Teachers' Followership Behaviours and Principals' Leadership Effectiveness in Malaysian Public Secondary Schools: A Case Study in Sarawak Southern Region

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Abstract

Improving leadership effectiveness in schools is a crucial priority across organizations. However, ineffective attempts to enhance leadership effectiveness often led to wasted resources and fail to improve student performance. These failures are typically attributed to an excessive focus on leaders while neglecting other organizational factors, including followers. Unfortunately, few studies have examined the impact of followership on leadership effectiveness in schools. This study aimed to investigate the followership behaviors of teachers and the leadership effectiveness of principals in Malaysian public secondary schools, using a follower-centric approach. The study employed a quantitative survey method, utilizing Google Forms to collect data. Respondents were selected from five public secondary schools in Sarawak's Southern Region through purposive sampling. A total of 108 valid questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 27.0 statistical software. The findings indicated that teachers exhibited high levels of followership behaviors, including Assuming Responsibility, Serving, Taking Moral Action, and Participating In Transformation. However, their levels of Challenge were only moderate. Additionally, teachers reported that their principals demonstrated all five components of effective leadership: Modeling the Way, Inspire A Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, And Encourage the Heart, at a high level. These findings provide valuable insights for academics and practitioners interested in understanding how followership actions can contribute to the success of leadership development efforts. The study contributes significantly to the field of educational leadership and management by exploring the emerging concept of educational followership. It serves as a reliable reference for those seeking to enhance leadership effectiveness in schools, offering new perspectives in this area of research.

Keywords: Teachers' Followership Behaviours, Principals' Leadership Effectiveness, Secondary Schools, Follower-Centric Approach, Teacher

INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, there has been a notable increase in interest regarding the impact of school leadership. Scholars, educators, and policymakers have consistently acknowledged that effective school leadership is strongly associated with improved school performance (Adams & Velarde, 2020; Day et al., 2016; Harris & Jones, 2020). Extensive evidence also supports the notion that school principals have a substantial influence on organizational and student outcomes (Doss et al., 2016; Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Uthman, 2018) and play a vital role in enhancing employee performance (Ahmad et al., 2019; Mwesiga & Okendo, 2018; Perera et al., 2015). Recent research by Leithwood et al. (2020) has further reinforced the claim that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching in its

impact on student learning. It is evident that school principals significantly contribute to the success of an organization.

While considerable research has focused on identifying the key factors that promote leadership effectiveness, it remains challenging to determine and classify the most relevant components (Hutton, 2018; Lemma, 2018). Among the potential determinants, followership has been recognized as an important influencer of leadership effectiveness, particularly in the corporate sector (Bufalino, 2018; Carsten, 2017; Ghias & Hassan, 2018; Kellerman, 2019). However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the potential impact of followership on principal leadership effectiveness in schools. Addressing these gaps through ongoing research efforts is crucial. Scholars in the field of educational leadership, such as Crippen (2012) and Thody (2003), have called for more "follower-centric" research to be conducted in the school context. Developing a clearer understanding of the concept of followership is essential for both leaders and followers to gain deeper insights into the educational leadership process.

Given the increasing importance of educational followership in the school environment, it is vital to gather empirical data on the followership behaviors among school teachers. This will enable further exploration of the relationship between teachers' followership behaviors and principals' leadership effectiveness. Additionally, a thorough examination of the role of followers in shaping principal leadership effectiveness is warranted. By obtaining a comprehensive understanding of followership dynamics, educational leaders and followers can enhance their understanding of the intricate nature of educational leadership.

