Instructional Leadership Practices of the Excellent School Principals in Aceh, Indonesia: Managing the Instructional Program

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Abstract

This research was aimed at studying the extent to which the principals of the excellent schools in Aceh, Indonesia practiced the second dimension of the instructional leadership: Managing the Instructional Program comprising three functions, Coordinate Curriculum; Supervise & Evaluate Instruction; Monitor Students’ Progress. The research employed Mixed Method Designs. The Systematic Sampling Technique was chosen in determining the sample of the study. The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scales (PIMRS) developed by Hallinger & Murphy (1985) was used to collect the quantitative data from 120 teachers of the 4 excellent senior high schools in Aceh, and 4 principals, 4 vice principals for curriculum affairs and 4 heads of the school committees were interviewed to gather qualitative data. The results of the quantitative study are consistent with those of qualitative investigation. The findings indicate that the principals of the excellent schools in Aceh, to certain extent, practiced the second dimension of the instructional leadership: Managing the Instructional Program. Further inquiry on the school principals’ leadership especially in Aceh is strongly recommended.

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Excellent School Principal Leadership, Managing the Instructional Program

Introduction

The term ‘instructional leadership’ is associated with measures that a principal takes, or delegates to others, to enhance students’ learning (Flath, 1989). The instructional leader gives the top priority to improving instruction and making efforts to realize the vision.

Principals who sustained diverse responsibilities for many aspects of school management, did not focus on the core business of schooling, teaching and learning, were urged to pay more serious attention to the matters of instruction (Little & Bird, 1987, in Greenfield, 1991). One out of the three dimensions of the instructional leadership construct is Managing the Instructional Program. Managing the Instructional Program is associated with the principal’s role in working with teachers in areas specifically related to educational technology, curriculum, and instruction (Hallinger, 1983). School principals play the most
important role in managing the instructional program, the second dimension of instructional leadership. Unfortunately, instructional leadership is not very popular yet, particularly in developing countries.

Most school principals especially those in developing countries, have yet to prioritize instructional leadership. A research carried out by Hallinger and Taraseina on the principals’ instructional leadership in Thailand in 1994 indicates that the secondary school principals in Northern Thailand do not exercise active instructional leadership in the domains measured by deploying the PIMRS (Principal Instructional Management Rating Scales) developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). Before Hallinger and Taraseina conducted this research, using the same instrument, the PIMRS, researchers had studied the secondary school principals in the United States (Haack, 1991, Pratley, 1992), Malaysia (Saavedra, 1987), and Canada (Jones, 1987). The results of these studies prove that the scores are consistently higher across the subscales compared with those of the assessment of the secondary school principals executed in Northern Thailand. In India, the educational regulations of the country do not seem to side with the shift of school management to the prime business of schooling, teaching and learning yet. For example, the educational code of the country still assigns the school head the duties concerned with general control of the school (Dash, 2008). However, if our goal is to have effective schools, then we must seek for ways to emphasize on instructional leadership (Chell, 1995).

An excellent school is often referred to “sekolah model,” or “sekolah percontohan,” or “sekolah unggul,” or “sekolah unggulan” in Bahasa. In literature, the excellent schools,”sekolah unggulan,” commonly share most of their characteristics with effective schools or high performing schools or “sekolah berkesan” in Malaysia. However, indeed, the terms excellent schools in this context are not identical with effective schools, high performing schools or “sekolah berkesan” in Malaysia, although it is hoped that these excellent schools would become effective schools one day. The schools under investigation are state senior high schools under the Education Service Office (Dinas Pendidikan) of the Aceh Province, meaning those under the control of the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Indonesia.

