SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN INDONESIA: PERSPECTIVES OF THE PRINCIPALS

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Abstract

Successful School Leadership in Indonesia: Perspectives of the Principals: Principals exert considerable influence on schools, with the most opportunity and responsibility for exercising leadership that will enhance school outcomes. Research on successful schools invariably links the success with successful principal leadership. Yet, there are a few studies that have explored successful principal leadership in Asian contexts, a fewer still that do so within an Islamic culture. This article explores principals' leadership in Indonesian successful secondary schools from the principals' perspectives. Whilst confirming several common practices of successful school leadership from earlier research, the principals from the three successful schools in Yogyakarta also demonstrated significant differences, particularly in terms of beliefs and values that underpinned the leadership. These values include Islamic and cultural beliefs and values which were strong and enduring, and articulated in the school leadership and strategies. The principals demonstrated ability in developing the school vision, setting strategies, building capacity, and establishing a broader network for the benefits of the school improvement.

Keywords: School Leadership, Principals,

Introduction

Principal leadership is important for school success. Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, & Beresford (2000) explicitly studied successful head-teachers in successful schools in England. They formulated a valued-based contingency view of which is described below. Building

upon this study, the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) was formed, with researchers in eight different countries (Australia, Canada, Denmark, China (Hong Kong), England, Norway, Sweden, and the USA) conducting multiple perspective case studies and surveys concerning successful school principals. Over 60 case studies have been conducted and, developed from these case studies, a common survey used across most of the eight countries.

While it is acknowledged that contexts of both country and school might be influential in shaping the principals' leadership characteristics and practices, the ISSPP, unfortunately, has been mainly concerned with school leadership in Western and Scandinavian contexts, with Asia represented by cases studies from China. Relatively few studies on school leadership have been conducted in Asian schools with fewer still available in English (e.g. Cheng, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Wong, 2005). This lack of information about Asian and other contexts of school leadership may limit our understanding of a worldview on school leadership, and more particularly on successful school leadership.

The study reported here is significant in that it investigated the principals' leadership characteristics and practices in successful secondary schools in Indonesia—an Asian country and one with the largest Muslim population in the world. So, both the Asian and Muslim contexts are important. As value concepts are derived from many sources with which the value holders have interacted, including religion, social norms and culture (Kuczmarski & Kuczmarski, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1990, 1992), the lack of representation of Muslim populations in successful school leadership research is of concern. This article, therefore, is focused on characteristics and practices of principals' leadership in successful schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia from their own perspectives. It also develops a model of Indonesian successful school leadership.

Successful School Leadership from the ISSPP Perspectives

Leithwood et al. (see Geisjel *et al.*, 2003; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Yu *et al.*,

2002), after conducting series of studies on school leadership, proposed a core set of basic leadership practices which are valuable in almost all school contexts. This core set includes:

-   *Setting directions* includes building a shared vision, developing consensus about goals and priorities, and creating high performance expectations.
-   *Developing people* includes providing individualized support, offering intellectual stimulation, and modeling important values and practices.
-   *Redesigning the organization* includes building a collaborative culture, creating and maintaining shared decision-making structures and processes, and building relationship with parents and the wider community.

The core set of basic school leadership practices support Hallinger and Heck's (1998) proposal for school conditions through which leadership may exercise its influence. These conditions include purposes and goals, school structure and social networks, people and organizational culture.

As indicated earlier, the ISSPP was inspired by Day et al.'s (2000) work on school leadership in the UK contexts. From this study, Day et al. developed a model of 'values-led contingency leadership', which include dimensions of values and vision, integrity, context, continuing professional development, and reflection (Day et al., 2000). In comparison to the previous research of MacBeath et al. (1998), Day et al. (2000, p.165) suggested that their findings revealed a distinct characteristic, that is, "good leaders are informed by, and communicate, clear sets of personal and educational values, which represent their moral purposes for the school".

'A contemporary model of educational leadership' developed by Gurr et al. (2003, p.33) confirmed the findings of Leithwood et al. (2000, 1999, 2003, 2002), Hallinger & Heck (1998), MacBeath et al. (1998), and Day et al. (2000) regarding successful school leadership practices. This model was developed in a study of Victorian school leadership as part of International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP). According to Gurr et al. (2000), this model has been

inspired by a number of previous studies such as King and Newman (2001), Hopkins (2001), Hill (2002), Geringer (2003).

