Strategic leadership in Malaysia education: A systematic literature reviews

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ABSTRACT

Strategic leadership is a critical issue for school leaders. Over the past few decades, strategic leadership studies in fields other than education have been implemented, but there is still a lack of studies related to strategic leadership in education. The purpose of this systematic literature review (SLR) is to provide a comprehensive overview of research related to strategic leadership in Malaysia, identifying any gaps in the literature as a reference for future research. This study was conducted systematically and the review was based on the PRISMA (Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Synthesis) method. This study selected articles using two leading databases, namely Scopus and Web of Science, and one supporting database, Google Scholar. A systematic review process, eligibility and exclusion criteria, review process steps (identification, screening, eligibility) and data analysis were conducted. The results show that there is limited literature on strategic leadership and from the literature there are three primary dimensions that are stated from a throughout the school and educational institutions viewpoint in Malaysia: (i) mission, vision and values, (ii) futuristic thinking skills, and (iii) leading a change strategy. Further research is also expected to develop a strategic leadership model of teacher leaders in the Malaysian context. This is important to expand research related to strategic leadership in a more complex way to gain a better understanding of this construct especially in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

High-performing leaders are able to increase the level of achievement towards an excellent work culture. In line with a study conducted by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (2007) which outlines the characteristics of high-performing leaders refers to (i) the ability to lead school organizations, (ii) futuristic thinking and (iii) being highly skilled in enriching data. While Elkington et al. (2017) proposes effective leaders capable of solving complex problems, committing to developing employee capacity, practicing tolerance with employees and always maintaining good relations with stakeholders. Therefore, these competencies need to be possessed by school leaders to improve the effectiveness of school management.

Strategic leadership is one of the forms of future leadership. However, this form of leadership is still poorly practiced as research on it is quite limited especially in the local context. Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 had explained two types of leadership styles but there are other leadership styles that can have a positive impact for the school which is strategic leadership (Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Aniyath Ali (2015); Fazleen Mohamad & Siti Noor Ismail (2018).

Thus, strategic leadership is a form of leadership that is able to improve the effectiveness of schools. However, this form of leadership is still poorly practiced as research on it is quite limited especially in the local context. This is further supported by Carvalho et al. (2021) study, which discovered only three studies in Malaysia between 1990 and 2019. As a result, the study's findings show that strategic leadership studies are still in their infancy and will need to be improved throughout time. Earlier, strategic leadership was more focused on business, public administration and corporate organizations. But in 1900 began the era of development of studies on leadership. In fact, scholars began to realize the need to replicate strategic leadership in educational organizations. Therefore, research on strategic leadership needs a precise definition, a comprehensive conceptual framework, and action to enhance the core elements of education.

This study can provide a comprehensive overview of relevant research on strategic leadership, identify any gaps in the literature that could inform future research agendas and evidence for practice. Hence, the SLR study examines the dimensions of strategic leadership studies in the field of education in Malaysia through a survey with the selected empirical studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses the highlights of the literature as follows:

Leadership

Leadership is a pillar of success in an educational institution. Western scholars associate leadership with organizational changes (Fullan, 2005; Davies 2005). In fact, some argue that leadership is the process of influencing others to achieve goals (Northouse, 2016; Stogdill, 1974; Yukl, 2002, 2008). Joyce (2012) in books Strategic Leadership in the Public Service, says that leadership in the civil service becomes more important when the government engages with the transformation agenda in the public service. Based on the model of the leadership process developed by John Kotter, the leader begins by setting the direction of the mission and the vision of the organization.

Strategic leadership

Strategic leadership has become an essential aspect for organisations seeking to grow, preserve a competitive advantage, and discover new prospects. This statement was also agreed by Ireland and Hitt (1999) that strategic leadership is the ability of leaders to anticipate situations, think systematically and collaborate with stakeholders to initiate change in the organization. Finkelstein et al. (2009) added that the effectiveness of strategic leaders is measured based on the output produced by an organization. In addition, Kimberly B. Boal and Hooijberg (2001) strategic leadership focuses on leaders who create and develop organizations while B. Davies and Davies (2009) state that the main focus of strategic leadership is the formulation of strategies and the implementation of change management strategies and improvements towards the effectiveness and excellence of educational organizations.