The emergence of educational leadership that recognize teachers' contributions to principals' leadership effectiveness serves as the basis for this research as shown in the research framework (Figure 1). This study is also addressing Crippen's (2012) claim to give recognition and attention to followership and the role it plays in schools. In the present study, the researcher analysed the exhibition of followership behaviours among teachers as suggested by Chaleff (1995) in Courageous Followership Model in Malaysian public secondary schools. Next, the researcher identified the exemplary leadership practices developed by Kouzes and Posner (2012) as an indicator of principals' leadership effectiveness from teachers' perceptions. Hence, the main research objective of this study is to better understand the level of teachers' followership behaviours and principals' leadership effectiveness in Malaysian public secondary schools.
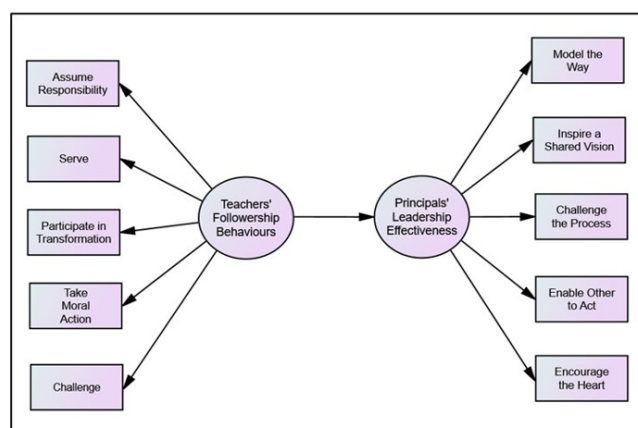
Figure 1 Research framework adapted from courageous followership model (Chaleff, 1995) and leadership practices model (Kouzes & Posner, 2012)

METHODS

In this study, the survey instrument consisted of three sections, totalling 59 items that required respondents' input. Sections A and B involved rating the level of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding teachers' followership behaviours and principals' leadership effectiveness. The remaining questions in Section C focused on gathering demographic information from the respondents.

To facilitate data collection, electronic and online questionnaires were utilized in this study. Respondents received a Google Form link via Telegram and WhatsApp, allowing them to complete the questionnaire at their own convenience. Employing this automated and real-time survey processing method helped save costs, time, and resources. Ethical considerations were considered by following principles proposed by Sekaran and Bougie (2016), including voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and providing research information to the respondents. To increase response rates, the questionnaire was kept concise and precise, and a soft reminder message was sent to participants.

Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the researcher obtained authorization from the Educational Planning and Research Department (EPRD) of the Malaysian Ministry of Education, Sarawak State Education Department, and the school principals of the participating schools. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling from five public secondary schools in the Southern Region of Sarawak. Within each school, the Google Form link was randomly distributed to teachers based on the school's name lists. The survey was administered using Google Form and was completed within one week. As a result, 108 teachers out of the total sample of 150 responded to the Google Form, indicating an excellent response rate of 72%. This high response rate can be attributed to the teachers' strong commitment to completing the survey.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Description of respondents' demographic characteristics

Characteristic	Variable	Frequency (N=108)	Percentage %
District Education Office (PPD)	Kuching	34	31.5
(Southern Region)	Padawan	38	35.2
	Samarahan	36	33.3
Gender	Male	38	35.2
	Female	70	64.8
Age	<30 years old	11	10.2
	30-39 years old	34	31.5
	40-50 years old	36	33.3
	>50 years old	27	25.0
Ethnicity	Malay	31	28.7
	Chinese	46	42.6
	Native Sarawak/Sabah	28	25.9
	Indian	3	2.8
	Other	31	28.7
Education Level	Diploma	2	1.9
	Bachelor	87	80.6
	Master	19	17.6
	PhD	0	0
	Other	0	0
Teaching Experience	< 5 years	13	12.0
	5-16 years	41	38.0
	> 16 years	54	50.0
Years of service in CURRENT SCHOOL	< 5 years	31	28.7
	5-16 years	51	47.2
	> 16 years	26	24.1
Years of service with CURRENT School Principal	< 5 years	89	82.4
	5-16 years	17	15.7
	> 16 years	2	1.9
Average time engaged with school principal per week (physically and/or virtually)	< 30 minutes	55	50.9
	30-60 minutes	32	29.6
	> 60 minutes	21	19.4

Table 1 presents the description of the Malaysian public secondary school teachers who participated in this study. The findings in Table 1 were generated by analysing the data from Section C of the questionnaires.

