School Administrators' Leadership Practice: A Case Study Related to a New Curriculum Implementation in Malaysia

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Abstract

This article used a qualitative case study approach to explore the school administrators' leadership practice in curriculum implementation of Tahfiz Model Ulul Albab (TMUA) in Malaysia. The paper also aims to identify problem arise due to its implementation as well as administrators' strategy in tackling the issue. The case study was conducted in a National Secondary Religious School executing the curriculum involving 3 participants, namely the Principal, Senior Assistant 1 and TMUA's Coordinator. Besides, semi-structured interview, data were collected also by observation and document analysis. The findings indicate several school administrators' leadership elements under the scope of curriculum implementation, which are 'goal setting', 'instructional management', 'leadership control and influence', 'motivation', 'teacher's development', 'tolerance, communication and interpersonal relationships', 'sharing responsibilities and leadership', 'foster understanding', 'promote religious values', 'school ambience', 'networking', 'financial management' and 'innovation'. Challenges in leading the curriculum implementation comprises of three categories, namely 'system and technical', 'teachers' disciplinary problem', 'students' performance', 'parents related issue' and 'financial constraint'. This research illustrates the discovery of new leadership dimensions and indicates that the school administrators are practicing more than a single leadership style. This paper also suggests that a proper planning by the policy maker as well as effective administration is necessary in order to ensure the success of the curriculum implementation.

Keywords: School Administrators' Leadership, Challenges In Curriculum Implementation, Curriculum Implementation, Tahfiz Model Ulul Albab

Introduction and the Curriculum Context

The Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) has started to give attention in expanding and enhancing the religious education in Malaysia in accordance to the in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). This concern was raised to deliver high-quality religious education by providing students with the knowledge and skills

to succeed in the labour market while upholding strong Islamic values and beliefs. Previously, the elements of secularism and dualism that took practiced in education system before have caused the imbalance of the education and the knowledge expansion itself (Nawi, 2012). This has resulted in segregation and gap between academic and spiritual aspects in education (Rashed & Tamuri, 2015). Consequently, it has become one of the factor in moral and social impairment of Malaysia's younger generation, especially Muslim youth. In another word, the aspect of moral, personality, attitude, religion and belief is not well taken care of. This lack and gap should be filled to fulfil Malaysia's National Education Philosophy: *"Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious based on a firm belief in and devotion to God."*

Therefore, a call towards integration between acquired knowledge (known as *aqli*) and spiritual knowledge obtained through revelation (known as *naqli*) is needed (Tafsir, 1992; Nawi, 2015). As the answer to this issue, a new integrated curriculum was introduced by combining both academic and religious education together. The curriculum is known as 'Tahfiz Model Ulul Albab' (will be then refers as TMUA). This curriculum or better known as 'Ulul Albab' was initiated in 1999 by Dato' Seri Idris Jusoh, Malaysia's current Minister of Higher Education to integrate the current education system at that time. The curriculum was implemented in Imtiaz Terengganu (a secondary school under the Terengganu State Foundation) since 1999 and was further implemented then in MARA Junior Science College (known as MRSM which governed by MARA, a government agency belongs under the Ministry of Rural and National Development) in 2009. The success of this curriculum in producing students with well-balanced education in both academic and religious matters has attracted the ministry to further implement this curriculum in the National Religious Secondary School (NRSS). It was implemented by stages beginning 2014 to selected National Religious Secondary School nationwide. This curriculum consists of three elements, which are Quranic, Encyclopaedic and Ijtihadik. Quranic refers to the activity of memorizing the Holy Quran. Encyclopaedic is a component in which students are taught an additional foreign language (besides English and Arabic) along with exposure to other knowledge in various discipline especially Sciences and Technology. The last component is Ijtihadic, that aims to prepare students with the ability in problem solving, maximizing capabilities in high order thinking, creative and innovative values. This curriculum is implemented along with National Curriculum which is the standard curriculum used by all national schools as well as some private schools in Malaysia. Ulul Albab implemented in these three type of schools (Imtiaz, MRSM and National Religious Secondary School) have some differences in term of practice and timetable as they were governed by different organization. This study focuses on the National Religious Secondary School (NRSS) which is governed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia.