In conclusion, strategic leadership refers to the ability of a school leader who looks forward and always sets the direction according to the current development of education and makes full use of his own capabilities to achieve the vision and mission of an institution.

METHOD

This section discusses the methodology of the study as follows:

Research Design

This study is a qualitative study using a systematic literature review (SLR) method. This method examines previous studies on strategic leadership trends in the field of education through systematic analysis.

Review protocol – PRISMA

This method retrieves articles on strategic leadership in education. This revision is based on the PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). Thus, Moher et al. (2010) states that the PRISMA Statement is able to assist researchers (i) conduct a thorough search of terms related to strategic leadership in education, (ii) report systematic reviews, and (iii) critical assessments of systematic reviews.

Formulation of research questions

The focus of this review is to explore key aspects of strategic leadership in the field of education. Therefore, researchers need to formulate clear and concise research questions that drive the overall systematic study methodology. The formulation of the research question for this study was based on mnemonics PICo recommended by Lockwood et al. (2015). It is a tool that assists authors to develop suitable research questions for the review. PICo is based on three main concepts namely Population or Problem, Interest and Context. Therefore, this study answers the question: what is the dimension of strategic leadership studies in the field of Malaysian education?

Systematic Review Process

The selection of articles in this study is carried out through systematic review. The process goes through three main stages as follows:

Identification

The first stage is the identification of keywords on the Scopus and Web of Science databases (see Table 1). Further, other terms are also identified through thesaurus, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and past studies for holistic search. Therefore, in this study, a total of 10 articles were identified from both databases. Manual searches based on similar keywords were conducted on the Google Scholar database which resulted in an additional number of 19 articles. In total, 29 articles were taken at the first stage of the systematic review process. However, only 23 articles were selected due to the overlap of articles during the search through the selected database.

Table 1. Full Search String Used in Selected Databases (Scopus And Web Of Science)

Database	String
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("strategic leadership*" OR "kepemimpinan strategik") AND ("education*" OR "higher education*" OR "schools*" OR "pendidikan") AND ("Malaysia"))
Web of Science	TS= (("strategic leadership*" OR "kepemimpinan strategik") AND ("education*" OR "higher education*" OR "school*" OR "pendidikan") AND ("Malaysia"))

