SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AS LOCALIZED POLICY: A REVIEW OF THE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

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Abstract
Policy borrowing, a key feature of today’s social policy and especially in education, is useful as it encourages nations and systems to learn new ideas (oftentimes dominant in the international literature) that seemingly work in other countries. However, equally useful is an overall understanding on how countries have adopted and adapted these ideas, highlighting the negotiated successes and challenges encountered which can further shape knowledge. This literature review, examines the knowledge base that currently exists in the domains of educational leadership and teacher development in both Indonesia and Malaysia. While there is a strong, overall pursuit by these governments to improve educational quality to meet international benchmarking standards for school improvement, multiple challenges are highlighted especially in the areas of 1) politics, 2) need for development and survival, 3) and a symbiotic need to look at school leadership and teacher development as a cohesive whole.

Introduction
While a single framework to improve schools and student outcomes is desirable, the differences in state capacity, political and social philosophies, issues in and around culture, multi-ethnicities, and geographies to name a few, all play a role in shaping the way a country’s education system operates. Despite these varying characteristics, popular arguments in education research on what makes a good school or the things that affect a school’s performance, narrowly or broadly defined, largely capitalizes on teacher effectiveness, school leadership quality and its practices.

Therefore, as governments, researchers and education practitioners attempt to evoke positive change within a school system, there is a dilemma to the degree of policy borrowing and contextualization needed. Underscoring that tension is a need to develop a “critical mass” of deeper, richer and critical accounts of school improvement processes in Asia, with contextualised approaches focusing on teacher and school leadership effectiveness (Harris, 2015). Research has shown that in order to improve schools, teachers and the school leadership must be treated as stakeholders in this strategy. Ideas adopted unchanged from a Western and English dominated literature, may run into barriers that are unique to ASEAN countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, both developing states with its own set of histories, political ideologies and cultural sensitivities.

This review explores research in the fields of teacher effectiveness and development, and educational leadership that may shed light on the complexities when global theories are applied in vastly different cultural contexts. The review is limited to two middle income ASEAN countries, Indonesia and Malaysia. Although their differences are aplenty, e.g. Malaysia’s ethnic pluralism is greater than Indonesia and their education systems reflect this, the two countries are also developing middle income economies with a common goal in attempting to improve school standards; providing the rationale for a brief comparative study.

This paper is not comprehensive as works cited are limited to those found written in English. As Indonesia and Malaysia are rich in their diversity of languages and with research potentially widely done in their lingua francas (Bahasa Indonesia
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and Bahasa Malaysia respectively), any literature in these languages remains inaccessible at this point of writing.

Still, this paper attempts to make a contribution in providing a brief overview of the domestic research conducted on school improvement, teacher development and educational leadership in Indonesia and Malaysia, highlighting their presence and potential to shape local policy. Insofar as policy borrowing is a widely preferred tool for policymakers, policy learning that emerges from the confluence of international theories and local, generative research provide the capacity for effective change unique to the context.

In the first section, the paper will contextualize the motivations behind the study, problematizing the notion of school improvement and its relations to teacher and teaching quality, and educational leadership. Thereafter, instances of domestic research in Indonesia and subsequently Malaysia will be weaved together, providing insight to the (hopefully) latest understandings available in the literature. This paper then concludes with some thoughts on the lessons learnt and the potential challenges for research in each country.

Contextualizing the Review

School Improvement

Educational quality across countries in Southeast Asia is varied. Countries such as Singapore are high performers in international standards tests such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), while member states like Indonesia and Malaysia perform below the OECD average. Although these international benchmarking tests are criticized on issues such as consistent or consistency of standards, cultural relativity and the potential implication of measurable accountability processes (Dohn, 2007; Hanushek & Raymond, 2002; Harris & Jones, 2015), these education markers claim their relevance in providing a snapshot of each country’s educational performance and its schooling quality. In comparison with others, these indicators reflect, partially, a country’s potential for socio-economic development, based on the ability of its human capital. More critically, these benchmarks, to a certain degree, provide evidence for assumptions of the education systems which seemingly work, and those that do not.

Although access to primary and secondary education continues to remain a key issue for many countries, scholars have argued that educational quality is the basis on which a causal relationship is established with economic outcomes (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007). While this incentivises governments to continuously invest in improving public education systems for human capital development, a strong quality of education can also lay the foundation for improved livelihoods. The old adage of attending schools in and by itself is, therefore, insufficient. To improve quality, schools may introduce refreshed curricula for its students, with new ways of teaching and assessment methods but this may not necessarily lead to improved learning outcomes. Hence, as Dimmock (2012) notes, what is also needed for educational reform then is an “organizational redesign” throughout schools that will affect both the organization and existing leadership
configurations – broadening the notion of school improvement beyond pedagogy or examinations.

