A Comprehensive Review of Research on Head of Panel Leadership in Malaysian Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a clearer understanding of head of panel (HoP) leadership in Malaysian primary schools. The research on HoP leadership is still in its early stages and requires further expansion. Additionally, this paper discusses the role of HoP leadership using the models developed by Turner and Bolam (1998). The research also revealed that the HoP needs to possess the necessary skills to guide the team members and set an example for their roles and

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responsibilities. Additionally, the HoP plays a crucial role in planning and managing middle-level leadership in schools. This study also significantly benefits the HoP, school administrators, and the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (MoE). Studies also reveal that careful application and management of HoP leadership can positively influence student achievement and school performance under HoP leadership.

Keywords: leadership, head of panel, middle leader, competent, head of department, subject leader

INTRODUCTION

Educational reforms and modifications have had a significant impact on the global educational system and environment. Only credible head of panel (HoP) leadership can achieve success in implementing Malaysian national education policies (Adawati Suhaili et al., 2021). As a result, the school's effectiveness is heavily dependent on HoP's leadership. Moreover, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 policy in the fifth shift aims to ensure that every school in Malaysia will have high-quality leaders (MoE, 2013). The ministry will ensure that a high-performing principal and headmaster will be stationed at each school and will be assisted by a team of middle leaders, including a competent leadership of HoP (MoE, 2013). It aims to create an effective school instructional leadership team that is capable of driving school performance to excellence (MoE, 2013).

Meanwhile, leadership at the school encompasses more than just principles; it also entails the HoP's crucial responsibility as a middle leader (ML). Multiple sources such as Bryant and Walker (2022), De Nobile (2018), Ekaterini (2011), Muhammad Nasaruddin Al Hussaini Shaari (2020), Grootenboer et al. (2015) and Zaliza Md Yasin et al. (2024), support ML's recognition as an educational leader and his leadership roles. The MoE found that the HoP of the primary schools (PS) committee was the ML in the school (MoE, 2022). HoP are known as pedagogical experts (Zaliza Md Yasin et al., 2024; Kahila et al., 2020) and are in charge of driving change among teachers and students (Edwards-Groves et al., 2019). Furthermore, the HoP is part of the ML or management structure of schools in the UK, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Kenya, and Trinidad and Tobago (Shaked & Schechter, 2017; 2019). According to various sources Bennett, Newton, et al. (2003), De Nobile, 2021; Hlengiwe (2022), Malinga et al. (2021b), RSA (2022), Wise and Bennett (2003) and Tapala et al. (2022) these individuals are also known as curriculum leaders, subject

leaders, subject coordinators, year heads, project leaders, evaluation coordinators, instruction coordinators, and departmental heads.

HoP is critical to ensuring the school's infrastructure functions properly. Prior research published by the OECD over the last 20 years has demonstrated the importance of HoP as ML in schools. Other countries, including the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, and Singapore, have expressed interest in studying HoP leadership as an ML (Bennett et al., 2007; Koh et al., 2011), citing a lack of research on primary school (Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007); De Nobile, 2018), but not on HoP leadership (Busher & Harris, 1999; Harris & Jones, 2017). This is because HoP's responsibilities as a school-level decision-maker and teaching leader are to coordinate professional activities and implement policies that are critical to a school's success. In addition, the HoP must govern the subjects under his jurisdiction. Indeed, Mok (2008) emphasizes the relevance of HoP, claiming that it can gradually improve children's exam results.

Other than that, several researchers, including Adawati Suhaili et al. (2020) and Norliza@Noriza Ahbar@Akhbar et al. (2021), have carried out a variety of academic investigations. A researcher from Malaysia such as Omardin Ashaari (1998) and Shamsherbie Narudin (1994) stated that the election of the HoP ought to prefer individuals who possess the expertise, knowledge, experience, abilities, and competence necessary to effectively administer the school committee. Other than that, the HoP is responsible for establishing plans and coordinating various actions related to the basic tasks of topics under their authority, these requirements are of utmost importance. However, the process of selecting key personnel in schools is highly subjective, which may result in the HoP being unable to properly carry out the leadership responsibilities that they are responsible for (Adawati Suhaili et al., 2021; Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999; Nada Megahed, 2018; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Wan Noor Adzmin Mohd Sabri, 2017).

