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Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Instructional Leadership Roles and Practices

(Persepsi Guru terhadap Peranan dan Amalan Kepimpinan Instruksional Pengetua)

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ABSTRACT

*As a part of Malaysia's education transformation, the Ministry of Education expects all principals to be instructional leaders. In response to this call, this study attempts to describe teachers' perceptions on instructional leadership roles and practices of principals, as well as examine the relationship between the teachers' gender and their perception of instructional leadership roles and practices. A total of 105 primary school teachers from five primary schools in Alor Gajah, Malaysia participated in this quantitative study. The data was collected randomly through distribution of a survey questionnaire containing 35 items adapted from the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (*PIMRS*). Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze data using SPSS (V.22). Results from teachers' responses reveal the following: 1) a moderate level of perception of instructional leadership functions related to defining the school's mission; 2) a moderate level of perception of functions related to managing instructional program; 3) a low level of perception of functions with respect to promoting a positive climate; and 4) no relationship between gender and the perception of instructional leadership. The results from this study will bring forth the current state of instructional leadership in Malaysian primary schools and keep the Malaysian government abreast with this scenario to improve training programs and make continuous training in principal leadership compulsory.*

Keywords: Instructional leadership; principal; gender; teachers' perceptions; primary school; education; Malaysia

ABSTRAK

Sebagai sebahagian daripada transformasi pendidikan Malaysia, Kementerian Pendidikan menjangka semua pengetua menjadi pemimpin instruksional. Untuk bertindak balas kepada panggilan ini, kajian ini menggambarkan persepsi guru tentang peranan dan amalan kepimpinan instruksional para pengetua, serta mengkaji hubungan antara jantina guru dan persepsi mereka tentang peranan dan amalan kepimpinan instruksional. Sejumlah 105 guru sekolah rendah dari lima sekolah rendah di Alor Gajah, Malaysia mengambil bahagian dalam kajian kuantitatif ini. Data dikumpul secara rawak melalui pengedaran soal selidik tinjauan yang mengandungi 35 item yang disesuaikan daripada Skor Penilaian Pengajaran Utama (PIMRS). Kedua-dua statistik deskriptif dan inferens digunakan untuk menganalisis data menggunakan SPSS (V.22). Dapatan menunjukkan perkara berikut: 1) persepsi tahap sederhana berkaitan fungsi kepimpinan instruksional yang berkaitan dengan penentuan misi sekolah; 2) persepsi tahap sederhana berkaitan pengurusan program pengajaran; 3) persepsi tahap rendah untuk fungsi yang menggalakkan iklim positif; dan 4) tiada hubungan antara jantina dengan persepsi kepimpinan instruksional. Hasil kajian ini mengetengahkan keadaan semasa kepimpinan instruksional di sekolah rendah di Malaysia dan memastikan kesedaran kerajaan Malaysia tentang senario ini untuk meningkatkan program latihan dan membuat latihan berterusan dalam kepimpinan utama yang wajib.

Kata kunci: Kepimpinan instruksional; pengetua; jantina; persepsi guru; sekolah rendah; pendidikan; Malaysia

Introduction

Instructional leadership provides a clear definition of the roles and practices of school principals with respect to the management and implementation of the curriculum. Ever since its early conception, instructional leadership has narrowed down the debate as to what constitutes the roles and responsibilities of principals as school leaders. Earlier defined as the evolution of the function of principals as school managers to managers of the curriculum (Hallinger 1992), the idea of principals as instructional leaders transcends to the notion of leadership for learning geared towards school improvement and students' academic achievement (Hallinger & Heck 2010; Pettiegrew 2013). With the emphasis on students' academic achievement in gauging school improvement, the effects of instructional leadership on student learning outcomes in various educational settings have always been in question especially in the Asia Pacific region (Hallinger & Chen 2015).

Studies related to instructional leadership address its positive effects on school improvement and students' academic achievement (Hoy et al. 2013). As leaders of learning, school principals have a direct influence on the development of teachers with regards to honing pedagogical practices used in the classroom (Rossow 2011). Specifically addressing students' learning outcomes, Day, Gu and Sammons (2016) highlight the significance of instructional leadership practices focusing on improving teaching and learning strategies. Likewise, a strong collaboration between principals and schoolteachers leads to initiatives in further developing existing classroom practices, which positively impacts students' academic achievement (Pettiegrew 2013). Although these correlational studies between instructional leadership and student achievement are dominated by findings from the West, particularly the United States, studies conducted in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia significantly contributes to further understanding the implications of instructional leadership in varied environments (Hallinger 2011).

