



Empowering Leadership among Head of Panel In Primary Schools: Teachers' Perspectives as Drivers of Educational Excellence

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Abstract

This study investigates the leadership practices of the head of panel (HoP) in primary schools (SR) in Selangor, based on teachers' perspectives. The research aims to provide practical insights for the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE), State Education Departments (JPN), and District Education Offices (PPD) to develop comprehensive leadership policies and training programs for HoPs. Recognizing their critical role, the study also emphasizes the need for MoEs to implement tailored programs that strengthen the leadership capabilities of HoPs, ensuring they meet the evolving needs of modern education. Using a survey design, data were collected through an online questionnaire involving 480 primary school teachers in Selangor. The results, analyzed through descriptive statistics, revealed that the leadership practices of HoPs are perceived to be at a moderately high level ($M=3.49$, $SD=0.56$). These findings illustrate the essential role of HoPs in driving school improvement through effective leadership and collaborative efforts. The study highlights the importance of continuous training and development for HoPs to enhance their leadership competencies. It recommends that the Aminuddin Baki Institute (IAB) play a more proactive role in designing and delivering sustained professional development programs that empower HoPs with the skills needed to manage their panels effectively and contribute meaningfully to school success. Ultimately, the findings underscore that effective leadership by HoPs improves their own leadership performance and significantly enhances the overall effectiveness of school organizations. This study serves as a critical resource for policymakers and educators to reimagine the role of HoPs as middle leaders who bridge the gap between school management and classroom teaching, ensuring educational excellence at all levels.

Keywords: Empowering, Leadership, Educational Excellence

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in schools has long been a cornerstone of educational success, sparking interest in discussions at both national and global levels. Within primary schools, heads of panel (HoP) stand as pivotal figures in driving effective teaching and learning (T&L). These middle leaders (ML) are not just administrative managers; they are the linchpins of pedagogical excellence, directly influencing teacher capabilities and school performance (Zaliza et al., 2024). The profound impact of effective HoP leadership highlights its significance as an essential factor in the success of educational institutions (Adawati Suhaili et al., 2021).

Research consistently underscores that school principals and headmasters (PGB) cannot shoulder the enormous responsibility of educational leadership alone (Grootenboer, 2018; Jefri Hamid, 2004; Yusuf K. K Nsubuga, 2008). Instead, they require active collaboration from HoPs to lead T&L at the classroom level (Balyer et al., 2017; Grootenboer, 2018; Jefri Hamid, 2004; Lillejord & Børte, 2020; Ruechakul et al., 2015). By fostering high-quality instructional practices, HoPs play a vital role in aligning school-level objectives with classroom realities, ensuring success (Kahila et al., 2020). Surprisingly, despite a wealth of studies on PGB leadership, the critical contributions of HoPs remain underexplored, presenting a gap that calls for deeper investigation into their unique leadership dynamics as MLs (Adawati Suhaili et al., 2020; Friedman, 2011; Harris & Jones, 2018; Grootenboer, 2018; Guillen & Saris, 2013; Norliza Samad et al., 2022; Sukor Beram, 2022).

In Malaysia, the transformative *Malaysian Education Blueprint* (MEB) 2013–2025 places instructional leadership at its core, emphasizing the importance of HoPs in ensuring the implementation of effective pedagogical strategies (MoE, 2022). Positioned as MLs, HoPs are expected to drive instructional quality while simultaneously supporting teacher performance and student outcomes (Bryant & Walker, 2022; De Nobile, 2018; Ekaterini, 2011; Muhammad Nasaruddin Al Hussaini Shaari, 2020). This dual responsibility requires a robust set of leadership skills and knowledge, enabling HoPs to balance their administrative duties with their instructional roles (Zaliza Md Yasin et al., 2024).

MLs, including HoPs, occupy a unique space in the school hierarchy, bridging senior management and classroom teachers. As defined by Grootenboer et al. (2015), MLs are instrumental in maintaining pedagogical quality while holding significant leadership responsibilities. The MoE (2022), further categorizes MLs into P1 (senior assistants) and P2 (department heads, including HoPs), underscoring their integral role in instructional leadership. Their contributions to quality assurance and teaching excellence are foundational to a school's success.