School Leadership and Education Transformation
The achievement and success of a school is strongly influenced by school leadership (Pihie & Sadeghi, 2012). This is crucial especially in facing the education or curriculum changes. A dynamic and courageous leadership is needed to steer its organization in achieving successful education transformation (Aziz, Foo, Asimiran, & Hassan, 2014). Thus, school leaders are responsible in making the goals came true. According to the Malaysia's Curriculum

Development Division (2001), principals and principals assistant carry the responsibility as curriculum leaders, curriculum monitor and curriculum evaluator. School leaders plays vital and crucial role in determining the effectiveness of the curriculum that was executed (Middlewood & Burton, 2001). Hence, school administrators especially principals as instructional leaders need to lead the school in the implementation of the curriculum as well as creating an effective learning environment that promotes the cultivation of learning culture (Inspectorate of Schools, 2010).

This new curriculum was implemented in three recent years. Within this period, the ability and capability of school administrators were put into test. Based on previous research related to this curriculum context done by Manaf, Azman, Fadzilah, and Alias (2014) and Samsuiman, Benjaman, and Arifin (2014) in MARA Junior Science College, there are some problems associated to student learning outcomes and the aspect of monitoring in term of student's personality development. These findings show the issues emerged in early implementation of the curriculum and indicate the possible challenges that the school administrators encounter.

This indicates some possible challenges and issues that arise during the implementation of the program. In addition, there has been no study to be found on the implementation of Ulul Albab program in government's school (National Religious Secondary School) as well as limited research discussing about school leadership in the context related to the implementation of this new curriculum in the context of NRSS.

The purpose of this research is to explore the school administrators' leadership in curriculum implementation of TMUA. This study also aims to shed some light on the issues related to the implementation of this curriculum and the problems face by the administrators as well as their strategies in addressing them.

This article focuses on four questions pertaining the leadership practice in the context of new curriculum implementation
  i. What is the new role of school administrators in this new curriculum implementation?
  ii. How leadership is practiced by school administrators?
  iii. What are the challenges faced by school administrators in this new curriculum implementation?
  iv. What is the school administrators' approach to address the challenges?

Methodological Approach
This study used deductive theoretical approach. It was framed by the combination of three leadership theories, namely instructional leadership, transformasional leadership and distributed leadership. The models adopted for this study are as follows:
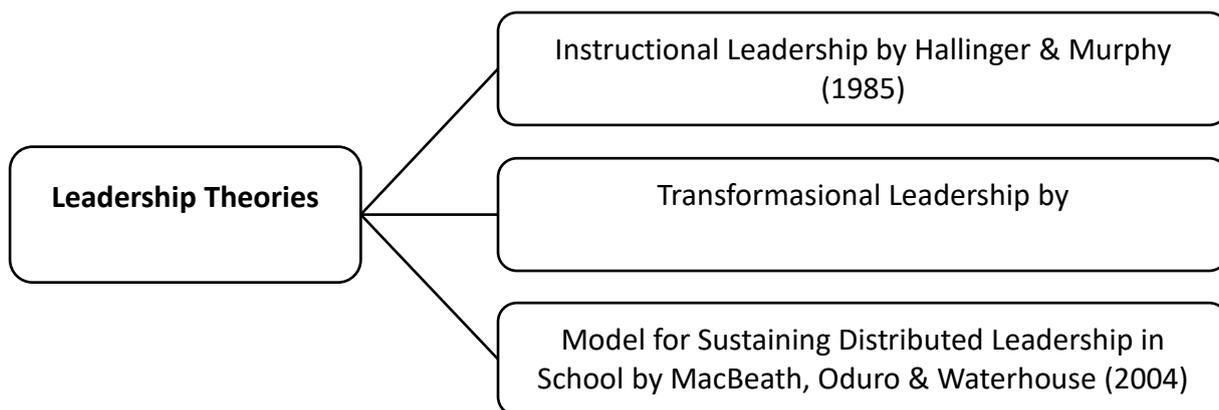
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┌─────────────────────────┐          ┌────────────────────────────────────┐
│                         │          │ Instructional Leadership by Hallinger│
│                         │          │      & Murphy (1985)                 │
│                         │          └────────────────────────────────────┘
│  Leadership Theories    │          ┌────────────────────────────────────┐
│                         │          │ Transformasional Leadership by       │
│                         │          └────────────────────────────────────┘
└─────────────────────────┘          ┌────────────────────────────────────┐
                                      │ Model for Sustaining Distributed     │
                                      │ Leadership in School by MacBeath,    │
                                      │ Oduro & Waterhouse (2004)            │
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Figure 1: Three Leadership Theories

These three leadership models were chosen to better understand the school leadership. Instructional leadership was chosen to explain the function of administrators in the aspects of teaching and learning management. With this model, the curriculum management aspect can be understood more clearly. Distributed leadership is also taken into consideration to view leadership from the perspective of shared leadership and empowerment of teachers. An organization that works well is an organization that utilizes its human resources well. Thus, transformational leadership was also chosen as it was evidently successful in assisting principals and schools in making changes (Balyer, 2012; McCarly, Peters, & Decman, 2016). These theories are combined and integrated together in formulating the conceptual framework of this study. These theories are summarized in the table below.