In the Malaysian context of primary education, the call for principals to be instructional leaders is deeply embedded in policy and practice. According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education 2013), principals are expected to be fully equipped in terms of instructional leadership matters, which cover duties related to school improvement, curriculum planning, and teacher development. Hence, the focus on instructional leadership in all Malaysian schools brings forth an idealized systemic change and aspirations for better students' academic achievement. In a study from high performance schools in Malaysia, Musa and Noor (2017) validates how the adoption of instructional leadership style by principals reflects the status of the school in terms of teachers' professional development, resource management, and students' performance. The potential of studying the teachers' perception of instructional leadership practices of their principals enriches existing literature in Malaysia and further establishes the value of instructional leadership in this academic setting.

As empirical research in instructional leadership in Malaysia continue to grow in the past 10 years, studies conducted in Malaysian primary schools still lags behind those conducted in secondary schools although a number of findings contribute to variables related to academic achievement (Hallinger et al. & Jones 2018). Likewise, the systematic review by Hallinger et al. (2018) of 120 studies on instructional leadership in Malaysia recommended that more studies should be done in primary schools to address the "clear imbalance in the Malaysian database favouring studies of leadership in secondary schools" (p. 119). Furthermore, a number of studies in Malaysia attempted to examine how the gender of teachers are linked with the way they rated their principals, but "no common patterns emerged from these studies" (Hallinger et al. 2018, p. 115). Hence, this study sheds light to the role of gender in understanding perspectives on instructional leadership, particularly in the primary school setting.

By considering the perception of Malaysian teachers, this quantitative study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To describe teachers' perceptions on principals' instructional leadership roles and practices in Malaysian primary schools.
2. To determine the relationship between teachers' gender and their perception on the effects of instructional leadership roles and practices of principals in Malaysian primary schools.

In response to the second aim of this research, null and alternative hypotheses have been formulated as follows:

H_0: There is no relationship between teachers' gender and the perception of instructional leadership roles and practices of principals.

H_1: There is a relationship between teachers' gender and the perception of instructional leadership roles and practices of principals.

Instructional Leadership: Roles, Practices, and Outcomes

According to Robinson et al. (2008), the concept of instructional leadership can be classified in two distinct approaches: exclusive and inclusive. As an exclusive approach, instructional leadership pertains to how school principals take full responsibility of the management, classroom teaching and learning, setting goals of the school, supervision and developing instruction to aid in students' academic achievement. On the other hand, an inclusive approach refers to the collaboration between the principal and school staff (Hallinger & Murphy 1987). Marks and Printy (2003) noted the significance for school principals to work closely with teachers to improve student learning outcomes. School principals should collaborate with teachers in order for teachers to understand the roles of their principal with respect to teaching and learning, which leads to shared knowledge in the school community.

In theory, instructional leadership defines the roles of school principals according to the following dimensions: defining the school's mission; managing the instructional program; and, promoting a positive school learning climate (Hallinger 2005; Hallinger & Murphy 1987). Each dimension specifically describes a set of functions of the principal as instructional leaders. In defining the school's mission, the principal has to frame and communicate the school goals, which forms the foundation of the schools' purpose and provides a clear sense of direction. In addition, principals manage their instructional program by being able to supervise and evaluate instruction, coordinate the curriculum, and monitor students' progress. Furthermore, Hallinger (2005) adds the value of promoting a positive

school learning climate in such a way that principals should protect instructional times, promote professional development, maintain high visibility, provide incentives for teaching and learning, as well as inculcate high academic and professional standards.

With roles and functions related to students' learning, principals as instructional leaders affect academic achievement to a certain extent. Although it has been argued that leadership is only second to teaching in terms of affecting learning outcomes (Leithwood et al. 2008), studies in instructional leadership persist to establish the direct correlation between the two constructs (Mitchell et al. 2015). Hallinger (2011) emphasized that the nature of instructional leadership as leadership for learning focuses on the main goal of improving schools in the context of teaching and learning. Thus, one of the main thrusts of instructional leaders is geared towards building capacity in order to address needs related to students' academic achievement (Sebastian & Allensworth 2012).

Despite the clear definition of the roles of principals, the theoretical implications of instructional leadership on students' learning outcomes present issues in reality as to the extent principals prioritise learning over other administrative matters (Eacott 2015). Blase and Blase (2001) noted that school principals spending more time on management duties like coordinating local events, logistics and infrastructure matters, which are not related to teaching. These cause them to have lack of time in planning and evaluating the curriculum, supervising teachers, and engaging with teachers in teaching and learning (Blase & Blasé 2001). Furthermore, Wildy and Dimmock (1993) reported that school principals tend to delegate their administrative duties and responsibilities to senior teachers, which does not reflect the application of instructional leadership into real-world school settings.