The HoP's job as a department head and a vital tool for improving the quality of education that maximizes student achievement requires significant scholarly attention. A recent study (Curtis ,2013; Muijs & Harris, 2003; 2006) shows that leaders can guide schools in a variety of ways. These include improving teacher cooperation, exchanging best practices, boosting professional

development, and assisting with subject-specific challenges. Therefore, we should direct our significant research focus towards the leadership of the HoP, who serves as the leader of teachers in their department, and their crucial role in improving teaching quality, which ultimately contributes to the maximization of student performance.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Harris et al. (2019) discovered a substantial gap in studies on school MLs from 2003 to 2017 using a bibliometric approach. Asian articles climbed from 7% to 34% compared to Europe, Oceania, the Middle East, and North America. While this improvement was significant, it is important to note that research on HoP as ML in schools varies among Asian countries. Malaysia had one article compared to Hong Kong and Singapore (Harris et al., 2019). Harris et al. (2019) only listed one publication on qualitative investigations of MLs at a Johor International School. Therefore, there is a need to conduct more comprehensive studies on HoP in Malaysian education.

According to a study by Hamidah Yusof et al. (2016) in Malaysia, there are still 13 teachers, or 7.0% of the total, who teach subjects but are never under the HoP's direct supervision. The failure to supervise the teachers can be attributed to the HoP's heavy-duty load while at school. The findings confirm the research (Abdul Said Ambotang & Katriani Maijohn, 2014) showing that several teachers, including the HoP, view administrators' unequal task distribution as a burden that negatively impacts their job satisfaction.

Moreover, the newly appointed HoP lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively organize and manage the committee. Jamaliah Abdul Halim and Norashimah Ismail (2005) also supported this, observing that some newly promoted HoPs lacked the necessary skills to effectively handle school administration responsibilities. Therefore, it is not surprising that they will face issues such as inefficient management, lack of management knowledge, weakness, and lack of effective leaders (Ahmad Zabidi Abdul Razak, 2005).

IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP FOR HoP

HoPs are people who may become school leaders and take over from current leaders (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018; Rohana Ahmad et al., 2018). Studies at Malaysia's High

Performing Schools (SBT) show that HoPs are the best people to take over as school leaders and headmasters if they get the right training (Mohd Izham Mohd Hamzah & Shuhaida Shamsudin, 2017). School leaders need to put instructional leadership first because there is a link between how well teachers do their jobs and instructional leadership (Abdul Ghani et al., 2019). Malaysian school leaders and headmasters decide how well and how often a school does its job (Abdul Rahim Abdul Rahman et al., 2020).

However, the school's overall management commitment binds principals and headmasters, making Malaysian school governance more administrative than instructional (OECD Talis, 2009). Malaysia's Education Inspectors and Quality Assurance (JNJK) issued an inspection report, revealing an average quality of instructional leadership among principals and teachers in Malaysia of 67.79% (JNJK, 2009). According to the same research, 35% of Malaysian instructors are doubtful of principals' and headmasters' abilities to guide current teaching policies and techniques. This opens new opportunities for the HoP in Malaysia to fill gaps in the current instructional leadership provided by principals and headmasters.