Table 1:

The Integration of Three Leadership Theories

Instructional Leadership	Transformasional Leadership	Distributed Leadership	Leadership Elements
• Framing school goals • Communicating school goals	• Idealized influence • Inspirational motivation		Goal setting
• Supervising and evaluating instruction • Coordinating curriculum • Monitoring student progress • Protecting instructional time • Enforcing academic standards			Instructional management
• Maintaining high visibility	• Idealized influence	• Formally and strategically assign leadership	Leadership control and influence

		responsibilities to capable individuals • Control and manage individual performance	
• Providing incentives for teachers • Providing incentives for students	• Inspirational motivation	• Motivate people to initiate leadership • Provide material help • Make yourself accessible	Motivation
• Promoting professional development	• Intellectual stimulation	• Create a mutual learning culture • Facilitate individual leadership performance • Provide opportunity for continuous professional development	Teacher's development
	• Individualized consideration	• Respect views of all • Listen • Allow sufficient freedom for people to initiate and implement • Ensure security	Tolerance, communication and interpersonal relationships
		• Identify leadership potential in people • Train people for leadership • Be prepared to stand back • Peer/self-evaluation	Sharing responsibilities and leadership

The elements of leadership integrated through the models are:
  i. Goal setting
  ii. Instructional management
  iii. Leadership control and influence
  iv. Motivation
  v. Teacher's development
  vi. Tolerance, communication and interpersonal relationships
  vii. Sharing responsibilities and leadership

These elements were used as the notion in designing the interview question – to understand how these leadership components are being exercised by the school administrators. Although

this study uses three leadership models, it will not be strictly based on these three models solely. This is because in qualitative studies, data will appear naturally to form a theme or character for the phenomenon studied (Silverman, 2006). Hence, the diversity of dimensions or perspectives in an issue or aspect is likely to occur (Harding, 2013). These theories are put into a table together to be compared.

This study used a single case study approach. Qualitative case study offers a descriptive and intensive approach in discussing and understanding the research in bounded context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this article, the context discuses about the leadership practice in a National Religious Secondary School (NRSS) related to a new curriculum implementation. Data collection was done through semi-structured interview, non-participant observation and data analysis. This research utilizes purposive sampling. The selected participants were the Principal, Principal Assistant 1 and TMUA Coordinator. The data gathered was analysed and categorized by codes that derived from the emerging themes.

Findings
New Role of School Administrators
There are some new leadership roles hold by school administrators that comes along with the new curriculum. The role involved are:
   i.   understanding
   ii. instructional restructured
   iii. distributing leadership roles

According to the school principal, the case school is one of the earliest selected schools to implement the TMUA curriculum. Hence, the first task is to understand the newly introduced curriculum. The understanding of the implementation took him about a year. The understanding of the curriculum implementation was said to be taken time as its implementation involves a total change of the school timetable along with the introduction of new subjects, different ways of assessment and new teachers appointed. This associated with another responsibility related to the instructional restructured.

The revision of instructional time is needed to be plan by the school administrators, namely the Principal Assistant 1. She said that the school period changed from 7.40 am till 4.20 pm to 6:30 am till 9.30 pm. The timetable prepared before the implementation has been totally reshuffle to allow the new subjects to be embedded. In addition to timetables, administrators are responsible in distributing the modules that have been provided by the Curriculum Development Division to the tahfiz teachers. In the first year of implementation, a total of 15 new teachers were appointed in this school to teach the Quranic aspects. Not only that, the duty roster for the teachers is arranged especially for the class that involves the night time, from 7 to 9.30 pm.

Another responsibility arise is to delegate leadership and administrative role to a specific TMUA's teachers. When this new curriculum is introduced at school, a tahfiz teacher (teaching students to memorize Quran – the core aspect of the new curriculum) has been appointed to hold the post as the coordinator. The coordinator joining the school in the first year of the implementation of the program and he was further entrusted as the TMUA Coordinator cum the Head of TMUA Leadership Board at the school. According to him, he is responsible for

coordinating anything related to TMUA. Everything involving this program will be handed over to him. In addition, he also serves as an advisor to the Principal in management area related to this curriculum. None of the TMUA's teachers in this school have teaching experience in this case school before the curriculum was introduced. All TMUA's teachers were recently posted at the school when the program was first implemented. Hence, no teachers including Principals has experience nor knowledge in the field of Quranic. As such, the TMUA Coordinator is appointed and has significant responsibilities in ensuring that the requirements and objectives of the curriculum implementation are met.