HoPs are often seen as leaders who enhance school operations while strengthening instructional systems through effective delegation and clear guidance (Pirola, 2015). Their strategic role ensures that decisions from senior leadership are translated effectively into classroom practices. This critical function positions HoPs as indispensable in creating a cohesive and impactful learning environment, ensuring that school objectives resonate with classroom realities.

Moreover, HoPs share decision-making responsibilities with PGBs, particularly in areas related to educational practices and instructional improvements (Kahila et al., 2020). They not only champion research-based strategies but also integrate best practices into their leadership, ensuring continuous development and innovation in schools. This shared responsibility amplifies their importance as leaders capable of transforming school culture and academic outcomes.

Despite their indispensable role, HoPs often face numerous challenges. Among these is an overwhelming workload that combines curriculum management with teaching duties, often detracting from their primary role as instructional leaders (Adawati Suhaili et al., 2020; Edwards-Groves et al., 2019; Hamidah Yusof et al., 2016). This dual burden risks diluting their focus on leadership, potentially undermining the effectiveness of teaching and learning practices within their

schools.

A school's overall success is heavily influenced by the competence of its MLs, particularly HoPs. Their ability to navigate complex responsibilities such as managing instructional quality, mentoring teachers, and meeting performance targets profoundly shapes institutional outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Norliza Samad et al., 2022; Sukor Beram et al., 2021). As frontline leaders, HoPs' work directly impacts both teacher practices and student achievements, reinforcing their indispensable role in educational leadership.

Therefore, this study emphasizes bridging the gap in understanding the multifaceted leadership roles of HoPs in Malaysian primary schools. Unlike PGBs, HoPs operate at the intersection of management and pedagogy, wielding influence over classroom practices and student outcomes. By exploring the complexities of their leadership, this study offers fresh insights into how HoPs can be empowered to fulfill their unique and critical role in driving educational excellence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Leadership

Leadership is a dynamic process of inspiring and guiding individuals or groups to achieve shared goals, encompassing influence, communication, and group dynamics. According to Kruse (2013), effective leadership goes beyond directing actions it is about empowering individuals to reach their highest potential while advancing organizational objectives. Gronn (2000) and Jamaliah Abdul Hamid dan Norashimah Ismail (2005) highlight that successful leadership thrives on collective motivation and collaboration, fostering unity and shared purpose among team members. Similarly, Sofo et al. (2012) dan Lokman Mohd Tahir et al. (2017) position leadership as a transformative force, driving innovation, adaptability, and diversity within organizations.

Maxwell (2006) argues that leadership is not confined to formal authority or titles but lies in the ability to inspire and motivate others toward a common vision. Effective leaders cultivate trust-based relationships, encourage open communication, and foster environments where teamwork and creativity can flourish. Yukl (2006) reinforces this idea by emphasizing that leadership involves aligning followers' understanding and commitment with organizational goals, ensuring decisive and collective action that drives success.

Northouse (2016), identifies influence as the essence of leadership, distinguishing it from mere management. While managers focus on processes and task execution, leaders create meaningful connections, instill trust, and unite teams around a compelling vision. This relational approach achieves immediate objectives and builds a foundation of loyalty and shared purpose, enabling long-term growth and resilience. Leaders who excel in this capacity inspire innovation and foster cultures where collaboration and adaptability become central to organizational success.

In conclusion, leadership is both an art and a science a deliberate process of inspiring action, nurturing relationships, and fostering collaboration to achieve shared goals. It transcends managing tasks and shaping the culture and future of organizations through influence and inspiration. Leaders who master this balance drive innovation, resilience, and sustained organizational excellence. With strategic and inclusive practices, leadership remains indispensable for navigating complexity and achieving transformative results.