Through time, efforts to address these issues of the past put principals' roles and functions back on track with instructional leadership ideals and students' academic achievement. Keefe and Jenkins (2002) explained that principals play the roles of instructional leaders by allocating instructional resources, supporting to teachers in developing their teaching styles, and also guiding students to achieve their learning goals. In a study in primary and secondary schools in England, Day et al. (2016) noted the necessity for principals to employ instructional leadership strategies in the specific context of their respective school systems to fully realise its impact on students' learning. In China, Hou, Cui and Zhang (2019) presents the correlation between the extent high school principals perform instructional leadership functions and the students' ability to do well in college entrance tests. Most importantly, the challenges of the 21st century demand effective school leaders to be instructional leaders who are committed not only to raising academic achievement but also the standards of teaching and learning (Adams et al. 2017).

Gender and perceptions of Instructional Leadership

From a psycho-sociological perspective, gender shapes an individual's perception of his or her environment, as well as other individuals (Aikhenvald 2016). In the earlier conception of instructional leadership, Hallinger and Murphy (1987) noted the potentials of exploring gender-related factors as a variable in understanding instructional leadership. Thus, gender remains to be one of the most researched variables in over 30 years of empirical studies in instructional leadership (Hallinger 2011; Hallinger et al. 2016). Although most of these studies pertain to gender as an antecedent variable defining the nature of instructional leadership, looking at gender as a factor shaping teachers' perspectives on leadership provides a different angle in understanding instructional leadership functions (Day et al. 2016). In a study conducted in the United States, Lee, Smith and Cioci (1993) reported that male and female teachers perceive the leadership styles of their principals differently. Likewise, Jantzi and Leithwood (1996) consider teachers' gender as a factor in shaping ideals and expectations of school leadership; thus, they characterize female teachers' perspectives to be more inclined towards interpersonal relationship and capacity building.

Instructional Leadership in the Malaysian Setting

In Malaysia, school principals remain to be the key figure in school organizations. The Ministry of Education regulates principals' tasks and capabilities based on the Malaysian School Principals' Competency Standards, which defined professional values and commitment to instruction as the core of principal leadership (Ayob 2012). The main intention of these standards is to improve principals' professional skills by providing relevant trainings as well as to provide them with a clear guide to understand and implement their responsibilities (MOE 1993). In this regard, principals' instructional leadership roles such as providing guidance to teachers on curriculum and pedagogy, as well as improving students learning outcome, will help them to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools by professionally influencing teachers, who have a direct influence on students' achievement (Leithwood et al. 2008).

Based on the Malaysian Review Committee Report (2006) regarding the status of education, school principals have a major part in students' academic achievement through teaching and learning activities, as well as effective supervision of the school organization. Jones et al. (2015) noted that Malaysian principals primarily consider their integral role as enabling others to act in order to improve schools and students' learning outcomes. In Malaysian secondary schools, studies link high performance of students in examinations with principals who manifest

traits that reflect instructional leadership ideals (Musa & Noor 2017; Suraya & Yunus 2012). In international schools in Malaysia, school leaders stress the significance of creating a clear vision and promoting a positive climate in a culturally diverse learning environment (Velarde, 2017). Moreover, Harris et al. (2017) interviewed Malaysian primary school principals who were able to explain their functions and responsibilities as instructional leaders, particularly in terms of monitoring teaching and learning in their schools. Since the aforementioned study only included 30 principals, a larger scale study could give a broader view as to how principals lead their schools and their impact on students' academic achievement.

Research Framework

The previous section discussed the theoretical underpinnings of this study, which revolves around instructional leadership functions of principals and students' academic achievement in the context of Malaysian primary schools. Based on the instructional leadership framework by Hallinger and Murphy (1987), this study looks into the perceived roles and practices of principals as instructional leaders. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study.

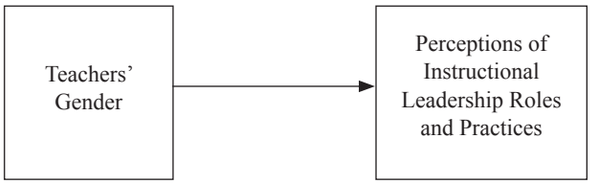

FIGURE 1. Conceptual Framework
(*Sources*: Hallinger & Murph 1987; Lee et al. 1993)

Aside from reporting the perceptions of instructional leadership functions, this study seeks to determine the relationship between the gender of the respondents and their perception of their principals' leadership roles and practices as illustrated in Figure 1. Lee et al. (1993) postulated the effects of the gender of the teachers as respondents on the way they perceive the quality of their school leadership.