The model reveals that successful school leaders intervene in a variety of school aspects. These include interventions that either directly or indirectly influence the students' outcomes. Gurr et al. (2003) explained that 'teaching and learning' is believed to have a direct influence on 'students' outcomes', and 'teaching and learning' are directly influenced by 'school capacity'. 'School capacity' is affected by some 'other influences' including policies and program of external organizations, organisational characteristics, community resources, stakeholders, and social and economic landscape. These 'other influences', according to Gurr et al. (2003) vary with the contextual variations of school.

A support to the above findings was also provided by a study on Tasmanian successful school principalship by Mulford and Johns (2004). This study, also part of the ISSPP, found that the principals' personal set of beliefs and values were the basis for their leadership practices. These beliefs and values led the principals in their decisions and actions regarding supports and capacity building provided both for individual people in the school and for the schools as organizations that include school culture and structure. Also, the successful school principalship was summarized to be an interactive, reciprocal and evolving process involving many players, which is influenced by and, in turn, influences, the context in which it occurs (Mulford & Johns, 2004, p.56). Furthermore, the findings support a claim made in most school leadership research that successful school leadership facilitates the attainment of student achievement through the provision of better school conditions (e.g. Leithwood and Reihl, 2003). This indirect relationship is able to create the quality curriculum and instruction, which, in turn, achieve better student outcomes.

From the above review of the literature, it can be summarized that successful school leaders have abilities in:

1. analyzing the school contexts and situations both internal and external to school;
2. visioning and setting strategies;

3. having strong personal and professional values and respecting and aligning others' personal and professional values;

4. developing strong teaching-learning characteristics including curriculum and instruction;

5. fostering professional development of themselves and staff through ways such as intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support, and modeling;

6. redesigning the organization including identifying and creating and/or changing the school cultures, and modifying organizational structures;

7. building collaborative cultures in which a high involvement of other stakeholders of school in the decision-making processes is exercised.

The Yogyakarta Case Studies

Indonesian School Context

In general, there are two types of school in the Indonesian education system in terms of ministerial affiliation (MNE, 2003b; National Office of Overseas Schools Recognition, 1995; Poerbakawatja, 1970; Raihani, 2001). This includes schools affiliated to the Ministry of National Education (MNE) and schools affiliated to the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA). The MNE and MRA administer public and private schools, and provide education at kindergarten, elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Both the MNE and MRA manage their own schools and develop the curriculum (Hasbullah, 1995; MNE, 2003a; National Office of Overseas Schools Recognition, 1995; Tilaar, 1995; Yunus, 1979). The number of the MNE schools constitutes about eighty per cent of the total number of Indonesian school (EMIS, 2002; Hartono & Ehrmann, 2001; MNE, 2002). The main differences between these school types are found in the curriculum content in that there is a stronger focus on religious teaching in MRA compared to MNE schools (Mastuhu, 1994; Raihani, 2001), with about thirty per cent of

the whole curriculum of the MRA schools being religious (Islamic), whereas it is less than five per cent in MNE schools.

The Indonesian government has conducted two major school reforms in the last decade. First, School-Based Management (SBM), both in primary and secondary levels, was introduced in 1999 (Jalal & Supriadi, 2001; Jiyono *et al.*, 2001; Umaedi, 2001). Second, Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) was trialed in 2004, and will be implemented in 2006 in both primary and secondary schools (MNE, 2003a; Penabur, 2003; Setiawan, 2000; Umaedi, 2001). Although these reforms have been criticized[1], they do reflect the major government policy of political decentralization begun in 1999, shortly after the fall of the Soeharto regime (Jalal & Supriadi, 2001; Jiyono et al., 2001; MNE, 2001). Another initiative is to have the larger community involved in the school education processes through the empowerment of local education councils (dewan pendidikan) and school committees (komite sekolah).

School Selection

Three successful public senior secondary schools (SMAN) in Yogyakarta were selected on the basis of two following criteria:

1. Schools that, on the basis of provincial wide test and examination results, could be shown to be improving their performance at an exceptional rate.