EXPECTED ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF A HoP

Preparing and coordinating teaching plans
Appointed a secretary
Providing and receiving up-to-date lessons
Configure and select reference books and reading materials
Establish a question/exam database
Doing "post-mortem"
Chairman of committee meetings
Become a reference for teachers
Sharing knowledge/experience (courses/workshops attended)
Collaborate and support school unions
Liaison agent with other school committees
Facilitator
Taking care of files, minutes, reports, letters, and committee records
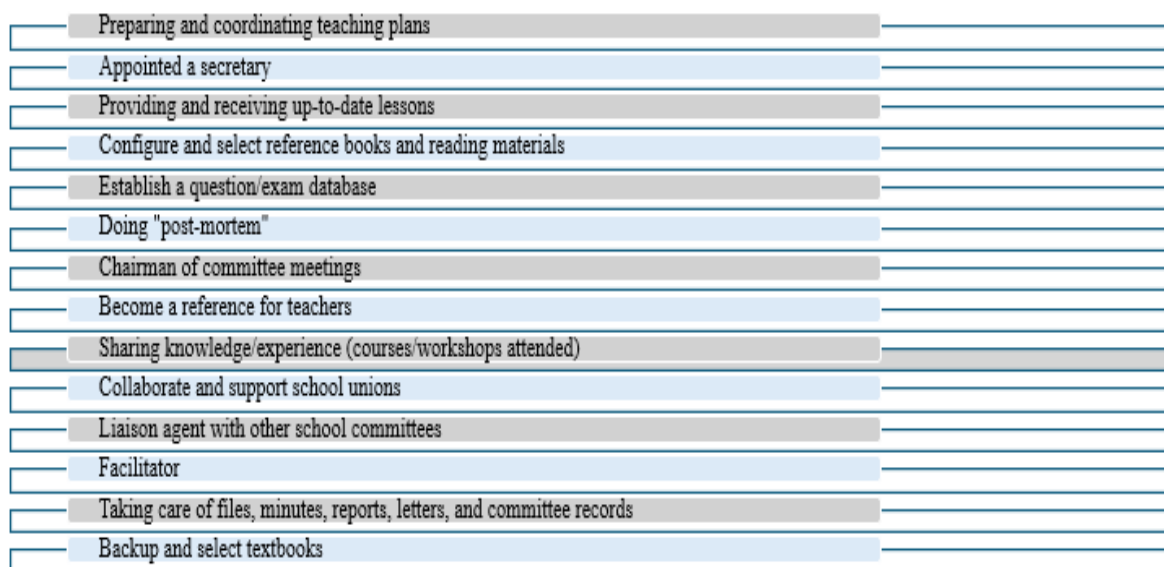Backup and select textbooks

Diagram 1 *Expected Role and Responsibility of a HoP*

Source. Modify. Ministry of Education Malaysia (1986). *Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bilangan 4 Tahun 1986. Panitia Mata Pelajaran.*

Diagram 1 shows the expected role and responsibility of a HoP by MoE (1986). This role demonstrates that HoP has a significant responsibility to improve the academic performance of teachers and students in their committees. HoP needs to ensure that teachers adhere to the curriculum, use appropriate teaching methods, evaluate student learning outcomes, and conduct activities that support learning. HoP also needs to provide guidance, support, motivation, and feedback to teachers to improve their skills and knowledge (MoE, 1986). In addition, HoP needs to establish positive relationships with school administrators, parents, communities, and external agencies involved in the development of their committee. According to Brown and Ond Rutherford (1998), Bell and Fletcher (1999) and Feeney (2009), these relationships are crucial for HoP's success.

It is believed that the HoP in the United Kingdom is the center for providing support to classroom educators (Shaked & Schechter, 2016). According to Shaked and Schechter, (2016), Tapala et al. (2022), and Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014), they are the ones who bear the substantial responsibility for improving the teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms. The HoP is required to monitor the work of colleagues and conduct classroom observations (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). However, some may interpret these actions as surveillance over colleagues, potentially leading to hostility. Furthermore, the HoP is responsible for focussing on the work of the learners, performing certain administrative tasks such as analyzing the results of the learners, being accountable for certain organizational roles such as budgeting for the department and the school, supervising educators and developing staff members, and playing strategic roles in the process of formulating a vision for the school and the department (De Nobile, 2017;2021). The literature concludes that the HoP must organize, coordinate, and collaborate with other stakeholders to actualize the school's envisioned vision.