The Concept of Leadership Among Heads of Panel

HoPs play a crucial leadership role among teachers, particularly within subject areas. Acting as team leaders, they guide their panel members toward achieving the educational goals set by the school. Gunter (2018) highlights that the success of a subject panel largely depends on the leadership and management skills of HoPs. Beyond being managers, they serve as instructional leaders who monitor academic, and curriculum matters while guiding teachers (Javadi et al., 2017; Wise, 2001).

Shafila Jumaat (2008), describes HoPs as vital intermediaries between school administrators and teachers. They are responsible for ensuring smooth curriculum implementation within their subject panels. Furthermore, according to Adawati Suhaili et al. (2021), HoPs are usually selected from senior teachers by the Principal or Headmaster (PGB). They also represent their subject panels in the school curriculum committee, acting as a bridge between teachers and the administration.

As leaders, HoPs not only lead teams of teachers but also play a strategic role in introducing innovative changes to enhance student performance. Their expertise in specific subjects allows them to serve as trusted references for their panel members. By combining subject knowledge with strong leadership skills, HoPs contribute to achieving school goals, improving education quality, and guiding teachers toward shared success (Adawati Suhaili et al., 2021; Gunter, 2018; Shafila Jumaat, 2008).

In conclusion, HoPs are instrumental in driving the success of school curricula and fostering teacher development. Their dual role as instructional leaders and managers requires a balance of expertise and leadership. With effective leadership and a clear vision, HoPs ensure progress in education, creating an environment where both teachers and students can thrive.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This quantitative study employs a survey design to examine the leadership practices of HoPs in primary schools from the perspective of primary school teachers. A structured questionnaire was utilized to measure the extent and effectiveness of leadership demonstrated by these HoPs. The survey method was selected due to its practicality for large sample sizes and time efficiency (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). This approach ensures comprehensive data collection and supports the study's objectives effectively.

Population and Sampling

The study targeted 480 primary school teachers from Selangor, selected through stratified random sampling to participate in Phase 1 of the survey. Stratified random sampling was chosen to ensure that each subgroup within the population is adequately represented, providing a more accurate and detailed estimation for each category (Liu & Pontius, 2021). The sample set accurately represents the population since the population is stratified, rather than using simple random sampling. Furthermore, this study encompasses various school categories, including national schools (SK), Chinese vernacular schools (SJKC), and Tamil vernacular schools (SJKT), as shown in **Table 1** below.

Table 1 Respondents' Profile

Participant Profile	Criteria	Total Percentage (%)	
Gender of Teachers	Male	86	17.9
	Female	394	82.1
	Total	480	100
Academic Qualification	Graduate	456	95.0
	Non-Graduate	24	5.0
	Total	480	100
School Type	National Schools (SK)	340	70.8
	Chinese Vernacular Schools (SJKC)	85	17.7
	Tamil Vernacular Schools (SJKT)	55	11.5

	Total	480	100
Age	21–25 years	9	1.9
	26–30 years	33	6.9
	31–35 years	57	11.9
	36–40 years	64	13.3
	41–45 years	151	31.5
	46–50 years	92	19.2
	51–55 years	47	9.8
	56–60 years	27	5.6
	Total	480	100

Research Instrument

The questionnaire instrument for this study was developed through four phases as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2005) such as planning, construction, quantitative assessment, and validation. The questionnaire was designed and adapted based on the study by Walter Anak Angan (2014) on the leadership practices of subject heads in primary schools, tailored to the context of this research. Questions were categorized into five constructs derived from literature findings (i) Leading Leadership Affairs, (ii) Leading Curriculum Activities, (iii) Supervising Activities, (iv) Leading the Competency Development of Subject Members, and (v) Fostering Harmonious Relationships Among Subject Members. The questionnaire consists of 50 items in total, systematically distributed across these constructs.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the robustness of the questionnaire, the researcher enlisted three experts: a language expert and two leadership specialists. These experts conducted content and face validity assessments to evaluate the accuracy of the questionnaire items, and the appropriateness of the Malay language, ensuring alignment with the original instrument. Their constructive feedback was meticulously incorporated to enhance the clarity and precision of the instrument. A pilot study involving 30 primary school teachers from a school near Putrajaya was then carried out. This site was carefully selected for its similarity to the actual study in terms of location and participant profiles, as recommended by David et al. (2010). The pilot study results demonstrated a high level of reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.97, as illustrated in **Table 2**. This strong reliability score underscores the instrument's consistency and readiness for the main study.

