

“I EMPLOYED MY OWN STRATEGY”: EXPLORING PRIMARY HEADTEACHERS’ ORGANISATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIALISATION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The main purpose of this study was to explore primary headteachers’ perceptions of their professional and organisational socialisation within their novice years as school leaders. There is a lack of studies exploring primary headteachers’ socialisation within the Malaysian primary education context.

Methodology – A total of nine primary headteachers from three states were purposely selected and interviewed to obtain their perceptions on the professional socialisation they received before and after their appointment and the strategies that they employed within their organisational socialisation process.

Findings – The study revealed that the primary headteachers employed their own organisational socialisation strategies in order to be accepted as a new member of the school. These were relatively diverse but accorded with their school’s values and culture. However, in terms of their professional socialisation, there were various findings: some mentioned the lack of support programs while others acknowledged receiving quite helpful programmes within their initial years of headship. The findings and the implications for the improvement of primary headteachers’ socialisation are discussed.

Significance – This study provides supplementary literature that explores primary headteachers’ organisational and professional socialisation within the Malaysian schooling context. This study notes some practical and theoretical implications for improving the prospective headteachers’ training and their leadership development which aim to enhance the leadership qualities of future primary school leaders.

Keywords: Primary schools, headteachers, headship training.

INTRODUCTION

In school, the headteacher or principal is the most indispensable individual who governs and maximises the school’s excellence and effectiveness through his or her leadership qualities (Bush, 2008; Bush & Jackson, 2002; Steyn, 2013). Therefore, it is widely accepted that school heads are held accountable for, and have a substantial impact on, students’ level of achievement (Louis *et al.*, 2010; Bengtson, Zepeda & Parylo, 2013; Wahlstrom *et al.*, 2010; Smith & Bell, 2014:7) and the overall performance of the school (Hariri, Monypenny & Prideaux, 2016; Daud & Don, 2012). Thus, in the Malaysian National Educational Blueprint 2012–2025, headteachers’ training, preparation and their knowledge development are emphasised by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in order to produce quality leadership among future headteachers (Ministry of Education, 2013). In the blueprint, the MOE stringently accentuates that underperforming headteachers should be supported with exposure and knowledge through training and leadership courses in order to enhance their leadership achievements and capabilities (Ministry of Education, 2013). It is hypothetically believed that the initiative is capable of strengthening the MOE’s hope that its transformation efforts will create knowledgeable school leaders.

Before being appointed as a school leader, prospective headteachers are required to attend some preparation programmes in order to furnish them with recent and pertinent knowledge on how to maximise their school’s performance. However, most researchers into principalship have critically highlighted that some the relevant preparation programmes have to be improved to support headteachers in fulfilling a school’s complex demands. These demands involve

issues such as globalisation, fast-emerging technologies and the diverse nature of society (Adam & Copland, 2005). Some researchers (Hecks, 1995; Normore, 2004; Daresh and Playko, 1994) have argued that the lack of professional socialisation among headteachers has affected their leadership performance and identity; in fact, some novice heads appeared lost within their roles as school leaders and within their practices as instructional leaders (Huff, 2010; Leithwood et al., 1991) if seniority in teaching qualification and experience were continuously used as criteria to select candidates aspiring to become principals (Bush, 2018; Bush & Jackson, 2002) without proper support for their leadership preparation and development. In Malaysian schools, Ismail, Abdul Hamid, Foo and Abdul Kadir (2009) revealed that most secondary heads noted that they had lacked support in terms of programmes and have had to create their own strategies and initiatives to familiarise themselves within the headship post. Given these points, the present study will at least provide more information and guidance for educational authorised officers and policy makers with regard to headteachers' leadership development and preparation programmes and also their socialisation processes. The findings will facilitate the planning of effective programmes that can assist prospective headteachers in seeking to attain excellence in schools.

Background of the Study

Bennis (1985), as cited in Normore (2004), defines socialisation as a process in which prospective school leaders learn knowledge and skills for leading their schools towards improvement and excellence (Huff, 2010). As such, Kramer (2010) claims that socialisation is an idiosyncratic and inimitable process in which an organisation attempts to influence and change individuals to meet its demands. In this context, it is believed that socialisation is a subjective process in which newcomers attempt to adapt and change their behaviours to fit their organisational and professional norms, identity, rules and procedures, which also mirrors the continuous process for an individual when joining an organisation, group or profession (Moreland & Levine, 2001).

Empirically, researchers into headship (Earley and Weindling, 2004; Male, 2006; Greenfield, 1985) have authoritatively classified a school leader's socialisation process into two major categories or

phases: (1) the professional socialisation in which school leaders are socialised and learn the knowledge, skills and behaviours through internalising the values and the norms of the profession, which generally begins within their pre-appointment to a post (Daresh, 2000); and (2) the organisational socialisation, which occurs immediately after the appointment in which the headteachers have to adjust their preferences towards their school's array of people, policies and preferences (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Male, 2006; Greenfield, 1985). In this sense, researchers into headship (Earley and Weindling, 2004; Simkins, Close and Smith, 2009) have also highlighted that novice heads will face failure and are not expected to clinch their effective role without any proper support structures, resources and administrative training in place within their professional socialisation. In addition, Hart (1993) cautioned on the content and curriculum of the development programmes for school heads claiming that the content can also cause "conflict" between headteachers' real life journeys and practices and that this has become more prevalent compared to the theoretical knowledge offered in some of the preparation programmes.

On the contrary, other researchers (Cowie, 2011; Norton, 2015) have reported that most heads had to rely on "job knowledge" after being appointed as school headteachers unless they received proper support from leadership development programmes within their initial years of headship. In this sense, Cowie (2011, p. 208) claims that most newly-appointed primary headteachers were disappointed with the support given by their superiors and yet were prepared to attend a few disconnected short courses and workshops to prepare themselves for the headteacher position. Earlier, Kelly and Saunders (2010) revealed the notable comments from three headteachers that the NPQH programmes had contributed the least to their leadership and professional identity. Additionally, the programmes merely provided theoretical knowledge on how to lead a school instead of the practical knowledge which they needed, particularly in order to make decisions and lead their schools towards excellence.