2. Schools where the principal had been in the principalship position at least for two years at the school.

These two criteria partly followed those set in the ISSPP. Consultation was held with an official of the Education Office of Yogyakarta regarding the two criteria to see whether the criteria were

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[1]For instance, Stuart Weston, a Chief of Party of the Managing Basic Education (MBE) Project, a project funded by USAID, in his email said: 'It is official [Indonesian] government policy to encourage school based management, but the roles of the various levels in the education system under decentralised government are not adequately defined. This means that many local governments intentionally fail to support school-based decision making, particularly by retaining many procurement activities (to support their corruption)'. As indicated by Bjork (2003), a lack of knowledge and conceptual basis of improvement programs has been a problem in Indonesia.

contextually acceptable and to see which schools best met the criteria. The schools selected are under administration of MNE. They are:

SMAN A: Located in an outskirt of the Yogyakarta city, this was a school of 857 students in 2004, mostly from middle to lower socio-economic backgrounds. The principal, a male in his forties, was in his third year at the school, and instituted significant changes, particularly in terms of academic improvement programs and the development of school facilities. Under his leadership, the school had achieved outstanding performances, both academically and non-academically. The school had been ranked for the last two years among the top ten schools in Yogyakarta, whilst previously it was below twenty.

SMAN B: This school is located outside the city of Yogyakarta, and had 712 students in 2004. The students mostly came from middle to lower socio-economic backgrounds, with more than fifty per cent of students having parents who were farmers. The principal was a male in his forties. Under his leadership, the school focused on improving its teaching and learning facilities, particularly the use of information and communication technology (there was the Internet available in the school library for students to use, and multimedia provision in every classroom). There had been continuous improvement over a three year period (the school was ranked ninth, fifth and third in the years 2002, 2003 and 2004 respectively), with the school regarded as one of the best secondary schools in Yogyakarta. There had also been outstanding achievements by students in non-academic programs in sports and arts.

SMAN C: This had been regarded as the best secondary school in Yogyakarta for many years. The school is located in the city of Yogyakarta, and had 781 students enrolled in 2004. Most of the students came from middle class families, in that most of the parents worked in public services. The principal was a male in his fifties. Under his leadership there had been some innovative changes implemented including the establishment of classes with internationally-standardized curriculum and accelerated classes. High student academic and non-academic achievement had been maintained or improved. For example, in 2003 95 per cent of graduates were accepted into prestigious universities, whilst in 2004

96.5% of its graduates were accepted, with some receiving scholarships from universities in Singapore, Japan, and the Netherlands.

Data collection techniques and analysis

The research was modeled on the multiple perspective case study approach of the ISSPP. In each school, individual or group interviews were conducted with the principal, vice-principal, three teachers, one support staff, two groups of students, one group of parents, and the school committee president. Yet, the reports here are only based on the principals' interviews[2]. All the interviews were recorded on audiotapes and transcribed, with the transcripts sent to the respondents for checking, amendments and additions as necessary. Within-case analysis was conducted for each school case, followed by cross-case analysis (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Flick, 1998; Merriem, 1988, 1998; Miles & Hubermen, 1994; Yin, 2003).

Successful School Leadership in Indonesia

The findings of this study presented and discussed in the following sub-sections were based on emerging themes drawn from the interviews with the principals. The major themes of the principals' leadership characteristics and practices include: defining school success; enduring beliefs and values; analyzing contexts; developing vision and strategies; building school capacity; and establishing a broader collaboration.

Personal beliefs and values

The study found that the principals' leadership was underpinned on a set of beliefs and values that they held. These beliefs and values can be classified into: religious beliefs and values; universal beliefs and values; and local cultural values.

A strong influence of religious beliefs and values was found in each of the principals' leadership practices. There were small

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[2] Comprehensive reports on this study based on the perspectives of all respondents will be available in another journal.

variations in terms of beliefs and values emerging from each interview, but some common religious beliefs and values—amanah and IMTAQ—were found.

'Amanah' was found to be the most influential value in each principal's leadership. It was the way by which the principals considered their job as something entrusted to them (typically with reference to being entrusted by God) to fulfil as perfectly as they could. In another study of school leadership in Indonesia, 'amanah' was found to be an important value of the principal (Nurman, 2003), too.

> To me if I am given a responsibility, I will work with it the best that I can. This is an 'amanah'. My commitment is to serve pupils and the school [SMAN B Principal].

According to SMAN C Principal, 'amanah' resulted in a strong commitment to his job, without complaining about what happened in the school. For the SMAN A Principal 'amanah' was related to accountability in that he was not only responsible to the school system, including the higher authority, pupils, and other members of the school community, but also to God.