According to Bouchamma (2012) and Lillejord and Børte (2019), HoPs are responsible for planning, creating, and implementing policies for their respective departments. Other than that, HoPs strategize, develop, and execute policies for their respective departments (Bouchamma, 2012). In addition to their administrative responsibilities, the HoP fulfills the role of a clerk by

overseeing budget management and procurement, distribution, and utilization of resources and supplies (Friedman, 2011; Paranosic & Riveros, 2017). If such a requirement arises, they can act as advocates for other people, notably educators, because they hold the position of HoP.

HoP leadership is an important part school's operation. Zaliza Md Yasin et al. (2024) assert that the HoP is responsible for supervising and ensuring the achievement of high standards in both teaching and educational growth. Research from (Bell & Fletcher, 1999; Brown & Ond Rutherford, 1998; Busher et al., 2000; Feeney, 2009; Thorpe & Tran, 2015; Moeketsane et al., 2021) says that the HoP can be a resource provider, administrator, supervisor, liaison officer, manager, deputy department head, communicator, intermediate, and teacher leader. This job shows how much responsibility the HoP has for improving the academic success of teachers and committee members. HoP must make sure that teachers follow the curriculum, use the right teaching methods, evaluate their students' progress, and plan tasks that help them learn. HoP needs to give them direction, encouragement, help, and feedback for them to improve their skills and knowledge. HoP should also build good relationships with people in the community, such as parents, school administrators, and other groups concerned about the committee's growth (Bell & Fletcher, 1999; Brown & Ond Rutherford, 1998; Feeney, 2009).

Everyone agrees that HoPs primarily drive high-quality teaching and learning in schools. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2006), Jaca (2018), Koh (2018) and Murphy (2011) state that they are crucial to the success of schools in fulfilling their primary mission of facilitating instruction and student learning. According to Murphy (2011), school heads have a responsibility to support teachers as they carry out their main responsibility of improving students' academic performance. They are both instructors and members of the administrative staff. In several countries, people in positions of power are known as middle leaders. HoPs also oversee and hold accountable schools and their individual departments or phases (Dinham, 2007). Du Plessis and Eberlein (2018; Jaca, (2021), Mokoena (2017), Malinga et al. (2021) and Zepeda and Kruskamp (2007) suggest that some HoPs, despite their responsibility for instructional activities in schools, lack of leadership or management training before their nomination.

Marzano et al. (2005)) found that to be considered competent, HoP must have a deep understanding of both pedagogy and the subject matter. This lends credence to the findings that Bennett et al. (2003) discovered in the United Kingdom when conducting a review to investigate the shifting

role of subject leaders. They observed that the authority of subject leaders was contingent on their ability as teachers as well as their subject knowledge. Another finding was that having a strong understanding of the subject matter gave topic leaders a sense of professional identity.

HoPs are expected to be subject specialists responsible for overseeing the teaching and learning of different subjects through classroom observation. They must possess these competencies to effectively identify and address the subject-related challenges faced by the teachers they supervise, thus enabling them to assist. De Bruyn (2007) argues that the authority of HoDs is not derived solely from their managerial roles, but rather from their expertise as educators and their understanding of their respective subjects. According to De Bruyn (2007), HoP may experience uncertainty over their skills and degree of expertise in a particular subject. As a consequence, they may face challenges in effectively overseeing the work of the instructors under their supervision. In her 2013 study, Emily Maboe discovered that experienced instructors outperformed HoP in carrying out their duties. (Malinga et al., 2021a; 2021b; Tapala, 2019; Tapala et al., 2022) investigated the subject-specific instructional leadership provided by HoP in South Africa. Their findings revealed that certain HoPs lacked the pedagogical content knowledge, subject knowledge, and professional credibility necessary to effectively oversee the teaching and learning of the subjects under their supervision. Based on the discoveries, it appears that only understanding the responsibilities and execution of duties by HoP is insufficient. It is also vital to comprehend how HoPs transition from being teachers to assuming the role of HoP, despite their deficiency in essential skills, as shown in the literature.