Table 2 Summary of Reliability Scale

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha Value	Number of Items
Leading Leadership Affairs	0.94	10
Leading Curriculum Activities	0.91	10
Supervising Activities	0.98	10
Leading Competency Development of Subject Members	0.90	10
Fostering Harmonious Relationships Among Subject Members	0.89	10
Overall	0.97	50

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 32.0, ensuring precision and reliability in data handling. Descriptive analysis was conducted to provide a detailed overview of respondents' demographic profiles, utilizing frequency, mean, and percentage statistics to present the findings comprehensively. To evaluate the level of leadership practices among subject heads in primary schools from the teachers' perspective, the mean score interpretation framework by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) was applied. This framework classifies mean scores into four distinct levels, as outlined in **Table 3**. The mean score interpretation offers a structured analysis approach and provides a clear benchmark to gauge respondents' agreement or assessment levels effectively.

Table 3 Mean Score Interpretation Table

Mean Score Range	Interpretation
1.00 – 2.00	Low
2.01 – 3.00	Moderately Low
3.01 – 4.00	Moderately High
4.01 – 5.00	High

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study aimed to assess the current leadership practices of subject heads in primary schools as perceived by teachers, while also exploring the need for a tailored leadership model for subject heads in Malaysian primary schools. The research involved 480 teachers from Selangor, who participated via an online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. Descriptive statistical analysis, including mean and standard deviation, was conducted using SPSS version

32.0 to interpret the findings systematically for each construct.

Respondent Demographics

The study engaged a diverse group of respondents, as summarized in **Table 1**. Out of the 480 participants, 86 were male, and 394 were female, reflecting the general gender distribution in primary education. The academic qualifications revealed a predominantly graduate cohort, with 456 teachers holding degrees compared to 24 non-graduates. The school categories represented were National Schools (SK) with 340 respondents, Chinese Vernacular Schools (SJKC) with 85, and Tamil Vernacular Schools (SJKT) with 55. This distribution underscores the inclusivity of the study across different school types.

In terms of age distribution, most respondents 151 were aged 41–45 years, representing experienced mid-career educators. Other age groups included (i) 9 respondents aged 21–25, (ii) 33 aged 26–30, (iii) 57 aged 31–35, (iv) 64 aged 36–40, (v) 92 aged 46–50, (vi) 47 aged 51–55, and (vii) 27 aged 56–60. These figures reflect a balanced mix of early-career, mid-career, and late-career educators, adding depth to the study's findings.

The analysis of service duration highlighted that the largest group of respondents (131) had served for 16–20 years, indicating a substantial experience base among participants. Notably, only one teacher had served for 36–40 years. Other service durations included 62 teachers with 1–5 years of service, 53 with 6–10 years, 86 with 11–15 years, 71 with 21–25 years, 57 with 26–30 years, and 19 with 31–35 years. These data emphasize the breadth of professional expertise within the respondent pool, enabling a nuanced analysis of leadership practices.

Leadership Level of Head of Panel in Primary Based on Teachers' Perspectives

The study evaluated the leadership practices of primary school subject heads (KP SR) through 50 items grouped into five main constructs (i) Leading Leadership Affairs, (ii) Leading Curriculum Activities, (iii) Supervisory Activities, (iv) Developing Competencies of Panel Members, and (v) Leading Harmonious Relationships Among Panel Members. **Table 4** presents the descriptive analysis results of these constructs as assessed from the teachers' perspectives.

