

Leadership Approaches for the Needs of Special Education Teachers and Students by Public and Private Principals

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Abstract: *The study explores how public and private school principals in Malaysia adapt their leadership styles to support special education teachers and students. Employing the Path-Global Theory, which includes directive, supportive, participate and achievement-oriented approaches, the study examines the effectiveness of the styles in meeting the unique needs of special education. Using a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach, insights were gathered from primary school teachers across seven schools in Selangor, including both public and private institutions. The findings indicate that leadership styles differ by school type, with private schools often prioritizing team performance and mental health support, while public schools focus on effective management and social inclusion. This research contributes to the discourse on inclusive education, suggesting that adopting strengths from both public and private leadership approaches could enhance support for special education teachers and students in Malaysia.*

Keywords: leadership, principles, private school, public school

1. Introduction

Malaysia's education system has undergone major reforms, with the zero-reject policy being the primary focus (Rahmat et al., 2012). This policy seeks to ensure that all children have the right to a primary education. The zero-rejection policy requires that all children, regardless of background, nationality, or legal status, attend a public school. This effort has played an important role in boosting access to education for marginalized populations and reducing the number of children who are not in school. Furthermore, in 2015, Malaysia committed to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the sphere. (Malaysia Millennium Development Goals 2015 Report, United Nations Development Programme, 2023). The government has taken several initiatives to integrate its educational policies and programs with the SDGs, particularly Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

By embracing variety in education, Malaysia is paving the road for a better future in which every child can study and grow to their full potential. Acceptance of students with various learning needs, including special needs kids, is an important step towards developing a more inclusive educational environment that meets the unique needs of everyone. These reforms are making schools better positioned to provide personalized support and resources, ensuring that every child receives the education they deserve. Shahrul et al. (2021) investigate the

contemporary landscape of inclusive education in Malaysian private schools, focusing on the Batu Pahat district in Johor. By assessing current practices and obstacles in special education, the study hopes to highlight the need for improvements in a variety of areas, including curriculum, assessment procedures, teacher appointments, and administrative frameworks.

The Path Goal Theory distinguishes four sorts of styles: directive, supporting, participative, and achievement-oriented. Directive leadership entails giving clear instructions and advice, whereas supportive leadership emphasizes expressing concern for teachers' well-being and fostering a happy work atmosphere. There are few studies on the differences between private and public school management, however an article in the News Strait Times on November 23, 2015, explores the controversy over whether private schools are better than public ones in Malaysia. Class size, resource availability, and teacher quality are all important considerations. Private schools are frequently regarded as superior due to lower class sizes, more individualized attention, and better facilities. The primary goal of this study is to look at how private and public-school administrators modify their leadership styles to meet the unique demands of special education instructors and students. This study investigates the differences in leadership styles employed by public and private schools when it comes to meeting the needs of instructors who teach students with special needs in their classroom. Furthermore, it raises questions about how satisfied instructors are with their current positions at school. Finally, the study aims to contribute effectively to the continuing discussion about inclusive education, paving the way for improved practices and policies that prioritize all learners' unique needs. This study also aims to help improve inclusive practices in primary schools, resulting in a more supportive and effective learning environment for all students, including those with special needs.

2. Literature Review

Malaysia's Education Act of 1996 requires that children aged 7 to 12 be enrolled in school, with penalties for noncompliance including an RM5000 fine or up to one year in prison, or both. Parents must select between public and private primary schools, creating a competitive environment for both types of institutions. Despite the lower costs charged by public schools, parental satisfaction remains higher in private schools. This demonstrates that society values perceived educational quality over cost. Nasreen et al. (2017) found that parents choose private schools because they believe they provide a higher quality education. Private school supporters, on the other hand, argue that they give pupils a higher-quality education and more personalized attention (Dronkers & Roberts, 2023). There are some differences in how public schools run their special education programs. The level of facilities and resources varies between Malaysian schools (Rosmalilly & Woollard, 2021). Participants in the survey highlighted differences between schools such as SK (government schools) and SJKC (Chinese national-type schools), with SJKC having better infrastructure despite receiving comparable government money. School management encompasses a wide range of characteristics, including administration, social elements, student learning outcomes, environmental variables, and psychological factors (Anand et al., 2023; Crispin et al., 2022; Hofman & Hofman, 2015). School administration is recognized as a "polysemic construct" (Anand et al., 2023), encompassing both theoretical and practical activities aimed at improving educational quality, equity, and relevance. Leadership is essential for managing special needs inclusive programs in both private and public schools (Abdulrasheed et al, 2020). School administrators' principal job is to support high-quality education for all students, especially those who are disadvantaged (Dyson, 2010; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Precey, 2011, as cited in Lambrecht et al., 2020).