At its core, an improvement in educational quality will mean an improvement in student outcomes. Yet, school improvement when situated in a context of international league tables focuses on the measurable while oftentimes relegating the non-measurable to the rear. Ladwig (2010) argued that debates about education are frequently about school accountability, with little consideration about the non-academic – also a consequence of schooling. Education, broadly defined, has a role in 1) shaping cognitive thought, 2) inculcating character, as well as 3) equipping the student with the necessary skills for work. It builds on existing fields of knowledge possessed by each child, shaped by his or her experience within the community. However, as character and values, for instance, are not always easily measurable, there is a danger of an overemphasis by stakeholders on the academic. The shift by national economies into the 21st century knowledge-based frame further problematizes educational needs, demanding students to look also at how, instead of singularly what, measurable knowledge is learnt.

Figure 1: Institutions needed for school improvement

This places clear pressure on education systems to improve, and to keep up with global and local demands – improved teacher effectiveness and school leadership are therefore part of that equation. Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded that “[educational] leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school”, earmarking the need to work with teachers and school leaders for better student outcomes. It is indicative that who gets selected, trained and inducted as both a teacher and school leader is all the more important in this new century forward. With educational needs going beyond the academic, the expectations are high (Pereira, 2016). The need for disciplinarity, soft skills, values and adaptive skills imbued in the next generation of
students, challenges traditional forms of practises employed by both school leaders and teachers. It hints at the complex idea of school improvement, and its constituent factors.

The agreed upon institutions that affect school improvement are, however, multifaceted (illustrated in Figure 1). Although the immediate literature may demand focus on teachers (Muijs et al., 2014) and educational leadership (Day et al., 2007; Fullan, 2001; Smith & Bell, 2014), stakeholders also include the government and the broader societal context. Lee and Hallinger’s (2012) piece elaborated later on in this paper is one example of how the broader social context acts as an influence towards how school leaders behave. It is an important consideration given that schools do not exist in a vacuum, and are just as much service providers to the communities and countries they are situated in. This literature review will highlight research found in these various areas, and how they necessarily intersect with the major domains of teacher effectiveness and educational leadership.

However, insofar that these areas are recognized to provide avenues for research towards improved outcomes, the school improvement literature is conceptually wide and disconnected (Scheerens, 2014). While Muijs et al. (2014) highlight discourses in the teaching effectiveness literature, they do not discuss how the act of teaching is affected and implicated by outside classroom variables; the social appears to be unconnected to the pedagogical. Reynolds et al. (2014) talk about the educational effectiveness literature centred on the school and the teacher, but place less emphasis on issues that occur at the systemic level. The overview provided by Hopkins et al. (2014) in school and system improvement note that much focus lies on macro educational reform strategies and research. Articles like Hallinger and Heck’s (2011) highlight that the individual school context is still a necessary consideration, and that one must factor in the school’s current status within the system and its intended trajectory.

From this broad overview of the various perspectives mentioned, it is clear that there is much interest in education research for school improvement. Apart from the need for broad reconciliation across domains, there is then also the issue of what gets adopted and adapted within policy circles. Complicating the problem even further is that while research for and around school improvement has been rigorous, a reconciliation of these findings on what works beyond general theory and into contextual, practical accounts is oftentimes problematic because of “different assumptions and research traditions” (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Moreover, while individual case studies are useful in developing a strategy, it is limited as it cannot be generalized.

As such, Hallinger and Heck (2011) have proposed that longitudinal data is a necessity to understand how a localized theory of school improvement can take shape. The time taken for longitudinal studies, however, is also a shortcoming, and not always one in which governments and policymakers can afford. As a result, there is a certain attractive quotient about learning the experience of other countries, especially those that represent “best practice”. Further, Steiner-Khamsi (2013) notes that the global circulation of best practices are a strong pressure acting on governments to simply adopt international solutions to local problems. Raffe (2011) argues that the tendency to learn from best practices creates a policy borrowing
approach that is methodologically unsound. Instead, a policy learning approach is recommended, where policies are developed tailored to the country’s needs. A unique feature about policy learning is that the international experience should be capitalized on as a platform to understand the domestic system – a feature well demonstrated and executable through local research.

Educational Leadership

While educational leadership theories since then and before have been addressing topics such as Transformational leadership, Distributed leadership and Instructional leadership, much of the criticism is that these models were built on Western empirical studies with little contribution from Asia. It was only in recent years that the literature on Asian educational leadership has taken prominence within academic circles (Hallinger, 2015; Li, 2015; National Institute of Education, 2013; Ng, 2015). Harris (2015) concurs with Hallinger and Chen (2014) that there is a dearth of domestic and comparative educational leadership literature that takes into account Asian countries. In particular, Harris argues that existing leadership theories are largely mono-cultural, and are normative in nature. How this is transferred across countries, especially developing states and societies which are halfway across the world is not as clear. Hence the advice that nations should be focused on policy learning rather than policy borrowing.

Teacher quality and effectiveness

Improving the quality of teachers within Asia has received increased attention by governments and researchers. Invariably regarded as the frontline officer with a crucial and immediate role in shaping student development, teacher development and quality research have frequently garnered the attention of international institutions such as the World Bank [eg. Moreno (2005) and Chang et. al (2014)] and UNESCO (2015, p. 54).

