The Leadership Style of School Principals in Improving Educational Quality at a Model School: Indera Shahbandar School Pahang (SISP) Malaysia

Original Article

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Abstract

This study analyzes the principal's leadership style at Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), examining its impact on educational quality, associated challenges, and strategies to overcome these challenges. This study used a qualitative research method with the type of case study research. The subject of the study was the principal of the Special Model School: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP). The research was conducted at Seri Bentong Vocational High School and Seri Tualang Vocational High School, Malaysia. Data collection was carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation. Furthermore, the stages of data analysis included data reduction, data presentation, conclusion, and verification. The study results find that: 1) The principal of Seri Bentong Tualang Vocational High School adopts a transformational leadership style, while the principal of Seri Tualang Tualang Vocational High School, the principal of the school, applies a democratic leadership style. 2) The leadership style applied by the principal also has different implications. 3) The two schools studied also face challenges in implementing leadership styles. 4) Leadership strategies implemented by the principal at Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP) to overcome challenges in improving the quality of education.

Keywords: Cluster Schools of Excellence, Principal's Leadership Style, Quality of Education, Special Model Schools

1. Introduction

The education system in Malaysia is designed to ensure that every citizen has access to quality education that meets individual needs, as outlined in the Education Act 1996 (Act 550). This Act, through Section 29A (1), mandates primary education, where every child aged six must be enrolled in primary school, as stated in Section 29A(2). Failure by parents to comply with this requirement, according to Section 29A (4), may result in a fine of up to RM5,000 or imprisonment for up to six months. This policy has been in effect since 2003 and is supported by the Mandatory Primary Education Operational Policy (Ayub, 2015). The Malaysian education system consists of preschool, six years of primary education (ages 7–12), and five years of secondary education (Form 1–5), resulting in a total of 14 years of formal education until the completion of secondary school (Syakhrani et al., 2022).

The Malaysian education system is broadly divided into primary and secondary education to ensure that students receive education suited to their age and developmental stage, while allowing for more efficient allocation of resources and teachers. One type of school in Malaysia is the Special Model School, which combines primary education at Stage II (students in Years 4, 5, and 6 aged 10–12) with secondary education (Form 1 to Form 5) under a single administration. This concept was introduced in 1995 by the Baling District Education

Development Foundation (YPPDP) in Kedah and approved by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) to enhance educational progress in rural areas. The first pilot Model Special Schools were implemented at Clifford School, Kuala Lipis (1997) and Seri Pekan Model Special School, Pekan (1998). As of 2024, there are 11 Model Special Schools in Malaysia located in Pahang, Perak, Selangor, Kedah, and Negeri Sembilan (National Education Policy, 2017).

The Special Model School, also known as Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), is a special education initiative in the state of Pahang, initiated in 1997 by Malaysia's sixth Prime Minister, the Honorable Dato' Seri Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, to assist rural students with potential but limited resources (National Education Policy Statement, 2017). Starting with two pilot schools, SISP has expanded to four schools in Bentong, Lipis, Pekan, and Temerloh, with a focus on holistic academic and non-academic education quality. SISP has also achieved Cluster of Excellence School (SKK) status, as stated in the Education Development Master Plan (PIPP, 2006), due to its success in producing high-performing students in academics, co-curriculum, and character, while meeting the strict criteria set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. This achievement reflects the high standard of education, further reinforced by the leadership of the school principal, which is key to the school's effectiveness and progress (Zheng et al., 2017).

A key pillar in educational organization is the school leader, whose role is crucial in determining the success of education through leadership style, knowledge culture, motivation, and leadership capabilities in the workplace (Nurcahyani et al., 2022). A 2003 study by the school inspectorate indicated that effective school leaders emphasize these aspects as indicators of effectiveness, which are also supported by cooperation among teachers to improve teaching and learning quality in schools (Shin, 2020). Teachers play a vital role, encompassing planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning, as their performance impacts both academic and non-academic achievements of students. Teacher performance, as a tangible outcome of their duties in educating, guiding, and developing students, is also a key element in achieving educational quality (Dina et al., 2022; Muspawi, 2021). Therefore, the success of schools depends on the effectiveness of school leadership and the quality performance of teachers.

The quality of primary education in Malaysia is assessed through the National Educational Assessment System, which serves as an indicator of the country's education quality. This assessment involves the collection of data and information to measure students' mastery in learning. Primary schools apply the School-Based Assessment (SBA), which is holistic, assessing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in accordance with the National Education Philosophy and the National Curriculum. SBA consists of four main components: Classroom Assessment (PBD), Centralized Assessment (PP), Physical Education, Sports, and Co-curricular Activities Assessment (PAJSK), and Psychometric Assessment (National Education Policy, 2017).