Methodology

RESEARCH DESIGN

Following a quantitative research design, this study utilized a deductive approach and administered survey questionnaires to describe the instructional leadership roles and practices of primary school principals. This study reflects a postpositivist worldview by ensuring an objectivist perspective in explaining a phenomenon (Creswell 2018). This design is highly suiTable in allowing researchers to achieve the aims of the study primarily in examining relationships between two variables as it follows a standardized procedure of ensuring reliability and validity of the instruments that seek to respond to the specified research questions and test related hypotheses (Chua 2016).

PARTICIPANTS

For the purpose of this research, the population of the current study was teachers from public primary schools in Alor Gajah. These primary schools are located in the southern region of Peninsular Malaysia. The teachers were randomly selected to participate from five public primary schools in Alor Gajah, Melaka. After data cleaning, 105 clear responses from the public-school teachers were deemed appropriate for data analysis.

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants, which include their age, gender, experience, ethnicity, and subjects they teach.

TABLE 1. Demographic information of participants

	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Age	21-30	52	49.5 %
	31-40	29	27.6%
	41-50	21	20.0%
	51-60	3	2.9%
Gender	Male	27	25.7%
	Female	78	74.3%
Experience	Less than 1 year	9	8.6%
	1-3 years	25	23.8%
	4-10 years	39	37.1%
	11-20 years	29	27.6%
	21-30 years	3	2.9%
Ethnicity	Malay	11	10.5%
	Chinese	48	45.7%
	Indian	46	43.8%
	Others	0	0%
Subjects Taught	Language	36	34.3%
	Mathematic	32	30.5%
	Science	31	29.5%
	Others	6	5.7%

Table 1 above presents the demographic information of the participants. It shows that 49.5% of the participants are ages 21 to 30 years old, 27.6% are ages 31 to 40 years old, 20.0% are ages 41 to 50 years old, and 2.9% are ages 51-60 years old. It is also shown also that a total of 74.3% of the participants are female, while the remaining 25.7% are male. For their work experience, 37.1% of the respondents have a work experience between 4-10 years while 2.9% has an experience between 21-30 years. In terms of racial profile, 45.7% of the participants are Chinese, 43.8% of the teachers are Indian, and 10.5% of the teachers are

Malay. With respect to the subjects they teach, 34.3% of the respondents teach Language, 30.5% of the respondents teach Mathematics, while 29.5% of the respondents teach science. Only 5.7% of the teachers teach other subjects. As indicated by the data, the largest proportion of the participants are dominated by female teachers between 21-30 years old, reflecting a young demographic.

INSTRUMENTATION

A survey questionnaire containing 50 items was used to obtain information from respondents. The items in the study's questionnaire were adapted from the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale or the PIMRS (Pettiegrew 2013), and modified accordingly to fit the research objectives. Moreover, the questionnaire is divided in two sections: Demographic Information of Participants; Instructional Leadership dimensions (roles & practices). The questionnaire was based on a four-point Likert Scale with the following descriptors: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, and Strongly Disagree = 1.

Hallinger (2008) claimed that the PIMRS is a valid and reliable instrument in measuring a principal's instructional leadership style. Utilized in more than 119 different studies, it has already surpassed the standards set for use for research and investigative purposes (Pettiegrew 2013). For validity of the instruments, Pettiegrew (2013) pointed out that Hallinger already validated the instruments via four professionals who were familiar with the primary aspects of instructional leadership for the 10 distinct functions stipulated in the PIMRS. Hallinger found that each item reaches the average agreement from the group of professional raters, which ranged from 80% to 100% (Pettiegrew 2013). In addition, the internal consistency of the instruments has been tested to establish the reliability of the instruments. Hallinger found that the values of Cronbach's alpha ranged between .78 to .90, which indicates the acceptable values that determine the reliability of the instrument (Pettiegrew 2013). Table 2 below presents the reliability results of the instruments.

TABLE 2. The Reliability of the Instrument

Subscale	Reliability (Cronbach's alpha)
Frame Goals	.89
Communicate Goals	.89
Supervision/Evaluation	.90
Curricular Coordination	.90
Monitors Student Progress	.90
Protects Instructional Time	.84
Visibility	.81
Incentives for Teachers	.78
Professional Development	.86
Academic Standards	.83
Incentives for Learning	.87

Source: Reliability estimates by Hallinger (1982) as cited in Pettiegrew (2013)

Therefore, based on Table 2 and the previous discussion, the instrument used for this study is considered valid and reliable as determined by previous studies (Hallinger 1982, as cited in Pettiegrew 2013).