The Asia Society is one specific example where there has been effort to spotlight attention onto the teaching profession, and its related effects on student learning outcomes. Since 2011, the society has organized annual iterations of the International Summit on the Teaching Profession (Asia Society, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). During the inaugural 2011 conference in particular, best practices on teacher policy were shared amongst countries and case studies from high-performing education systems were highlighted (Asia Society, 2011). Insofar that these ideas were useful, they were ultimately premised on the results of sixteen high-performing countries and regions. As such, its applicability and transferability to developing Southeast Asian countries that have varying structural priorities, differing social and economic regard for teachers or even fundamentally separate state-supported school systems because of religion and political philosophies, remain open for debate and research. This further undergirds the necessity and importance to contextualize global research and theories, and where possible, highlight localized adaptation of existing theories that may not be as prevalent or widely understood.

1 Belgium, Brazil, Canada, the People’s Republic of China, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong SAR, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Singapore, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, the United States of America.
Educational Leadership and Teacher Quality in Indonesia

Our scan of the Indonesian educational literature demonstrated a heavy emphasis in ensuring that educational fundamentals are achieved. Research on educational leadership is however slowly gaining traction, with a stronger realization that a sole emphasis on teacher quality and teacher policies is insufficient in creating a high performing education system.

Educational Leadership and the Politics of Decentralization

Scholars have noted that in lieu of a ‘missing’ domestic research literature on educational leadership in Indonesia, policymakers often take to practices employed by Western school systems as the basis of instruction to create policy. Motivated by education systems whose comparative international benchmarking scores are significantly higher than Indonesia’s, there is strong impetus to follow practices highlighted in the global literature (eg. educational decentralization and policies such as the country’s school-based management (SBM) systems). Furthermore, when education policy practices resonate with certain political ideologies, policy makers are driven to pay closer attention.

This privilege of the political over the empirical is evident in how school principals perceive decentralized movements such as the SBM. Although there is little mention on how SBM has impacted schooling outcomes, researchers have found that Indonesian principals generally agree that the system worked in their favour (Bandur, 2012). The increase in participatory decision making practices have emphasized “democratic principles in school-decision making processes”. By giving autonomy to local systems and encouraging participatory discourse, it was assumed that schools can be better managed for improved outcomes.

Ironically, despite being portrayed as a means of empowerment, decentralization in education has instead disempowered competent school leaders. Recent work done by Sumintono et al. (2015) argue that although Indonesia emplaced efforts to improve school leader quality through certification and training since 2009, these nationally trained leaders find it difficult to lead schools if they lack social connections with the local political office. Educational decentralization, while empowering local governments in making school appointments then acts against the system’s interest. Competency and meritocratic ability is but a shadow acting under the more important realities of networks and relationship. Considering the country’s social and political realities, scholars thus argue that what is necessary is training and opportunities for school leaders to negotiate the intricacies which educational autonomy brings about (Bjork, 2005; G. W. Jones & Hagul, 2001, p. 214).

As such, scholars such as Bjork (2005) have pointed out that the broadly employed movement for educational decentralization and other policies like the Local Content Curriculum (LCC) were embraced out of “hopefulness” rather than as a “careful study” of the concept. The ADB noted that the move for decentralization was due to the World Bank’s 1998 recommendation as a means for improved schooling quality – backed by beliefs in autonomy and economic efficiency on resource allocation compared against private schools (Behrman, Deolalikar, & Soon, 2002, p. 33). However, while decentralization gives autonomy to regional and local
leadership, its effective implementation is highly dependent on many variables – one of which is the availability of competent school and government leaders who are committed to schooling effectiveness and schooling improvement. Decentralization is also an attractive concept because of its political empowerment separate and a contrast to Indonesia’s past authoritarian and federal-centric political history. Yet, Hadiz (2004) argued that the pursuit of decentralization by the authorities was less on the notes of transparency and accountability, but more on the development of a decentralized network of patronage. Research conducted by Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006) found while some parents perceived an improvement in educational quality, it was also at the expense of transparency, accountability in government spending and an increased cost of education.

This barrier towards systemic change have thus prompted Sofo, Fitzgerald and Jawas (2012) to argue that recommendations on Indonesian schooling have tended to address “technical issues rather than [issues] on education reform”. However, in an effort to provide ‘solutions’, they make a case for Instructional Leadership as a model for school principals to address issues in 1) managerial shortcomings, 2) change and irrelevancy, and 3) the quality of teaching within schools [see Figure 2]. On a different note, Hariri, Monypenny and Prideaux (2014) recommend instead that Transformational and Transactional leadership should be instituted as part of the educational leadership training programme. Their research on school principal leadership styles and subsequent decision-making methods suggest that as surveyed from the teachers’ perspective, these leadership styles produce positive working relationships. As transformational and transactional leadership may be coherent in establishing a strong partnership with teachers, it is evident that
researchers are attempting to adapt established global theory to fit the local context in order to achieve long-term goals.