School-Based Assessment (SBA) is a system that emphasizes continuous learning to ensure students' overall development, unlike examination systems that are more normative. This system provides comprehensive information about individual achievement without comparing students' scores within the same class. According to the Malaysian Quality Education Standards (SKPM), the principal's leadership plays a crucial role in implementing educational policies and strategies through policies that align with the school's vision and mission, as well as adopting an appropriate leadership style (Mansor, 2009). In the context of Special Model School, principals face the challenge of integrating primary and secondary school systems, especially in rural areas such as Bentong and Temerloh in the state of Pahang, where there has been a decline in educational quality based on the School Average Grade

(GPS) in 2022 and 2023. Therefore, government attention to the quality of education in rural areas is necessary for a more equitable and widespread education system in Malaysia.

According to data from the Bentong District Education Office, Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), namely Seri Bentong and Seri Tualang Vocational High School, experienced a decline in their School Average Grade (GPS) in 2023, from 3.00 to 3.40 and from 2.98 to 3.50, respectively, compared to 2022. However, both schools maintained their status as Model Special Schools, as evidenced by a 100% pass rate in national examinations, particularly in mandatory subjects such as Bahasa Melayu and History. The main challenge faced by the principals is maintaining education quality at both primary and secondary levels, while managing student outcomes, including character development in residential schools. Initial observations indicate the need for strengthening the principal's leadership style to enhance overall education quality. Based on these findings, the research titled "The Leadership Style of School Principals in Improving Education Quality in Special Model School: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Malaysia" aims to describe the leadership style of principals and its implications for teachers, as well as the challenges faced in achieving improved education quality.

2. Literature Review

2.1. School Principal Leadership Style

The school principal is a leader selected from among teachers and appointed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) to manage secondary schools, with the autonomy to manage all resources within the school. As an individual holding this autonomy, the principal must serve as a role model and exhibit exemplary leadership in guiding the school toward success. An effective principal can bring about positive changes within the educational system, as stated by Fink & Stoll (1998) in their book Changing Our Schools, which highlights that effective leadership is a key driver of change. Mamat (1998) adds that the principal is the central figure responsible for all school activities, while Sidiq (2021) clarify that leadership refers to the person leading, whereas leadership refers to the position itself. Leadership involves the ability to influence others in achieving specific goals (Muhani et al., 2016), emphasizing that the principal, as a leader, is tasked with guiding all members of the school toward common objectives.

According to Kartono (2008), indicators of leadership style include several key aspects, such as decision-making ability, which refers to the leader's capacity to determine the appropriate course of action in a given situation; motivation, which refers to the leader's ability to encourage subordinates to willingly invest their efforts and resources to achieve the goal; communication skills, which involve the ability to convey messages clearly to ensure understanding by others; control over subordinates, which means the leader can direct others to follow the vision and provide guidance in line with the organizational context; responsibility, indicating the leader's readiness to bear the risks associated with their actions; and emotional control, which is a key factor for achieving success and happiness in life.

2.2. Quality of Education

The quality of education consists of two essential elements: quality and education. According to Hadiansah et al. (2021), quality is defined as the standard set to meet customer expectations, while Baro'ah (2020) defines quality as a comprehensive representation of goods or services that demonstrates the ability to satisfy customer needs. Therefore, quality can be concluded as the fulfillment of criteria that indicate the capacity to meet customer

expectations in the context of education. Meanwhile, the Cluster of Excellence Schools (SKK) refers to the status granted to schools that excel in management and student outcomes. Saat & Zain (2016) defines student success as students' achievement in reaching excellence in examinations, while SKPMg2 (Jemaah Nazir Jaminan Kualiti, KPM, 2016) states that student success can be measured based on academic, co-curricular, and personal development aspects. The SKK status, outlined in the Education Development Master Plan (PIPP, 2006), provides guidelines for enhancing the education system in Malaysia, including the strengthening of Sekolah Kebangsaan (National Schools) and the development of education through schools with specific areas of excellence.

The National Educational Assessment System is the assessment system used by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) to measure students' achievements in learning, involving national examinations and assessments. In special school model, such as Sekolah Indera Shabandar Pahang (SISP), the assessment system used is the School-Based Assessment, which is holistic in evaluating students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. This assessment includes evaluations that reflect overall achievement, in alignment with broader educational goals, to ensure students' success in various life aspects.

2.3. Status of Excellence Cluster Schools (SKK)

The Cluster of Excellence School (SKK) is a status awarded to schools recognized for excellence in management and student outcomes. According to Saat & Zain (2016), student outcomes are defined as the achievement of students in academic excellence, while the Malaysian Education Quality Standards Wave 2 (SKPMg2) (Jemaah Nazir Jaminan Kualiti, KPM, 2016) measures student outcomes through academic performance, co-curricular activities, and character development. SKK aims to strengthen Malaysia's education system, as outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (PIPP, 2006). Schools that achieve this status must have a niche area in both academics and co-curricular activities, reflecting the specific excellence of each school.

The selection process for SKK is lengthy and requires meeting various criteria set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM). These criteria include student excellence across multiple aspects, quality leadership, effective school management, a conducive school climate, and the successful implementation of KPM programs. The principal or headmaster of an SKK school must meet certain leadership standards, such as holding a grade DG 52 or DG 36. Additionally, the quality of teachers and the effectiveness of the curriculum and co-curricular programs are critical factors. To maintain quality standards, SKK implements both internal and external control mechanisms to ensure the continuous success of students in academics, co-curricular activities, and character development.