Aceh is an autonomous territory (daerah otonom) of Indonesia located on the northern tip of the Sumatra Island. It also used to be called Nanggröe Aceh Darussalam. Past spellings of its name include Acheh, Atjeh and Achin. Aceh is the area where Islam was first established in Southeast Asia. In the early seventeenth century the Sultanate of Aceh was the most wealthy, powerful and cultivated state in the Malacca Straits region. Aceh, which is presently inhabited by 5,006,807 inhabitants (the result of census carried out by the Aceh Government in 2010), has a history of political independence and fierce resistance to control by outsiders. It has substantial natural resources, including oil and natural gas. Aceh is partly implementing syaria law now. The capital of Aceh is Banda Aceh. It was the closest point of land to the epicenter of the terrible 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, which triggered a tsunami that devastated much of the western coast of the region, including part
of the capital, Banda Aceh. The massive earthquake and tsunami killed 226,000 people (Ilyas, 2008). This deadly disaster helped peace initiators bring the warring parties, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, to the negotiating table to end 30-years of war. Mediated by the former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari -- the head of the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) Agency -- the peace agreement, the Memorandum of Understanding, MoU Helsinki, was signed in Helsinki, Finland, on August 15, 2005. The end of long war accelerated the well-managed rehabilitation and reconstruction process and resulted in significant changes and continuous development in Aceh. The fast development remarkably impacts education including school management and leadership practices.

**Conceptual framework**

The three dimensions of Instructional Leadership are Defining School Goals, Managing the Instructional Program and Developing School Learning Climate. This study concentrated on the second dimension of the instructional leadership practices formulated by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Managing the Instructional Program comprising Coordinates the Curriculum; Supervises and Evaluates Instruction; Monitors Student Progress subscales.


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Literature review

Definition of Excellent/Effective School

In most literature, the term ‘effective school’ is more frequently found than the term ‘excellent school,’ which is often associated with ‘sekolah unggul’ or ‘sekolah unggulan’ in Bahasa. In international literature, the effective schools/excellent schools are frequently associated with lab school, effective school, demonstration school, experiment school, or accelerated school (Abidin, 2007). In Malaysia, effective school is often referred to ‘sekolah berkesan’ or ‘high performing school.’ It can be found anywhere both in urban and rural areas and it is a dynamic process. Today a school is an effective school. In a couple years in the future, the school may become a regular school, and this also applies in reverse (Reuter, 1992). Output, which is normally expressed in terms of students’ academic achievement, is commonly measured as a standard of school effectiveness (Rahimah & Zulkifli, 1996). In Aceh, the status of the excellence is decided and inscribed in an official decree by the Head of the Education Service Office of Regency/City level together with regents or mayors, and school administrators (Laisani, 2009). The table below depicts eleven characteristics of effective schools.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Professional leadership</td>
<td>Firm and purposeful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A participative approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The leading professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Shared vision and goals</td>
<td>Unity of purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistency of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collegiality and collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 A learning environment</td>
<td>An orderly atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An attractive working environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Concentration on teaching and learning</td>
<td>Maximization of learning time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Purposeful teaching</td>
<td>Efficient organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clarity of purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structured lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptive practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 High expectations</td>
<td>High expectations all around</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is a change from conventional management practice of the schools, in which principals were seen as general managers of the schools, to a principal as instructional leader. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) whose instrument, the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), is widely used for school principal leadership assessment including for this study, state that instructional leadership in an effective school comprises three dimensions: Defining the School Mission, Managing the Instructional Program and Promoting a School Learning Climate.

Previous studies using the PIMRS have been conducted in many different school settings especially in the United States. Among others, a study carried out by Brendan J. Lyons in 2010: Principal Instructional Leadership Behavior, as Perceived by Teachers and Principals, at New York State Recognized and Non-Recognized Middle Schools. The study compared the principals’ instructional leadership practices between the recognized and non-recognized schools. The results indicate that, on the average, principals of recognized schools are demonstrating the leadership behaviors measured in the PIMRS more frequently than their counterparts of non-recognized schools. Based on the bulk of research, lack of instructional leadership of the principal is blamed for school ineffectiveness (Findley & Findley, 1992).