The questionnaires were given randomly to 150 teachers in Alor Gajah public (*Government Schools*) primary schools after getting the permission for collecting data from that school. The teachers who participated voluntarily in this study were asked to answer all the questions carefully and honestly based on their experiences with and perceptions of their principals. After one week, the questionnaires were collected from the respondents. Total of 150 questionnaires were distributed and 105 were returned. The questionnaires with missing information, which cannot contribute to the findings of this research, were not counted. In the end, a total of 105 questionnaires with full information were tallied for this study.

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS (V.22), software for both descriptive and inferential statistic. Frequencies and percentages were used to get information about the background of the respondents, as well as teachers' perception of principals' instructional leadership roles and practices. In addition, T-test was used to see if there was a difference between teachers' gender and their perception of instructional leadership roles and practices of principals.

Findings and Discussion

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON PRINCIPALS' INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ROLES AND PRACTICES IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

DEFINING THE SCHOOL'S MISSION

The first research objective seeks to describe the teachers' perception of instructional leadership roles and practices. In response to this objective, Table 3 and Table 4 show the mean and standard deviation obtained for the first dimension of instructional leadership–defining the school's mission. These functions pertain to framing the school goals and communicating school goals.

As shown in Table 3, the overall mean score for framing the school goals according to the perception of the teachers was 1.87 (SD = 0.747). The mean scores of the five items range from 1.35 (SD = 0.50) to 2.54 (SD = 0.951). This could be interpreted as the teachers having a moderate level of perception of their principal's role in terms of framing the school goals (Pettiegrew 2013).

As shown in Table 4, the overall mean score for communicating the school goals according to the perception of the teachers was 2.02 (SD = 0.823). The mean scores of the five items range from 1.53 (SD = 0.621) to 2.54 (SD = 1.028). This could be interpreted as the teachers having

TABLE 3. Framing the school goals

	Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
A1	My school principal develops a focused set of annual school-wide goals	46 (43.8%)	39 (37.1%)	18 (17.1%)	2 (1.9%)	1.77	.800
A2	My school principal frames the school's goals in terms of staff responsibilities for meeting them	69 (65.7%)	35 (33.3%)	1 (1.0%)	0 (0%)	1.35	.500
A3	My school principal uses needs assessment or other formal and informal methods to secure staff input on goal development	22 (21.0%)	42 (40.0%)	35 (33.3%)	6 (5.7%)	2.24 2.24	.849 .849
A4	My school principal uses data on student performance when developing the school's academic goals	21 (20.0%)	19 (18.1%)	52 (49.5%)	13 (12.4%)	2.54	.951
A5	My school principal develops goals that are easily understood and used by teachers in the school	66 (62.9%)	31 (29.5%)	8 (7.6%)	0 (0%)	1.45	.635
	Overall mean					1.87	0.747

TABLE 4. Communicating the school goals

	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
B1	My school principal communicates the school's mission effectively to members of the school community	56 (53.3%)	42 (40.0%)	7 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	1.53	.621
B2	My school principal discusses the school's academic goals with teachers at faculty meetings	29 (27.6%)	52 (49.5%)	24 (22.9%)	0 (0%)	1.95	.712
B3	My school principal refers to the school's academic goals when making curricular decisions with teachers	21 (20.0%)	27 (25.7%)	36 (34.3%)	21 (20.0%)	2.54	1.029
B4	My school principal ensures that the school's academic goals are reflected in highly visible displays in the school (e.g., posters or bulletin boards emphasizing academic progress)	34 (32.4%)	43 (41.0%)	19 (18.1%)	9 (8.6%)	2.03 2.03	.925 .925
B5	My school principal refers to the school's goals or mission in forums with students (e.g: in assemblies or discussions)	29 (27.6%)	45 (42.9%)	27 (25.7%)	4 (3.8%)	2.06	.830
	Overall mean					2.02	0.823

a moderate level of perception of their principal's role in terms of communicating the school goals (Pettiegrew 2013).

MANAGING THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

Table 5 and Table 6 show the functions of principals based on instructional leadership practices based on the second dimension. These functions under *Managing the Instructional Program* refer to how principals coordinate the curriculum and how they supervise and evaluate instruction.

As shown in Table 5, the overall mean score for coordinating the curriculum according to the perception of the teachers was 1.07 (SD = 0.744). The mean scores of the five items range from 1.63 (SD = 0.624) to 1.79 (SD = 0.840). This could be interpreted as the teachers having a moderate level of perception of their principal's role in terms of coordinating the curriculum (Pettiegrew 2013).