Table 4. The Leadership Level of HoP in Primary School Based on Teachers' Perspectives

Construct	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Leading Leadership Affairs	3.68	0.61	Moderately High
Leading Curriculum Activities	3.41	0.61	Moderately High
Supervisory Activities	3.39	0.65	Moderately High
Developing Competencies of Panel Members	3.40	0.54	Moderately High
Leading Harmonious Relationships Among Panel Members	3.58	0.62	Moderately High
Overall Level	3.49	0.56	Moderately High

Overall, the findings in **Table 4** demonstrate that the leadership practices of Primary School Subject Heads (KP SR), as perceived by teachers, are at a **moderately high level**, with an overall mean score of **3.49** (SD = 0.56). This indicates that while the HoP perform their leadership roles relatively well, there remains significant potential for further improvement across various dimensions.

Among the five constructs analyzed, **Leading Leadership Affairs** achieved the highest mean score (**M = 3.68, SD = 0.61**). This highlights that HoP excels in strategic leadership tasks such as setting goals, managing priorities, and guiding the overall direction of its panels. Their ability to articulate the vision and drive collective efforts is recognized as a strong point.

The second-highest construct, **Leading Harmonious Relationships Among Panel Members** (**M = 3.58, SD = 0.63**), underscores the HoPs' capacity to build and maintain positive and collaborative relationships. This suggests that they are skilled in conflict resolution, fostering teamwork, and creating a harmonious working environment, which is essential for effective panel functioning.

Leading Curriculum Activities (**M = 3.41, SD = 0.61**) and **Developing Competencies of Panel Members** (**M = 3.40, SD = 0.54**) scored slightly lower but remain within the moderately high range. These findings suggest that HoP are actively involved in curriculum planning and professional development efforts, though there may be gaps in ensuring consistent and impactful implementation.

The construct with the lowest score, **Supervising Activities** (**M = 3.39, SD = 0.65**), points to an area requiring particular attention. Effective supervision is crucial for monitoring teaching practices, providing constructive feedback, and ensuring accountability among panel members. The relatively lower score indicates potential challenges in these areas, such as limited capacity, lack of resources, or inadequate training in supervisory skills.

DISCUSSION

Overview of Leadership Practices

This study highlights the moderately high leadership practices among primary school HoP in

Selangor, reflecting a balance between strengths and areas for improvement. The overall mean score of 3.49 (SD = 0.56) suggests that HoP primary school is effective in certain domains but requires targeted interventions to address specific gaps. This finding aligns with De Nobile's (2017), assertion that middle leaders often face challenges in achieving excellence due to workload and limited leadership training. Adawati Suhaili's (2022) study in Sarawak reported weaker leadership practices among Science HoP due to deficiencies in pedagogical content knowledge and ineffective communication. This contrast underscores the variability in leadership quality across different contexts and highlights the importance of localized training programs tailored to address contextual challenges (Irvine, 2017).

Supervisory Leadership

The study found that supervisory activities among HoP were rated moderately high (mean = 3.39, SD = 0.65). Supervisory leadership is a cornerstone of instructional effectiveness, requiring leaders to oversee and support teaching quality (Harris et al., 2001). This result parallels Latip Muhammad (2007) findings, which also reported moderately high scores among school leaders in Selangor. However, the moderately high rating reveals room for improvement in strategic supervisory practices. Norhana Mohamad Saad et al. (2018), Peacock (2014) and Shaked and Schechter (2019) emphasized the importance of role clarity for HoPs to execute supervisory duties effectively. Ngui (2000) study in Kuching, Sarawak, reported low supervisory performance due to a lack of understanding of leadership roles among HoPs. This highlights a critical need for role-based training and clearer job descriptions, as supported by Farchi and Tubin (2019) who found that structured role definition enhances leaders' ability to manage instructional tasks.