Managing the instructional program

Managing the Instructional Program, for the purpose of this study, is defined as the principal’s role in working with teachers in areas specifically related to educational
technology, curriculum, and instruction (Hallinger, 1983). It is divided into three instructional leadership functions:

**Coordinating the curriculum**

**Supervising and evaluating instruction**

**Monitoring student progress** (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

**Coordinating the curriculum** is as the degree to which school curricular objectives are aligned with course content, achievement tests, and the continuity in a curricular series across grade levels (Hallinger, 1983). Murphy, Elliot, Goldring, and Porter (2006) state that “school leaders in effective schools are knowledgeable about and deeply involved in the school’s curricular program.” Principals manage and support the teaching and learning program; they apply the highest standards of teaching and learning; they solve the problems emerge (Chapman & Mongon, 2008).

**Supervising and evaluating instruction** is defined as activities that involve interaction between the principal and teachers regarding classroom practices (Hallinger, 1983). It is a job function which is most often than not refers to the role of the principal as instructional leader. The classrooms of the effective school are frequently visited by the principal (Hallinger & Murphy, 1987).

**Monitoring student progress** is defined as the extent to which principals take responsibility for developing a systematic and comprehensive testing program. Test results are discussed with the staff as a whole, and are provided interpretations or analyses for teachers detailing the relevant test data. Test results are used for goal setting, curricular assessment, planning, and measuring progress toward school goals (Hallinger, 1983). Good school principals provide teachers and parents with assessment results on an ongoing basis (Levine & Stark, 1982; Venezky & Windfield, 1979). In this way, they know the progress the students make concerning their study.

**The study**

**Research purpose**

In response to the importance of instructional leadership, this study intended to focus on one of the three instructional leadership dimensions based on the Hallinger’s Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) model developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Managing the Instructional Program.

**Research question**

This research was aimed to serve one research question: To what extent have the Excellent Senior High School Principals in Aceh practiced the second dimension of the instructional leadership construct: Managing the Instructional Program?
Research design

This investigation employed Mixed Methods Designs. Mixed Methods Designs are “procedures for collecting, analyzing, and linking both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a multiple series of studies” (Creswell, 2005). According to Creswell (2005), mixing both quantitative and qualitative data provides better understanding of a research problem than one type of data. In this study the emphasis was put on quantitative data as a basis for further gathering of qualitative data.

The PIMRS as a main instrument

This research was carried out in two main phases. The first phase was for gathering the data on principal instructional leadership practices by means of the teacher versions of the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), developed by Hallinger & Murphy (1985). The instrument provides a “1” to “5” response scale accompanied with each item with 1 representing “almost never”; 2 representing “seldom”; 3 representing “sometimes”; 4 representing “frequently”; and, 5 representing “almost always” (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). It was completed by participants, teachers of the four excellent senior high schools, during the quantitative phase, the first phase of the study.

Interview as an instrument

During the second phase, principals, vice principals for curriculum affairs and the heads of the committee of the four schools were interviewed on their perceptions on the principals’ instructional leadership practices. The interview questions were designed to complement and enrich the data gathered by using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) of the teacher versions.

The process of mixed method

Figure 3.1 Sequential Explanatory Strategy. Source: Creswell et al, (2003).

Sequential Explanatory Strategy

Figure 3.1 presents the data collection stages. Quantitative data were collected during the first phase of the study. The quantitative data were analyzed prior to qualitative
investigation. Then, the qualitative data were gathered during the second phase of the study. After qualitative study was carried out, the qualitative data were analyzed followed by interpretation of the whole data analysis.

Systematic sampling and samples

In this study systematic sampling was used. The researcher studied instructional leadership practices of 16 principals of excellent/effective senior high schools in Aceh, Indonesia under the administration of the Education Service Office (Dinas Pendidikan) of the Aceh Special Province or the National Education Ministry of the Republic of Indonesia. Referring to systematic sampling procedure, 20% out 16 is 3.2. This means that 3.2 excellent senior high schools would become the sample of this study. However, it is advisable to select as large a sample as possible from the population, because the larger the sample, the less potential error, which is called sampling error (Verma & Mallick, 1999). Therefore, the sample of this research was slightly larger than it is supposed to be, 120 teachers out of 480 teachers, 4 principals out of 16 excellent senior high school principals in Aceh, 4 vice principals for curriculum affairs and 4 heads of the school committees.