Apart from that, Rosenfeld et al. (2009) examined secondary school HoP changes in Australia. The HoP function has become more sophisticated, and HoPs had no notion of what responsibilities and abilities they needed. Additionally, HoPs were unhappy with their workloads. In another study in Singapore, Heng and Marsh (2009) examined ML's views on elementary school teaching and learning. They discovered that MLs were required to manage change and influence others, make fair and consistent decisions, establish partnerships across departments, and grow their knowledge, skills, and values.

Atebe (2009) investigated the perspectives of HoPs on their responsibilities and expectations in Kenya. There was a consensus among the majority of school heads and many principals that they were responsible for designing and disseminating topic plans of work, as well as arranging, moderating, and marking examinations. In addition, some HoPs held the belief that they had a duty to furnish instructors with lessons in progress, oversee workbooks, and guarantee timely completion of assignments. Additional responsibilities included producing class content and methodology, monitoring students' progress, planning and leading departmental meetings, assisting new teachers in their departments, reporting to parents on student welfare and misbehavior, and implementing the curriculum. HoP was also responsible for accurate, professional, and timely recordkeeping.

HEAD OF SUBJECT PANELS LEADERSHIP MODELS OF TURNER AND BOLAM (1998)
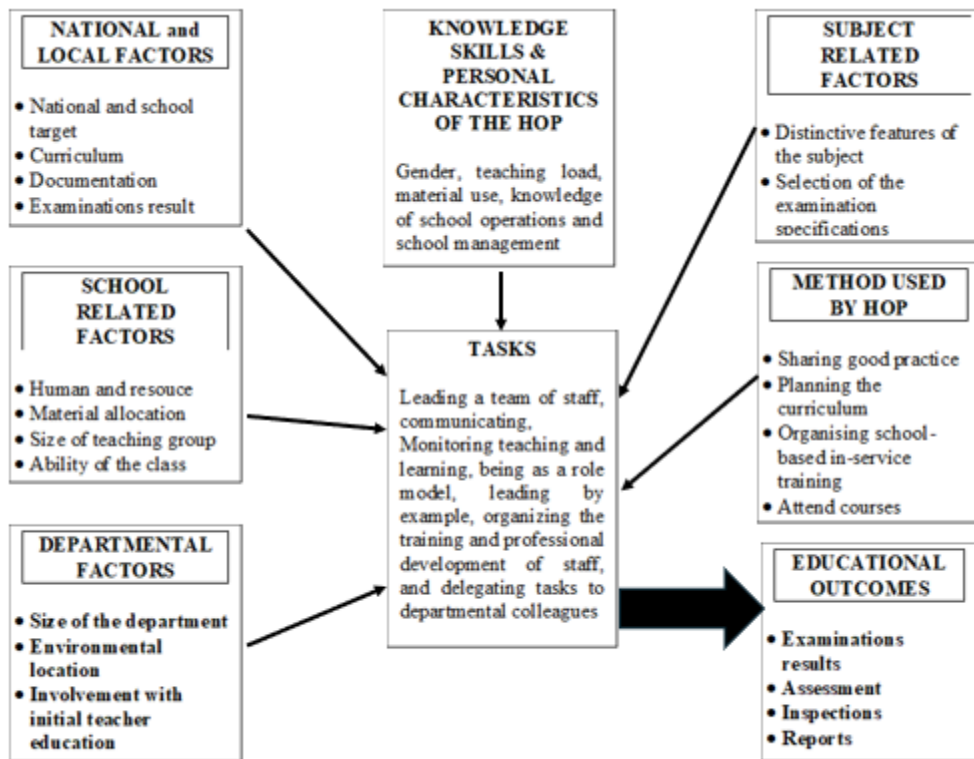
Diagram   2

Models of Turner and Bolam (1998)

Source. Modify. Turner and Bolam (1998). Analyzing the role of the subject head of department in secondary schools in England and Wales: Towards a theoretical framework. School Leadership and Management, 18(3), 373–388.