Table 6 shows that the overall mean score for supervising and evaluating instruction according to the perception of the teachers was 1.53 (SD = 0.632). The mean scores of the five items range from 1.41 (SD = 0.583) to 1.68 (SD = 0.596). This could be interpreted as the teachers having a moderate level of perception of their principal's role in terms of supervising and evaluating instruction (Pettiegrew 2013).

PROMOTING A POSITIVE SCHOOL LEARNING CLIMATE

Table 7, Table 8, and Table 9 show the descriptive statistics on the instructional role of principals in primary schools focusing on monitoring students' progress, protecting instructional time, and providing incentives for learning, which are under the third dimension of instructional leadership pertaining to promoting a positive school learning climate.

TABLE 5. Coordinating the curriculum

	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
D1	My school principal makes clear who is responsible for coordinating the curriculum across grade levels (e.g., the principal, vice principal, or teacher-leaders)	43 (41.0%)	44 (41.9%)	18 (17.1%)	0 (0%)	1.76	.728
D2	My school principal draws upon the results of school-wide testing when making curricular decisions	54 (51.4%)	34 (32.4%)	17 (16.2%)	0 (0%)	1.65	.747
D3	My school principal monitors the classroom curriculum to see that it covers the school's curricular objectives	50 (47.6%)	27 (25.7%)	28 (26.7%)	0 (0%)	1.79	.840
D4	My school principal assesses the overlap between the school's curricular objectives and the school's achievement tests	56 (53.3%)	29 (27.6%)	20 (19.0%)	0 (0%)	1.66	.782
D5	My school principal participates actively in the review of curricular materials	47 (44.8%)	50 (47.6%)	8 (7.6%)	0 (0%)	1.63	.624
	Overall mean					1.70	0.744

TABLE 6. Supervising & Evaluating Instruction

	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
C1	My school principal ensures that the classroom priorities of teachers are consistent with the goals and direction of the school	40 (38.1%)	60 (57.1%)	4 (3.8%)	1 (1.0%)	1.68	.596
C2	My school principal reviews student work products when evaluating classroom instruction	54 (51.4%)	45 (42.9%)	6 (5.7%)	0 (0%)	1.54	.605
C3	My school principal conducts informal observations in classrooms on a regular basis (informal observations are unscheduled, last at least 5 minutes, and may or may not involve written feedback or a formal conference)	58 (55.2%)	35 (33.3%)	8 (7.6%)	4 (3.8%)	1.60	.792
C4	My school principal points out specific strengths in teachers' instructional practices in post-observation feedback (e.g., in conferences or written evaluations)	67 (63.8%)	33 (31.4%)	5 (4.8%)	0 (0%)	1.41	.583
C5	My school principal points out specific weaknesses in teacher instructional practices in post-observation feedback (e.g., in conferences or written evaluations)	67 (63.8%)	33 (31.4%)	5 (4.8%)	0 (0%)	1.41	.583
	Overall mean					1.53	0.632

TABLE 7. Monitoring students' progress

	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
E1	My school principal meets individually with teachers to discuss student progress	67 (63.8%)	38 (36.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.36	.483
E2	My school principal discusses academic performance results with the faculty to identify curricular strengths and weaknesses	59 (56.2%)	41 (39.0%)	5 (4.8%)	0 (0%)	1.49	.590
E3	My school principal uses tests and other performance measure to assess progress toward school goals	71 (67.6%)	29 (27.6%)	5 (4.8%)	0 (0%)	1.37	.576
E4	My school principal informs teachers of the school's performance results in written form (e.g., in a memo or newsletter)	72 (68.6%)	32 (30.5%)	1 (1.0%)	0 (0%)	1.32	.490
E5	My school principal informs students of school's academic progress	66 (62.9%)	35 (33.3%)	4 (3.8%)	0 (0%)	1.41	.567
	Overall mean					1.39	0.541

As shown in Table 7, the overall mean score for monitoring students' progress according to the perception of the teachers was 1.39 (SD = 0.541). The mean scores of the five items range from 1.32 (SD = 0.490) to 1.49 (SD = 0.590). This could be interpreted as the teachers having a low level of perception of their principal's role in terms of monitoring students' progress (Pettiegrew 2013).

Table 8 shows that the overall mean score for protecting instructional time according to the perception of the teachers was 1.32 (SD=0.467). The mean scores of the five items range from 1.29 (SD=0.454) to 1.37 (SD=0.486). This could be interpreted as the teachers having a low level of perception of their principal's role in terms of protecting instructional time (Pettiegrew 2013).