2.4. National Education Assessment System

The National Education Assessment System (SPPK) is the assessment system used by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) to measure students' achievements in learning through national-scale examinations and evaluations. In the context of the Special Model School: Sekolah Indera Shabandar Pahang (SISP), the assessment implemented is similar to other primary schools through the holistic School-Based Assessment (PBS) approach. This assessment evaluates students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. The PBS system comprises four main components: Classroom-Based Assessment (PBD), Centralized Assessment (PP), Physical Education, Sports, and Co-Curricular Activities Assessment (PAJSK), and Psychometric Assessment (PSi).

Classroom-Based Assessment (PBD) is conducted continuously to assess students' progress through both formative and summative assessments. Centralized Assessment (PP),

on the other hand, uses instruments provided by the Examination Board (LP) with official reports from the school. PAJSK records student involvement in co-curricular and sports activities, while PSi aims to assess students' talents and personality systematically. This system reflects a comprehensive approach to education, emphasizing both academic and non-academic aspects for balanced student development (KPM, 2024).

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. A case study is a method for collecting and analyzing information related to a specific case, focused on exploring conditions, activities, evolution, and factors influencing the development of the case (Ahyar et al., 2020). The aim of this research is to describe the leadership of school principals at Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Malaysia, in improving the quality of education in the state of Pahang Darul Makmur. The study locations include Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Seri Bentong and Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Seri Tualang, selected as part of the four Model Schools in the state. The research is scheduled to take place from August to December 2024, encompassing various stages such as data collection and analysis.

The primary data source for this research is the school principals of the two schools, while secondary data includes educational reports, school policies, and school profile data. Data collection techniques are conducted through triangulation, combining interviews, observations, and documentation. Observations are carried out to record the interactions between school principals and educators, students, and staff, while interviews are used to explore information regarding leadership style, implications, and challenges faced by the principals. Documentation complements data collection by including relevant reports and notes related to leadership.

The main research instrument is the researcher as the human instrument (Sugiyono, 2013), responsible for establishing the research focus, selecting informants, and drawing conclusions based on findings. Additional instruments include interview and observation guidelines, covering indicators such as decision-making ability, motivation, communication, and responsibility. Data validity is tested using four criteria: credibility through triangulation, transferability with detailed reporting, dependability through independent audits, and confirmability through confirmation of research findings (Ahyar et al., 2020).

Data analysis is conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification. Data reduction helps summarize information and highlight key aspects, while data presentation is carried out through tables, graphs, or descriptive narratives to facilitate interpretation. Conclusions are drawn by ensuring that the research results are consistent and accountable, leading to high-quality and reliable data (Fadli, 2021).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Result

4.1.1. Description of Research Results at SISP, Seri Bentong Vocational High School

a)   School Profile

Seri Bentong Vocational High School, which began operations on January 6 1997, is a leading educational institution in Pahang, Malaysia. Initially, this school shared its location with the National Sulaiman Middle School for eight months before occupying its own building on 14 September 1997. Strategically located in Kampung Karak Setia, Bentong, this school is an educational center for students from Year 4 to Year 5, especially in the Indera Shahbandar Pahang School (SISP) which is specifically for outstanding students. In 2014, Seri Bentong Vocational School was recognized as a Cluster School of Excellence (SKK) thanks to its extraordinary achievements in academic and extracurricular fields, especially in Malay language subjects and Petanque sports.

Figure 1. Location of Seri Bentong Vocational School

Figure 2. Organizational structure of Seri Bentong Vocational School

Commitment to the quality of education is reflected in a holistic approach that integrates academics, extracurriculars and the learning environment. This school is a choice for parents in rural areas due to its location away from the distractions of big cities, creating an ideal atmosphere for young students aged 10–12 years. With a controlled number of students and adequate facilities, Seri Bentong Vocational School continues to strive to build an educated generation that is ready to fulfill national aspirations in accordance with its mission: "*Preserving a quality education system to awaken individual potential to fulfill the nation's aspirations*".

b) Leadership style of school principals in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Seri Bentong Vocational High School

The transformational leadership style implemented by Mr. Rosli, the principal of Seri Bentong Vocational High School, focuses on creating a long-term vision and building collective commitment within the organization. This approach emphasizes the importance of inspiration and motivation in transforming the values, beliefs, and behaviors of organizational members to achieve shared goals. Mr. Rosli highlight that the success of the institution lies in the active involvement of all staff and teachers through an inclusive strategic planning process. This is realized through regular discussions and training sessions that ensure each individual understands and supports the school's vision. Open communication and active participation in routine meetings provide a solid foundation for collective achievement, making staff feel heard and valued.

