

Curriculum Leadership Practices among School Principals



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Abstract: *Effective and efficient curriculum management can lead to academic excellence. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore curriculum management practice of school principals in selected secondary school in Malaysia. This survey study involved 14 principals, 7 senior assistants, and 7 senior teachers. The qualitative data was collected through interviews, which has been analyzed manually. Finding showed that, in overall principals' practices were at their best and has contributed to the school excellence in academic. Among the practices by principals were being open to opinion from teachers, guiding and monitoring task given to teachers, empowering subordinates to do certain administrative job and having discussion for continuous improvement. Principals also took part in handling curriculum issues and spending times with teachers to find ways to tackle problems that they were facing. Based on the findings, this study recommended that principals could increase their capability in managing curriculum if they really understand the process of planning, implementing, controlling and monitoring and set strategies for continuous improvement and at the same time having close relationship with teachers and students.*

Keywords: *Education, curriculum. Principal, best practices and empowering teachers.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum related resources such as the syllabus, teachers, students and the necessary facilities need to be managed at the best level to ensure the implementation of teaching and learning goes smoothly. At the ministry level, development of curriculum syllabuses is to achieve the goals of producing excellence students physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually as intended by the National Education Philosophy. At school level, all parties particularly administrators and teachers should ensure the curriculum implementation is in line with the National Education Policy, National Curriculum, relevant laws and regulations, latest developments, principles and regulations, strategies to improve curriculum performance, research findings and latest technologies. School administrators must also support teaching and learning, setting high targets and challenges, ensure learning is a core school activity, conduct evaluation to improve curriculum programs, monitor teaching and learning process, analyze teaching and learning performance and provide feedback to teachers for improvement as stated in Competency Standards of Malaysian School Headship

(SKKSM, MOE, 2006).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore at what extent secondary school principals play their role in managing and leading subordinates, particularly to ensure teachers implement teaching and learning according to curriculum syllabus efficiently and effectively.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The main reference in conducting this study is Competency Standards of Malaysian School Headship (SKKSM, MOE, 2006). The fact that school managers used SKKSM as guidelines to improve their effectiveness in managing school as well as in carrying out their duties more effectively also contributed to the decision. Besides, SKKSM is an instrument to detect strengths and weaknesses of school managers (Abdul Razak 2006). In the process of developing the standard, IAB has consistently referred to National Standard for Principal of Wales, Rukun Negara, Vision 2020, National Education Policy and National Education Philosophy (Abdul Razak 2006). Therefore, this study refers to the said documents in developing interview protocol to collect data.

2.1 The Core Attributes of Headship and the Action Model

The Core Attributes of Headship and the Action Model as shown in Figure 1 is the model that underlies the National Standard Principal of Wales. It demonstrates that competencies include principals' actions in implementing roles and responsibilities and it depends on the knowledge, skills, as well as personal qualities that they possess. The National Standard of Wales Principal stated that the role of principals is based on three key principles, which are centered learning, focused leadership and professional orientation. This principle serves as a guideline in SKKSM formulation and is a key in providing a description of the knowledge, skills, and personal qualities that they have identified.

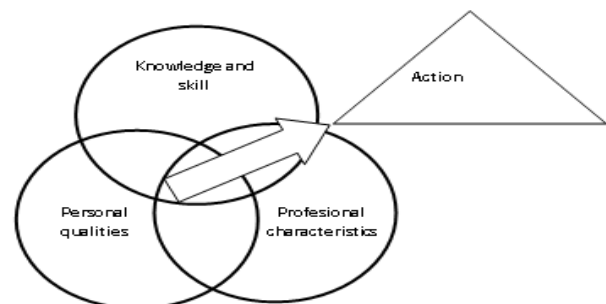


Figure 1 Model Attributes Core Leadership and Action
Source: Cattell 2004

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2.2 Malaysian Education Quality Standard

Malaysian Education Quality Standard (SKPM) is being used for benchmarking purposes. The formulation of the SKPM by School Inspectorate (year?) is based on the Education Act 1996 (Act 550) and Education Regulations 1997. The standard is in line with the objective of National Education Philosophy, and being referred as well as to ensure the success in implementation of all policies and programs by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. It provides guidance for principals to lead school community as intended by KPM.