TABLE 8. Protecting instructional time

	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
F1	My school principal limits interruptions of instructional time by public address announcements	66 (62.9%)	39 (37.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.37	.486
F2	My school principal ensures that students are not called to the office during instructional time	70 (66.7%)	35 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.33	.474
F3	My school principal ensures that tardy and truant students suffer specific consequences for missing instructional time	71 (67.6%)	34 (32.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.32	.470
F4	My school principal encourages teachers to use instructional time for teaching and practicing new skills and concepts	75 (71.4%)	30 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.29	.454
F5	My school principal limits the intrusion of extra- and co-curricular activities on instructional time	75 (71.4%)	30 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.29	.454
	Overall mean					1.32	0.467

As shown in Table 9, the overall mean score for providing incentives for learning according to the perception of the teachers was 1.45 (SD = 0.586). The mean scores of the five items range from 136 (SD = 0.521) to 1.63 (SD = 0.724). This could be interpreted as the teachers having a moderate level of perception of their principal's role in terms of providing incentives for learning (Pettiegrew 2013).

TABLE 9. Providing incentives for learning

	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
I1	My school principal recognizes students who do superior work with formal rewards such as an honor roll or mention in the principal's newsletter	65 (61.9%)	34 (32.4%)	6 (5.7%)	0 (0%)	1.44	.603
I2	My school principal uses assemblies to honor students for academic accomplishments or for behavior or citizenship	54 (51.4%)	36 (34.3%)	15 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	1.63	.724
I3	My school principal recognizes superior student achievement or improvement by seeing in the office the students with their work	68 (64.8%)	34 (32.4%)	3 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	1.38	.544
I4	My school principal contacts parents to communicate improved or exemplary student performance or contributions	59 (56.2%)	44 (41.9%)	2 (1.9%)	0 (0%)	1.46	.538
I5	My school principal supports teachers actively in their recognition and/or reward of student contributions to and accomplishments in class	69 (65.7%)	34 (32.4%)	2 (1.9%)	0 (0%)	1.36	.521
	Overall mean					1.45	0.586

Based on the abovementioned results, the teachers have varying levels of perceptions of the roles of principals as instructional leaders with respect to students' academic achievement. In terms of defining the school's mission and managing the instructional programs, the average perception of instructional leadership functions in their schools reflects the current progress of principals in embracing instructional leadership. On the other hand, the

functions related to promoting a positive school learning climate have rendered below average perceptions from the teachers in this study. As noted in the interviews conducted by Harris et al. (2017) among primary school principals, the principals discussed in detail their practices related to how they communicate the school's mission and how they are involved in the managing of the curriculum. However, the principals in that interview did not see promoting a positive learning climate as their key responsibility as instructional leaders but rather as a way to motivate or inspire members of the school community.

Moreover, Hallinger and Lee (2014) reported a similar scenario in Thailand where the perceptions of teachers generated low results on the three dimensions. Although a number of factors could be attributed to these results, the findings suggest that the principals in these primary schools are still in the stage of developing instructional leadership practices. Goodlad (2004) stated that a more in-depth professional preparation for principals should be implemented in an effort to make schools more effective. Knowledge and skills in management and leadership of the organization is a necessity for principals to manage the school effectively. Without proper knowledge and skills, it is very difficult for principals to boost school performance to a higher level. Thus, training program developers could use the findings of this study as a guide in modifying future modules especially when it comes to aiding current and prospective principals in protecting instructional time.

Of all the instructional leadership practices cited in this study, protecting instructional time registered with the lowest perception among the teachers. This implies that the teachers perceive that principals should prioritize taking the necessary action to ensure that interruptions such as announcements are limited during class hours. Similarly, Harris et al. (2017, p. 215) reported that "principals in Malaysia do not have a core responsibility for [this] function." Although the Malaysian Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education 2013) stipulated systemic changes in ensuring increased instructional time spent for Math and Science and increasing instructional time for English language learning, the blueprint does not specify how principals could act as leaders protecting instructional time. Since the second phase of the Malaysian education transformation is about to end, Malaysian principals are expected to have fully embraced the tenets of instructional leadership and move forward to capacity building and professional excellence (Ministry of Education 2013). Hence, this study suggests that there should be a set of concrete actions defining the core responsibility of primary school principals to further protect instructional time.

Relationship Between Teachers' Gender and the Perception of Instructional Leadership Roles and Practices of Principals

This section presents the results of the hypothesis testing based on the results from the SPSS analysis. Both null and alternative hypothesis are presented below followed by the results shown in Tables 10, 11, and 12.

H_0: There is no relationship between teachers' gender and their perception of instructional leadership roles and practices of principals.

H_1: There is a relationship between teachers' gender and their perception of instructional leadership roles and practices of principals.