Despite the considerable number of studies and debated issues on the consequences of headteachers' socialisation, little has been explored with regard to the professional and organisational socialisation of Malaysian headteachers, especially within the primary school context. Additionally, it is considered unknown whether the professional

socialisation received by our primary heads is considered relevant and able to help them to lead their schools. Through this study, we can also understand their strategies in order to be accepted within their organisational socialisation process. Therefore, a study on headship socialisation would also trigger a strong call for more studies on the socialisation process of primary headteachers, particularly with regard to whether they have received profound professional socialisation as part of their preparation programmes prior to their post. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the organisational and professional socialisation received by primary headteachers. Based on the findings of this study, it is hoped that a closer understanding of the professional and organisational socialisation within Malaysian schools will be obtained. Secondly, it is hoped that this study will provide practical implications and recommend some improvements related to the training and professional development of school principals, especially to the primary school setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Process of Socialisation

Socialisation is defined as a process in which an individual acquires knowledge and skills that are needed to perform a specific role (Crow, 2006; Moorosi & Grant, 2013). By definition, all socialisation processes involve a learning process that headteachers will experience. In this sense, Duke (1987) pointed out that the socialisation process is a substantial, on-going, developmental process of learning for headteachers similar to their early years of schooling because, through socialisation, headteachers learn how to be effective school leaders.

In the pathways into headship, headteachers will experience the three elements of socialisation: professional socialisation, organisational socialisation (Crow, 2006: Higham, Earley, Coldwell, Stevens & Brown, 2015) and anticipatory socialisation. In defining the concept of anticipatory socialisation, Brody, Vissa and Weathers (2010) believed that the process commenced when novices projected themselves for their future headship post or role. In fact, Spillane and Anderson (2014) argued that the process of anticipatory socialisation is further improved when headteachers become deputy heads, which

will allow them to observe and learn the process of being a school leader in the future. According to Kramer (2010), anticipatory socialisation is an on-going evolving process in developing future expectations for a role that an individual aspires to acquire or hold in the future. As for professional socialisation, it is authoritatively defined as a process in which school heads acquire their professional identities, roles and personalities (Heck, 1995; 2003; Bush, 2018). Within the process, heads learned technical knowledge and skills through values and norms internalised within the profession, which generally begins with their pre-appointment to a post (Daresh, 2000). Further, prospective heads or newcomers will also experience the second phase of socialisation when they have to employ or regulate their own strategic mechanism in learning organisational values, policies and preferences in order to be accepted as a member of a school (Greenfield, 1985). To conclude the discussion on the three major theories/phases of socialisation, Theodosiou (2015) listed the three processes of socialisation of a teacher until being appointed as headteacher within the school context:

- a. Anticipatory socialisation: informal enculturation process before appointment as a school head.
- b. Professional socialisation: instilling values, attitudes and personality that should be acquired by members of a profession.
- c. Organisational socialisation: being accepted and influencing a new member with an organisational culture and identity.

Thus, anticipatory socialisation is a process of inculcation to a headship post starting before the teacher is appointed as a headteacher. Professional socialisation will influence the values, attitudes and personality within the first year after appointment as a head. He or she will also experience the organisational socialisation process when he or she becomes a member of the school and is immersed within the school's culture and context. However, in this study, we tried to explore the two major socialisation processes - professional socialisation and organisational socialisation - experienced by primary headteachers and not anticipatory socialisation since exploring an intending head's interest in becoming a school head is considered difficult.

Professional Socialisation

Hart (1991) and Crow (2006) posit that both the organisational and professional socialisation stages happened during the initial years of headship. Professional socialisation is a process of learning how to be a headteacher by taking the position as a school leader based on prior experiences and formal training (Kelly and Saunders, 2010; Bengtson *et al.*, 2013). At this stage, heads prepare themselves by developing their traits and personalities through their informal experiences (Crow, 2006) in order to provide assurance that they are individuals qualified to hold the leadership post (Male, 2006). Further, Fidler and Jones (2005) claimed that professional socialisation is a learning process for headteachers to acquire and understand the skills, attitudes and necessities of being a school head. Meanwhile, in an earlier perspective, Greenfield (1985) classified professional socialisation into two essential constructs: technical and moral preparations for headship. Technical preparation involves the skills, knowledge and behaviours related to a headteacher's role as a school head while moral socialisation involves the good personality, positive values and belief as a role model in performing the headship post. Male (2006) describes professional socialisation as an anticipatory socialisation in which prospective holders prepare themselves for the technical and social experiences to show that they are qualified for the headship role.

Nevertheless, Kelly and Saunders (2010) emphasise that the process of professional socialisation emerges when headteachers attempt to adapt themselves to their fellow teachers in the phase of accepting novice headteachers as new school leaders. Anticipatory socialisation, according to Theodosiou (2015), citing Merton 1968, is a learning process. A newcomer can consciously or unconsciously experience the changes of values from being a non-member and this will become a process of adaption of the values and behaviours of the relevant group. For headteachers, it is a sequential process when they assume the headship post, statues and roles based on experiences of social and technical knowledge, which later qualifies them to be a member of the headship community (Daresh & Male, 2000; Male, 2006).

In the Malaysian educational context, the authorised educational institutions that have roles in the professional socialisation process

of primary headteachers, especially within their initial years of appointment are (1) the National Institute for Educational Leadership and Management or the *Institute of Aminuddin Baki* (IAB), (2) the District Education Office (DOE), (3) the State Department of Education (SDE) and (4) the informal headship community known as the Headteachers' Council. Since this study involved primary headteachers from three state departments of education, some comments delivered by the primary headteachers were closely related to their own SDE and DOE.

Organisational Socialisation

In analysing organisational socialisation, Oplatka (2012) believed that headteachers will experience an organisational socialisation process to discern the organisational values, knowledge and behaviours of the leader of a particular school organisation, which requires heads with a headship identity. In another definition, Van Maanen and Schein (1979) mentioned that organisational socialisation is a process in which individuals try to obtain knowledge and adjust their values and personality to their work and school context. According to them, organisational socialisation is an individually-acquired process related to social knowledge and skills to enable one to be a member within the organisational context. Later, Bargues (2012) added that organisational socialisation is a socialisation process in which newcomers experience the attainment of attitudes, knowledge and disposition in order to be accepted and function effectively as a member of an organisation. Accordingly, Theodosiou (2015) defines organisational socialisation as an influencing process within an organisation. In this context, both the school with the new member and the headteacher will try to influence each other.