Screening

The second stage is the screening of the selection of the desired article based on the criteria on Table 2. First with regard to literature type, only article journals with empirical data are selected which means conference proceedings, newspapers, review articles, books and chapters in books are all excluded. Second, in order to avoid any confusion and difficulty in translating, the searching efforts focused only on articles published in English and Malay. Thirdly, with regard to timeline, a period of 10 years are selected (between 2012 and 2022), an adequate period of time to see the evolution of research and related publications. Finally, the research was limited to the Malaysian context.This
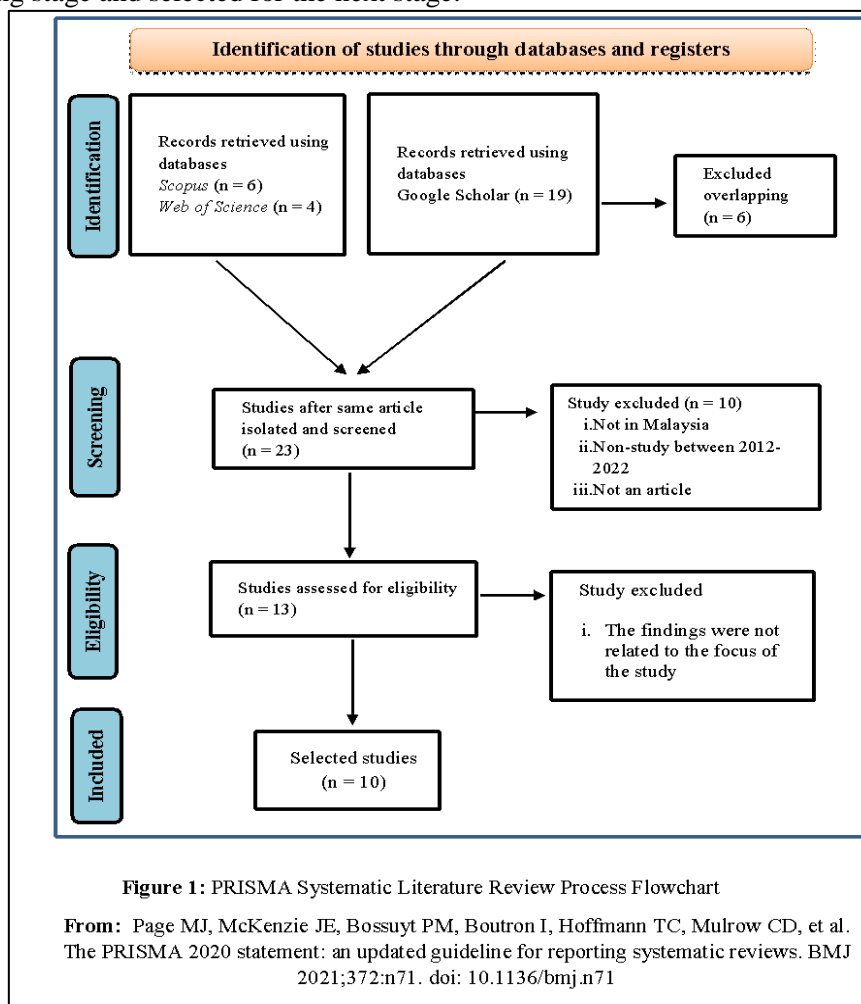
process had excluded 10 articles as they did not fit the inclusion criteria. The remaining 13 articles were used for the third process - eligibility.

Table 2. Selection and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Selection	Excluded
Types of publication	Journal (research articles)	Conference proceedings, newspapers, review articles, books, chapters in books
Language	English and Malay	Non-English and Non-Malay
Timeline	2012 to 2022	Before 2012
Scope of study	Malaysia	Other than Malaysia

Eligibility

Several eligibility and exclusion criteria are determined. Researchers review articles manually to meet the selection criteria set. Thus, 10 of the 23 articles did not meet the selection criteria. While the other 13 articles meet the criteria during the title, abstract and content screening process is conducted at the screening stage and selected for the next stage.

Figure 1: PRISMA Systematic Literature Review Process Flowchart

From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

Data extraction and analysis

The remaining items were examined. Efforts were focused on specific studies that addressed the posed questions. The data were extracted by first reading the abstracts, then the whole papers (in depth) to find relevant topics and sub-themes. The objective of the study is to examine the dimensions of strategic leadership studies in the field of education in Malaysia through a survey with the selected empirical studies. To uncover themes related to strategic leadership in education, qualitative analysis

was undertaken using content analysis. Sub-themes were then organized around the typology-established themes by the authors.

The study's findings also revealed that the scope of strategic leadership research in Malaysia concentrated on four themes: (i) the relationship of strategic leadership and other important variables (ii) the development of strategic leadership models, (iii) strategic leadership characteristics, and (iv) strategic leadership practices (see Table 3).

Table 3. Scope of strategic leadership in Malaysia

Scope	Articles
The relationship of strategic leadership through important variables	Hemathy Kunalan & Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2020; Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2017; Ilminza Zakaria et al. 2021; Mua'azam Mohamad et al. 2016; Siti Noor Ismail et al., 2018; Kalaimani Ramakrishnan & Aida Hanim Abd Hamid, 2020.
The development of strategic leadership models	Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2019; Hemathy Kunalan et al., 2022
Strategic leadership characteristics	Mohamad Johdi Salleh & Alwani Mohamad, 2015; Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2012
Strategic leadership practices	Hemathy Kunalan et al., 2022; Mua'azam Mohamad et al., 2016

Most of the empirical research investigate the relationships between strategic leadership and other variables such as organisational change readiness (Mua'azam Mohamad et al., 2016), student aspiration (Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2017; Ilminza Zakaria et al., 2021) quality assurance system (Hemathy Kunalan & Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2020) and quality of teaching (Siti Noor Ismail et al., 2018; Kalaimani Ramakrishnan & Aida Hanim Abd Hamid, 2020).