In this study, the measurement of the Teachers' Followership Behaviours (TFB) construct involved a self-reported questionnaire with 20 items. The respondents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement on a 10-point interval scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree). Awang et al. (2016) emphasized the reliability of the 10-point interval scale compared to the 5-point scale, highlighting its larger range of options and greater flexibility. The TFB construct encompassed five components: Assume Responsibility, Serve, Participate in Transformation, Take Moral Action, and Challenge. Table 2 presents the statements and corresponding coding for each item. The descriptive statistics in Table 2 provide the mean values of the TFB construct items, which ranged from 6.52 to 9.43, as well as the standard deviation (SD) values, which ranged from 0.800 to 1.963.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of measurement items of teachers' followership behaviours construct

Component	Label	Item Statement	Mean	SD
Assume Responsibility	AR1	Teaching is an important goal for me	9.43	.871
	AR2	I reflect on my strengths and weaknesses	8.81	.988
	AR3	My work goals are in line with the school's goals	8.88	.964
	AR4	I am committed to my school	9.26	.800
	AR5	I am enthusiastic about my work	9.23	.883
	AR6	I actively develop my teaching competencies so that I become more valuable to the school	8.95	.993
Serve	S1	When I start a new task at school (e.g., teaching, project, committee, etc.), I consider outcomes that are important to the school	8.64	1.006
	S2	Even though I may not be the leader of a project, I continue to contribute to my best ability	8.79	1.006
	S3	I help my colleagues, even when I am not receiving recognition for doing so	8.92	1.057
	S4	I understand the principal's goals for the school	8.79	.961
Participate in Transformation	PIT1	I independently identify which school activities are most critical in achieving the school's goals	8.47	1.250
	PIT2	I independently think of ideas that will contribute significantly to the school's goals	8.14	1.313
	PIT3	I help my principal to identify the pros and cons of ideas	7.33	1.578
	PIT4	I take the initiative to pursue tasks beyond my routine job (e.g., Parent-Teacher Association)	7.38	1.794
Take Moral Action	TMA1	I act based on my own ethical standards rather than on others'	7.93	1.692
	TMA2	I try to solve the work-related issues on my own rather than seek help from my principal	7.98	1.542
	TMA3	I can complete a difficult assignment (e.g., teaching, project, committee, etc.) without supervision	6.52	1.963
Challenge	C1	When the principal asks me to do something that contradicts my professional preferences, I say "no" rather than "yes"	7.37	1.936
	C2	I assert my views on important issues even though it may differ from my principal's	7.48	1.456
	C3	I ponder my principal's decisions	8.77	1.076

Also, the measurement of the Principals' Leadership Effectiveness (PLE) construct in this study involved a self-reported questionnaire comprising 30 items. Respondents were required to rate their agreement or disagreement on a 10-point interval scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree). The PLE construct encompassed five dimensions: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. Table 3 provides the statements and corresponding coding for each item. The descriptive statistics presented in Table xx demonstrate the mean values of the PLE construct items, which ranged from 7.23 to 8.42, and the standard deviation (SD) values, which ranged from 1.265 to 2.025.

The reliability analysis conducted in this study examined the consistency of the TFB construct and their components. The Cronbach's alpha values for the five TFB components ranged from 0.681 to 0.907, indicating good internal reliability. The overall reliability value for the TFB construct was 0.884, suggesting that all 20 items demonstrated strong reliability and were highly acceptable. Similarly, the Cronbach's alpha values for the five components measuring the PLE construct ranged from 0.958 to 0.981. These high values indicate excellent internal reliability for the items analyzed within each component, surpassing the threshold of 0.90. The overall reliability value for the PLE construct was 0.987, indicating that all 30 items exhibited strong reliability and were highly acceptable.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of measurement items for principals' leadership effectiveness construct