Additionally, Hart (1991) described organisational socialisation as a process in which an organisation begins to protect the individual through formal or informal strategies in order to sustain the members, their values and their beliefs system. Further, Fidler and Jones (2005) borrowed the terminology of organisational socialisation from Parkay *et al.* (1992) and renamed it as an 'organisational learning process', which represents a situation in which a head learns and understands how a school operates, how its values are emphasised and how some strategic approaches to creating change and improvement to the school become part of its own organisational context. Even though

the head posted to the school is a senior head, he or she will also experience an organisational socialisation process because one has to adapt and learn about the values and attitudes that represent the context of each school. Perrot *et al.* (2012) mentioned the effects of the organisational socialisation process described as noteworthy because it has much impact on developing an individual's attitudes and behaviours that are well accepted by other members of the organisation. From the perspective of training, organisational socialisation is a process of adapting and changing the attitudes of newcomers through an informal approach, which does not involve any relevant cost.

Previous Studies on Headteachers' Socialisation

Professional socialisation: Purdie (2014) conducted an in-depth auto-ethnographic study among novice Scottish headteachers within their early headship development in the Scottish context of socialisation, which concluded that the headteachers were shaped by their individual career trajectory and professional socialisation upon accepting their post. Support and assistance from other headteachers and formal and informal preparation programmes were some of the meaningful approaches that can be widely used to enhance the professional identity and characteristics of a headteacher. By using a framework, Purdie (2014) then summarised that the headteachers' professional socialisation later influenced their identity, personality, confidence level and leadership approaches in gearing their own school towards improvement. In another study, Cottrell (2013) investigated the situations that required primary headteachers to socialise themselves through three major tasks: resource allocation, task role allocation and application of organisational procedures. The socialisation of newly-appointed headteachers was through the use of authority that employed a reciprocal, recurrent and relational interactions approach. Purdie then opined that most headteachers have much control and influence over the socialisation process based on the knowledge of their roles and practice.

Further, Sayce (2014) conducted a study with novice headteachers to explore their professional and personal needs in the context of Western Australian Catholic schools. In this study, the demographics of headteachers were differentiated through their gender, the location of their school and whether the school was primary or

secondary. The semi-structured series of interviews revealed that female headteachers believed that knowing the tenor of the culture is a requirement for headteachers before they begin their position as heads. They also believed that colleagues who are former heads play a substantial role in providing support through the coaching and mentoring approaches. The male heads pointed out that support from other heads also influenced their effective role in sharing knowledge, skills and information to improve their leadership and decision-making competencies. To conclude her findings, Sayce (2014) considered that professional socialisations (such as mentoring, coaching and some induction programmes) provide support and opportunities to share knowledge, network with peers and interact with other heads, especially with senior headteachers. This notion is supported by Shadeed-Samai and Normore (2006), who indicated from their study with intern headteachers that formal activities organised, by the department of education and informal approaches (such as informal meetings, networking, mentoring and coaching) greatly influence intern headteachers' success because these elements enhance their skills and knowledge as instructional leaders.

Organisational socialisation: In understanding organisational socialisation, Van Manaan and Schein (1979) and John (1986) highlighted some approaches used in socialising a newcomer. The approaches were classified into individualised tactics and institutionalised tactics. The individualised tactics consist of a process of socialisation with an individually-based approach that is based on personal, informal, random, variable, disjunctive and divestiture approaches. As for institutionalised tactics, they are meant to socialise all members within an organisation through collective, formal, sequential, fixed and serial approaches. The institutionalised tactics are usually employed by novice headteachers because one of the approaches is to improve their perspectives by adapting themselves to their new school (Ismail *et al.*, 2009). As for the individualised approach, it is meant for newly-appointed school heads because the approach allows them to familiarise themselves with the new school's approaches, procedures and values. In other words, the individualised tactic is more suitable for adapting school heads to their newly-appointed school.

In Malaysia, Wai-Bing and Omar (2014) conducted a study of the Malaysian stages of socialisation using a sample comprising

Malaysian secondary and primary school leaders. In their study, they employed the Parkay and Hall (1992) socialisation stages. They found that in the entry stage, the heads went through a traumatic culture shock in their new schools. At this stage, they had to face some immediate problems and become accepted as a member by some senior teachers and even by the community that surrounded the school. Thus, most of them did not make any changes within the school's policies and practices as, at this stage, most heads were struggling and were learning the school's and staff's values and attitudes. In addition, they also tried to be visible to all teachers and staff by staying back late in order to familiarise themselves with the school's values and practices. At the second stage, known as the *identity formations* stage, the heads tried to establish their identity through deploying their interpersonal skills and establishing relationships with their teachers and staff. Thus, heads acted like a motivator and coach in building teachers' motivation and commitment whilst concurrently building a good relationship with them. The third stage is labelled *making a difference*, which is when the heads felt that they had acquired the confidence to lead their own teachers and even had strategic approaches to deal with any related problems. They also enhanced the instructional leadership practices when they emphasised the importance of teaching and learning as an indicator for school growth and advancement. The final stage, known as the *reformulation of personal values*, happened when the heads started to think about their life stages with various emotions; at this stage, some continued to become more committed and enchanted with the headship while other heads felt discouraged and experienced stagnation and a loss of enthusiasm.

METHODOLOGY

The Research Questions

In this exploratory-based study, two pertinent research questions were addressed: (1) How do primary heads describe the professional socialisation that they received within their early years of appointment?, (2) How do primary headteachers socialise themselves within their school context within the early years of their appointment?

Research Participants

In this study, the primary headteachers were chosen through a purposive sampling strategy in selecting those who have experiences that are relevant in answering the research question (Flick, 2014; Bryman, 2012) on professional and organisational socialisation. Initially, we intended to select one primary head to represent each state in Malaysia. However, due to our time and financial constraints, it was later decided three primary heads from three state departments of education would be selected. This provided an overall total of nine primary heads. All selected primary heads consisted of six beginning/novice primary heads (one to two years' experience after their appointment) and another three primary heads categorised as middle primary heads (three years and more experience after their appointment as school heads). At the time of the interview, all primary heads were working at government primary public schools. In terms of primary headteachers' age, eight of them were in the 40 to 49 age range while only one primary head was in the 50 to 59 age range (Table 1). None of the nine primary headteachers were National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) graduates since NPQEL was not a mandatory professional qualification for being appointed as a primary school head.