Leadership Elements & Practice by School Administrators

This part will answer the question of 'how does leadership exercised?' based on the notion of the integrated leadership models namely 'goal setting', 'instructional management', 'leadership control and influence', 'motivation', 'teacher's development', 'tolerance, communication and interpersonal relationships' and 'sharing responsibilities and leadership'. The article aim to see how does this aspect practiced, occurred or absence in the school administrators' leadership. Throughout the study, there are some new recurring aspects related to leadership and administrative duty that were highlighted by the participant. These emerging elements are:

    i. Foster understanding
    ii. Promote Islamic values
    iii. School ambience
    iv. Networking
    v. Financial management
    vi. Innovation

Some of this element are interrelated with one another. A visual model of the leadership elements is shown below.
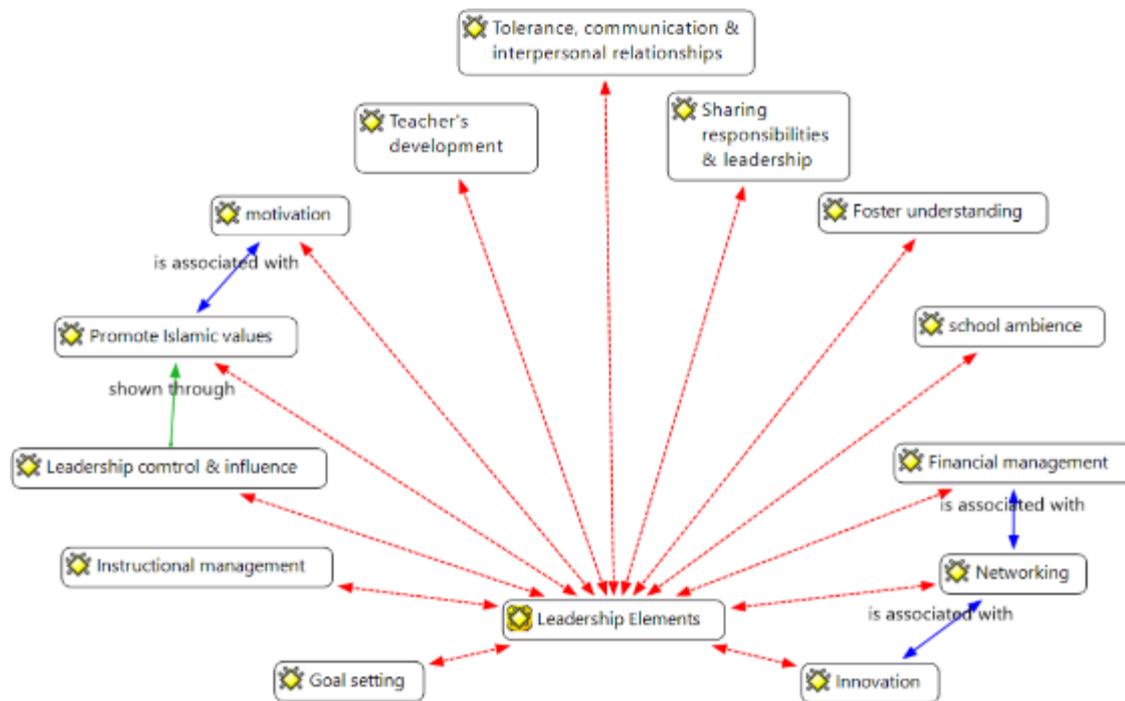
Figure 2: Visual Model of the Leadership Elements

These elements and how it was practiced will be discussed in the following table. Notes that there are some sub-elements under a single leadership element.

Table 2:
Leadership Elements and Descriptions of the Practice by School Administrators

Elements	Descriptions
Goal setting	• Creating goal and Expected Target Result (ETR) for the new curriculum. • Setting up the new target based on mainstream benchmark (school achievement before the implementation of TMUA). • Involving teachers in setting the target.
Instructional management	**Instructional and timetable adjustment** • Replanning the school timetable. The school experienced a total reshuffle in term of school schedule (from 6.30 am to 9.30 pm). • Arranging specific duty roster for tahfiz teachers.
	Monitoring and supervision • The principal stays in a staff quarter located in school compound and conduct the supervision for early morning session (beginning 6.30 am) and night classes (7.30 to 9.30 pm). • Principal delegates teacher's monitoring and evaluating task to other school administrators – Principal Assistants and TMUA's Leadership Board.