Component	Label	Item Statement	Mean	SD
Model the Way	MW1	Sets a personal example of what he / she expects from the teachers	8.08	1.641
	MW2	Takes the time to monitor teachers' performance	8.01	1.602
	MW3	Follows through the promises and commitments he/she makes	7.95	1.629
	MW4	Seeks feedback on how his / her actions affect teacher's performance	7.51	1.696
	MW5	Obtains a consensus on a common set of values to run the school	7.62	1.618
	MW6	Is clear about the philosophy of school leadership	7.95	1.662
Inspire a Shared Vision	ISV1	Talks about future trends that will influence how our work gets done	8.10	1.265
	ISV2	Describes a compelling image of what our future could be like	7.76	1.537
	ISV3	Seeks cooperation from teachers in sharing their dreams of the future	8.05	1.440
	ISV4	Shows teachers how their long-term interests can be achieved through a common vision	7.68	1.405
	ISV5	Paints the "big picture" of what we aspire to accomplish	7.60	1.577
	ISV6	Motivates teachers to understand the impact of their teaching on students' achievement	7.65	1.974
Challenge the Process	CP1	Seeks out challenging opportunities that test his / her own skills and abilities	7.85	1.605
	CP2	Challenges teachers to be creative and innovative in delivering their work responsibilities	8.42	1.633
	CP3	Looks for innovative ways to improve what teachers do	8.01	1.722
	CP4	Asks "What can we learn?" when things do not go as expected	8.36	1.426
	CP5	Encourages teachers to set and achieve their goals	7.88	1.519
	CP6	Experiments and takes risks, even when there is a chance of failure	7.79	1.742
Enable Others to Act	EA1	Develops cooperation among his/her teaching staff	8.09	1.404
	EA2	Listens actively to different opinions from teachers	7.74	1.705
	EA3	Treats teachers with dignity and respect	7.23	1.950
	EA4	Supports the decisions made by the teachers	7.27	1.868
	EA5	Gives teachers a great deal of freedom to decide how to do their work	7.54	1.580
	EA6	Ensures that teachers learn new skills and upgrade themselves	7.66	1.759
Encourage the Heart	EH1	Praises teachers for a job well done	7.41	1.862
	EH2	Expresses his/her confidence in the teachers' abilities	7.48	1.876
	EH3	Makes sure that teachers are rewarded for their contributions to the success of projects	7.55	1.815
	EH4	Experiments and takes risks, even when there is a chance of failure	7.79	1.742
	EH5	Ensures that teachers learn new skills and upgrade themselves	7.66	1.759
	EH6	Give teachers appreciation and support for their contributions	7.70	2.025

a.   Teachers' Followership Behaviours (TFB) construct

The descriptive statistics of the Teachers' Followership Behaviours (TFB) construct, comprising five components ("Assume Responsibility," "Serve," "Participate in Transformation," "Take Moral Action," and "Challenge"), provide insights into various aspects of teachers' behaviors and attitudes within an educational context. Within the "Assume Responsibility" component, teachers exhibit strong identification with teaching as an important goal (AR1) and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses (AR2). They also align their work goals with the school's goals (AR3), demonstrate commitment to their school (AR4), show enthusiasm for their work (AR5), and actively develop their teaching competencies (AR6) (Abdulaziz et al., 2022). These findings indicate that teachers perceive their role as crucial and are highly dedicated to their profession and school. The relatively low standard deviations suggest a high level of agreement among respondents.

On the other hand, in the "Serve" component, teachers prioritize outcomes important to the school when undertaking new tasks (S1), contribute to the best of their ability without assuming leadership roles (S2), assist colleagues without seeking recognition (S3), and understand the principal's goals for the school (S4) that suggested by Lysberg (2023). These results indicate a strong sense of collaboration, teamwork, and support for colleagues and the school's objectives among teachers. Furthermore, the "Participate in Transformation" component highlights teachers' autonomy in identifying critical school activities (PIT1), generating ideas that contribute significantly to the school's goals (PIT2), assisting the principal in evaluating ideas (PIT3), and pursuing tasks beyond their routine responsibilities (PIT4). These findings are supported by Muckenthaler et al. (2020) which demonstrate teachers' proactivity, autonomy, and willingness to actively contribute to the transformation and improvement of their school.

The "Take Moral Action" component reflects teachers' tendencies to act based on their ethical standards (TMA1), solve work-related issues independently (TMA2), and perceive themselves as capable of completing difficult assignments without supervision (TMA3). These findings highlight teachers' moral autonomy, problem-solving abilities, and self-reliance in professional matters. Likewise, in the "Challenge" component, teachers expressed their preferences when faced with tasks contradicting their professional beliefs (C1), assert their views on important issues even when differing from the principal's (C2), and reflect on their principal's decisions (C3). These results indicate teachers' willingness to voice their opinions, engage in critical thinking, and contribute to the decision-making processes within the school (Da'as, 2019). The research by Berjaoui and Karami-Akkary (2020) further supports the importance of fostering a professional community where teachers' voices are invited and valued as part of a distributed form of leadership.