There are 12 elements introduced in the standard that has been grouped into four core competencies. The management of educational programs that contain elements of curriculum program management, curriculum and student affairs, teaching and learning, student character development and student achievement assessment is one the competencies. There are also dimensions which are related to pupil's incidence that is academic, co-curriculum and personality. The leadership element stated that the headmasters/principals should lead and mobilize the entire school towards attaining the vision and mission, set school policy clearly which parallel to the vision and mission, adopt appropriate leadership style, build a strong working group and work in team, identify causes, prevent and resolve conflicts, and promote development of knowledge and thinking culture amongst school community. The leadership element also stated that the headmasters/principals need to adopt effective communication systems by creating a friendly atmosphere of interaction, gives school community an opportunity to express opinions, stimulates brainstorming among students and makes collective and collaborative decisions. Headmasters/principals also need to motivate and encourage continuous confidence and viability of students by providing moral and material support, appreciate students' contribution and success, implement fairly appraisal, give attention to students' problems and welfare, and give reprimand. In accordance with the standard, the headmasters/principals should also play an effective role as a curriculum leader by taking part in teaching and learning, conducting teaching and learning supervision, giving guidance to teachers to improve teaching and learning quality, mobilizing and monitoring curriculum and co-curriculum committees, , and monitoring student progress.

2.3 Iceberg Competency Model

Malek Shah and Liew (2006) described the Iceberg Competency Model developed by HayMcBer (Figure 2) by saying that knowledge and skills obtained through courses and training will determine person's attribute. The Iceberg Competency Model also showed that competency is a combination of a person's knowledge, skills, and tret. The knowledge and skills are located at the top of the iceberg, above the water level and can be identified or measured. Personal qualities are located under the water level and are hard to measure. It also said knowledge and skills even needed to do something, are said not to differentiate performance. Whereas, behavioral element (determined by hidden personal characteristics) becomes a dominant factor and is considered to distinguish high-performance and low-performances employees.

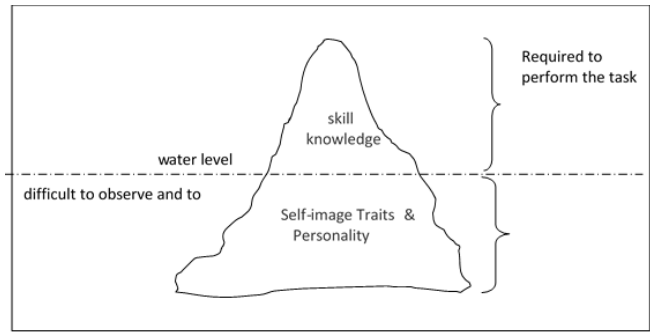


Figure 2. Iceberg HayMcBer Competency Model
Source: Malek Shah and Liew 2006

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative study and focusing on interviews session with principals, senior assistants and senior teachers. The research instrument is an interview protocol which was developed based on principal's job of scope as stated in the referred document. Data were collected by researchers at the school of principals, senior assistants or senior teachers. Interviews were conducted individually according to the date, time and place determined by the respondents. Data were transcribed, indexed and coded manually.

IV. FINDINGS

The presentation of the findings are according to research question, 'what is the practice of principals in managing curriculum based on principals, senior assistants and senior teachers' opinion?'. Finding showed that addressing curriculum policy changes, improving curriculum achievement, prioritizing teaching and learning, promoting teamwork in curriculum implementation are principals' practices. To ease the writing report, a shortform of P is being used for principal (P1 – P14), SA for senior assistant (S1 to S7), while ST is used for senior teacher (ST1 to ST 7). Belows are the findings in detail:

i. Addressing Curriculum Policy Changes

To address curriculum change, the first step taking by P1, P6 and P7 is explaining to teachers why changes is needed. P1 also conducts periodic monitoring, engages directly to assist teachers and students to make changes, as well as identifies the level of teachers achievement in implementing change. Belows are some of the input from the respondents.

“... To ensure that teachers are open to changes, we need to explain to them directly. For example, I myself observe teacher's achievement.. their teaching approach, their pedagogy ...” (P1)

“... HM comes down to you asking for the implementation of change ... I think that's how he makes things done.” (ST1)

“... The principal describes the changes determined by the Ministry...” (SA4)

“... In every meeting, the principal highlighted the policies changes that cannot be avoided ...” (ST3)

Any behavior that demonstrates negative attitudes is addressed by clarification of the benefits gained from the change made. Continuous incentives are also given to teachers in order to encourage them being positive to change. P3 avoids pressure to his teachers, P5 likes having discuss with teachers, while P7 always give friendly reminder. The quotation from the respondents are as follows.

“When changes are introduced, there are teachers who keep on complaining ... so principals will explain all the instructions ... but principals stick to the command.” (SA2)

“... Change, for example PPSMI ... early stage is a lot of negative views, but we can accept and cope ... principals will discuss the problems in management meeting...” (ST2)

“There were of course different response towards change. So the principal will take time to explain the benefit of doing change ...” (SA4)

“... Initially, teachers were refused to accept change, but in the end, principal successfully convince them to do so.” (P7)

P1, P2 and P3 are not only positive about the policy changes by the Ministry of Education, but they are proactive in reforming at school level. P1, for example, encourages teachers to do action research to find better way in teaching and learning. P2 implement change in curriculum by suggesting the first six months of schooling as a time to complete syllabus while the last three months as a time to drill and do revisions. For the second semester, P2 encourages teachers to use their own creativity and apply different approach to improve student achievement, while P3 try to ensure that students do their revision during long holidays by implementing diagnostic tests immediately after the school is open for the new semester. Belows are some of the says.

