Servant, Democratic, and Transformational Leadership Styles: Implications on Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia

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Abstract: **The purpose of this conceptual paper was to present the implications of three leadership styles on higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. Relevant articles were downloaded from JSTOR, Google Scholar, Emerald, and ERIC, focusing mostly on peer-reviewed papers published between 2020 and 2024. Further, a thematic analysis was used to categorize the literature by leadership styles, including servant, democratic, and transformational. Secondary findings indicated that these leadership styles tend to significantly shape institutional culture, faculty morale, and student outcomes, with context-specific implications on HEIs in Malaysia.**

Keywords: **democratic, higher educational institutions (HEIs), leadership styles, Malaysia, servant, transformational.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership has emerged as a pivotal factor in improving higher educational outcomes in Malaysia, with effective leadership increasingly being recognized as fundamental for building positive and innovative higher educational environments to achieve quality education in line with SDG 4 Quality Education. Effective leadership is particularly critical in achieving SDG 4, as it directly impacts the management of resources, overall organizational culture, and quality of education (Gaol, 2021). A significant body of research demonstrates that effective leaders help create academic environments where academics can thrive, and are empowered, to deliver quality learning experiences (Pont, 2020).

In the face of global shifts, educational leaders in Malaysia today are tasked with guiding their institutions through ever-changing conditions by employing innovative strategies that encourage change and resilience (Akbari *et al*., 2024; Black, 2015). Leaders at Malaysian higher educational institutions (HEIs) need to adopt diverse approaches to address various issues and complexities faced by HEIs of varying types and sizes, from prominent research universities to smaller, teaching-focused colleges. They need to acknowledge that providing quality education demands effective leadership practices that are both strategic and collaborative. By involving faculty members in decision-making and fostering a shared sense of purpose and direction, they can create a more cohesive and engaged team that further enhance institutional performance and student outcomes (Kiral, 2020).

At the core of effective educational leadership is the ability to empower faculty, while recognizing their vital role in the educational ecosystem (Barry *et al.*, 2010). Leaders of Malaysian HEIs need to support academics in maximizing their impact within and out of campus, thus extending their influence to inspire the community, while bringing favorable change throughout the institution (Suyanto *et al*., 2022). Further, empowered academics are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and satisfied with their roles, which in turn, benefits student learning (Ismail, 2017). Additionally, they should

be aware of the significance of their actions and potential impact on both the institution and its stakeholders, including students, parents, and the broader community (Fernandez, 2023).

In Malaysia, HEIs often face unique challenges in leadership, which have significant implications on educational quality. The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) has consistently strived to ensure that every educational institution is supported by competent leadership, regardless of its location or stage of development. Despite these efforts, many educational leaders encounter various obstacles that hinder their ability to manage resources effectively and lead teams successfully (Fajar & Alias, 2020). Common barriers include low levels of organizational commitment, inadequate staff-management efficacy, and general weaknesses in leadership competencies, which erode leaders' confidence and capability to make impactful decisions (Suhaili *et al*., 2020; Sulaiman *et al*., 2017).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Purpose

The purpose of this conceptual paper was to present the implications of three leadership styles on higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. Relevant articles were downloaded from JSTOR, Google Scholar, Emerald, and ERIC, focusing mostly on peer-reviewed papers published between 2020 and 2024. Further, a thematic analysis was used to categorize the literature by leadership styles, including servant, transformational, and democratic. A systematic literature review was conducted to gain greater insight into the challenges faced by Malaysian educational leaders and to seek potential solutions that could scaffold them in overcoming these challenges.

B. Significance

The significance of this paper lies in its potential to deepen our understanding of educational leadership in Malaysia, while producing evidence-based implications for enhancing leadership effectiveness. As the Malaysian educational sector continues to evolve, particularly in response to local and global challenges, understanding and refining leadership styles is crucial to ensuring that HEIs remain adaptable and change-capable to meet students' needs. Effective leadership not only enhances the internal performance of HEIs, but also contributes to the broader objective of educational excellence to support Malaysia's ongoing efforts to provide quality education for all students.