However, the successful implementation of leadership model is highly dependent on how a principal perceives his role within the education system. Lee and Hallinger (2012) conclude that Indonesian principals prioritize school management and administrative procedures rather than other leadership or instructional functions. This selective preference of time use is shaped by the "organizational and [the] cultural context" where the principal's actions are influenced by the country's economic, sociocultural and institutional priorities. Although the literature privileges the principal to be a leader rather than an administrator, Lee and Hallinger's work highlights how the principal is also a reactive constituent to his surrounding and nationalistic demands. This understanding implicates how a school principal settles into his role as a leader, and how the school's teachers are subsequently managed by the individual. It has implications towards directions for change, and the capacity of change that can be effectively embraced.

Nonetheless, there is also a strand of argument within the Indonesian educational leadership literature that highlights the school principal's efforts in going beyond the conventional administrative role. Raihani (2008) argues from his research on three successful Indonesian schools that principals commonly shared an ability to 1) analyse context (understand the school's capacity and the community's needs), 2) create their own vision of success (in line with comparative standards at the National and comparative level), and 3) make decisions based on beliefs and values strongly grounded in religion. There appears to be a drive for success and school improvement. What is not as clear, however, is how these localized ideas are adopted and can work their way with the more macro perspectives produced by the country's education policymakers.

This brief survey over the Indonesian educational leadership literature reveals a critical assessment still caught up in its infancy stages. While there are some efforts to contextualize educational leadership within the multiple intersectionalities of power, politics and geography, proposed suggestions for change are brief and not as rigorous; there is too little research evidence on how well these 'solutions' might work. Given Indonesia's unique geopolitical landscape, models for school improvement and better educational leadership may be better achieved from success stories within the region. Top-down implementation of policies may encounter difficulties that are unique and unattested for. It is a sentiment that is clearly resounded within the next section on Teacher Reform in Indonesia.

The multiple complexities of research on Indonesian Teacher Quality

The World Bank’s recent report on “Teacher Reform in Indonesia” (Chang et al., 2014) provides a comprehensive overview of Indonesia’s efforts in improving teacher quality. The report structures work done around the teacher reform conceptual framework (see Figure 3), detailing success and failures impacted by the 2005 Teachers’ Law. Notably, while policy has argued for significant increments in teacher salaries, certification, professionalization, pre-service and continuous professional development, the conclusion for future directions in Indonesian teacher policy
centres on “whole-school reform” that integrates knowledge, culture and a “learning community”.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 3: Conceptual framework for quality education extracted from Chang et al. (2014)*

Clearly, this emphasis on teaching stems on the critical role which teachers play in delivering and shaping student outcomes. Researchers has therefore attempted to historicize the development of the Indonesian teaching community in order to better understand where intervention can be made. Suryadarma and Jones (2013) make the case that many of Indonesia’s educational problems revolve around the teaching force. Because of strong teacher hiring occurring in the 70s – 80s in a bid to vastly improve educational access to all Indonesians, compromises were made in teacher recruitment, training and overall quality:

“This infusion of new, but not very rich, blood diluted the strength of the teacher cadre; blurred the mythic image of the teacher as a community leader and nation builder; and ultimately, combined with a large expansion of the rest of the civil service, reduced the salaries of teachers and other civil servants relative to other professions.”

(Chang et al., 2014)

As such, while government efforts created the educational capacity for universal school enrolment by 1983, it had also created problems in 1) educational quality, 2) teacher absenteeism, 3) de-professionalization, 4) and impacted the Indonesian teacher’s role and identity. Despite government attempts to expand the teaching force and improve teaching qualifications since Law 14/2005 (also known as the Teachers’ Law), there is now a surplus of teachers, and the relationship
between teacher certifications and student performance is minimal (Al-Samarrai & Cerdan-Infantes, 2013; Suharti, 2013). The doubling of salaries also has had no impact to student outcomes, and was seen only as a financial transfer to teachers and an increment in teacher welfare (Ree, Muralidharan, Pradhan, & Rogers, 2015).

Fahmi, Maulana and Yusuf (2011) note that teacher certification in Indonesia is a confusion of the means and ends. Although the formal end goal was to improve student outcomes, certification only led to an improvement in a teacher’s living standards. The authors recommend that a reward and punishment scheme be implemented, closely tied to a student’s performance. This call for incentives and sanctions was also resounded in tackling teacher absenteeism. Suryahadi and Samabodho (2013) point out that because of the widespread case of teacher absenteeism, especially in rural areas, student learning is negatively impacted. Both authors argue that communities should be better involved with schools, and that school committees should have the capacity and flexibility to discourage absenteeism. It re-emphasizes earlier research which concluded policy’s motivating and punitive roles in encouraging teachers to come to work (Usman, Akhmadi, & Suryadarma, 2007).

However, Broekman (2013) pointedly argues that existing Indonesian teacher accountability policies based on standards, appraisal, and links between performance and reward are flawed. While these measures are appropriate based on a “carrots and sticks” approach, Broekman questions if they truly reflect the motivational and de-motivational factors among Indonesian teachers. He asserts that this managerial perspective stems from the Indonesian policymaker following global rhetoric influenced by key stakeholders such as the World Bank. Also, as much as teachers are expected to be professional individually, Broekman highlights the nuances in institutional culture that displays a stronger teacher preference for hierarchical “discipline”. This is contrasted to a degree by Hariri et al. (2012) and Damanik (2014) who showed that a teachers’ job satisfaction could be improved if the principal were “less coercive and bureaucratic”.