Table 1

Primary Heads' Demographics

Participants	Headship Experience Classification	Age
Headteacher A	Novice (2 years)	48
Headteacher B	Novice (1 1/2 years)	49
Headteacher C	Novice (2 years)	48
Headteacher D	Novice (1 years)	46
Headteacher E	Novice (2 years)	48
Headteacher F	Novice (2 years)	47
Headteacher G	Middle (2 1/2 years)	49
Headteacher H	Middle (3 years)	49
Headteacher I	Middle (2 1/2 years)	51

During the interview sessions, we asked them about the professional and organisational socialisation processes that they had undergone through their headship socialisation experiences within their initial

years as primary school heads. In protecting the identities of the primary heads, ethical consideration procedures were ensured by replacing their real names, the state department of education's names and their schools with letters e.g. Headteacher A to Headteacher I and their state department of education labelled as SDE A, B to SDE H.

The Interview Protocol

This qualitative study employed the interviewing process to collect data on primary headteachers' experiences of socialisation within their initial years of primary headship. The substantial reasons why interviewing was selected as the major approach for data collection was because, through interview, primary heads are able to 'recall' their previous experiences of their leadership socialisations, including any setbacks that they received as a novice school leader. Secondly, interviews also permit participants to discuss and reveal their own viewpoints and experiences of certain aspects and phenomena (Denscombe, 2003). Furthermore, this study is about the life experiences of heads and using interviews allows them to discuss, recall and reveal their own standpoints on, and experiences of, certain aspects and phenomena which they consider to be significant (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994).

Due to the lack of clarity surrounding headship socialisation, the interview protocol items constructed were based on previous studies such as Purdie (2014), Sayce (2014), Theodosiou (2015) and Cottrell (2013). The interview protocol had two main sections: sections A and B. In section A, four items were constructed to query the respondents' backgrounds, such as years of experiences of being a headteacher at a particular school and length of appointment. In section B, three semi-structured items were based on the research questions related to headship socialisation. The queries include (1) the professional socialisation: "Have you asked to attend some formal training or professional support such as courses and workshops before being appointed as headteacher?"; "Do you think that the professional support/programs that you received are capable of helping you to lead your school?" and (2) organisational socialisation: "How do you familiarise yourself within the early years of your appointment to be accepted as member of the school?"

Prior to the actual data collection, a pilot study was conducted with one of the primary headteachers who was not purposively selected for the actual data collection. During the interview session, the following changes were made to the interview protocol items: (1) a few questions that were too long and quite difficult for the headteachers to understand were eliminated; (b) the interview session took longer than the expected one-and-half hours, much to the discomfort of the headteachers, therefore some of the items were discarded and modified to ensure that the interview session would be much shorter and more precise.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The actual data collection took place within the primary headteachers' offices in order to eliminate distractions and noises from the surroundings. Another reason was that most of the heads had to be in their offices during school days. For each headteacher, the interview sessions lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. During the interviews, all the comments and viewpoints were recorded using a small tape recorder after permission was obtained from the participants. The recording was carried out to ensure accuracy of the data (Freebody, 2003).

During the interview, it was the researcher's duty not to interfere with any comments or suggestions against the philosophy of the headteachers. In fact, the researcher had to re-access some points in order to guide the participants and probe any unclear statements delivered. Following the suggestion by Inman (2007), the researcher engaged in the interview by listening to the responses provided without considering or thinking of the subsequent questions. In order to determine the actual data content, the researcher also revisited the headteachers after sketching and transcribing the actual data to verify the answers they had provided during the interviews. Most of the headteachers agreed on the transcription process, which illustrated their leadership journey from being a novice to a senior headteacher.

After the data collection, a few procedures were adopted to analyse the interview data. The study was based on the inductive approach in which most of the data emerged through grounded approaches. Four stages were employed to analyse the data: data

organisation, data comparison, data synthesising process and selection of content of the data as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013) and Boyatzis (1998) using the thematic approach. In the first stage, all the interview data were transcribed. Relevant data in the narratives recorded from the nine interview sessions with the nine primary headteachers were kept, saved and labelled with each headteachers' identification letter. In the analysis, the data were re-read several times to understand the headteachers' perceptions and comments from the items protocol. After understanding the data and completing the transcription process, the data were re-read and compared with the actual recording in order to ensure accuracy.

The second phase involved selecting and filtering the actual meaning of the narratives by an in-depth examination of the actual data. In this process, the data were categorised into small units according to their similarities and differences. All the data were categorised and respectively assigned a code. In phase three, the data were synthesised into patterns and similarities. At this stage, the researcher attempted to construct some patterns on the basis of the similarities. Next, themes were decided from the small units on the basis of the relevance of the emerging themes. In the last stage, conclusions were drawn based on the interpretations and meanings. This was followed by the process of report writing based on the themes and conclusions that emerged from the data analysis processes.

Some ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the entire qualitative data collection process. Prior to data collection, consent to participate was given to headteachers before any participation began. This informed consent meant that research participants must at all-times be fully informed about the research and that participation was voluntary. The informed consent process included the following process. Firstly, the research participants agreed to give their permission to be part of a study by filling the consent form provided by the researcher. They could exercise their right to decline to participate, and if it necessary, they could withdraw from the study at any time (Busher & James, 2012). Secondly, the researchers must maintain the respondents' confidentiality by protecting their real identity especially on issues related to participants' involvement in the policy and administration implementation. The identity of the schools and

participants were kept anonymous. Contextual details such as the name of the school, headteachers' demographics (age, schools, and gender) were protected from public exposure.

FINDINGS

In general, two major themes emerged from the interviews: professional and organisational socialisation processes. All themes were segregated, presented and discussed based on the interview data from the headteachers' viewpoints and perceptions related to socialisation processes within their own experiences and contexts.