Data analysis

The qualitative data gathered by using interview, was organized and transcribed. The fieldnotes, interview results, were typed and the qualitative data was analyzed by hand. The findings and interpretations were validated to check the accuracy. Finally, for this study the qualitative data were just presented in common themes; quantitative and qualitative findings were linked; pertinent theories of previous studies were also connected with these findings.

Findings

Quantitative data of PIMRS

This section discusses the results of quantitative study using PIMRS (Principal Instructional Management Rating Scales) developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). The tables below present quantitative data of teachers’ responses derived from the PIMRS (Principal Instructional Management Rating Scales), the second dimension: Managing the Instructional Program consisting of three subscales : Supervise & Evaluate Instruction; Coordinate Curriculum; Monitoring Students’ Progress
Table 2:  
Mean Scores of Supervise & Evaluate Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensure that the classroom priorities of teachers are consistent with the goals and direction of the school</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review student work products when evaluating classroom instruction</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct informal observation in classrooms on a regular basis</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point out specific strengths in teacher’s instructional practices in post-observation feedback</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point out specific weaknesses in teacher instructional practices in post-observation feedback</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3:  
Mean Scores of Coordinate the Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make clear who is responsible for coordinating the curriculum across grade levels</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw upon the results of school-wide testing when making curricular decisions</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor the classroom curriculum to see that it covers the school's curricular objectives</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess the overlap between the school's curricular objectives and the school's achievement tests</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate actively in the review of curricular materials</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4:  
Mean Scores of Monitor Student Progress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meet individually with teachers to discuss student progress</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss academic performance results with the faculty to identify curricular</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
strengths and weaknesses

| Use tests and other performance measures to assess progress toward school goals | 104 | 1 | 5 | 3.83 |
| Inform teachers of the school’s performance results in written form | 104 | 1 | 5 | 3.95 |
| Inform students of school’s academic progress | 104 | 2 | 5 | 4.43 |

Taken as a whole there are similar level of the mean scores of the three subscales. In each of the three subscales just one of the five items displays above 4.0 mean scores. Most of the items of the three subscales show similar mean scores 3.5 or above.

**Supervise and evaluate instruction**

Apart from to “ensure that the classroom priorities of teachers are consistent with the goals and direction of the school,” items with a relatively high response, meaning that principals ‘frequently’ perform this particular subscale, the teachers reported a lower mean score overall for each items of the Supervise and Evaluate Instruction function. This indicates that principals practice ‘sometimes’ most of the item in this subscale. The results suggest that principals’ instructional leadership practices in this particular area should be improved.

**Coordinate the curriculum**

Except for “make clear who is responsible for coordinating the curriculum across grade levels” item which was responded at the highest mean score meaning that principals ‘frequently’ practice the item, the rest of the items were reported at slightly below frequently threshold. The results indicate that principals almost ‘frequently’ practice these four items of the subscale. Although most of the items were reported at relatively higher mean scores, it also reveals that there is room for enhancement.

**Monitor student progress**

Similarly, only one of the items, “inform students of school’s academic progress” was responded the highest of the five items indicating that principals ‘frequently’ practice the item. The rest of the items fell below ‘frequently’ threshold. Even though the responses to the items are relatively high, they are still considered low. Low responses in these particular items indicate that the principals need to practice these items more frequently.
Linkage between quantitative and qualitative findings

One of the most important findings is that there was a high consistency between the teachers’ responses in the quantitative research and those of the interview sessions.

Qualitative

On the whole, qualitative findings enrich the quantitative data. For “Supervise and Evaluate Instruction,” the results of interview sessions display that the principals are mobile throughout the building and classrooms supervising instruction. To a certain extent, principals perform this instructional leadership function.