Curriculum Leadership

The construct of curriculum leadership was also rated moderately high (mean = 3.41, SD = 0.61). This finding underscores the need for HoP PS to improve their knowledge of curriculum design and pedagogical strategies. Hammersley-Fletcher and Brundrett (2005) argue that curriculum leaders must possess expertise in subject content and the ability to align curriculum objectives with institutional goals. The study aligns with Simin Ghavifekr and Mohammed Sani Ibrahim's (2014) view that curriculum leadership is a dynamic process requiring strategic thinking and collaboration. HoP PS must enhance its competencies in designing, implementing, and evaluating curricula, ensuring they meet both national education standards and student needs. According to Shaked and Schechter (2019), collaborative curriculum planning fosters innovation and ensures alignment with broader educational goals.

Developing Competencies Among Panel Members

Leadership in developing panel member competencies was another area rated as moderately high (mean = 3.40, SD = 0.54). Ghamrawi (2010) underscores the importance of staff development, where leaders provide coaching, mentoring, and professional growth opportunities. Effective staff development builds capacity among teachers, improves teaching quality, and enhances learning outcomes. However, HoP PS face significant challenges, such as time constraints and teaching responsibilities, which limit their ability to focus on staff development (Farchi & Tubin, 2019). Javadi et al. (2017) noted that many middle leaders view themselves primarily as teachers rather than leaders, inhibiting their ability to mentor and guide peers effectively. Overcoming this perception requires targeted leadership training and a shift in mindset, encouraging HoP PS to embrace their roles as instructional leaders.

Fostering Harmonious Relationships

The construct of harmonious relationships among panel members received a mean score of 3.58 (SD = 0.62), indicating that HoP generally maintains positive relationships within their teams. Effective

communication is key to fostering harmony and collaboration, as highlighted by Hargreaves and Shirley (2020). HoP must possess strong interpersonal skills to mediate conflicts, build trust, and encourage teamwork. Ghamrawi (2010) emphasized that harmonious relationships within panels contribute to a positive school culture, which directly impacts student achievement and staff morale. HoP must also balance the expectations of school administrators with the needs of their panel members, a task requiring diplomatic communication skills (Farchi & Tubin, 2019). The ability to influence and inspire through both verbal and non-verbal communication is critical for maintaining team cohesion and achieving shared goals (Watson & Shannon, 2016).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigates the existing leadership practices of HoP in PS from the perspective of primary school teachers. Through a comprehensive descriptive analysis, it was found that HoP exhibits moderately high leadership practices. These findings provide valuable insights into the current state of leadership development among future educators within the Malaysian education landscape. While the moderately high level suggests a basic understanding of leadership principles and practices, it also highlights significant opportunities for improvement and refinement in leadership skills and capabilities.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching for teacher education programs and the broader educational context in Malaysia. First, identifying the moderately high leadership level among HoP in primary schools emphasizes the importance of integrating targeted leadership development initiatives into teacher education curricula. By fostering intentional leadership development, such as the creation of a specialized leadership model for HoP, this initiative can empower HoP to enhance their leadership competencies. This, in turn, would equip them with the skills necessary to effectively navigate the complexities of the educational environment. Furthermore, recognizing the existing opportunities for improvement in HoP leadership underscores the need for ongoing professional development efforts that prioritize leadership skill enhancement throughout an educator's career.

Additionally, identifying the moderately high leadership level among HoPs offers valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders in education. By acknowledging this foundational level, policymakers, such as the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia, can design targeted interventions and support mechanisms to cultivate a culture of leadership excellence within educational institutions across the country. Moreover, fostering a culture that values and nurtures leadership among HoP can contribute to the creation of a more dynamic and innovative educational landscape. Ultimately, addressing the moderately high leadership levels among HoP has the potential to catalyze positive transformation in Malaysia's education system, leading to improved student outcomes and enhanced educational experiences for all stakeholders involved.

In summary, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on leadership practices among HoP in the Malaysian education landscape, providing empirical insights into the practices and transformative potential of HoP leadership within the educational sector. By delineating the contours of HoP leadership in this specific context, the study serves as an effort to inform policy development, institutional practices, and professional development initiatives aimed at fostering a culture of excellence and innovation in teacher education in Malaysia.

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