The researcher's observations at Seri Bentong Vocational High School affirm the success of the transformational leadership style in fostering a positive dynamic within the school environment. Daily interactions between Mr. Rosli and the staff reflect empowering leadership practices, where every idea is valued and every contribution recognized. This approach not only enhances the quality of education but also strengthens team synergy, creating a harmonious work atmosphere. In general, the transformational leadership style has proven effective in driving positive change, strengthening teamwork, and reinforcing collective commitment to advancing the educational institution.

c) Implications of the leadership style of school principals in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Seri Bentong Vocational High School

The leadership of the principal at the Model School: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP) and Seri Bentong Vocational High School has a significant impact on improving the quality of education. Based on an interview with Mr. Rosli, the principal, effective leadership fosters innovative teaching that is inclusive and dynamic. The mentor-mentee program is one of the key implementations that not only enhances academic performance but also improves students' interpersonal skills. Teachers at Seri Bentong Vocational High School agree that innovative leadership policies create a collaborative learning environment, facilitating active student engagement in the teaching and learning process.

Field observations show that initiatives such as the development of collaborative learning modules and project-based programs have successfully increased student engagement while preparing them with critical thinking and innovation skills. These strategies have positioned Seri Bentong Vocational High School as a model school that integrates innovative leadership approaches to advance educational quality. The research findings indicate that the dynamic learning environment at this school boosts students' confidence and fosters a deeper understanding of the material taught.

d) The challenges of school leaders in implementing leadership styles in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Indera Shahbandar Pahang School (SISP), Seri Bentong Vocational School

Challenges in educational leadership at special model schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Seri Bentong Vocational High School, can be categorized into internal and external challenges. Encik Rosli, the school principal, highlighted resource constraints and adaptation to changes in the assessment system as significant internal challenges. He explained that limited funds often forced him to make difficult decisions regarding budget allocation to meet priority needs. In addition, the change in the national assessment system from UPSR to PBS and PBD required rapid adaptation in learning strategies, as he said: "The change in the assessment system that has been used for decades must be replaced, forcing us to quickly adjust our learning strategies so as not to be left behind." These challenges not only put pressure on teachers but also on students. External challenges include the diversity of student backgrounds and the well- being of the school community. Encik Rosli explained that differences in culture, social, and learning abilities of students require inclusive and thoughtful policies: "We are faced with various backgrounds of students who are different, both in terms of culture, social, and learning abilities." In addition, the welfare of teachers and students is a major concern, including aspects of mental health and job satisfaction. According to him, the balance between work demands and personal well- being is very important to support a healthy learning process. These challenges require innovative management and strategic policies so that the quality of education in schools can continue to be improved.

e) School leaders' strategies for overcoming challenges in implementing leadership styles in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Seri Bentong Vocational High School

This study identifies the strategies implemented by Mr. Rosli, the principal of Seri Bentong Vocational High School, in addressing the challenges of implementing transformational leadership styles at the special model school Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP). The main strategies include resource management, professional development for teachers, an inclusive approach, a focus on well-being, and student empowerment. In terms of resource management, the principal optimizes the use of funds, facilities, and teaching staff, as well as fosters partnerships with companies and alumni to gain additional support. Additionally, teacher professional development is carried out through training sessions, workshops, and seminars tailored to the new assessment system, Pentaksiran Berdasarkan Sekolah (PBS). This program aids teachers in adapting to educational changes and enhances their skills (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2024).

An inclusive approach is applied to appreciate student diversity by creating an environment that supports individual development. The principal also prioritizes the well-being of both teachers and students through work-life balance programs and counseling services to maintain the mental health of the school community. Another crucial strategy is student empowerment through leadership programs and the development of social-emotional skills, which enhance students' engagement and responsibility for their own learning. This program fosters a sense of ownership of the school and strengthens students' commitment to the educational process. These strategies highlight the important role of transformational leadership in improving the quality of education at the school (Rosli, 2024).

4.1.2. Description of Research Results in Special Model Schools: Indera Shahbandar Pahang School (SISP), Seri Tualang Vocational School

a)   School Profile

Seri Tualang Vocational High School, located in Temerloh, Pahang, Malaysia, is a superior educational institution under Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP). Established in January 2004, this school was designated as a Special Model School and recognized as a Cluster School of Excellence in 2013. With a focus on holistic education, this school offers intensive learning programs for Year 4 to Year 5 students through strict selection at the Pahang State Education Department (JPNP). Apart from supporting high academic achievement, Seri Tualang Vocational School also emphasizes character development through various extracurricular activities. Its strategic location provides easy access for students, with a calm learning environment that supports effective learning.