	Student's achievement • Monitoring student's progress through formative and summative assessment. • Establish intensive classes and programs for student that left behind of the targeted achievement or learning outcome.
	Student's personality development • Plan, create and implement specific program to promotes good personality among student. • Assigning a special teacher board to lead the assessment of student's attitude, moral and personality.
Leadership control and influence	• Giving preach and promoting Islamic values to teachers. • Being the exemplar to the teachers by doing right thing first.
Motivation	**Teachers' motivation** • Provide motivation program for teachers during training and special meeting. • Emphasizing the importance of sincerity in work. • Persuade and encourage less motivated teacher during personal meetings.
	Students' motivation • Organize motivational program and academic visit for student. • Monthly recognition award program for outstanding students.
Teacher's development	• Interim teachers for Ulul Albab program have no background in education and teaching area. The administrators provide in-house training and specific meeting for these teachers at least once a month. • The Coordinator of TMUA conduct retreat program specifically for TMUA's teachers.
Tolerance, communication and interpersonal relationships	• Verbal communication through meeting and the use of communication application. • Prefer personal meeting with specific teacher to give advice. • Discussion and persuasion is used for teachers with problem. • Do not tolerate with teacher's disciplinary problem to prevent disoriented instructional implementation.
Sharing responsibilities and leadership	• Establishing the TMUA Leadership Board and appointing a Coordinator to coordinate and manage TMUA. • The Principal lets the TMUA Leadership Board to lead the TMUA's teacher evaluation and conducting programme for teachers. • Giving space and opportunity for teachers to express their views, actions or initiatives. • Giving turn to other teacher to lead or take part in a certain activities or program. • Teachers are given chance to propose an idea or paperwork involving any school's activity. The administrators will evaluate the proposal and provide them with incentive and fund.

Foster understanding	• All school administrators are required to understand the concept introduced, the additional subjects that comes along with the new curriculum and the new timetable needed in the implementation of TMUA. • Give understanding to teachers especially mainstream subjects' teachers. • Provide briefing session to parents about the new curriculum.
Promote Islamic values	• Promoting the awareness, sincerity, Islamic values and remembrance of God to the teachers in doing their job. • This element is related to 'leadership influence' and 'motivation'.
School ambience	• Maintaining and preserving a minimum social interaction between male and female students by establishing specific rules related to the school compound and building. • Involving all school members including the non-academic staff in religious programme. • Setting up specific dress code for all teachers.
Networking, Financial management and innovation	• Administrators perform a very good connection with stakeholders such as parents and other parties including school alumni and other TMUA's school. • Raise fund and financial assistance through Parent-Teachers Community and school alumni. • Utilise the expertise and skills through the networking to create innovation – creating an 'e-hafazan application' to allow parents to check for their children's performance. • Cooperate with other TMUA's implementing schools to create benchmark and sharing the strengths of each school.

Issues Faced by School Administrators and Their Solution

Based on the findings of the study, issues and challenges in the implementation of the curriculum are categorized into several dimensions, namely 'system and technical issues', 'teachers' disciplinary problems', and 'student performance issues'. These issues will be described and the administrators' approach and strategy in addressing them will also be discussed.

Table 3:

Issues and School Administrators' Strategy in Curriculum Implementation

Issues	Description	Strategy & Solution
System and Technical	• This curriculum has been planned to be implemented on 2015. However, some confusion and technical problems have led to this curriculum being announced its implementation in 2014. At that time, the school has already selected their new Form 1 students for the school year of 2014. The announcement of the early implementation was informed later.	• Giving two weeks of trial period for students and parents to try the new curriculum. • Allowing parents and student to transfer to other school for students that unable to proceed and adapt with new curriculum especially the Al-Quran memorization.
	• Textbooks and modules for related subjects are still not ready to be provided during the first year of the implementation. • The guides for the implementation of the TMUA module are more focused on Quranic aspects and no specific scope given for other two aspects – Encyclopaedic and Ijtihadik.	• Continue the implementation based on administrators' and teachers' understanding and interpretation. • Giving appropriate suggestion to policy maker.
Teachers Disciplinary Problem	• Administrators were having difficulties with teachers' compliance towards the instructional time especially during early morning and night session.	• Being firm and non-tolerant for teachers' discipline problem and instructional-time related issues. • Conducting religious program to create awareness among teachers.
Students Performance	• The first cohort did not undergo any specific test or screening to check their capability in Al-Quran memorization as well as in academic and Islamic study altogether. More than 30% of students fail to achieve academic target and learning outcome.	• Organize a variety of special programs to improve students' achievement. • Student intake for the next cohort has been screened, interviewed and tested.
Parents Related Issue	• Lack of understanding among some parents regarding the curriculum implementation. TMUA's students are required to stay in dormitory and specific instructional program was arranged on weekend. Some parents insisted in taking their child home	• Programs involving schools and parents and parents were organized. • Initiative in conducting counselling programs and