Primary Heads' Professional Socialisation

In terms of primary heads' professional socialisation, the feedback related to their professional socialisation (preparation courses and workshops, on-going professional development courses and experience-sharing sessions). A few primary headteachers highlighted the minimal support they received in terms of preparation and professional development while other primary headteachers from other state departments of education acknowledged the support and preparation courses that they received based on the initiative and efforts of their SDE and DOE.

Minimal Support Received

Five primary headteachers interviewed revealed that they received minimal support within their professional socialisation within the inception stage of their trajectory as a headteacher. In the interviews, they remarked that the professional socialisation they received from the authorised educational entities was lacking in terms of courses, workshops and even knowledge-sharing sessions with other primary headteachers. They believed that all these components should be employed early in the socialisation stage. Headteacher A, for instance, expressed his frustration with regard to the little support he obtained during his years as a novice headteacher. To him, there should be more courses offered to assist them since some of them lacked experience on the current post. He later expressed his displeasure at the professional socialisation he had received:

“Admittedly, I received little support such as courses on school leadership and management within my initial years of headteacher. There are limited courses on school leadership and management offered even though I had no experience as deputy head before being promoted to a headship post. I always insisted on courses related to school financial management which is relevant and significant as headteacher.”

Most of the primary headteachers had to make their own effort to attain knowledge on headship. A few heads also informed that they had to apply for school management and leadership courses on-line in order to be offered a place on the courses. In the interviews, three primary headteachers replied that they had applied for school management courses. Headteacher B narrated his past experience:

“Most of us apply *on-line* in order to be slotted within the courses’ participants. Through the courses, we learnt and obtained much information on school leadership and most of the courses lasted for only three and four days. Most of the courses were based on theoretical knowledge and we have to decide whether it’s suitable for our school context and culture.”

Five primary headteachers revealed their despair about the lack of support given within their professional socialisation and were particularly displeased with the lack of programmes and courses from which they could gain knowledge on headship. Thus, they requested more relevant courses and programmes on school management and leadership to support them with the knowledge and skills for leading their schools. Headteacher C disclosed the lack of support provided in her novice years of headship:

“During my inception phase, I’m quite nervous and anxious due to the lack of knowledge on how to be a primary head. We received little knowledge and exposure on how to be school heads. Thus, we have [*sic.*] to use my previous experiences as deputy head.”

Helpful Professional Socialisation Programmes

On the contrary, primary headteachers from other state departments of education admitted and acknowledged that some valuable efforts had been made to equip some prospective headteachers with practical and theoretical knowledge on school leadership. Significantly, the primary headteachers interviewed felt that they had learnt much valuable knowledge and lessons that have benefited their leadership journeys as school leaders. One mentoring programme met with issues related to heads' busy routines and location constraints, yet the primary headteachers described it as meaningful and noteworthy in helping novice headteachers to obtain knowledge related to school leadership and management. Through this programme, they obtained much practical and theoretical knowledge from their networking and collaboration efforts with their novice counterparts and senior heads. Headteacher C positively commented on the courses:

“In 2010, there was a mentoring programme organised in helping novice headteachers between eight to one year duration. I also once experienced being a mentee to my senior and experienced headteacher. However, the chance to meet our mentee was also an issue due to the busy schedules of our senior headteacher which halted our meetings. However, for me it was an effective experience. Until now, we are still in contact and we together with my school's leadership team whenever we visited her school [*sic*.]”

In addition, primary headteachers talked positively about the informal programmes organised by their state departments of education and the district headteachers' council, particularly the seminars, meetings and conferences with the main objective of sharing knowledge among senior and novice headteachers. During the informal meetings, most of the heads shared applicable and practical knowledge on school leadership even though the event was not periodically organised by the Headteachers' Councils. Through these settings, the primary headteachers gained much knowledge from their senior counterparts and officers, particularly on matters related to school financial management and auditing processes, which were quite relevant to them as school leaders. However, they commented that most of the programmes were not frequently organised and lasted for only two

hours. The programmes should be organised frequently and more knowledge sessions should be provided for them to gain more exposure and knowledge on how to be an effective and competent headteacher. Headteacher D explained the organising of valuable programmes by the Headteachers' Council:

“Our Headteachers' Council also organised a sharing knowledge session which lasted about two hours which should be longer. Within the two hours, sessions were filled with some valuable presentations from seniors and excellent primary headteachers and even some briefing of the school's audit tasks from SDE officers. At least, it provides us with ideas and theories to be implemented within our schools.”

In conclusion, primary headteachers formally receive their professional socialisation from the programmes initiated by the DOE and informal headteacher councils. Some of the programmes are informally self-organised with the objective of providing novice headteachers with practical and theoretical knowledge on how to be an effective school leader. The authorised educational institutions were described as lacking in provisions supporting novice headteachers with professional socialisation. Thus, it appears that the professional socialisation of primary headteachers is highly dependent on the decentralised approach where initiatives and efforts provided by the state departments of education involve organising a few courses and workshops on leadership and management.

Primary Headteachers' Organisational Socialisation

The interviews also uncovered that the majority of the primary headteachers had employed their own efforts, tactics and creativities in order to be accepted as a member within their own values and school context. Based on the interviews, themes emerged which reflected primary headteachers organisational socialisation approaches such as receiving help from deputies; immersing themselves in the school's culture and values; building networks with the community and parents; solving teachers' conflicts and dealing with incompetence.

Receiving Help from Their Deputies

Headteachers interviewed were mostly grateful during the early weeks because they were assisted by their deputies, especially those who have been with the school for more than three years. There was no sense of conflict between the headteachers and their deputies in ensuring the smooth operation of the school. In fact, the majority of the headteachers tried to build good relationships with their deputies and were quite relieved when their deputies provided most of the information related to the culture, values and procedures in the initial phase of appointment. They were treated by their deputies as close friends within the school hierarchy, which decreased their feelings of isolation since they hardly knew anyone in the new school when they began their headship.