IMTAQ (constructed from the words Iman and Taqwa, meaning faith and piety) was another religious belief and value common to each principal. This value is explicitly stated as one of the national education objectives (Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2003; Tilaar, 1995), and therefore became one of the inspirational values for the principals. This was evident in the school vision and program in which IMTAQ development in students was emphasised. For instance, as will be mentioned later on, an explicit mention of IMTAQ was found in the SMAN A and B school vision statements, while it was implied in the SMAN C vision. Included in this IMTAQ value is 'akhlak karimah' (good morality).

Another category of the principals' enduring beliefs and values is universal beliefs and values including equity and trustworthiness. Equity was manifested in their policies and practices of leadership, which openness to criticisms and other ideas, the school stakeholder involvement, and equal rights and responsibilities in education.

> A Chinese mother came to me one day crying and begging for her daughter to be accepted in this school. I asked: but why are you crying? She said that she's afraid that her daughter would not be accepted here given the fact that this school is strong in [Islamic] religious cultures. I said to her, 'Madam, this school is a public school. Anyone regardless of his/her religion and ethnicity can enter this school. As long as I am the principal here, this is the policy of the school' [SMAN C Principal].

All the principals had regular meetings with their staff, teachers and students in which they could listen to, and accept, their ideas of the school development, and criticisms on their leadership practices. Dialogs with the school community, school committee, parents and other stakeholders were held regularly. The principals were aware of the importance of the stakeholders and the nature of school-based management which requires intensive and broader involvements of those that influence the school (Caldwell & Spinks, 1998; Mohrman *et al.*, 1994). In SMAN C, for instance, the involvement was extended to the board of alumni and the association of ex-SMAN C-teachers.

Trustworthiness was another universal belief and value that the three principals shared. This was reflected in their transparent and accountable school policies through regular consultation with other stakeholders and shared decision-making. In particular, they were very transparent regarding money issues. As corruption has been a major problem in Indonesia, money has become a very sensitive issue in every sector of governance, including the school sector. Irawan et al. (2004), in a study about school-based management implementation in Jakarta, indicates a severe level of corruption occurring in schools.

The last category of the principals' common personal beliefs and values was local cultural values. Uniquely and explicitly found in the SMAN C principal was a set of Javanese beliefs and values that were articulated in the school vision that emphasised, among other matters, an emphasis on graduates having a well developed sense of Javanese culture. Accordingly, one of the strategies was teaching the Javanese language to all students, with an emphasis on the rich Javanese philosophies and values as the basis of the whole Javanese culture. An example of this, which was explicitly mentioned by the principal, was

a Javanese adage *menang tanpo ngasorake*. In the essence, as he said, this philosophy means inviting and welcoming the loser in a competition to work together in order to improve the organisational conditions. This was applied in his strategies when he came first to the school and took the position as principal.

While the SMAN A and B principals did not explicitly mention the Javanese cultural values during the interviews, their leadership practices implied a high respect for these values, particularly regarding the way they interacted with others. Yet, Javanese cultural beliefs and values in these schools were not emphasized in the school vision, and were absent in the school improvement strategies.

Analyzing situations

Each of the principals demonstrated ability in understanding and analyzing the contexts of their schools to determine the actions required for the achievement of leadership objectives. This was also found in studies of successful school leadership across different countries (Leithwood, 2005). The contexts are classified into two—immediate and broader. The immediate contexts include the school conditions such as teacher competences and school facilities, student background such as prior academic achievement and economic backgrounds, and parent and community expectations. Meanwhile, the broader contexts are those outside the school and community believed to influence the school process such as IT development.

Some of the examples of how each principal understood both contexts—immediate and broader—can be seen in the following quotations. The SMAN B principal said:

> Now is a competition era. We have to compete with other schools in improving our school quality, improving our service to students and community, accommodating IT development, completing the school facilities with more quality stuff.

The SMAN C principal also showed his deep understanding of the school contexts. For instance, considering that the school he has been leading was a model school and the best school in Yogyakarta with better resources than any other schools, he has initiated some innovations to achieve better school performance.

> After we achieved good performances, I initiated some innovations such as the international school program. This is to motivate the students to perform the best so that there will be more students able to study overseas.

The SMAN A principal was found to free some students from paying the school fees considering their parents' economic disadvantages—the immediate context of student's backgrounds. The principal implemented a policy of 'subsidi silang' (cross-subsidy) to help the economically disadvantaged students.

