills to inspire the school members to remain committed to this shared vision and goals. The principal needs to ensure that any decision-making complies with the culture and norms of society. Multicultural competence is an important skill that needs to be included so that principals are culturally sensitive and address the needs of students and staff

Learning leadership means leaders need to consistently reflect on their experiences, consequently identifying strengths and weaknesses so that they can make better decisions in the future. Principals need to familiarize themselves with new learning modes and encourage subordinates to continue learning so that a culture of continuing to better oneself is developed. Principals need to encourage professional learning communities among teachers so that teachers can collaborate within and across schools with their innovative teaching methods.

Mentoring and coaching, informal discussions, benchmarking visits, continuous workshops, and effective leadership are seen as potential supporting programs. There are also informal discussions with the Association of Principals or National Union Teaching Profession (NUTP), especially when there are pressing issues that involve teacher's rights or students' rights that are often discussed before making any official press release.

In addition to internal and external support to enhance principal competency, smart partnerships with diverse stakeholders are important for the success of school activities. Adams [18] argued that school leaders should collaborate with the wider community and not operate within the school as a separate entity. In this case, such competencies need to be prioritized and trained.

4.7. Smart Partnerships with Industry and Non-Profit Organizations

Among some of the notable efforts to support online teaching during the pandemic observed in Malaysia are YTL Foundation's 'Learn from Home Initiatives'. This initiative provides free smartphones with 120 GB of one-year internet connectivity to students in need. In addition, telecommunication companies allocated an additional 1 GB worth of data to their users, while Time and Telekom have increased the capacity of fiber optic connectivity to ensure stable bandwidth performance [49].

In collaboration with UNICEF Malaysia, the government has curated teaching and training resources to support educators in enhancing virtual teaching skills via the *Komuniti Guru Digital Learning Bersama KPM* [26]. This effort has equipped existing teachers with the necessary competence to assimilate and integrate technology into their teaching.

Smart partnerships have been established with various industries, such as NGOs, health providers, and financial institutions. For example, mental health issues have become an important concern recently, and psychometric assessment and awareness programs with clinics and hospitals have been established.

Financial literacy programs are conducted by schools in collaboration with financial institutions to equip the school community with financial knowledge. This skill has become

very important, especially in post-COVID-19 eras. Financial institutions such as Bank Rakyat, Yayasan Maybank, CIMB are important sponsors of such programs.

Smart partnership with international counterparts, such as benchmarking visits, student exchange, and international leadership training programs, is often highlighted. For instance, University Malaya academics have conducted workshops to train principals from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Nepal.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the importance of preparing and appointing quality school leaders. Quality leaders are an important factor that contributes to students' performance and school effectiveness. The findings from document analysis revealed that various initiatives have been taken by the Malaysian government to ensure the appointment and preparation of quality school leaders. Previously, only those leaders who were very senior and near retirement age were appointed as school principals, and in some instances, it has proven to be ineffective. Recently, there has been much emphasis on ensuring school leaders are well-trained and have 21st-century leadership skills. The Malaysian Education Blueprint has emphasized the need for training and professional development for middle school leaders. This paper highlights the support given to principals in terms of internal and external support. To be a globally competitive school leader, continuous professional development is important, especially for principals. Principals should be given more opportunities to upskill themselves, particularly regarding leadership training, which should not be limited to the initial NPQL training only. Thus, principal leadership training should incorporate practice, policy, theory, and previous research [50]. Principals can share their experiences and learn from each other. However, principals should be able to reflect on their context and make independent decisions based on their school needs. In addition, this program should also incorporate analytical skills, such as data collection, analysis, and data usage for decision-making [51]. Previous studies also pointed out that leaders need to be equipped with analytical skills so that the available data on teachers, students, examination results, health insurance, and financial resources can be used for school improvement [52]. Mentoring serves as an important strategy to develop effective leaders with skills and knowledge, and instill professional values. Though SIPartner+ is a good initiative, the Ministry needs to ensure that the mentor is fully competent, trained, and possesses more experience than the school principal that is being mentored, so that the effectiveness of the coaching program can be maximized [42].