“... I encourage my teacher to do action research... I try to attend every meeting of the committee ... I want to see the new approach used.” (P1)

“There’s one innovation in curriculum that he makes ... complete all the syllabus between January to July. From July up to September, remedial work and revision. The most interesting is the second semester, whereby they have to explore various teaching skills ...” (ST1)

“An improvement for this year ... the second week after schooling, we’ve done diagnostic test at school-level. The objective is to ensure that students read the book and review the lesson during the holidays.” (P3)

ii. Improving Curriculum Achievement

To improve curriculum achievement, P1 sets target for the school to achieve or set a key performance indicators (KPIs), focusing on the works implement by each committee. This means that every activity done must be documented, while at same time monitoring teachers, showing support for the

curriculum program , and being present in every committee meetings.

“... We value what we want to accomplish, we have the KPI, key performance indicators ... I emphasis on the committee's work, I call for a meeting regularly, then minuted everything ... We documenedt all the activities.” (P1)

“He is very concerned with the implementation of the curriculum, for example, we are short of English teachers, he works hard to get a replacement teacher ... he must attend a curriculum meeting ... do not just leave it to the senior assistant. He himself chaired the meeting, and he tried to attend all committee meetings ... He fully support school curriculum programs.” (SA1)

Beside having KPIs for each committee, P2 set a regular meeting to discuss on strategy improvements for any deficiencies. From the beginning, he informed and explained the curriculum plan to the teachers. P2 also will make sure that teachers' strength are fully utilized to improve students' skills in answering questions.

“For the curriculum program, we have a target ... we have meeting four times a year, strategic meetings ... as a basis for improvement ... the whole program for our curriculum is planned earlier ... we have a school calendar ... I always remind teachers of what's going to happen every month ... improvements will be made from time to time... after we realize the weaknesses in the previous program ... we do reinforcement to increase student capability of answering questions ...” (P2)

P2 also implemented TOV (take off value) to identify low performance and high performance students for each subject. Evaluation output is used as a guideline to design strategies for student achievement. Discussion on strategy is a key agenda in every Management Committee Meeting. During the meeting, teachers will be reminded about the target that the have to achieve. Report on problematic issues is discussed, reprimanded or sought after. Teachers are welcome to give their opinions. At the same time, ideas for a new strategies are generated. Teachers are asked to discuss solutions for each problems that they are facing. Internal training to improve teachers skills in curriculum implementation was also carried out.

“We have what we call a "head count" ... then the first TOV (take off value), that is, after the mid-year exam, we will identify the good and the weak student. The subjects area that they are not good... in the curriculum management meeting which was held four times a year, we discussed not only about curriculum and strategies for achievement ... but so many things about school achievement... everything is discussed in meeting. The solution is always with the committee meetings ... the general solution is in house ...” (P2)

“... beginning of the year, he starts to do benchmark, will specify what average grade he wants. He will call for involvement from everyone ... what should be covered, examination that should be done, follow JSU, carry out impact analysis, follow strategies, making sure the curriculum is covered as well as excellent school performance. We have a lot of meetings, he will tell us what he dreams for, what is the project for the year. After that, we have our own meeting with our teachers. The teachers have to come out with their own strategies ...” (ST1)

Discussions with subordinates are also a practice of P6, especially to get feedback on teaching and learning. He also ensures that there is a close collaboration between teachers for a smooth teaching and learning, for a quality learning materials, to repair tools and equipments, to monitor students achievement, and to do immediate remedial for a weak students. Monitoring is done at ongoing basis, while targets are always being remind.

“... such as T&L, I will ask senior teachers, committese, or senior assistants about the problems that they are facing... we must cooperate with the teachers, prioritized R&D... must be ready with the required materials ... labs damaged immediately improved ... I always ask my teachers about monthly tests. Monthly monitoring ... I did, especially PT3 and SPM exam classes ... I remind students, if they did not pass the test, I would call ...” (P6)

“... all teachers, students need constantly monitoring, we need to remind the target that we want to achieve ... the efforts needed...”(SA4)

P3 also implements motivational programs to improve curriculum achievement. P3 uses the parents advantage to contribute to the school. In addition, he ensures that students were well-trained and were expose to various paper exams from other schools throughout Malaysia. P3 uses the ability of the teachers to get the examination papers. The programs that emphasize on student academic and student self-esteem are also P3 strategy to improve curriculum achievement.