Figure 3. Location of Tualang Vocational School

Seri Tualang Vocational High School is equipped with modern facilities such as science laboratories, a library, and comfortable dormitories. With a student population of 93 for primary education (Grades 4-6) and highly qualified teaching staff, the school ensures that every student receives quality education. The teachers here not only teach but also act as mentors, providing personalized attention to the development of each student's potential. Additionally, the professional administrative and dormitory staff support the smooth operation of the school, including managing the daily life of students in the dormitory. The presence of these facilities and supporting personnel ensures an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Seri Tualang Vocational High School vision to become one of the top five schools in Pahang is supported by its mission to develop individual potential through quality education in a conducive atmosphere. This success is reflected in outstanding academic achievements and innovations in the learning programs. With infrastructure such as 29 classrooms, five science laboratories, a library, and various other supporting spaces, the school continues to strive to provide the best education for its students. The full support of teachers, staff, and the school community forms a solid foundation in shaping a generation that is innovative, creative, and competitive.
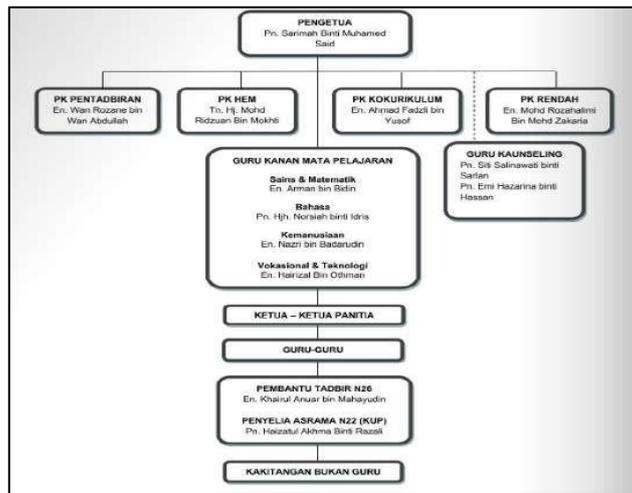
Figure 4. Organizational Structure of Tualang Vocational School

b) Leadership style of school principals in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Seri Tualang Vocational High School

Democratic leadership in the educational context, as implemented by Puan Sarimah at Seri Tualang Vocational School, emphasizes collaboration, involvement of all stakeholders, and open communication. Puan Sarimah describes her leadership style as inclusive and collaborative, involving teachers, students and parents in decision making. He stated that this approach does not only focus on achieving academic results, but also on a shared process that prioritizes a sense of ownership and responsibility among all school members. This approach aims to create a school culture based on two-way communication, where every individual feels their voice is heard. By implementing dialogue forums, open meetings, and brainstorming sessions, Puan Sarimah succeeded in fostering trust, respect, and a strong spirit of cooperation at Seri Tualang Vocational School.

Observations show that this inclusive and collaborative approach has a positive impact on harmony and interaction in the school environment. Teachers, students and administrative staff actively participate in various activities that strengthen school community relationships. Regular open meetings and group discussions create an atmosphere of constructive cooperation, so that tensions or dissatisfaction can be immediately identified and resolved. Through democratic leadership, Puan Sarimah has built a school culture that supports collective success by instilling a sense of togetherness and a spirit of active participation, making Seri Tualang Vocational School an example of a model of effective leadership in education.

c) Implications of the leadership style of school principals in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Seri Tualang Vocational High School

The democratic leadership style applied by Puan Sarimah as principal at Seri Tualang Vocational School has had a significant positive impact on the quality of education at the school. The inclusive and collaborative approach he employs allows teachers to innovate teaching and create dynamic learning environments. This contributes to improved academic achievement and development of students' holistic skills, including social and leadership skills. Puan Sarimah also ensures the welfare of teachers by strengthening their professionalism, which has an impact on increasing teachers' motivation and commitment to their duties (Puan Sarimah, interview, 2024).

In addition, the implementation of a democratic leadership style can be seen in the formation of the Student and Teacher Council, which provides opportunities for students and teachers to be involved in school decision making. This strengthens the sense of ownership and shared responsibility, and increases student motivation and academic achievement. Diverse extracurricular activities are also a focus, with the aim of supporting the development of non-academic skills and providing an outlet for students to express themselves. These programs have contributed to improving students' academic and non-academic achievements as well as developing their social and leadership skills (Puan Sarimah, interview, 2024).

d) The challenges of school leaders in implementing leadership styles in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Seri Tualang Vocational High School

The challenges in implementing leadership styles to improve the quality of education in Model Khas Schools, such as Seri Tualang Vocational High School, are mainly related to limited resources, both in terms of qualified teaching staff and adequate facilities. Puan Sarimah, the principal of Seri Tualang Vocational High School, said that despite the dedication of the teachers, without sufficient resource support, it is difficult to achieve quality education. She emphasized the importance of increasing teacher capacity through training and workshops to address these limitations. In addition, another challenge faced is the diversity of student demographics, which requires a more inclusive and adaptive learning approach according to the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of students, as explained by Puan Sarimah. Observations show that despite facing limited resources and student diversity, Seri Tualang Vocational High School continues to maximize learning efforts with interactive methods and existing tools. Learning is carried out in small groups to provide more attention to students with special needs. The combination of intensive training for teachers and innovation in learning is a solution to overcome these challenges. With the right inclusive approach and efficient management strategies, fairer and higher quality education can be achieved, providing benefits for all students, in line with the expected vision of inclusive education (Puan Sarimah, interview, 2024).

e) School leaders' strategies for overcoming challenges in implementing leadership styles in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Seri Tualang Vocational High School

Strategic planning in the field of education, which emphasizes diversity and external collaboration, is a crucial effort to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. This is exemplified by Seri Tualang Vocational High School, as Puan Sarimah emphasizes that the main focus of the school's development strategy is to create an environment that values differences through effective communication between educators and students from diverse backgrounds. Diversity is viewed as an important asset that needs to be managed strategically to maximize its benefits, both in learning and in the school's social life (Puan Sarimah, interview, 2024).