In addition, this paper recommends a more comprehensive framework for producing outstanding Malaysian school principals (Figure 1). The process of producing Malaysian school principals begins with identifying potential school leaders among senior assistant teachers. This is represented through the input variable. The potential school leaders will go through three phases as shown by the process variable to produce principals who fit into the Malaysian context as depicted in the outcome variables. The three phases include preparation, appointment, and continuous support. Support for school leaders includes internal and external support as well as smart partnerships with non-profit organizations such as Parent Teacher Associations, NUTP, and industry and international organizations. In other words, the support system is not only focusing on principals' competency but also negotiations with various stakeholders to ensure the success of school programs, and endeavors that lead to overall school improvement and effectiveness. The principal will be tested in the evaluation variable in terms of school effectiveness. If they fail in the evaluation phase, they will reiterate through either input or process variables. However, the effort to produce an outstanding principal as described in the five variables is greatly influenced by contextual factors, such as the government's education policy.

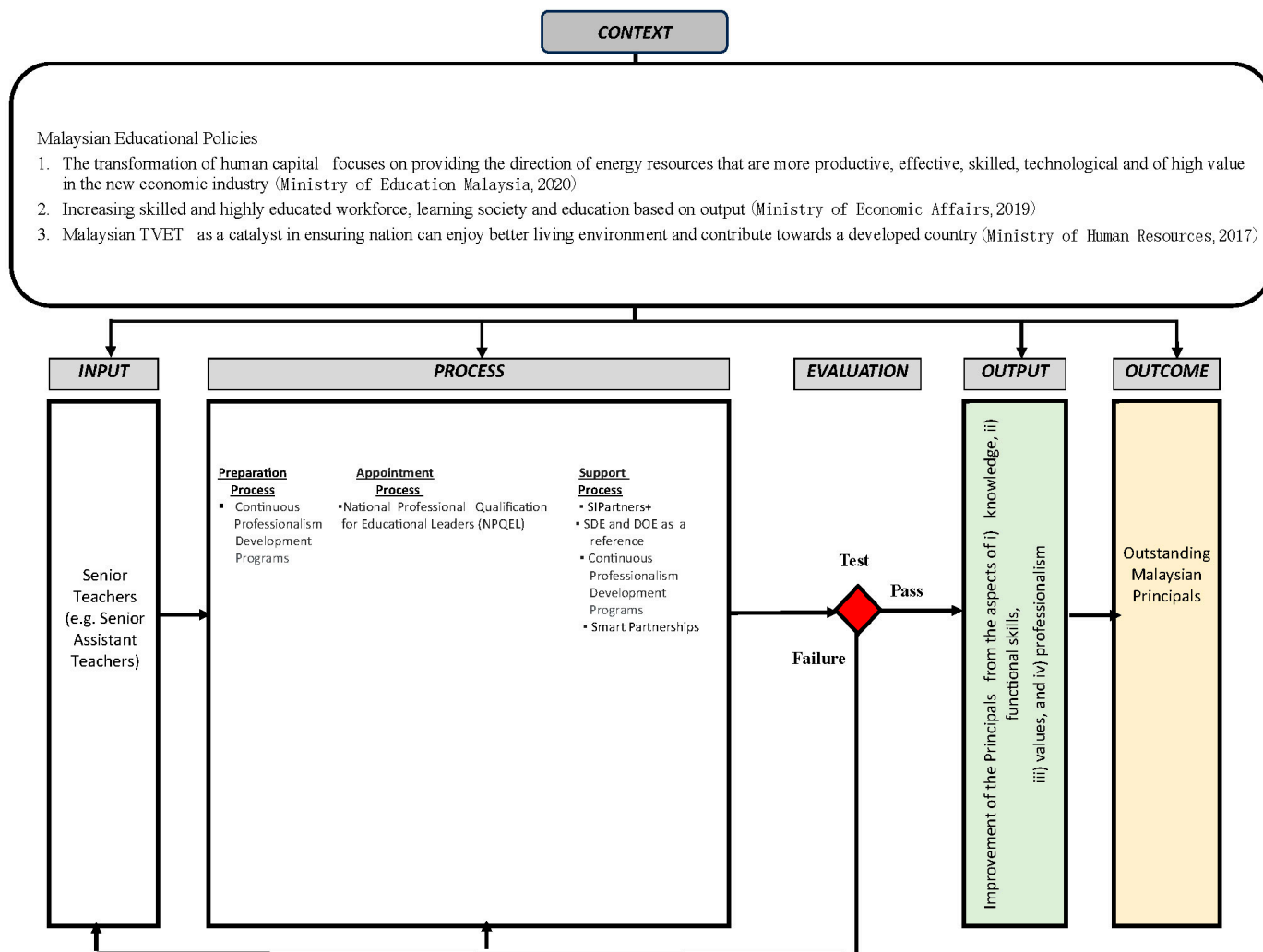


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Producing An Outstanding School Principal [53–55].

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