It is critical for school leaders to have successful leadership styles that can provide effective assistance that meets the needs and goals of special education students.

The Path-Goal Theory, developed by Robert House in 1970, has been used in educational management and leadership. According to the Path-Goal Theory, leaders should modify their leadership behaviours and styles in response to their followers' needs and traits, as well as the situational environment. Path-Goal Theory features four distinct styles. Supportive leadership occurs when the leader is personable, approachable, and concerned about the well-being of his or her subordinates, treating them as peers. This approach is useful for dealing with demanding or demotivating activities, as it helps to enhance morale and job satisfaction. Suit (2023) identifies various ways in which Path-Goal Theory might help schools improve. The use of Path-Goal Theory in educational leadership can considerably improve school leaders' effectiveness by allowing them to tailor their leadership styles to meet the individual needs of their personnel as well as the contextual demands of the school environment. The Achievement-Oriented Leadership Approach emphasizes setting demanding targets for followers, developing high-quality goals, and seeking continuous progress. Leaders instill confidence in their followers and are appropriate when followers have an external locus of control, accept authoritarian leadership, and have high ability levels.

To summarize, while exact techniques and emphases may differ depending on the region and type of school, good inclusive school leaders share some characteristics. These include a strong commitment to inclusion, collaborative workplaces, thoughtful resistance management, trust building, and proper resource allocation. Through these measures, principals from various sorts of schools can build and maintain educational settings in which all children, regardless of ability, can succeed. In Malaysia, the value of inclusive education has been acknowledged, but its incorporation into mainstream educational programs is yet insufficient. Leadership at the school level is critical in creating inclusive education practices (Anastasiaou & Garametsi 2020).

3. Methodology

The qualitative investigation will use a narrative inquiry research approach and deliberate sampling to acquire a better knowledge of at least ten primary school teachers, five from public and five from private schools. A purposive sampling strategy will be used to identify instructors who educate special needs students, teachers from schools with at least five special needs students, and teachers who have been teaching for more than five years. These instructors have firsthand experience with the leadership styles used in their schools, which provides useful insights on how different approaches affect the management of inclusive programs. Participants were chosen from 7 schools in the Selangor area. Two schools are located in Petaling Jaya District, one in Puchong, four in Shah Alam, and one in Setapak. Teachers' questions emerge from their personalities, emotions, ethics, situations, and genuine concern for their students. The viewpoint is consistent with Dewey's (1920) idea that inquiry entails observing circumstances, analyzing factors, resolving uncertainties, and evaluating the results of activities. Teachers can use narrative inquiry to organize, articulate, and explain their teaching knowledge and values. This study guaranteed the correctness and trustworthiness of its findings by using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility, like internal validity, is determined by prioritizing the participants' opinions as a metric of credibility. This study used open, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with nine

carefully chosen primary school instructors for kids aged 7 to 12 years old, each with at least five years of teaching experience. Participants were also asked to write down their thoughts on how their leader has addressed the needs of Student Educational Need (SEN) teachers and kids.

A pilot study was done to test the interview procedure, uncover any biases, and make the questions more explicit and open-ended. This technique also increased the interview time from 30 to 45 minutes, allowing for more detailed and insightful responses. The exploratory interviews, which lasted 30 to 50 minutes, asked open and semi-structured questions. The first interview was designed to start a discussion about the participants' experiences with management and how they affected teacher and student needs. In accordance with Kvale's (1996) recommendations for effective interview approaches, I asked clear and succinct questions while being patient and sympathetic, allowing participants to speak at their own pace and listening closely to hidden implications.

The research topic is: How can private and public-school principals tailor their leadership styles to meet the unique requirements of special education instructors and students? The interview topic focusses on how instructors perceive school principals modifying their leadership style to meet the unique demands of special education teachers and kids. This can include materials requirements, contextual factors, behavioral management tactics, and encouraging peer participation. The teacher recalls a moment when he observed the principal employing a specific technique to address those issues. Are there any differences between the past and present? A follow-up meeting was held to verify notes, clarify responses, and answer any follow-up questions.