Therefore, while policy measures have attempted to employ tangible rewards and sanctions to correct teacher behaviour, scholars have also broadened the paradigm to look into other influencing factors such as the sociological and psychological underpinnings that affect teacher performance both in the classroom and out of it. Bjork (2013) notes that Indonesian teachers have a superordinate “civil servant” identity that needs to shift into one of an ‘educator’. He argues that teachers, loyal to the education ministry, implement its policies with little consideration of its impact to students. This disjuncture between the central and the local is only reinforced by the unquestioning bureaucratic teacher, grounded in its own history of teacher-state relationships. Still, while Bjork argues that the idea of the ‘autonomous educator’ is an alien concept partly motivated by the past, Young (2010) asserts that such a perspective is limited as it “does not consider extra-national or global forces”. In particular, English language teachers in Indonesia are challenging the state’s overt presence because of the global language’s influence intermixed with the local – which Young terms the global-state-local dialectic. It suggests that although

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2 This is a theme consistent in Bjork’s writing. See Bjork (2005)
there might be a consistent teacher culture, such homogeneity is constantly evolving and re-shaped with the introduction of various internal and external influences.

Exacerbating the issues on maintaining and improving teacher quality is Indonesia’s geographical diversity and divides between the urban and rural areas. Even though educational access is almost universal, access for quality and continuous teacher training remains a problem. Luschei and Zubaidah (2012) pointedly note that rural schools are characterised with multigrade classrooms that teachers are not equipped to teach. While the literature extolls the benefits of a multigrade classroom and a multigrade pedagogy (Little, 2001; Thomas & Shaw, 1992), Luschei and Zubaidah’s (2012) respondents note that these ‘Western’ methods are hindered by large classes, insufficient resources, and a teacher training that does not take into account local challenges – with teachers much preferring monograde classes. The authors suggest that this preference for monograde teaching is behavioural. A deep loyalty to the country’s previous dictum of a one-grade, one-curriculum learning philosophy advocated by the previous centralized education system, and the need to cater to high stakes national examinations in the 6th and 12th grades, discourage teachers from autonomously innovating multigrade practices. Furthermore, with rural schools and teachers being geographically separated from their teacher educators and continuous training opportunities, the capacity to respond and improve becomes a spatial issue.

**Teacher Professional Development**

Indonesia’s rural and remote landscape thus raises issues on how teachers can engage in continuous professional development (PD). Sari (2012) posits that as current PD practices focus on teacher-centred instead of collaborative approaches, with a strong demand for “face-to-face” interaction, teachers are structurally prevented from improving existing skills if they do not have the benefit of access. Her proposal in establishing a modified Online Learning Communities (OLC) that is adapted for Indonesia’s socio-cultural context through hierarchical teaching, and one that leverages on social media on mobile phones considering the country’s ICT infrastructural landscape, opens up a discussion for possibilities towards change.

Where instructional practice is concerned, one international practice adapted and researched within Indonesian classrooms is the use of Lesson Study (LS) to re-shape pedagogical methods. Introduced to Indonesian teachers since the early 2000s, LS provide a platform for continuous professional development and is an area that has garnered significant attention from local scholars (Eisuke Saito et al., 2006; Firman, 2010; Hendayana, 2010; Hendayana et al., 2007; Saito, Hawe, Hadiprawiroc, & Empedhe, 2008; Saito, Imansyah, Isamu, & Hendayana, 2007; Saito, Imansyah, Isamu, & Hideharu, 2006; T. Suratno & Cock, 2009; T. Suratno, 2009a, 2009b). More recently, Suratno (2012) argues that because of the Ministry’s commitment, international expert support, local adaptation, teacher motivation for change and a “learning process that was more engaging and different from the norm”, LS is currently “spreading like wildfire across Indonesia”. Still, scholars caution that more effort and understanding is needed in LS partnerships and sustaining reflexive practices in order to create a valuable form of continuous quality teacher education (Tatang Suratno & Iskandar, 2010). The main issues that
seemingly stand out from the Indonesian teacher literature largely centres on impacts which the 2005 Teacher Law achieved, the teacher’s underlying social and psychological grievances, and challenges concerning continuous professional training considering the country’s wide geographical spread.

Notably, there is a distinct effort to critically engage with existing policy and practices to adapt to domestic nuances. However, one lasting consideration is that as Indonesian teacher policy remains a reform centrepiece with a vested interest by international organizations and global research, the leverage which domestic research has remains a point for contention.

**Educational Leadership and Teacher Quality in Malaysia**

Before delving into the Malaysian educational literature, it is important to note that while similar concerns are shared with Indonesia in broad attempts to improve educational quality, there is a substantial push in the Malaysian education system, towards an attempt to produce equitable student outcomes. While this does not mean that the Indonesian government is ignorant of student equity issues, the Malaysian National Educational Blueprint 2013-2025 has highlighted multiple factors concerning educational equity such as a state’s economic capacity, the presence of rural and urban schools, the divide amongst ethnic schools and its varying performances, and the increasing educational-gender gap between boys and girls (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. E–9).