III. SERVANT LEADERSHIP

A. Background

The concept of servant leadership was introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1977, who defined it as a leadership style characterized by the desire to serve others naturally, resulting in a commitment to fulfilling the needs of others (Mustam & Najam, 2020). Servant leaders are driven not by authority, but by their fundamental urge to support and empower staff. This perspective on leadership, which focuses on service to others and organizational responsibility for societal improvement, aligns with a growing demand among Malaysian HEIs for leadership models that counteract the perception of self-serving corporate leadership (Pawar *et al*., 2020).

Servant leadership enables Malaysian educational leaders to serve without expecting anything in return, while providing the best opportunities to staff (Setiawan & Irwanto, 2020). This philosophy resonates in today's organizational climate as it prioritizes the growth and development of staff, thus nurturing a positive psychological environment that benefits both individuals and the institution. As Setiawan and Irwanto (2020) highlighted, the last decade has seen a resurgence of interest in servant leadership, emphasizing its relevance as a staff-centric leadership style that actively promotes employees' wellbeing and growth.

B. Implications of servant leadership

Servant leadership is particularly well-suited for Malaysian HEIs, where leaders need to prioritize serving the needs of students, staff, and stakeholders. By focusing on others' wellbeing and development, servant leaders are able to foster a supportive and collaborative environment that enhances personal growth and the institution's overall success. This approach often includes prioritizing professional development for staff and creating student-centered policies (Pawar *et al*., 2020). For instance, deans may regularly consult the staff about their challenges and issues, while ensuring that they

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have access to essential resources and training, which are actions that exemplify the principles of servant leadership that contribute to a nurturing educational environment.

Servant leadership, which emphasizes the well-being and development of others, has been shown to significantly improve staff morale and job satisfaction. This leadership style enables Malaysian educational leaders to serve the needs of staff by offering support, while ensuring that they feel valued (Setiawan & Irwanto, 2020). When staff perceive their leaders as attentive to their needs, they are more likely to report higher levels of job satisfaction, as they experience both personal and professional growth in a supportive environment (Mustamil & Najam, 2020). Servant leadership also tends to increase staff retention, as academics who feel nurtured and supported are more likely to remain committed to their roles (Nordin *et al*., 2020). By focusing on the development of staff and fostering a sense of community, servant leaders contribute to a more cohesive and productive institutional culture.

Lastly, servant leadership, which emphasizes the prioritization of others' needs over the leader's personal ambitions, is particularly advantageous for Malaysian PEIs, where nurturing students' and staff's holistic development is critical. By fostering a culture of empathy and support, servant leaders can create an environment that prioritizes student welfare and professional growth for staff. In Malaysia, where educational disparities often exist across urban and rural areas, servant leadership can support efforts to enhance equitable access to quality education (Adams, 2022).

IV. DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

A. Background

Democratic leadership, introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1939, emphasizes that leadership should be based on collaboration and shared decision-making (Nordin *et al*., 2020). Malaysian educational leaders who adopt this leadership style often encourage open communication and collective decision-making by actively involving staff that fosters a sense of camaraderie, while balancing praise with constructive criticism. They not only value team members' input and perspectives, but they also increase staff commitment to organizational goals by reinforcing shared responsibility for outcomes (Muguna *et al*., 2022).

Democratic leadership, which encourages inclusive decision-making and shared responsibilities, has been associated with positive student performance. This approach allows for collaboration between school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders, including students, to create a supportive learning environment (Azar *et al*., 2020). In Malaysia, schools where democratic leadership is practiced often report higher levels of teacher engagement, which leads to more effective teaching methods that benefit students. Research indicates that democratic leadership tends to improve staff motivation, which can enhance students' academic engagement and performance (Azar *et al*., 2020).

B. Implications of democratic leadership

Malaysian leaders who practice democratic leadership tend to be receptive to the views and constructive criticisms of their team; thus, they are able to leverage the insights of multiple stakeholders to make holistic, informed decisions. According to Nordin *et al*. (2020), democratic leadership enables Malaysian educational leaders to make decisions that prioritize the organization's collective success, rather than focusing on personal success. By involving staff in goal-setting and problem-solving, they encourage a collaborative environment where everyone feels invested in achieving shared objectives.