Diagram 2 shows the Contingency Model by Fiedler (1967) serves as the foundation for the leadership model of HoP by Turner and Bolam (1998). The Contingency Theory is employed in this concept to address situations or contexts in which HoP plays their roles. It demonstrates intricate and intricate interactions that overlap and are easily comprehensible.

Six elements influence HoP leadership in achieving high educational and learning standards. For example, these factors are national and local, school-related, individual characteristics and knowledge skills of each HoP as the subject leader, subject-related, and the methods used by the HoP as the subject leaders of the respective committees. According to this model, a variety of factors influence HoP leadership in enhancing education and learning within educational institutions. This factor can influence an individual's position on the school committee in the following ways: Therefore, Turner (2003) states that the outcome of input and process interaction will determine the function or role of the HoP at school.

IMPACT RESEARCH OF THE HEAD OF PANEL IN MALAYSIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Head of Panel

This study makes a huge contribution and benefits the HoP, who is now holding positions at the school. The HoP can pinpoint the specific practices and tasks they must perform in their role more precisely. HoP can reasonably use the results of this study as a guide or manual to determine the scope and field of tasks they need to perform in line with today's work demands. This additional study can assist HoP in dealing with problems or challenges related to their job description because some are incomprehensible, still vague, and lack the necessary skills. This study's effort to clarify the HoP's role and scope makes it practical and applicable to designing appropriate and consistent actions to ensure their role is effective.

School Administrator

The school administrator can conduct this study to establish a clear and structured framework for the functions, duties, and roles of the Head of the Department (HoP) in their particular schools, aligning it with the aims and goals of the subject area. The school, in collaboration with the Head of the Department (HoP), will identify the objectives and scope of the topic area. This will improve the planning and management of the upcoming programs. Furthermore, the school may utilize this study course to enhance the leadership skills of the Head of the School at their specific institution.

Ministry of Education Malaysia

The study aided the MoE in acknowledging the significance of HoP leadership in schools from a more streamlined and productive standpoint. Staff development programs, courses, and training are highly sought after and are organized and implemented by various stakeholders to equip the HoP with up-to-date skills, information, and knowledge that align with ongoing changes. It is imperative for the MoE in Malaysia to carefully consider this matter to prevent the HoP from consistently being placed in a lower position in the schools' management and administrative structure.

CONCLUSION

The leadership of the HoP in primary schools in Malaysia plays a critical role in achieving the country's educational goals. Effective leadership not only enhances academic achievement but also cultivates a new cohort of high-caliber students. Given that these school leaders have the potential to become exceptional teachers, the HoP leadership in Malaysia must be focused on.

The limitation that prevents HoP from participating in leadership training and courses is a major obstacle to improving the HoP's leadership. Moreover, a major impediment to improving the leadership of the HoP in Malaysia is the government's incapacity to offer training and leadership programs.

To enhance the HoP's ability to coordinate activities and achieve the highest degree of educational success, it is important to prioritize the development of the HoP's leadership skills. The understanding of leadership subject matter and proficiency in specific leadership skills required for their area of responsibility determine the suitability of a leadership HoP. Based on the study's findings, the HoP leadership can improve understanding, provide clear information about the HoP's content, and demonstrate the necessary leadership skills and professional attitudes to effectively lead and manage the committee.

In a nutshell, the HoP must possess the capability to cultivate trust among the team members. The HoP must be aware of the importance of being able to function effectively within the professional team environment. Furthermore, the results of this study have the potential to serve as a roadmap for the HoP, evaluating their leadership methods and formulating strategies for ongoing professional development initiatives to enhance leadership effectiveness and advance educational leadership in Malaysia. The results of this study can serve as a reference for HoP to assess their leadership practices and plan actions for ongoing professional growth.

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