The challenge becomes even more significant as the country recognizes the need to equip Malaysian students with 21st century knowledge, skills and competencies that, while present in a few schools, effectively intensifies existing issues of inequality. This quest for educational opportunity has been a core concentration of the government since independence, as a means to correct the ethnic-based differences within society wrought about by colonial rule.

Therefore, although this paper had initially begun a discussion on moving away from the issue of access to one of quality, conversations around equity is now also an influential reason as to why school improvement is sought in a country. Elements of the domestic literature, has as such, reflected this sentiment with a stronger emphasis on critical education policies centred around topics such as multiculturalism (eg. Tan and Raman (2010, 2014)). Yet, this criticality does not necessarily always permeate the immediate literature on schooling, with a stronger tendency to view educational issues dissociated from the intersectionalities that make a school. The seminal work by Hussein Ahmad (2012) on the *Mission of Public Education in Malaysia: The Challenge of Transformation* is perhaps one of the few recent pieces that attempt to provide a degree of critical thought in Malaysian education.

**Growing attempts at educational leadership research**

In 2012, a new and ambitious National Educational Blueprint was established by the Malaysian authorities attempting to raise the country’s education performance to international educational standards. Within 11 recommended shifts to transform the existing system, points 4 and 5 argue for the transformation of teaching into the profession of choice, as well as ensuring high performing school leaders present in
every school (Ministry of Education, 2012). This level of expertise and quality is deemed necessary especially with a stronger move towards educational decentralization. Stronger school leadership and management capacities are required for strategies that advocate a “more open curriculum” (H. Ahmad, 2012, p. 369) and are designed with “minimal rules and procedures”. In this new normal, schools are idealized with a capacity and autonomy to create direction while reacting to policy. Ahmad (2012) argues that this demand beckons the development of principals as “SuperLeaders” in Malaysian schools. It is to an extent, a re-invocation of the Charismatic Leader that dominated previous leadership theories.

However, as noted by Jones et al. (2015), despite the recent attention given by the Malaysian government towards principal preparation and training, the empirical research on school leadership within the country remains limited. Earlier work done by researchers proposing school leadership models suited for a 21st century knowledge frame remain conceptual (eg. Ahmad and Ghavifekr (2014) and Tie (2011)). Therefore, in a brief contribution to the domestic literature, Jones et al. (2015) highlight findings that because Malaysian principals currently identify their role as one which also empowers others to take action, institutionalizing a Distributed Leadership model seems consistent and effective for schools. Halim and Ahmad (2015) further concur that teachers are receptive with this model as it is also an enabling factor for expertise to be shared. Nonetheless, the authors do argue that Distributed Leadership is still in its infancy changes for widespread acceptability and more research is needed to understand its implementation within the Malaysian school work culture.

Still, this recognition of teacher empowerment through school leadership demonstrates a shift in how earlier scholars perceived school leaders to be simply a manager and an administrator (Quah, 2011, p. 1787; Tie, 2011, p. 424). It resonates with earlier research that there is growing consensus domestically on how leadership practices have an impact on teacher performance, and subsequently better student achievement for school improvement (Abdullah, DeWitt, & Alias, 2013; Simin Ghavifekr, Ibrahim, Chellapan, Sukumaran, & Subramaniam, 2015; Ponnusamy, 2010; Salleh & Mohamad, 2015; Sharma, Sun, & Kannan, 2012; Suraya & Yunus, 2012).
Through his research on Instructional Leadership, Quah (2011) makes the point that Malaysian principals are, in general, successful instructional leaders. However, Quah also notes that Malaysian principals do not place as much attention on weak teaching methods or underperforming students. Instead, there is an emphasis towards areas of overall vision, a smooth teaching program, a collaborative climate, and avenues for teacher’s professional development. The implications of this discussion is that Malaysian school principals, though instructional, are selective and grounded by older schools of thought that privilege certain values and discourses. Sekhu (2011) then recommends that for methods towards better student performance, instruction should be central to school activities and that good relationships be established between teachers and learners. She also advocates that the principal should take a stronger role in their teacher’s development, especially those who are underachieving, as well as being kept abreast of classroom activities.

Although Malaysia embraces a largely centralised education system with direction set by Kuala Lumpur, the earlier Malaysian National Education Blueprint of
2006-2010 attempted a degree of decentralisation through the establishment of cluster schools in the country. Despite being given management autonomy in five distinct areas\(^3\), school leaders still had a delimited freedom of choice (Malakolunthu & Shamsudin, 2011). This limited autonomy impacts a school’s capacity for teacher recruitment decisions, resulting in a little authority in retaining the right teachers. Recognizing the breadth of leadership-operational challenges within schools, work produced by Ghavifekr et al. (2014) detail their findings from research on Chinese primary schools Heads of departments (see Figure 4).