Only two studies used SEM software to build models for theme development in relation to strategic leadership, notably (Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2019; Hemathy Kunalan et al., 2022). In addition, studies have been conducted to identify strategic leadership practises in schools (Hemathy Kunalan et al., 2022; Mua'azam Mohamad et al., 2016). While some research identifies the efficiency of strategic leadership characteristics (Mohamad Johdi Salleh & Alwani Mohamad, 2015; Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2012)

According to the analysis, there were fewer strategic leadership studies that used qualitative research methodologies and had a more in-depth style of discussion. While analyzing the sample studies, it was discovered that the sample of studies consisted of educational leaders at educational institutions, school leaders, and secondary school teachers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on literature trends, research related to strategic leadership has increased rapidly in quantity as well as across different academic fields (Fernandes et al., 2022). While (Eacott, 2008) notes that the concept of strategy emerged in the education management literature in the 1980s; however, the studies that have been produced up to the 1990s are limited and knowledge of strategic leadership is still incomplete and misleading. Strategic leaders play a significant role in strategy, but research raises the question of what the major qualities of strategic leaders in schools are, taking into account this wide and holistic idea of strategic leadership. Specific abilities, actions and other traits can be determined from the studied literature.

Based on a review of ten Malaysian studies, it was discovered that the majority of local researchers used the Strategic Leadership Model Davies and Davies (2004) as a reference, particularly in the questionnaires and development of models. The research discusses what organizational ability and what personal characteristics strategic leaders exhibit. Strategic leaders have the organizational ability to (i) be strategically oriented; (ii) translate strategy into action; (iii) align people and organizations; (iv) determine effective strategic intervention points; and (v) develop strategic competencies. Meanwhile, strategic leaders have personal characteristics which display (vi) a

dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present (vii) absorptive capacity (viii) adaptive capacity (ix) wisdom (B. Davies & Davies, 2010; B. J. Davies & Davies, 2004).

The key attribute of strategic leadership for personal characteristics, is restlessness (Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2017, 2019; Hemathy Kunalan et al., 2022; Ilminza Zakaria et al., 2021; Mohamad Johdi Salleh & Alwani Mohamad, 2015). Strategic leaders may envision the "strategic leap" that an organization desires to undergo while advocating change passionately.

Strategic orientation is a key component for the organization's capabilities (Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2012; Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2017, 2019; Hemathy Kunalan et al., 2022). It is the process of looking forward to building a strategic vision of what we want for schools in the future, therefore establishing guidelines and frameworks for how to proceed (B. Davies & Davies, 2005)

Researchers analysed data using nine domains of Davies Strategic Leadership Model (B. J. Davies & Davies, 2004). This suggests that the model can be adapted in the context of local leaders. The findings showed that Malaysian education leaders have a high tendency to practice strategic leadership in their workplaces and demonstrate a high level of strategic leadership practices. However, there is still a domain that has not yet been mastered by Malaysian education leaders (Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2019).

In consideration of the significance of these studies, the strategic leadership includes three primary dimensions that are stated from a throughout the school and educational institutions viewpoint in Malaysia. (i) Mission, vision and values (Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2012; Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2017, 2019; Hemathy Kunalan et al., 2022; Hemathy Kunalan & Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2020) (ii) Futuristic thinking skills (Hemathy Kunalan & Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2020; Siti Noor Ismail et al., 2018) and (iii) Leading a change strategy (Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2012; Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli, 2017, 2019; Hemathy Kunalan et al., 2022; Hemathy Kunalan & Hairuddin Mohd Ali, 2020; Ilminza Zakaria et al., 2021; Kalaimani Ramakrishnan & Aida Hanim Abd Hamid, 2020; Mohamad Johdi Salleh & Alwani Mohamad, 2015; Mua'azam Mohamad et al., 2016; Siti Noor Ismail et al., 2018).