To some of the primary headteachers, their deputies have always been available and have played the significant role of administrative supporter. Some headteachers viewed their deputies as the resource person when they faced some issues and problems in their initial years at school. Headteacher B, for example, commented that his deputy was his former colleague and has been in the school for four years. The deputy had been supporting him in his initial years of headship and he was also grateful that he could consider his deputy as the resource person whenever he faced complex problems:

“During my initial years, I felt worried and isolated until my deputy came into the picture and helped me in solving my problem. My deputy had been with the school much earlier than me. Thus, he knew much of the school culture and values. He was my supporter.”

Immersing into the school’s culture and values

A majority of the headteachers talked about the feeling of isolation at the beginning of their appointment. However, having their deputies by their sides as a resource person enabled them to solve most of the school’s problems in the early years of their appointment.

The majority of primary headteachers also created their own approaches and initiatives in immersing themselves in the school’s culture and values, which might differ from those of their previous

schools. Some of them could not rely much on their deputies, fearing that others may perceive them as “weak leaders”. Most of them used their first formal meeting to explain the new school’s vision and introduce their preferences. Most of them particularly talked about their strategic approaches to socialise and be accepted by teachers and other staffs. They tried to accept teachers as friends, particularly by joining them for lunch in the school’s canteen during free time. One of the headteachers also spoke about her frequent visits to the teachers’ lounge to learn and understand other teachers’ characters, attitudes and identities. During her visits, she often had some informal conversations and discussions with the teachers in solving teachers’ instructional and teaching issues. In fact, she also organised a few birthday lunches and prepared some presents to appreciate the efforts of some staff and teachers. Headteacher B revealed her strategic approach to understanding and gaining other teachers’ acceptance, which had stopped her from being isolated from other teachers and staff.

“I talked to teachers and even eat with them [*sic.*] at the school’s canteen during my free time. I also visit the teacher’s lounge and also have some conversations with teachers. We also celebrate teachers’ birthdays and I prepare some gifts and presents. I also have informal sessions with teachers in solving their instructional issues and this helped me from being isolated [*sic.*] within my own school compound.”

Some headteachers used a warm approach, such as talking and having some impromptu conversations with teachers and staff during their “morning walk,” just to be accepted by them while inspecting the school’s blocks and facilities. To the headteachers, the use of informal approaches would prevent barriers arising between them and teachers and staff; instead, a collaborative teamwork would be created between the teachers and the school leadership team. The collaboration would also provide much easier access for the teachers if they had some problems that require the headteacher’s intervention. A headteacher revealed her own approach in getting herself close to her teachers and staff through the informal approaches that definitely made teachers feels comfortable. In addition, the teachers were welcomed whenever they faced some problems and issues related to school operational management. In another situation, Headteacher

D talked about her informal and comfortable approach to build good rapport with her teachers and staff:

“My approach is simple in order to establish a good relationship with my teachers and staff. During my morning session, I usually visited them and asking [*sic.*] about their problems. It is much easier access to visit them instead of asking them to be at my office.”

Building Good Relationships with Communities and Parents

As headteachers, they were simply unable to place their schools within a “vacuum” and isolate them from parents and the local community. The headteachers believed that having a good relationship with parents and the local community is also part of their efforts to be accepted by these groups. Through this approach, the community would be able to understand the school’s culture and provide support for school activities that involved parents and local communities. Further, a headteacher of a school in a rural district talked about his strategic approach to gaining the acknowledgments of the local community and parents:

“As a school head, I usually mixed and talked with parents and people within the local surroundings and I always met them at their chatting place just to introduce myself to the parents and local community. To me, it’s a significant approach since this school is located in the country and a rural district.”

Solving Teachers’ Conflicts and Incompetence

In her initial years, a headteacher faced many issues with regard to distributing teachers’ tasks in which only dedicated teachers were assigned with a high number of tasks, leaving behind other teachers with fewer tasks. Later, she noticed conflicts between young and seniors teachers, which required her to restructure the whole school in order to improve its instructional and administration tasks. This had impacted on the whole school environment, culture and values, which were meant to be conducive to teachers providing a good education for the students. At the same time, she had to handle some

incompetent teachers which required her to give her additional time to improve her school's academic achievements. She later elaborated her initiatives during her initial years of headship:

“When I arrived, I noticed some problems related to [the] issue [of] task distribution among teachers when too much tasks [*sic.*] were given to senior teachers. Later, I asked my deputy head to re-structure the task-distribution issue within the school planning and structure.”

In addition, Headteacher E also had to solve some problems with regard to the conflict between senior and junior teachers. According to him, many issues have occurred due to the weak leadership style of the previous headteacher. He also mentioned some issues related to teachers' discipline, which required him to apply some turnaround and transformation processes that he learnt during his university days. To him, prior to implementing some improvements, a headteacher should solve teachers' disciplinary issues because teachers are role models to students and any issues related to teachers must be corrected immediately before they become major problems. He explained further his experiences in handling teachers' problems:

“Initially, I have to tackle some issues on teachers' discipline and conflict among teachers. There are two major groups within the teachers who always blamed each other if there were problems within the school context. I think this was caused by the previous head that currently at his retirement phase [*sic.*]. I have to implement the transformation and turnaround process within the school context and mixed the young and senior teachers so they can easily work as a team.”

In conclusion, most primary heads created and employed their own initiatives to understand and socialise themselves within their new schools. Empirically, most of the initiatives and strategic approaches employed were based on their practical knowledge. The objective was to introduce themselves to teachers and build good relationships with the latter and staff, an effort they believed can have implications for overall school achievements.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore primary headteachers' professional and organisational socialisation within their initial years as Malaysian primary school heads. Due to the paucity of studies on professional and organisational socialisation within a Malaysian context, this study hopes to provide an understanding of the socialisation processes of school leaders.

In terms of professional socialisation, it is a difficult experience for some primary headteachers following their frustration with regard to the preparation courses, workshops and support for their professional socialisation, particularly at the inception stage of their career trajectory. Through the interviews, the primary headteachers negatively remarked about the issues related to the professional socialisation they received, which they deemed as lacking in support from courses, workshops and knowledge-sharing sessions with other senior primary headteachers. This finding, however, is consistent with Sayce (2014) within the context of Australian Catholic school headteachers in which most of the primary headteachers felt that they received little support in terms of preparatory programmes prior to appointment. Furthermore, this finding is also consistent with Cowie (2011) and Norton (2015), who debated the minimum role provided by professional socialisation and that headteachers were the least supported by professional socialisation. In this sense, the primary headteachers also admitted that through some activities with the Headteachers Council, they were able to obtain knowledge and experience regarding school administration and leadership.