Further, democratic leadership is particularly relevant among Malaysian HEIs, where involving staff in decision-making can yield a stronger sense of ownership, motivation, and engagement. Malaysian educational leaders who adopt democratic leadership can create an inclusive culture that makes all stakeholders feel valued and empowered. For instance, department heads who conduct regular feedback sessions with staff to address classroom challenges, curriculum changes, or policy adjustments not only can boost staff morale, but also foster a collective commitment to improvement initiatives and quality education (Safrida *et al.*, 2023).

Additionally, Malaysian educational leaders who practice democratic leadership are often characterized by increased flexibility and responsiveness within their institution. For example, department heads who involve faculty members in curriculum development or strategic planning can tap into their diverse expertise, thus ensuring that most decisions will reflect the needs and aspirations of staff, students, and other stakeholders. Such democratic practices enable them to align

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institutional goals with faculty strengths and community needs, thereby creating a more engaged and collaborative academic environment.

Research suggests that democratic leadership tends to positively contribute to staff performance and organizational culture. Kholil (2021) found that principals who implement democratic leadership tend to improve staff performance by creating an environment where staff feel secure, respected, and motivated to excel. Malaysian educational leaders who encourage staff to express ideas and concerns freely often allow them to contribute meaningfully to institutional policies and initiatives. By providing staff with the autonomy to influence institutional decisions, they can promote a sense of belonging and commitment, thus benefiting students and other stakeholders through enhanced teaching quality and innovative practices.

To bridge theory and practice, Malaysian educational leaders who aim to implement democratic leadership need to establish regular, structured feedback sessions that allow staff to voice their ideas and opinions on institutional operations, curricular matters, and professional development needs. Creating decision-making committees or task forces that include staff and student representatives will enable them to further promote a participative culture. By instituting open-door policies that make staff feel comfortable to discuss issues or suggestions without formal protocols, they can reinforce the openness and inclusivity that characterize democratic leadership. By integrating democratic practices, Malaysian educational leaders not only can strengthen relationships with their teams, but also can create a more adaptable and supportive educational environment, thus establishing an organizational culture that is rooted in collaboration, shared accountability, and continuous improvement.

Democratic leadership enables Malaysian educational leaders to practice a participatory approach, thus encouraging the involvement of staff, students, and the community in decision-making processes. It generates a sense of ownership among stakeholders and fosters collective responsibility for institutional improvement. In Malaysia, this style promotes the active engagement among staff in curriculum development and policy implementation, resulting in more innovative educational practices, while contributing to higher levels of motivation and job satisfaction among staff. For Malaysian PEIs, where the need for inclusivity and collaboration is paramount, democratic leadership aligns well with national aspirations for a more student-centered and community-engaged educational framework (Arias *et. al*, 2023).

Lastly, democratic leadership, characterized by collective decision-making and active staff involvement, has a positive impact on staff morale and job satisfaction. Malaysian educational leaders who give staff the opportunity to contribute to decision-making processes, often foster a sense of ownership and empowerment (Hoque & Raya, 2023). Moreover, democratic leadership also tends to reduce staff burnout, as it encourages open communication and mutual support, which contributes to higher retention rates (Kholil, 2021). Overall, democratic leadership often enhances staff motivation and commitment to institutional improvement initiatives as staff believe that their input is valued. Therefore, HEIs led by democratic leaders are likely to demonstrate greater job satisfaction among staff, as the collaborative nature of this style promotes a sense of shared purpose and strengthens relationships among staff (Mohamed & Fook, 2022).

V. TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

A. Background

Transformational leadership, introduced by Bass in 1985, initially targeted general leadership, but was later expanded by Avolio and Bass in 1988 to encompass business leaders. Since the 1990s, it has been adopted by educational administration as well, thus underscoring its versatility and applicability across sectors (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Malaysian educational leaders who practice transformational leadership are often characterized by their ability to inspire and motivate staff to exceed expectations, thus enhancing their morale, ideals, interests, and values. Moreover, transformational leaders tend to act as role models who can elevate staff awareness on the importance of their tasks, while aligning their personal goals with the broader organizational mission (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Transformational Malaysian leaders tend to focus on empowering staff by providing support that encourages them to perform beyond their perceived limits (Alharbi & Aljounaidi, 2021). They also drive change by managing long-term issues and inspiring staff to adopt an initiative-taking, values-driven approach to their roles (Alessa, 2021).