Malakolunthu (2007), though her analysis is limited to two Malaysian secondary schools, points out that teachers face a bureaucratic school management structure which undermines the teacher’s efforts. While there has been much effort to promote various leadership models at the national level, Malakolunthu’s research shows a situational “inability of the principal to establish a working culture based on the norms of collegiality and professional inquiry” (ibid:127). In other words, there is a dissonance between both teachers and principal of what it means to have a supportive work climate.

Crucial to this discussion, however, is her assertion that there are different conceptions to management, teaching and learning embraced by the principal – an ethos that can subsequently affect a teacher’s performance. This is largely influenced by a principal’s 1) beliefs, 2) existing professional knowledge as well as 3) demands from larger policy contexts and their subsequent expectations most especially brought about by frequent reform. Therefore, Malakolunthu proposes that despite the realities of out-of-touch educational power-brokers from central government, there needs to be stronger efforts in “building principals” to support school development.

It is clear that though research attempts have been made in illuminating best practices amongst school leaders, as well as various advocates arguing for a leadership model that works, there is a strong undercurrent that demands for leadership to take place in schools. Nonetheless, while there is strong research establishing leadership’s necessity, there is little empirical work done that reveal how leadership practices are challenged within the existing system. This is an important consideration as though there are calls for strong leadership, more understanding is needed how these leaders (if any) negotiate the realities brought about by a strong centre. In other words, scholarship that provides a critical address on the complexities of power for the system’s middle leaders can give better insight to the steps needed in creating high performing school leaders.

The research reviewed in this essay make a stronger argument that leadership is important for school improvement, but it does not explicate as much on how it is also problematic. The challenges that do surface are oftentimes operational, and not immediately revealing of a larger discourse that is present in a confluence of the political, social, psychological or geographical.

A stronger need to study Teacher quality and development

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\(^3\) School management, physical management, human resource management, teaching and learning, co-curriculum management.
There is a global consensus that one of the best ways to improve teaching is to transform teaching into the profession of choice – a fact not lost on the Malaysian authorities. Articulated as a career meant for top graduates, teachers will arguably receive the best training from recruitment to retirement, and have access to career progression based on competency and merit (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. E–26). This resolve, however, has been a frequent pursuit by the authorities with the various reform plans such as the Education Act 1996 and the Education Development Plan 2006 – 2010 (H. Ahmad, 2012, p. 167; Goh, 2012, p. 74; Jamil, 2014) to improve the profession’s status as a whole as well as to improve instruction. Yet, as argued by Malakolunthu (2007), the success of reform is not just a bureaucratic initiative. It is highly dependent on those who implement the initiative. Therefore, when reform does fail, one must look at potential “conceptual and practical cleavages” (Malakolunthu, 2007, p. 1) between the policy planners and the implementers.

As shown in the earlier section, one of Malakolunthu’s (2007) key ideas is the “building principal” concept. Apart from being an administrator and a manager, the building principal’s core function as an instructional leader is to develop teachers. However, as demonstrated through her empirical studies on two Malaysian schools, the potential for teacher development is very much limited by the type leadership present. This suggests then that central to opportunities for Professional Development (PD) is the presence of instructional school leaders. Therefore, even if there is strong government effort in encouraging PD as a means of career development or because of monetary incentives (Jamil, Razak, Raju, & Mohamed, 2011), proper teacher development cannot occur without the right leaders. In that sense, although Ahmad (2012) has identified several policy challenges when it comes to developing quality teachers in Malaysia (such as issues on talent attraction and the ability to connect pre-service training with professional service), the gap that needs addressing are policy and research efforts that looks at teaching and leadership relationships as a cohesive whole.

Also fundamental to this discussion is that a high quality teacher education system is necessary to ground the teacher development process, and where necessary, build resilience for future complexities. However, researchers have argued that the Malaysian teacher education system must change. Lee (2002) proposed early on that a revamp is needed in shifting the teacher education curriculum from the technical-rational approach to one that is closer to a reflective practitioner. Moreover, the “one-size fits all” approach in teacher education is problematic especially with a culturally diverse teaching cohort that has to internalize a national curriculum for an even more diverse group of students. Because the challenges are multi-fold, Lee argues that there should be strong focus for research on teacher education, especially in the context of teaching and learning and the issues of lifelong professional development within a distinctive Malaysian context.

This emphasis on a high quality and relevant teacher education and educators have been echoed a decade later. Ahmad (2012) acknowledges four areas of opportunity that can ensure a quality teacher education: 1) the recruitment of the right teacher educators, 2) rigorous pre-service teacher training programmes, 3) quality continuous teacher education programmes, and 4) retaining of the best teachers and teacher educators within the field. Importantly, he asserts that one
critical question that needs discussion is “not where the Malaysian teacher education mission is heading . . . but where it ought to be heading” (ibid:218).

At the agent level, Mokshein et al. (2009) argues that for Malaysia to train and retain quality teachers within the cadre, teachers must be active participants in policy discourse and take greater ownership in areas for professional development. The authors further assert that at the system level, a greater decentralization of educational governance is needed to include more stakeholders within the reform process. Most importantly, a call is made for teachers themselves to solve the issues on quality teaching. However, quality teaching varies and is not easily defined. Contemporary pre-occupation by scholars and government with measurable figures that reveal ‘quality’ is perhaps most clearly seen in the establishment of the 2009 Malaysian Teacher Standards. Yet, though standards are in one aspect limited and may not be the only way to measure teacher quality, Goh (2012) notes that with a “rigorous method”, competent instructional practice can be encouraged. Still, she acknowledges that while the goals are clear, the empirical impact which standards have within the teaching profession is currently uncertain.