Furthermore, Puan Sarimah also highlights the importance of external collaboration with the local community and alumni to improve the quality of education. Collaborative programs involving alumni, both in terms of financial support and through training and mentoring, play a vital role in ensuring continuous professional development for both teachers and students. Observations at the school indicate that synergistic relationships with the local community and alumni enrich students' learning experiences and enhance school facilities. Overall, the strategy that prioritizes diversity and external cooperation demonstrates that an

inclusive and collaborative educational model can produce competent and adaptive graduates (Puan Sarimah, interview, 2024).

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Leadership style of school principals in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP) at Seri Bentong and Seri Tualang Vocational High School

This study explores the leadership styles of principals at two Special Model Schools (SISP) in Pahang, namely Seri Bentong and Seri Tualang Vocational High School. The main focus is to evaluate whether the leadership styles implemented by the principals in these schools have effectively enhanced educational quality. At Seri Bentong Vocational High School, Principal Encik Rosli adopts a transformational leadership style, focusing on long-term vision creation and collective commitment to strengthen the organization. This approach empowers staff and teachers to work towards common goals, aligning with Leithwood (2005) theory and the findings of Manan et al. (2023).

In practice, Principal Rosli at Seri Bentong Vocational High School employs a participative decision- making approach, which fosters a sense of collective responsibility among the school members. He also implements five key transformational leadership factors, including idealized influence, charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Northouse, 2013). This creates an environment that supports intellectual and emotional development for both teachers and students, fostering closer collaboration between staff and teachers. The findings indicate that transformational leadership can enhance the quality of education through stronger team synergy.

In contrast, at Seri Tualang Vocational High School, Principal Puan Sarimah employs a democratic leadership style, emphasizing collaboration among all stakeholders. Teachers, students, and parents are involved in making key educational decisions. This style aligns with Hersey and Blanchard's participative leadership theory (Dharma, 1992), which emphasizes staff development and the creation of a harmonious working atmosphere. The democratic approach at Seri Tualang Vocational High School has fostered an environment of open communication and active participation, promoting innovation and decision-making effectiveness. Research by Lang & Noor (2024) highlights the importance of democratic leadership and teacher integrity in creating a quality educational environment. At Seri Tualang Vocational High School, this approach has led to increased active participation and shared responsibility, improving educational quality. Overall, both transformational and democratic leadership styles in these schools demonstrate their potential to significantly improve educational outcomes by fostering collaboration, open communication, and empowerment within the school community.

4.2.2. Implications of school principal leadership styles in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Indera Shahbandar Pahang School (SISP) at Seri Bentong Vocational School and Seri Tualang Vocational School

This research examines the leadership styles of school principals and their impact on educational quality at Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP) Model Schools: Seri Bentong and Seri Tualang Vocational High School. The principal at Seri Bentong Vocational High School applies transformational leadership, while at Seri Tualang Vocational High School, the democratic leadership style predominates. These leadership styles significantly contribute to the improvement of educational quality in both schools. Transformational leadership at Seri Bentong Vocational High School focuses on empowering both teachers and students,

promoting academic achievement and holistic development. The mentorship program facilitates student collaboration, enhancing their understanding and social skills. Research by Manan et al. (2023) supports this approach, highlighting the positive effects of transformational leadership on teacher motivation and academic participation.

At Seri Bentong Vocational High School, transformational leadership is evident in innovative policies promoting collaboration among teachers and the development of a project-based curriculum. These strategies align with Bass & Riggio (2006) leadership theory, which posits that innovative leadership can shift individual perspectives on the importance of education. Project-based learning has boosted academic performance while preparing students for practical skills. Furthermore, professional development initiatives for teachers create an inclusive and inspiring learning environment, supporting a dynamic educational atmosphere.

On the other hand, Seri Tualang Vocational High School applies democratic leadership, fostering teacher and student involvement in decision-making, which enhances teaching and learning innovation. This approach increases teacher motivation and encourages a collaborative school environment. The democratic leadership style encourages teachers to guide and engage students in decision-making, according to Davis and Newstrom's theory. The school's student development programs emphasize leadership and social skills, preparing students for future challenges. The extracurricular activities and the Student and Teacher Council contribute to maintaining a balance between academics and skill development. This collaborative environment, fostered by democratic leadership, significantly enhances the educational quality at Seri Tualang Vocational High School.