Transformational leadership tends to have a direct positive impact on student performance, particularly in the Malaysian context, where educational reforms and innovation are ongoing. Transformational Malaysian leaders can motivate staff to

adopt innovative instructional strategies and invest in professional development, which equip them with the skills necessary to address diverse student needs (Siraj *et al*., 2022). In Malaysia, where students face varying socioeconomic challenges, transformational leadership can foster an adaptable, inclusive teaching approach that enhances learning outcomes. Moreover, it promotes a vision of academic excellence that inspires both staff and students to strive for higher standards and quality, thereby enhancing students' academic achievement (Alzoraiki *et al*., 2023).

B. Implications of transformational leadership

Malaysian educational leaders who practice transformational leadership often exhibit such characteristics as foresight regarding future needs, a broad perspective on organizational challenges, and a capacity to elevate staff's commitment to organizational objectives. They are highly impactful as they inspire changes in staff's attitudes and core values, thus aligning them with the organization's vision. This, in turn, fosters an environment that is conducive, development-focused, and adaptable to change (Alessa, 2021).

In Malaysia, transformational leadership can be particularly effective, especially during periods of reform when many PEIs are adapting to digital technologies, instructional methods, and policies. Malaysian educational leaders who adopt this style can drive innovation, create a shared vision for the future, and foster a culture of continuous improvement. For example, department heads can inspire staff to implement innovative teaching strategies that can enhance student outcomes, while promoting a collective vision of educational excellence (Alessa, 2021).

Transformational leadership has been widely acknowledged in educational settings as a means to inspire change and foster a culture of continuous improvement. It was first introduced as a method of motivating staff to exceed their own expectations and align with broader organizational goals. Malaysian educational leaders who adopt transformational leadership can inspire staff and students to embrace novel and innovative learning methodologies, utilize technology more effectively, and strive toward shared educational goals. At Malaysian PEIs, where reform efforts have aimed at integrating digital technology and 21st century skills into the curriculum, transformational leadership enables educational leaders to drive change and foster a progressive, adaptive culture within their institution (Adams, 2022).

Lastly, Malaysian educational leaders who practice transformational leadership can enhance staff morale and job satisfaction by providing a clear vision, offering professional development opportunities, and fostering a culture of innovation. They tend to motivates staff to exceed expectations and align their personal values with the organizational mission, thus resulting in higher job satisfaction by promoting a supportive and forward-thinking environment (Mokhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Additionally, staff collaborating with transformational leaders are more likely to remain in their positions, as they feel motivated and engaged by the leader's vision, and are given the tools and encouragement to grow professionally (Mirsultan & Marimuthu, 2021; Basar *et al.*, 2021). By focusing on staff's personal development and fostering a sense of purpose, transformational leaders can increase their emotional investment in their work, which promotes staff retention in the long run.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the Malaysian educational context, leadership styles, such as servant, democratic, and transformational leadership, can significantly affect staff and student performance. Servant leadership is well-suited to fulfil the holistic needs of Malaysian HEIs, where staff development and wellbeing are becoming a primary concern. Malaysian servant leaders can create a nurturing environment that enhances staff morale and commitment, which in turn, will positively influence teaching and learning outcomes. On the other hand, democratic and transformational leadership can foster an educational environment that encourages collaboration, innovation, and shared responsibility. These styles empower staff, support a sense of community, and lead to positive outcomes in terms of student engagement and learning.

Overall, Malaysian educational leaders should integrate the elements of servant, democratic, and transformational leadership to support staff wellbeing, enhance job satisfaction, and promote student success. A more effective leadership approach for Malaysian PEIs should not be limited to one particular style, but rather a combination of style components that leverages the strengths of each. In Malaysia, an integrative leadership approach that encompasses the compassion of servant leadership, inclusivity of democratic leadership, and vision of transformational leadership, could best address the current and emerging challenges faced by PEIs. This eclectic approach aligns with the nation's aspiration for a progressive, inclusive, and adaptable educational landscape that can thrive amidst rapid societal and digital changes.

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