Insofar that there are expectations on the teacher to deliver, a proper environment is also needed to facilitate results. Nonetheless, scholars have argued that teacher’s welfare is being neglected. Research conducted by Malakolunthu, Idris and Rengasamy (2010) reveal that deteriorating work environment in Malaysian secondary schools are having an impact onto teacher’s welfare and subsequently classroom performance. Although some may argue that teachers are motivated by intrinsic factors, Hamid et al. (2012) note that good personality alone is “insufficient in terms of enhancing the teachers’ commitment and responsibilities towards their students”. The complementary link, they argue, is a high degree of “cognitive competency”. While this remains a factor to be further discussed, what is clear is that both internal and external motivating factors need addressing in better understanding the Malaysian teachers status and conditions.

From this brief survey of the Malaysian teacher development literature, it is apparent that there are attempts in breaking the monolithic discussion called ‘quality teaching’ into feasible parts for researchers to work on. Still, as much as these articles highlighted are to a degree critical of existing practices, there are multiple questions that need answering. For instance, if school leadership and teaching were to be viewed as symbiotic halves, stronger empirical studies are necessary in unveiling domestic best practices. In cases where schools have seemingly failed, researchers must look at the larger political and policy discourse that affects results. The factors that contribute to recruitment and development of a high quality teacher are well documented. What is needed then is to establish the challenges in the implementation of the policies in identifying and retaining quality teachers within particular political, educational and cultural contexts.

**Concluding Remarks**

Firstly, it is important to note that this review set out to interrogate the national literature that, it was hoped, would provide a basis for understanding the educational policies in leadership and teacher quality in two Asian countries. The challenges faced in this process is that much more work remains inaccessible due to language
constraints and that not all works published in international journals are available online. Despite these limitations, this review is significant as it provides the international reader with a more informed, contemporary understanding of the education research, issues and challenges that are present in both Malaysia and Indonesia.

For Indonesia, the social realities brought about by politics, geography and survival are most distinct in the research on educational leadership and teacher development. Also, while there are numerous attempts to improve educational quality, what it means to have improvement varies across locales ranging from urban cities to rural schools. This beckons the question if international benchmarks such as OECD’s PISA are entirely necessary, or equitably reflective of the country’s state of education. It is clear that in Indonesia’s case, there is a stronger underlying emphasis within research and policy that speaks of politics, state development and survival.

Malaysia’s challenges as understood from the research studies are less clear. There is a clear recognition of education’s role for the national economy and the country’s drive towards 21st century competencies, but the domestic research available does not always rigorously assess the implications for such decisions. The research focus is in the area of viewing teaching and school leadership as a symbiotic whole. As much as there is call to create SuperLeaders (Malaysian education system’s designation for good quality experienced teachers), this is also in the view to develop better leadership capacities to encourage teachers’ development.

Still, attempts to adapt global ideas are present in both contexts. While globalization may seemingly encourage policy borrowing from systems that ‘succeed’, Harris (2016) warns reformers that there is ample evidence to demonstrate that approaches to school or system improvement needs to be properly contextualized in order to have any real chance of succeeding. More documented lessons are needed to understand the effects of policy acquisition that is adopted based on just ideological assumptions.
Cluster IA
ANALYSING CONTEXTS:
Showing the ability, and inviting other school community members, to analyse and understand contexts both internal to school and external, and to act accordingly.

Cluster II
VISIONING:
developing and promoting a shared vision, putting high expectations, focused on directions.

Cluster IIA. SETTING STRATEGIES: demonstrating ability in setting pre-conditional, academic, non-academic, evaluative strategies (strong influence of instructional leadership practices).

Cluster IIB. BUILDING PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL CAPACITIES: concerned with fostering PD of own self and others by giving examples, developing meaningful and simultaneous programs

Cluster IIC. BUILDING SCHOOL ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITIES: concerned with creating supportive school culture and with reshaping school structure to ease changes & improving cultural and participative/distributed leadership.

Cluster IID. CREATING SCHOOL NETWORKS, COLLABORATIONS, PARTNERSHIPS: demonstrating ability in establishing linkages to outside school stakeholders.

Cluster IC. BELIEFS AND VALUES:
Underpinning, enduring, strong, and shared religious, professional, relationship, and cultural beliefs and values of the principals—guidance, standards, and screening devices for any decision and action made. Amanah and IMTAQ of religious values appeared to be importantly driving values of their leadership.

Cluster IV. OUTCOMES:
- Student Outcomes— academic (NEM; local and national academic competition), and non academic (IMTAQ, other qualities, extracurricular).
- School Outcomes— teacher capacity; school conditions; leadership and management.
Note
The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of The HEAD Foundation.

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