Consequently, some of the headteachers took their own initiatives from their previous experience as deputy heads to help them understand the leadership journey of a school leader. Most of them mentioned applying for their IAB preparation programmes and applying *online* in order to participate in school leadership courses. They felt that enrolling on the IAB's preparation courses was relevant to their needs. At the same time, they were quite displeased with the dearth of programmes offered by the SDE and DOE. In Malaysia, besides the MOE courses which are offered to heads, the SDE and DOE also conduct courses and experience-sharing sessions in order to assist novice and prospective headteachers in the early phase of their appointment. Thus, through this decentralised approach,

the MOE empowers the SDE and DOE to organise and implement headteachers' courses.

On the contrary, the headteachers from some other states applauded their SDE's valuable effort to equip novice headteachers with courses offering practical and theoretical knowledge on school leadership. They mentioned that they were pleased with the opportunity to acquire some new knowledge and valuable information that benefited their leadership paths as school heads. In addition, they described the mentoring programme organised by SDE as an effective programme in helping novice headteachers obtain some knowledge of the practice of school leadership without having to leave their school premises. The mentoring programme also benefited their networking and collaboration with their novice and senior counterparts. In addition, their state and district informal Headteachers' Council also provided some support by conducting seminars, meetings and conferences with the objective of sharing knowledge among senior and novice heads. These informal gatherings, although not regularly held, have allowed novice heads to be exposed to knowledge applicable to school leadership. Through this setting, the heads gained current knowledge and relevant information from SDE officers with regard to the school financial and auditing process. To them, such informative courses should be frequently organised and more knowledge sessions should be devoted for them to gain more exposure and knowledge on how to be an effective and competent headteacher. Based on this finding, it is clear that some preparation programme have been decentralised by the Ministry of Education's central office to SDE in order to prepare prospective headteachers with the knowledge and skills in school administration. In other words, it depends on the SDE's own initiative to enhance the self-preparation and support programmes for primary or secondary headteachers. This finding is consistent with that of Sayce (2014) and Purdie (2014) with regard to the Scottish context of headteachers' preparation and training.

Theoretically, organisational socialisation is defined as a continuous learning process for heads when they are seeking to understand, learn, adapt and adjust themselves to their newly-appointed school's values, norms and procedures. Hence, most newly-appointed heads employed their individual formal and informal socialisation strategies to be accepted by the school and local communities as a new leader and member of the school. Within this process, the

heads tried to embrace their school's values and norms and inculcate them into their own work commitments and values. This gave them the opportunity to influence the school and local communities and become part of the school's context. The findings indicate that the primary headteachers employed extensive determination exercises according to their own school context just to be accepted as a new member of the school. A majority of them were quite fortunate and thankful for the assistance provided by the school's deputy, who provided them with much information on the school's procedures, values and culture. At the same time, the deputy heads were helpful in ensuring the smooth operational and managerial system of the school. Hence, the deputy's assistance managed to decrease the heads' isolation and lonely feelings, particularly by playing a significant role as administrative supporter, closest friend and resource person when the heads faced difficulties in their early years of headship.

In contrast, a few heads mentioned their own efforts and doubted having to rely too much on the deputy, the reason being to avoid the negative impression of being "weak leaders". In fact, most of them noted their assertive styles and characters in the first official meetings with their teachers and staffs. In order to be part or member of the school, the heads typically adopted their own preferred informal methods to be accepted as a member of the school and build a good rapport with the teachers. Some of the mentioned approaches were (1) by having lunch or tea break in the canteen with teachers; (2) by making frequent visits to the teachers' lounge to learn and understand their characters, attitudes and identities; (3) by having informal conversations with teachers in solving their instructional and teaching issues; (4) by celebrating teachers' birthdays; and (5) by giving presents for particular occasions in order to be accepted and understood by their staff and teachers. Some heads also talked about their impromptu conversations with teachers and staffs during the "morning walk" just to get themselves accepted while inspecting the school's blocks and facilities. A few heads stated their frequent involvement with teachers in some informal approaches to break barriers and create a collaborative teamwork between teachers and the school leadership team. Informal approaches were able to provide teachers with easy access to leadership approaches and were conducive to creating comfortable relationships between teachers and staff.

In order to be accepted by the local community, the heads enhanced their strategies by learning the community's preferences and culture

through planned conversations and informal meetings with the parents and community. To the heads, parents and local communities have much information on the school's performance, teachers' attitudes and any problems that existed within the school, especially when it is located in a rural area.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Findings from this study have theoretical and practical implications for the socialisation and professional development of Malaysian primary heads. In terms of theoretical implications, this study strongly supports the Bush (2018) normative leadership model and Earley and Earley and Weindling (2007) for the preparation and induction of school headteachers. This model commences with the element of succession planning with the identification of, or search for, potential talents to be appointed as school heads. Next is the process of leadership preparation when headteachers attend courses on school leadership such as the NPQEL to develop their knowledge and skills followed by an induction process to enhance the professional learning of the school headteachers and lastly, on-going in-service development in order to support the heads as effective school leaders by providing recent knowledge and skills.

Based on the Bush (2018) normative leadership framework, we propose mapping the socialisation process of Malaysian primary headteachers outlined in Table 2. In Table 2, the heads' career path begins with their first to two years of headship. In terms of experience, most heads were deputies before being promoted to the post of school headteacher. In general, the initial phase of a primary headteacher's career commences when they try to develop their own role conception whilst being exposed to life as a headteacher. At the same time, primary heads also received their early socialisation process of formal and informal training as their preparation for headship. In the early phase as primary heads, they also started to learn and understand the school's culture besides handling some problems and, at the same time, socialising themselves with teachers and staff. In fact, heads employed the socialisation approach in order to build their networks with the local communities, parents and other headteachers within the same district. These networking tasks had two major functions: (a) to introduce the school head to the

school community with other parties and (b) to eliminate the feeling of isolation and loneliness.