4.2.3. The challenges of school leaders in implementing leadership styles in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Indera Shahbandar Pahang School (SISP) at Seri Bentong Vocational School and Seri Tualang Vocational School

This study examines the challenges faced by school principals in implementing leadership styles to improve educational quality at Sekolah Model Khas: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), which consists of two schools: Seri Bentong and Seri Tualang Vocational High School. At Seri Bentong Vocational High School, the challenges are categorized into internal and external factors. Internal challenges include limited resources, funding, and facilities, requiring the principal to make strategic decisions regarding resource allocation. Furthermore, changes in academic assessment systems demand rapid adaptation by the principal. Additionally, the principal faces difficulties in creating inclusive policies due to the diverse student backgrounds (Manan et al., 2023).

The principal at Seri Bentong Vocational High School adopts a transformational leadership style, as described by Leithwood (2005), which emphasizes a democratic approach. In this model, the principal acts not only as an authority but also involves all stakeholders in decision-making. This leadership style focuses on ideal influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation, which help manage resources and foster creativity among staff and teachers. The study by Manan et al. (2023) indicates that transformational leadership can enhance teacher motivation, leading to improvements in educational quality. External challenges include student diversity and the well-being of both students and teachers, which can be addressed through effective communication strategies and maintaining the mental well-being of all school members.

At Seri Tualang Vocational High School, the main challenges include a shortage of qualified teachers and student demographic diversity. The principal addresses these challenges by enhancing teacher capacity through training and workshops, as well as

developing inclusive and adaptive teaching strategies to meet student needs (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Democratic leadership, which encourages active participation from all stakeholders in decision-making, is a relevant approach to overcome these limitations (Goleman et al., 2002). This aligns with leadership principles that foster collaboration between teachers, staff, and the school community. The principal also manages student diversity by grouping classes into smaller groups, allowing for more individual attention. This approach aligns with differentiated instruction, aiming to meet the individual needs of students (Tomlinson, 2001). Through interactive teaching methods, the principal strives to increase student engagement and learning outcomes. Ultimately, the principal plays a crucial role in ensuring that innovative educational steps are implemented through effective coordination among school members (Prince, 2004).

In conclusion, the democratic leadership style implemented by the principal at Seri Tualang Vocational High School has provided a solid foundation for overcoming resource limitations. Through open communication, active participation, and collective decision-making, challenges can be addressed more effectively. Collaboration with external parties and the implementation of innovative strategies also strengthen the school's capacity to deliver quality education, despite resource constraints. This research highlights that with the right leadership strategies, every obstacle can become an opportunity to create more inclusive and effective education.

4.2.4. School principals' strategies for overcoming challenges in implementing leadership styles in improving the quality of education in Special Model Schools: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP) at Seri Bentong and Seri Tualang Vocational High School

This study examines the leadership strategies implemented by the principal of Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP) at Seri Bentong and Seri Tualang Vocational High School to enhance educational quality. In Seri Bentong Vocational High School, the research highlights the importance of resource optimization and collaboration as key strategies to improve teaching and learning effectiveness. This approach aligns with transformational leadership theory, where the leader acts as a role model who inspires the school community to achieve common goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By reorganizing and efficiently allocating resources, SISP successfully enhanced the educational infrastructure and strengthened collaboration among school staff and external stakeholders.

The inclusive approach adopted by the principal at SISP aims to enhance student well-being by providing opportunities for students to participate in decision-making processes, both academically and extracurricularly. This strategy reflects the Individualized Consideration dimension of transformational leadership, which addresses individual needs and helps students reach their full potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Empowering students through active participation fosters leadership development among them, as well as boosting their academic motivation and success. Moreover, the principal emphasizes the importance of collaborative relationships between students and staff, aligning with Inspirational Motivation, where leaders create a supportive environment to motivate the entire school community to contribute to achieving shared goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Meanwhile, at Seri Tualang Vocational High School, the principal implemented a strategic plan focusing on diversity and external collaboration to improve teaching and learning quality. This plan incorporates an inclusive approach that considers the ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity of students, integrating contributions from various stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents. This approach is consistent with democratic leadership theory, where decision-making is participatory, enabling quality

education through solid collaboration (Goleman et al., 2002). By managing diversity effectively, SISP at Seri Tualang Vocational High School fostered a learning environment that supported all students, while collaboration with the local community and alumni, such as training and mentoring, enriched the educational experience and prepared students for the workforce. This approach enhanced tolerance, educational quality, and global community readiness (Lang & Noor, 2024).

4.3. Key Findings of the Research

This study investigates the impact of transformational and democratic leadership styles implemented by the principal at Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP) on educational quality improvement. The transformational leadership style, which includes idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, has been effective in motivating both teachers and students to contribute maximally to learning (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The principal often holds regular meetings to discuss the school's vision and goals, fostering a sense of involvement and motivation among teachers, which aligns with Judge et al. (2004) findings that inspirational motivation enhances commitment and performance.