Visioning & setting strategies

After analyzing the contexts of the school, the principals created the school vision and set strategies accordingly. The visioning process of their leadership included articulating and aligning the vision, explaining it to the school stakeholders, and putting high expectations on school performance.

> After being a while in this school learning the situation, I sent a letter to teachers, staff, as well as students and school committee asking for inputs regarding the vision formulating. The responses varied. Some of them said this is very good [approach], some others just said it is up to me as the principal. Finally, with all the inputs and my own concept, we formulated the vision. We have a target that we will realize the vision in 2010 (SMAN B Principal).

The above quote indicates the involvement of other stakeholders in formulating the school vision—aligning their vision with the principals' vision. The involvement of more stakeholders assured the acceptance of the vision by the school community, and attracted their commitment to it. In SMAN C, the involvement of stakeholders in the visioning was broader, including the school alumni association, too whilst in SMAN A it was limited to the principal, vice principals, teachers, and the school committee.

Religious beliefs and values, intellectual characteristics and images of being up to date in terms of science and technology were commonly found in each of the schools' vision.

The SMAN B vision: "Mewujudkan sekolah yang unggul dan terdepan dalam penyelenggaraan pendidikan dan pengajaran untuk menghasilkan lulusan yang memiliki IMTAQ, Akhlak, dan penguasaan IPTEK dalam dunia global pada tahun 2010" [to realize a competitive and advanced school in running education and teaching for the production of graduates with faith, piety, and good morality, mastering science and technology in the global world in 2010](SMAN B, 2004).

The SMAN C vision: "Mewujudkan sekolah yang mampu menghasilkan keluaran yang berakar budaya bangsa, berwawasan kebangsaan, dan bercakrawala global" [to realize a school which is able to produce graduates with strong cultural traits, spirit of nationalism, and global orientation](SMAN C, 2004).

The SMAN A vision: "berusaha menciptakan manusia yang memiliki citra moral, citra kecendekiawanan, kemandirian, dan berwawasan lingkungan berdasarkan atas ketaqwaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa" [striving to produce graduates who possess good images of morality, intellectuality, independence, and have environmental knowledge, which all are based on the faith and piety towards God the Only One] (SMAN A, 2004).

The above visions reflect the respective school community's expectations towards future. In order to realize such visions, each of the principals set several strategies that can be classified into three: academic strategies, non-academic strategies, and supporting strategies. Academic strategies included programs oriented to facilitate students to achieve better academic performance such as material comprehension and enrichment for Grade 11 and 12 students, an extra program commonly found in each case. Meanwhile, non-academic strategies referred to extra-curricular activities such as sporting and arts.

Supporting strategies included disciplining students and teachers, building teamwork and improving the school facilities. In terms of promoting discipline among students, for example, the SMAN A principal with the support of staff, teachers, and parents, has launched a program called 'pagi simpatik' [morning of sympathy]. Every morning from 6:30 to 7:00, the principal along with some teachers

stand in front of the school main gate to say hello and shake students' hands. According to the principal, besides to strengthen emotional relationship among the principal, teachers, and students, this is to enforce the students' discipline for not being late.

Fostering professional development

The three principals believed in the importance of professional development of themselves and teachers for the whole-school improvement. Each of the principals was eager to learn. For example, the SMAN B principal said that he had a plan to continue to a doctorate level. The SMAN C principal was studying at a doctoral level in the field of education, and the SMAN A principal had a strong commitment to learn from other successful principals.

As to the teacher professional development, the principals implemented several programs and strategies including sending teachers to training and seminars, motivating by modeling and promoting teachers to higher rank and providing rewards, delegating jobs, and providing funds for teachers to continue their education.

> I always send some teachers to join trainings held by other institutions. I also send teachers to join MGMP (Subject Teachers Consultative Group) (SMAN A Principal).

> I also regularly send teachers to join seminars, trainings and conferences. For example, I sent some teachers to the 2003 curriculum workshop, even though at the same time we sacrifice learning time for students since the teachers are being sent to that workshop. I think one step backward does not matter for hundred steps forward (SMAN B Principal).

The three principals were also aware of the importance of motivating their staff and teachers. For this, each of the principals has provided a model for staff and teachers. The SMAN C principal said:

> I believe in the motto of life-long education. I am now doing my PhD. Beside to pursue my personal objectives I want to motivate [my staff and teachers]. If we want to ask them to study further, we have to do it first. How come we ask them to run while we do not want to run?