TABLE 10. Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
E1	Male	27	1.37	.492	.095
	Female	78	1.36	.483	.055

Table 10 shows the number of the participants in each group. 78 participants are female and 27 are male. The results show that the perceived instructional leadership practices from the perspective of male teachers (M = 1.37, SD = .492) is higher than the perception of instructional leadership from female respondents (M = 1.36, SD = .483). The next step involves checking the assumptions via independent t-test.

TABLE 11. Independent Samples t-Test

		Levene's test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
E1	Equal variances assumed	.042	.837	.105	103	.916	.011	.108	-.203	.226
	Equal variances not assumed			.104	44.543	.917	.011	.109	-.209	.232

Table 11 above presents the results of the independent sample t-Test. In order to check the t- value and its significance, the researchers have to consider the Levene's Test. According to Pallant (2013), if the significance value of Levene's Test is higher than 0.05, the researchers have to consider the section of equal variances assumed; otherwise, they must consider the line of equal variances not assumed. Based on that assumption, the results show that the significance value for gender is 0.837. This value is higher than 0.05. Hence, the researchers will consider the assumption of equal variances assumed line. The value of t is 0.105 and d.f. is 103.

Moreover, in order to check the differences between groups, the researchers should check the value of t-test for equality of means. If this value is equal or lower than 0.05, this refers to the ideal that there is a significant difference in the mean score. However, if the value is greater than 0.05, this indicates that there is no significant difference in the group's mean score. Based on the results, the value of the significance (2-tailed) for the equal variances assumed is 0.916, which is above 0.05. This indicates that there is no significant difference in the group's mean score. The results of the independent sample t-test show that there is no significant difference in the mean score of the perception of instructional leadership towards student academic achievement for both male and female.

TABLE 12. Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	t-value	df	P-value (> 0.05)	Decision	Results
H0: There is no relationship between gender and the perception of instructional leadership roles and practices of principal towards students' academic achievement.	.105	103	.916	Supported	Accepted

The results in Table 12 indicated that t-value = 0.105 and P-value = 0.916 are greater than 0.05. Hence, the researchers fail to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, there is no relationship between gender and the perception of instructional leadership roles and practices of principals.

Regarding the relationship between the respondents' gender and their perception of their principals' instructional leadership practices, the findings of this study reveal that there is no relationship between the two constructs. On the contrary, Hallinger et al. (2016, p. 26) reported that gender has a "small but significant effect" in shaping perceptions of instructional leadership from the perspectives of principals. This difference could be attributed to polarizing perspectives as Hallinger and Lee (2014) noted the discrepancy in the perceptions of instructional leadership between teachers and principals using the PIMRS. From the teachers' perspectives, earlier studies showing gender differences in the perceptions of instructional leadership practices pointed out current social norms and expectations as drivers of ideal leadership (Jantzi & Leithwood 1996; Lee et al. 1993). Nevertheless, the relatively small sample size of this study, which is also conducted in a rural area in Malaysia, limits the extent of its findings. Thus, further studies establishing the relationship between gender and perception of instructional leadership practices could have a larger sample size in an urban academic setting.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to describe teachers' perceptions on principals' instructional leadership roles and practices in primary schools in Alor Gajah, Malaysia. Although the primary school teachers in Alor Gajah revealed below average to average perceptions of their principal's instructional leadership practices, the principals still manifested key functions of instructional leadership that are designed to aid students' academic achievement. In addition, the responses from 105 primary school teachers helped determine the relationship between teachers' gender and their perception on the effects of instructional leadership roles and practices of principals in Malaysian primary schools. As the results showed that there is no relationship between gender and the perception of instructional leadership, this prompts further inquiry on gender as a variable shaping perspective on leadership functions. With the findings of this research, the Ministry of Education may collaborate with the State Education Department and District Education Department to ensure that schools are implementing relevant leadership programs and educational plans to achieve educational targets. In terms of policymaking, this study provides the Ministry of Education with a glimpse of the current state of leadership in Malaysian primary schools from the perspective of teachers. Thus, the Ministry should continuously strive to make it compulsory for all newly appointed principals to be given training in instructional leadership matters. Instructional leadership helms at the core of the Malaysian education system's aspiration for systemic change. Since this study only focuses on instructional leadership roles and practices of principals, it is suggested that future studies should be conducted to examine other leadership styles of principals. In addition, specific schools should be taken into consideration for advance studies, and researchers may conduct this study in urban areas and in high performing school by doing comparative studies in instructional leadership. Nevertheless, primary school principals could gain more knowledge in terms of developing instructional leadership through this study. Indirectly, the principals

will be able to appreciate and practice instructional leadership functions in schools throughout the year. As for long-serving principals, training programs should be designed to be sensitive to address their needs and help them perform instructional leadership functions in their respective schools in order to push for school improvement and students' academic achievement.

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