Additionally, the democratic leadership style at SISP fosters an inclusive and collaborative environment, as all school members are involved in decision-making. Democratic leadership, emphasizing active participation, enhances a sense of ownership and shared responsibility (Yukl et al., 2013). The principal provides opportunities for teachers and students to participate in shaping school policies, which in turn improves their motivation and performance. Somech (2005) supports this, stating that participation in decision-making improves organizational effectiveness. Data triangulation through interviews, observations, and document analysis confirms these findings, revealing that teachers feel more valued and empowered by their involvement in decision-making processes.

The study also highlights the differences between transformational and democratic leadership styles. Transformational leadership focuses on individual inspiration and motivation to achieve collective goals, while democratic leadership emphasizes collective participation in decision-making. The principal at SISP serves as a role model (Bass & Riggio, 2006), providing personal attention and support to teachers and students, and encouraging creativity in teaching methods (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). This approach has helped foster a sustainable learning culture and increased teacher loyalty and job satisfaction. Furthermore, democratic leadership at SISP prioritizes active participation, inclusivity, collaboration, and transparency, which have led to increased engagement in the learning process, as discussed by Sutanto (2017) and Barth (1990). This approach aligns with Northouse (2021) emphasis on collaboration in leadership.

4.4. Strategy Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the principal at Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP) faces several challenges in implementing leadership styles aimed at improving the quality of education, such as limited resources, changes in the assessment system, and the well-being of both teachers and students. The researcher recommends that the school establish partnerships with local communities, industries, and alumni to obtain additional support in the form of funding and facilities. Furthermore, the development of an adaptive and flexible assessment system, involving teachers in the design process and providing intensive training, can help ensure more effective implementation. A holistic well-being program, including yoga, meditation, and physical activities, is also suggested to support the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of both teachers and students.

The researcher also proposed strategies for addressing challenges within the democratic leadership style, including the shortage of qualified teachers and student diversity. Recommendations include offering incentives to qualified teachers through competitive salaries and professional development opportunities, as well as partnerships with universities for internship programs. To address student diversity, inclusive strategies such as cultural sensitivity training and the development of curricula that reflect ethnic and cultural diversity are crucial. The formation of support and mentorship groups between teachers and students could also help create a more inclusive environment. With a comprehensive approach, the principal can overcome existing challenges and improve the quality of education at SISP.

4.5. Research Novelty

This study presents several significant innovations compared to previous research. First, it focuses on the Model Special Schools, of which there are only 11 in Malaysia, integrating primary and secondary education under a single administration—a context that has been underexplore. Second, this study integrates Hersey and Blanchard's leadership style theory with Leithwood's leadership theory, providing a new and more comprehensive perspective on the implementation of leadership styles in the Malaysian educational context. The qualitative methodological approach with a case study design also offers a more holistic and in-depth analysis of participants' real-life experiences at Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), differing from the quantitative approaches more commonly used in previous research.

Additionally, this study explores the challenges faced by school principals in implementing leadership styles and the strategies employed to overcome these challenges, offering practical, applicable insights. Based on current empirical data obtained through interviews, observations, and document analysis, this study ensures the relevance and accuracy of its findings to the current situation at SISP. It is also closely aligned with Malaysia's national education policy, contributing to governmental policies that may assist policymakers in formulating more effective strategies. With these innovations, this study not only enriches the theoretical understanding of educational leadership but also provides practical contributions for the management of Model Special Schools in Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

Based on qualitative research conducted at the Sekolah Model Khas Pahang (SISP), namely Seri Bentong and Seri Tualang Vocational High School, the leadership styles implemented by the school principals in both schools revealed significant differences. At Seri Bentong Vocational High School, the principal adopts a transformational leadership style that focuses on long-term vision and collective commitment, involving teachers and staff in strategic decision-making, which successfully increased teacher motivation and the quality of education. Meanwhile, at Seri Tualang Vocational High School, a democratic leadership style is applied, emphasizing active participation and collaboration between teachers, students, and parents, creating a harmonious and innovative work environment, which positively impacts engagement and academic achievement.

These two leadership styles also have distinct impacts on the quality of education in the respective schools. At Seri Bentong Vocational High School, transformational leadership encourages teachers and students to achieve high performance through empowerment and collaboration, reflected in improved academic performance and innovation. On the other hand, SMK Seri Tualang, with its democratic leadership style, successfully enhances integration and shared responsibility among the school community through active participation in decision-making and the development of social skills. Despite both schools

facing challenges in implementing leadership styles, including resource limitations and socioeconomic differences among students, the strategies employed by the principals, such as managing diversity and collaborating with the local community, have successfully addressed these challenges and enhanced the overall quality of education.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be considered regarding the leadership styles of the principals at Special Model School: Sekolah Indera Shahbandar Pahang (SISP), Malaysia. First, the principals are encouraged to improve and enhance school programs related to educational quality so that these model schools can be on par with high-performing schools such as SBP and MRSM. Second, further research on leadership in Sekolah Model Khas is recommended to attract more researchers to explore and understand the existence of these model schools, of which there are only 11 in Malaysia.

6. References

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