The principals also provided various rewards to well-performing staff and teachers. The rewards could be in forms of psychological and material rewards. Each of the principals was found to give praises or compliments to well-performing teachers and consistently strived to increase their wages.

Intellectual stimulation as part of professional development strategies was also provided by each of the principals. The SMAN B principal, for instance, said:

> I inform my staff and teachers about this as it is, including the student achievement both at local and national levels. We seek together the reasons and factors behind our performances. It seems to me that before, they had never been told about the school performance. They had never been invited to analyze and make improvements. I also encourage teachers to make analysis of their students and curriculum.

Building collaborative culture

The principals believed in the necessity of collaboration among the school stakeholders in order to make a simultaneous and comprehensive improvement. This belief has been manifested in their actions to involve the school stakeholders in the decision-making process.

> I try that every decision we make becomes all's decision and responsibility to implement it. Therefore, I always involve teachers, staff, and students, and when necessary other stakeholders. Furthermore, we apply the bottom-up principle. We empower teachers by creating some teams where they can develop themselves (SMAN B Principal).

The efforts to create a collaborative culture went beyond the formal professional relationship between the principal and other stakeholders. Many initiatives done by each of the principals symbolized the importance of informal approaches to the creation of this culture. These approaches, for instance, included arisan haji[3]

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[3] 'Arisan Haji' is **a regular gathering** whose members contribute to and take turns at winning an aggregate sum of money for doing hajj or pilgrimage to

(SMAN B), school staff/teacher-family recreation (SMAN A, B, C), and sporting (SMAN A & C).

Redesigning school structure

Each of the principals demonstrated his ability in redesigning the school structure. The school structure redesign was intended to meet the need for changes and improvement by putting each school matter into the right division in the school. Parallel to the creation of collaborative school culture, each of the principals put additional coordinators under the principal structure to cater for the needs for personnel specified to deal with certain areas. Included in this was a common additional structure across the cases: the formation of Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran (MGMP), meaning subject teacher consultancy, in which subject teachers shared ideas, showed their creative and innovative thinking, collaboratively solved their problems of instruction, and so on.

> Also for the purpose of professional development, I added to the structure an MGMP. In this board, teachers of the same subject sit together and discuss what needs to be discussed (SMAN B Principal).

Another method was by redefining the job description within the existing structure so that each staff member was aware of his or her own rights and responsibilities. However, changing or replacing staff in general was found to be a very sensitive issue for the principals to undertake, particularly in the early period of their principalship. If not calculated carefully, as all the principals said, it could be counter-productive to the improvement efforts and strategies developed.

Concluding Remarks

This case study confirmed the findings of previous studies of successful school leadership (Day et al., 2000; Mulford & Johns, 2004). The three principals based their leadership on their enduring personal beliefs and values. While some of the values found in this

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Mecca. Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islamic belief. This program continues for many years until all the members are able to perform hajj.

study are similar to those found the previous research, the religious beliefs and values of the principals were found to be distinct in their leadership, even though they were working in schools which were not formally religious. Their ability in analyzing the school external and internal contexts indicates one of the successful school leader criteria suggested in the body of literature (Day et al., 2000; Leithwood, 2005; Mulford & Johns, 2004). The integration between the principals' beliefs and values and their understanding of the school contexts helped them in the creation of the school vision and strategies. Basic dimensions of successful school leaders suggested by Leithwood et al. (2004, 2003), i.e. *setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization* was also confirmed.

Besides demonstrating their ability in visioning and setting appropriate strategies, the principals successfully worked on the provision of school conditions including professional development, building collaborative culture, and redesigning school structure supporting to the school improvement. This intervention in such school conditions indicate a support to Gurr et al's (2003) contemporary model of educational leadership. Although mostly indirectly, the principals also intervened the aspect of teaching learning by fostering professional development programs oriented to build instructional competences of teachers.

To summarize, from their own perspective, successful school principals in this study were found to be able to:

- identify, articulate, and translate their enduring personal beliefs and values along with others' and use them as their foundation in their leadership. In this study context, Islamic religious beliefs and values were strongly identified;
- dynamically consult and communicate such beliefs and values with the school contexts, both internal and external in order to establish directions for the school improvement;
- conceptualize the school vision, align others' vision and socialize it to the school community. They were also able to make the vision as a direction for them to set strategies and to proceed with the whole school practices and procedures.

- develop better school conditions including building personal, professional and organizational capacities oriented to the whole school improvement.

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