Overall, the descriptive statistics offer valuable insights into the behaviors and attitudes of teachers in Malaysian public secondary schools across different components. These findings emphasize the dedication, commitment, collaboration, proactivity, moral autonomy, and willingness of teachers to challenge decisions. The teaching workforce demonstrates an engaged and committed nature that actively contributes to the development and transformation of the educational environment.

b.   Principals' Leadership Effectiveness (PLE) Construct

In a comparable vein, the descriptive statistics for the measurement items of the Principals' Leadership Effectiveness (PLE) construct provide insights into various aspects of principals' leadership behaviors and their impact on teachers within an educational setting. Within the "Model the Way" component, the mean values indicate that principals lead by example in expressing their expectations from teachers (MW1), actively monitor teachers' performance (MW2), uphold their promises and commitments (MW3), seek feedback on how their actions affect teachers' performance (MW4), establish a consensus on shared values within the school (MW5), and demonstrate a clear understanding of the philosophy of school leadership (MW6). These findings suggest that teachers perceive principals as role models who exhibit integrity, accountability, and a clear sense of direction. The relatively high standard deviations across these items indicate some variability in teachers' perceptions of these leadership behaviors.

Regarding the "Inspire a Shared Vision" component, the mean values reveal that principals discuss future trends that influence work (ISV1), articulate a compelling vision of the future (ISV2), encourage teachers to participate in sharing their aspirations (ISV3), demonstrate how teachers' long-term interests align with a common vision (ISV4), provide a broad perspective of what is to be achieved (ISV5), and motivate teachers to understand the impact of their teaching on students' achievement (ISV6). These results align with Meyer et al. (2022), who suggest that teachers perceive principals as inspiring leaders who foster a shared vision, collaboration, and a sense of purpose.

In the "Challenge the Process" component, the mean values indicate that principals actively seek challenging opportunities (CP1), encourage teachers to be creative and innovative (CP2), explore innovative approaches for improvement (CP3), adopt a learning-oriented approach when facing unexpected situations (CP4), support teachers in setting and achieving goals (CP5), and demonstrate a willingness to experiment and take risks (CP6). These findings suggest that teachers perceive principals as leaders who encourage continuous improvement, foster creativity, and embrace change. In other words, the leadership behaviors exhibited by principals contribute positively to teachers' motivation, focus on tasks, and the development of students' learning abilities (Özdemir et al., 2020).

In terms of the "Enable Others to Act" component, average values indicate that principals encourage collaboration among teachers (EA1), actively listen to diverse teacher opinions (EA2), treat teachers with dignity and respect (EA3), support teachers' decisions (EA4), grant teachers autonomy in their work (EA5), and prioritise teachers' learning and skill development (EA6). These findings suggest that administrators are viewed positively by teachers as leaders who foster a supportive and empowering atmosphere in which teachers' opinions are appreciated, choices are respected, and professional progress is fostered.

As for the "Encourage the Heart" component, the mean values suggest that principals commend teachers for their achievements (EH1), demonstrate confidence in teachers' abilities (EH2), ensure that teachers are recognized for their contributions (EH3), promote a culture of experimentation and risk-taking (EH4), prioritize teachers' learning and skill development (EH5), and provide appreciation and

support for teachers' contributions (EH6). These findings suggest that teachers perceive principals as leaders who acknowledge and value teachers' efforts, foster a positive and supportive atmosphere, and encourage professional development.

In summary, the descriptive statistics derived from the measurement items shed light on teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership behaviours across different components. The findings reveal that principals are seen as role models, inspiring individuals with a visionary outlook. They are also recognized for challenging the status quo, promoting teachers' autonomy and development, and providing encouragement for their endeavours. However, it is important to note that there is some variation in how these behaviours are perceived by teachers, emphasizing the significance of individual experiences and viewpoints. These positive leadership attributes reflect principals' dedication to cultivating a positive school culture, empowering teachers, and fostering an environment that nurtures professional growth and achievement.

CONCLUSION

The study showed a positive and engaged teaching workforce that is distinguished by their devotion, commitment, cooperation, proactivity, moral autonomy, and readiness to confront judgements. These characteristics emphasise teachers' active contributions to the growth and transformation of the educational environment. Eventually, the study emphasised the critical importance of good leadership in increasing teacher engagement and satisfaction, which leads to better student results. Furthermore, teachers viewed principals as successful leaders who act as role models, inspire with a common vision, question the status quo, promote autonomy, and progress, and offer encouragement, particularly in public secondary schools in Southern Region of Sarawak. While teachers' opinions may vary, these findings highlighted the importance of principals' behaviours in developing a good school culture and fostering an atmosphere that encourages professional growth and success.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data will be made available on request.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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