Table 2

Proposed Primary Headteachers' Socialisation Framework

Timeline	Socialisation processes
Before appointment	Experience as a deputy headteacher. Professional socialisation – NPQH/NPQEL, school leadership and management courses. Headteacher Council knowledge-sharing sessions.
Understanding school culture (0 – 4 years)	Organizational socialisation (with teachers, the local community and PTA). Encounter school problems (problematic teachers, instructional issues, students' disciplinary problems and financial and operational system disputes). Experience isolation and loneliness, stress and worries.

As for the practical implication, the primary headteachers commented that they received minimal exposure and training related to their professional socialisation, particularly by the SDE. Some critically highlighted that the SDE has not provided them with more exposure with regard to professional knowledge and they believed the organisation should play certain roles in assisting them to be effective school leaders within the primary context. More programmes on novice headteachers' professional socialisation should be implemented with the objective of assisting primary headteachers in their early years of headship. To some of the heads, professional socialisation has substantive implications for their leadership journey through the headship phases, but to other heads, the process of knowledge adoption and the combination of theoretical knowledge with experience are necessary to assist them to be effective and excellent school leaders. Other primary heads commented that it would be wise for primary or secondary heads to obtain their initial exposure and formal training before being posted to their own school. Most of them revealed that they have to solve issues and problems related to previous headteachers who had been in a 'comfort zone', which had allowed some loose attitudes to leadership and administration to develop. Thus, the combination of

theoretical knowledge and experience as deputy head would assist them in solving many problems related to school leadership and administration.

Secondly, it was mentioned that early internship and a school orientation programme should be implemented to familiarise novice primary headteachers with the school culture and values prior to headship. Hence, understanding and knowing potential teachers and staff is helpful for headteachers within their socialisation; it provides them with the time and opportunity to think of solutions to some issues and problems in the school context (Steyn, 2013). Most of the headteachers favoured organisational socialisation over professional socialisation in building their leadership identity as effective school heads. Through organisational socialisation, they are capable of learning and understanding the school's culture, norms and values as practised by the school members, such as students, teachers and staff. In this sense, the primary heads also believed that their own socialisation process provides much valuable experience and information for their leadership journey as school leaders.

Thirdly, re-introducing the mentoring programme in the professional socialisation for novice headteachers is considered a significant effort by the SDE in helping novice headteachers to be successful within their headship journey. The primary headteachers interviewed reflected that they requested a mentoring or immersion programme to improve their initial knowledge of school leadership and claimed that the existence of their mentor as a resource person helping their mentee is seen as a meaningful initiative in providing guidance to novice headteachers. The literature on mentoring indicates that the implementation of mentoring within the headship journey has a significant impact on novice heads/mentees who can then be well-guided by highly experienced and knowledgeable heads. Indirectly, they felt that the mentoring approach helped them to improve the efficiency with which the newly appointed head can organise the school's operation. Mentoring is considered a noteworthy approach because it enhances self-confidence level, promotes positive communication and collegiality and decreases the feeling of isolation/loneliness (Tahir et al., 2016). However, previous researchers have highlighted the constraints of the mentoring system, such as differences in gender, distances between school locations and the need for careful selection and training of headteachers' mentors

(Theodosiou, 2015). These are some of the glitches in mentoring which particularly require some assurance from the MOE, SDE and DOE officers with regard to the successful implementation of mentoring in their state department of education.

Fourth, it is relevant that educational authorities should have clear thoughts on instilling socialisation strategies in their NPQEL training syllabus to equip potential headteachers with the enculturation approaches in their initial entry into the headship phase. Based on previous studies conducted locally and abroad regarding the socialisation processes and tactics used, it is concluded that the socialisation of headteachers provides many benefits to their enculturation with a school's culture and environment (Glasspool, 2007; Steyn, 2013; Ismail et al., 2009). Pertaining to the role of the *Institute of Aminuddin Baki* or National Educational Leadership and Management College, it is wise that all aspiring headteachers are equipped with formal training and knowledge of school leadership. Through this study, it is noted that most of the efforts in obtaining theoretical knowledge were based on primary headteachers' own efforts. Therefore, it is suggested that all prospective heads obtain their theoretical knowledge as an official requirement from the *Institute of Aminuddin Baki* or National Educational Leadership and Management College. Also, aspiring heads should be equipped with some theoretical and practical knowledge based on the efforts of the SDE and DOE, such as knowledge-sharing sessions, short courses and workshops and some briefing sessions.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the implications of the study, a few limitations are also acknowledged. First, in terms of generalisability, it is possible that the data derived and analysed from a series of interviews with primary headteachers could not be generalised to the context of secondary headteachers. Second, the exploration was carried out using semi-structured interviews, which proved challenging because the researcher then had to depend only on one type of data. In terms of reliability and accuracy of the data, concerns may arise as to whether the subjects were reporting based on their previous experiences or on something created by them. Hence, it is strongly

suggested that a mixed-method study should be used to deal with the weaknesses of relying solely on the interview technique. The observation method, for example, can provide more reliable, in-depth data that can contextualise the findings from the interview and hence determine their accuracy and validity.

Third, in terms of sampling, this study interviewed nine primary headteachers from three major state departments of education to qualitatively investigate the leadership journeys (socialisation process). Future studies may increase the number of subjects in order to yield richer and saturated data and thus better depict the socialisation issues in the context of primary headship in Malaysia. Fourth, to represent Malaysian primary headship, it is proposed that the study be expanded to another eight state departments of education in order to provide an overview of Malaysian primary headship. Notably different patterns might be revealed in terms of leadership journeys, especially within career stages and headship socialisation processes.

It is also recommended that future studies consider the headship socialisation processes in the context and the leadership journeys of secondary head teachers. Such studies would investigate whether secondary headteachers also note similar patterns of journeys as their primary counterparts. In doing so, the distinctive elements, e.g. headteachers' level of education, can be discovered and included in a conceptual framework to represent the Malaysian headteachers' overall leadership journey. Lastly, this study was conducted in public primary schools that merely consisted of national medium primary schools and special type primary public schools. The variation of patterns can be more identifiable in studies that include secondary, religious-based schools and international-curriculum-based schools, particularly in terms of culture, structure and values. As such, the leadership patterns and socialisation that cover the training and development received can be compared and validated.

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