	resulting them being miss out in programs organized by the school.	parenting talks delivers by good parents themselves. • Networking, collaboration and support was met through Parent Support Group.
Financial Constraint	• Inadequate aid of per capita grant (PCG) to cover the expenses of TMUA's implementation involving swimming, horse riding and archery.	• Good connection and networks between school and parents is the administrators' strategy in getting support and funding.

Discussion

The findings suggest that administrators have various role and aspects of leadership. There are also several new aspects emerged throughout the study such as to foster understanding, promoting religious values, school ambience and networking as well as other aspect such as financial management and innovation. These elements were not found or specifically stated in the leadership models discussed. In addition, research findings also show that administrators should be critical to the issues that occur in the implementation of the curriculum. Implementation of the new curriculum is not an easy matter. Hence, administrators need to solve problems proactively and innovatively. The discovery of these dimensions illustrates that school administrators are now not only practicing a single style of leadership.

This study shows that distributive leadership is a prominent factor in the leadership of the school administrators. The results show that TMUA Coordinators are responsible administrators in setting certain requirements for the implementation of the TMUA curriculum. He also serves as an advisor to the principal for the implementation of this curriculum. This finding implies that leadership in reforming the curriculum is not dominated by principals. This illustrates that school leadership has changed towards a distributive and collaborative leadership that involves the importance of the role of other administrators. According to Rotherham and Willingham (2009), the new era of education requires collaborative, creative and innovative practices in leading the school to address the challenges of the millennium. In addition, the study also found that this collaboration aspect was also extended to collaboration through networking with other entities and stakeholders such as parents, alumni and other schools.

This study also implies that the implementation of a new curriculum requires time to be understood by the administrators as well as the school community. Understanding the curriculum is important to ensure that the implementation is in good order. Hence, the implementation of a new curriculum is a big thing that requires careful preparation and planning. Information on its implementation should be clearly communicated to the school to prevent any problem nor confusion to occur. The findings of previous studies on the curriculum changes found that there was a problem with teachers confusion on new concepts and curriculum as well as the lack of teaching and learning materials (Solumuthu, 2014;

Abdullah, Noh, Mansor, Hashim, & Wong, 2015; Tan & Lee, 2015; Zakaria, Ahmad, & Awang, 2015).

The planners and policymakers need to provide a meticulous strategy, plan and preparation before enforcing the curriculum into the school. The curriculum development should be thoroughly prepared in terms of content, syllabus and teaching materials before the implementation of the curriculum. If these aspects are not fully equipped before the execution phase, the implementation of the curriculum will be done by the school based on its own interpretation and understanding without a clear guidance. In addition, the content of subjects as well as textbooks and reference materials should be prepared and provided to teachers as preparations prior to implementation. Teachers are need to be provided with a specific development program for the new curriculum to allow them in developing the pedagogical knowledge and skills necessary to teach the curriculum. Not only that, a specific program to disseminate understanding towards the education change should be conducted among involving stakeholders as well as parents in a formal manner to ensure their understanding to what the transformation is about.

Conclusion
The findings of this study is able to present the elements of educational leadership within the context of curriculum implementation. There are some new emerging aspects of leadership that should be highlighted such as 'foster understanding, 'promoting religious values' and 'networking'. These elements were not much discussed in previous leadership studies. This study offers new perspective on leadership practiced in curriculum execution. Implementation of education transformation, changes and new curriculum requires time to be understood by administrators as well as school members. Therefore, it should not be taken frivolously especially by the policy maker and school administrators. The explanation and understanding on an educational change should be disseminate to all involving stakeholder to establish a great insight among everyone involved. This way, an effective implementation could be executed in actualizing the transformation that were wished for.

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