Table 4. The dimension of strategic leadership in Malaysia context

Title	Year	Mission, vision & Value			Futuristic thinking skills			Leading a change strategy		
		SO	SP	SMV	COL	QA	WIS	RC	SA	RST
Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli	2019	/		/						/
Hairuddin Mohd Ali	2012	/							/	/
Mua'azam Mohamad et al.	2016								/	/
Siti Noor Ismail et al.	2018				/					/
Mohamad Johdi Salleh & Alwani Mohamad	2015								/	/
Hairuddin Mohd Ali & Inas Zulkipli	2017	/				/				
Ilminza Zakaria et al.	2021									/
Hemathy Kunalan & Hairuddin Mohd Ali	2020		/			/				/
Kalaimani Ramakrishnan & Aida Hanim Abd Hamid	2020									/
Hemathy Kunalan et al.	2022	/				/				/

1.Mission, vision & Value	**2.Futuristic thinking skills**	**3.Leading a change strategy**
SO = Strategic orirentation	COL = Collaboration	WIS = Wisdom
SP = Strategic planning	QA = Quality assurance	RC = Ready to change
SMV = Sharing mission & vision		SA = Strategy to action
		RST = Restlessness

a. Mission, vision and values

Strategic direction setting is a key feature of strategic leadership. It was followed by the setting of a clear vision and mission and dissemination to the organization's citizens to ensure that its followers follow the changes it wants to implement. According to Pryor et al.,(2007) the aspects that comprise the organization's strategic goal involve its mission, vision, goals, objectives, strategy, measurement, and feedback.

b. Futuristic thinking skills

Boal and Hooijberg (2001) assert that affective and cognitive activities can both be involved in vision. The affective component incorporates the individual value and the target belief system, whereas the cognitive component concentrates on the outcome and the means to accomplish it. Strategic leaders should be able to see the "bigger picture" and comprehend the environment in which the organization is currently operating (B. J. Davies & Davies, 2004). Additionally, leaders must be more critical in their interpretation of complex information (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001).

c. Leading a change strategy

Strategic leaders should be able to guide their teams in making changes. However, choosing the necessary strategic changes is the crucial difficulty that leaders face. Such a choice implies not only knowing what to do and how to do it, but also knowing when modifications are necessary (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). The point that was made by Davies and Davies (2006) that strategic time is vital because it has the power to either advantage or disadvantage the school is further supported by this statement. Therefore, leaders must be able to react to new facts, be sufficiently brave to compete and take opportunities with decisions, and apply discretion while making decisions.

Particularly, strategic leadership as a leadership style facilitated the growth or development of organisations. The concept was also accepted by B. Davies (2003), who explored the development of strategic leadership and discovered that the most important characteristics of a leader were the ability to envision the future, implement strategic plans into action, and encourage teamwork.

CONCLUSİON

Strategic leadership becomes more important when leaders evaluate how to manage and configure strategy and, as a result, reinforce concurrently organizational abilities and personal characteristics relevant to school improvements. Now that we have a better knowledge of the constructions, it is time to broaden the research in more complex and detailed, throughout explanatory ways.

Therefore, the recommendations of further studies so that the study of strategic leadership in education is carried out using a qualitative approach. Further research is also expected to develop a strategic leadership model of teacher leaders in the Malaysian context. In addition, the purpose of this systematic literature review study was to contribute to this effort by combining and systematizing educational literature on strategic leadership.

Hence, to ensure that education leaders master the characteristics of strategic leaders in leading an organization, various initiatives need to be implemented such as providing exposure on strategic leadership through in-service training, courses and workshops from leadership-related training providers such as Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB). Moreover, the education leaders themselves need to be prepared to make changes especially in an often-changing world. The self-awareness of education leaders is the tipping point for change to be made to ensure that the mission and vision of an organization is achieved.

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