The interviews were exploratory, with open-ended and semi-structured enquiries. Merriam (1998) defines data analysis as a complex process that involves the constant movement between concrete bits of data and abstract notions, the interaction of inductive and deductive reasoning, and the balance of description and interpretation. This study guaranteed the correctness and trustworthiness of its findings by using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility, like internal validity, is determined by prioritizing the participants' opinions as a metric of credibility. This study used open, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with nine carefully chosen primary school instructors for kids aged 7 to 12 years old, each with at least five years of teaching experience.

4. Results and Discussion

Participants were picked from seven different schools in Selangor. Each district has its own professional development plan, which may or may not be related to a school improvement plan. Table 1 summarizes the nine professors who participated in this study. To protect confidentiality, each teacher chose a pseudonym.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profiles

Traits	Myra	Jesslyn	Shahrul	Daniel	Mary	Min En	Rae Han	Syuhada	Marzah
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	31	29	33	27	35	42	40	33	34
Years of teaching	8 years	7 years	9 years	5 years	<10years	< 10 years	< 10 years	8 years	9 years
Education	Bachelors	Masters	Bachelors	Bachelors	Masters	Bachelors	Bachelors	Masters	Bachelors
Level	Degree	Degree	Degree	Degree	Degree	Degree	Degree	Degree	Degree
Classroom type	Inclusion	Integration	Integration	Integration	Inclusion	Inclusion	Inclusion	Integration	Integration

School Name	SAS	RIS	PHIS	PHIS	BIS	SJKC 1	SJKC 1	PPKI 1	PPKI 2
School Type	Private	Private	Private	Private	Private	Public	Public	Public	Public

Table 2: Schools' Profiles

Characteristics	SAS	RIS	PHIS	BIS	SJKC 1	PPKI1	PPKI 2
Number of SEN students	5	10	7	32	10	22	19
Student Diagnosis	Dyslexia	Dyslexia, Down Syndrome, Autism	Intellectual Disability, Dyslexia, Autism and ADHD	Intellectual Disability, Dyslexia, Down Syndrome, Autism and ADHD	ADHD and Dyslexia	Intellectual Disability, Dyslexia, Down Syndrome, Autism and ADHD	Intellectual Disability, Dyslexia, Down Syndrome, Autism and ADHD
Student teacher ratio	1: 15	1:24	1:2	1:3	1:32	1:2	1:2

The Summaries of Interview based on teacher perspective.

Teacher Myra's perspective SAS uses a collaborative and supportive leadership style that encourages teacher input and prioritizes student-centered learning. Leaders offer ongoing support, direction, and face-to-face training to maintain a safe and inclusive atmosphere. Despite the difficulties of addressing severe autism cases owing to inadequate resources and expertise, the school's administration encourages professional growth and creative teaching approaches. This supporting approach makes instructors feel appreciated and empowered, which improves overall management of special needs kids and creates a nurturing educational atmosphere.

According to teacher Jesslyn, RIS values diversity and individualized instruction, which has a huge impact on student management. Jesslyn's principle encourages an inclusive worldview that prioritizes life skills and moral responsibility over academics. Teachers, including Jesslyn, feel empowered to adopt new tactics, thanks to regular professional development seminars on disability and behavior management. The principal's demanding but collaborative approach promotes responsibility and a team atmosphere. This inclusive leadership style has promoted good peer interactions, successful integration of special needs kids into extracurricular activities, and effective psychological support, hence improving overall student well-being and achievement.

In the new Gifted Kids Care Centre (GKCC) department, Teacher Sharul believes that the school has an individualistic leadership style with a strong supportive leadership style. This approach results in little official advice and assistance from management, causing enormous stress for Shahrul and his coworkers, who frequently have to rely on their own efforts. Despite a lack of administrative assistance, the department benefits from the knowledge and participation of senior teachers, who, while not technically in charge, give valuable direction and support.

According to Teacher Daniel, the special needs department at PHIS is administered in an individualistic manner, resulting in a lack of official guidelines and norms. Due to the lack of organized assistance, Daniel and his team are forced to rely significantly on their own efforts. Despite the burden, the department benefits from older instructors' knowledge and collaboration, even without official leadership positions.

According to Teacher Mary, the special needs department follows an inclusive school policy, which focusses on integrating neurodivergent and average pupils via various activities. Despite his experience in therapy, the principle stays remote from regular student interactions and relies on supervisors (SVs) for control. This strategy leads in a lack of direct help for behavioral difficulties and insufficient staff training, both of which contribute to high turnover. Despite these hurdles, the team works well together, using each member's abilities.