For “Coordinate Curriculum,” almost all participants stated that principals are doing well on curriculum coordination, meaning that principals practice this instructional leadership function. They coordinate curriculum.

For “Monitor Student Progress,” the results of qualitative study indicate that principals also exercise this instructional leadership function. They monitor student progress. Almost all respondents stated that principals rely on evaluations in terms of monitoring student progress.

Discussion

In terms of “Coordinate Curriculum,” based on the result of the quantitative study, principals of the excellent senior high schools in Aceh, Indonesia ‘frequently’ practice the items under this subscale. All respondents of the qualitative study stated that principals are doing well and collaborating with teachers on curriculum coordination. The principals not only rely on a single method in coordinating curriculum but also use multiple approaches, such as teaching program checks, vice principal’s information, the MGMP (the Discussion Forum for the Teachers Who Teach the Same Courses)/teams, test results, the KKM (Passing or contract Grades), and classroom visits. This finding is aligned with existing theory that principals of effective schools work collaboratively with the teachers to ensure that the schools apply a rigorous curriculum program and all students learn rigorous content of high quality curriculum (Newmann, 1997; Ogden & Germinario, 1995).

Concerning “Monitoring Student Progress” which was responded at almost ‘frequently’. Almost all respondents of the interview responded that principals not only rely on evaluations, tests, and classroom teachers, but also successes in certain competitions. The finding corresponds to previous studies which indicate that effective schools are characterized by systematic, school-wide procedures for monitoring student progress (Baron & Shoemaker, 1982; Cohen, 1981; Edmonds & Fredericksen, 1978; Sweeney, 1982). In regard to “Supervise and Evaluate Instruction” which was rated at an average score of below ‘frequently’ but still at ‘sometimes’ or higher, meaning that principals also practice this particular instructional leadership function “sometimes.” They see this function as one of the most important functions of the instructional leadership. The principals are mobile throughout the building and classrooms supervising instruction. To a certain extent, principals perform this instructional leadership function. They supervise and evaluate...
instruction. However, some respondents failed to specifically mention the principal instructional leadership practices on reviewing student work products, the length of time spent on the classroom observations, and feedback of specific strengths and weaknesses of the teacher’s instructional practice. The findings are consistent with those found by Little and Bird (1987) who emphasized the significance of the supervision and evaluation.

The schools, whose principal leadership under study, are excellent schools. These schools are called “sekolah unggulan” in Bahasa. They are favourite schools in Aceh, Indonesia.

The findings of this investigation support the contention that principals of the excellent senior high schools in Aceh, Indonesia, to certain extent, practice instructional leadership functions specifically those under Managing the Instructional Program dimension-items of “Coordinate the Curriculum; Supervise and Evaluate Instruction; Monitor Student Progress’ functions.

The result is not in line with the findings of a survey conducted by Hallinger and Taraseina on the principals’ instructional leadership in Thailand in 1994 indicating that the secondary school principals in Northern Thailand do not exercise active instructional leadership in the domains measured by deploying the PIMRS (Principal Instructional Management Rating Scales) developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), and is not consistent either with the findings of a study in India. In India the educational regulations of the country do not seem to side with the shift of school management to the prime business of schooling, teaching and learning yet. In this country, the educational code of the country still assigns the school principals the duties that are concerned with general control of the school (Dash, 2008).

**Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that the principals of the excellent senior high schools in Aceh, Indonesia, to certain extent, exercise the second dimension of instructional leadership functions: Managing the Instructional Program. Since this report just focused on the three functions of the principal instructional leadership, it is impossible to draw the conclusion of the whole picture of the instructional leadership practices of the excellent senior high school principals in Aceh, Indonesia. The principals of the excellent schools in Aceh should practice the instructional leadership functions more frequently. All stakeholders should be aware of the significance of the principals’ instructional leadership practices for school improvement. Further study on other principal instructional leadership functions of the excellent schools or instructional leadership of regular schools is strongly recommended.
References