Teacher Min En believes that special needs management is primarily hands-off and inadequate, resulting in several issues. Regular instructors are untrained to meet these pupils' specific requirements, resulting in inadequate support. Bullying and mental discomfort are prevalent, and ordinary kids receive little direction on how to engage with their special needs peers. Without governmental action, measures to serve special needs pupils are left to individual teachers such as Min En, who lobby for more awareness and resources.

According to teacher Rae Han, the school for SEN management lacks knowledge and assistance, resulting in the neglect of special needs pupils. Large class sizes and poor professional development for instructors worsen the problem. Parental participation is vital, although cooperation varies. The principal promotes involvement in school events and invites external specialists for training, but these sessions are not specifically designed for SEN management. Teachers frequently must pay for specialized training. The growing number of special needs pupils underscores the critical need for focused teacher training and improved administrative assistance.

Teacher Syuhada believes that the special needs department emphasize delegating and flexible leadership from the principal. The principal encourages activities that make sense and interacts with herself lightly, relying on the instructors to handle the special needs pupils. This hands-off attitude can cause administrative issues, such as poor communication and dependency on teaching aides for behavior control. The assistant principal's emphasis on reputation might lead to unfeasible undertakings that place additional demands on teachers. While this strategy provides for some teacher autonomy, it often leads to dissatisfaction and insufficient support for instructors dealing with complicated demands and behavioral problems.

Teacher Marzah believes the principal's leadership style in the Special Education and Integration Program (PPKI) is extremely inclusive and supportive, emphasizing equal chances and resources for special needs pupils. She ensures that her staff receives continuous professional development and actively engages parents through the PPKI Parent Partnership. The officials support her ideas, encouraging PPKI pupils to participate in all school events and contests. However, issues remain in behavior management and obtaining essential resources. Teacher Marzah's principal approach promotes an understanding and inclusive school atmosphere, but administrators need additional exposure to properly comprehend PPKI's specific requirements.

Table 3: Path Goal Leadership Style by Principals

Participant	School Type	School Name	Number of SEN students	PGL style
Myra	Private	SAS	5	Supportive and Participative
Jesslyn	Private	RIS	10	Directive and Achievement Oriented
Shahrul	Private	PHIS	6	Supportive
Daniel	Private	PHIS	6	Supportive
Mary	Private	BIS	32	Directive and Achievement Oriented

Min En	Public	SJKC 1	7	Directive
Rae Han	Public	SJKC 1	7	Directive
Syuhada	Public	PPKI 1	22	Supportive and Participative
Marzah	Public	PPKI 2	19	Supportive and Participative

5. Conclusion

Participants shared their experiences with how principals fulfil the needs of the classroom, students, and instructors. Participants were also asked if they had seen their principal employing a specific method that has improved daily classroom management and student behavior. Six themes comprise principals' methods for managing SEN kids.

Table 4: Adaptation of Principal's leadership approaches in Private Schools and Public Schools

	Private School					Public School			
	Myra	Jesslyn	Shahrul	Daniel	Mary	Min En	Rae Han	Syuhada	Marzah
Ensuring quality of team performance	X	X			X				X
Efficient display of leadership management	X	X			X			X	X
Opportunities for Social inclusion	X	X			X	X	X	X	X
Ensuring staff collaboration	X		X	X					X
Providing Holistic Education Plan		X	X	X	X				X
Providing mental and school support	X	X	X	X	X				X

Both private and public schools have guidance counsellors for children, but most instructors who engage with SEN pupils are under a lot of stress and would benefit from help dealing with burnout. Private school principals modify their leadership styles by emphasizing team performance, effective leadership, and mental support. However, the absence of a holistic education plan in some private schools indicates a possible area for improvement, as some private schools, such as PHIS, have their own specialized therapists who will assist with the development of motor goals in the child's IEP. The study focusses on leadership styles and their execution rather than explicitly assessing the effectiveness of inclusive environments or their effects on student outcomes.

This narrow emphasis may limit our ability to draw conclusions about inclusive education programs' practical success and limitations. Both private and public-school principals seek to address the needs of special education students and teachers, albeit with varying emphasis and levels of success. Private school principals typically ensure higher-quality team performance and more extensive mental health care, whereas public school principals prioritize effective leadership management and social inclusiveness. Both private and public-school principals seek to address the needs of special education students and teachers, albeit with varying emphasis and levels of success. Private school principals typically ensure higher-quality team performance and more extensive mental health care, whereas public school principals prioritize effective leadership management and social inclusiveness. To increase assistance for special education students and instructors, both sectors can learn from each other's strengths and address their respective areas of growth.

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