“... we have a motivational program ... smart learning ... our strength is ...parents are educated ... they can do motivational programme to our students and share their experience with the students ... we have organized trainings ... we have made a collection of exam papers from other schools all over Malaysia ... teachers try to get those questions ... we have to improve... we aim for the excellence not only in terms of academic progress, but also in student personal qualities...” (P3)

Implementing motivational programs especially for examination classes is also a practice of P7. A program done whether in school or out of school is said to increase school performance.

“... motivational programs such as the Star Achieving Program for Form Three, Form Five and Form Six classes have helped us achieve a level equal to boarding school...” (ST3)

However, effort to improve curriculum achievement at P5 schools is affected by a number of students who are not

interested in learning. The students also involved in disciplinary problems. P5 will ask subordinates to solve a small problems, but for a serious problems, discussion with Management Committee will be held. Actions taken include having face to face discussion with students, conducting motivational courses, give and imposing penalties on students. P5 also asked the teachers to work together to solve the problem. In weekly assembly, teachers and students will be reminded about the target, while the things that can delay the achievement were reprimanded.

“... Principal always take part to overcome problems ... when he consults me, things that we can do on the spot, we do. But if we cannot do on the spot, we call for the management meeting with the presence of the principal. We discuss and take action together ... the principal always there... to talk to the student... we make a special motivation course... The Management Committee doing spot check ... actions taken including merit to a good student and penalty to a bad students ...” (ST2)

“ Every Monday in the assembly, we will inform if there is something wrong... We will reminds on the targets that the Inspectorate wants ...” (P5)

P4 faced challenges to improve curriculum achievement due to moderate and weak student that they have. It becomes more challenging when teachers feel demotivate due to the difficulties in implementing teaching and learning. To address these challenges, P4 gives continuous encouragement to teachers, asking teachers to diversify their teaching & learning methods, do additional classes, use time wisely and emphasize on reading and discussion.

“This is a conforming school, students learn three languages, English, Malay, Chinese, so all are not good ... teachers demotivated ... our principals give encouragement. We have to smartly adjust the situation, I ask the teachers to diversify teaching and learning method ... doing tuition classes for weak students ...” (P4)

“... there are also students who are moderate... principals said that if teachers teach good classes, apply different methods in terms of teaching ... adapted to the level of intelligence ... we discuss with the principal how to solve the problems ... we monitor at our best to ensure R&D is on schedule ... we create library class, we encourage students to read ... relief time, relief teachers are encouraged to bring books or reading materials ...” (SA3)

P1, P2, and P7 stated that the biggest obstacle to improve curriculum achievement is whrn many teachers have to attend activities outside school. This problem is also acknowledged by SA3 who is the senior assistant in P4’s school and ST3, senior teacher at P7 school. Interruptions occur due to insufficient teachers in the classroom. P1 and P2 stated that the phenomenon was a major obstacle to improve curriculum achievement, but they were unable to doing anything because they had to comply with the order from top management.

“... no coordination between the Department, District and Ministry becomes a barrier. When teachers have to attend the course ... this problem often happens. That's the main obstacle.... to do relief, there is not enough teacher. It's out of my control ...” (P1)

“ The biggest obstacles are routine job especially from outside, for example district programs... but then, I have no power to say no, have I!?” (P2)

“... sometimes what we plan to do is not feasible ... because so many teachers are out to get involved...” (SA3)

“Constraints ... many teachers go out for a course. Sometimes we have exam but at the same time teachers have to attend course ... sometimes seven, eight people are not in school at the same time... to do relief is very difficult. This is the main problem...” (ST3)

P5 faces the same problem and states that the only solution for the problem is teachers replace their teaching and learning session that they have left with another session at some other time. According to P7, with the relief, teacher may be able to ensure that their teaching and learning process are on the right track.

“... when teachers go for outstation, I encourage them to replace what they have left ” (P5)

“... there is a solution for teachers who are unable to implement teaching and leaning ... they need to prepare work materials and modules that can help students do their work during their absence.” (P7)

iii. Prioritizing Teaching and Learning

To ensure that teaching and learning is the priority, monitoring is a must for all principals. It includes supervising or observing teaching and learning activities in class, The purpose is to identify teaching and learning progress as well as to ensure that teachers and students are always in the classroom. Sometimes, principals will check students' exercise books and/or teachers' report book. Monitoring will involve all management committees. Results are documented. P6 stated that he provided a checklist to ensure that all teachers were supervised. Problems identified will be overcome. P7 likes patrolling at the end of the teaching and learning session to make sure that the students are in the classroom. If he does not have the opportunity, he will empower subordinates to do so.

“... I monitor teaching and learning. I will give my own opinion for improvement.” (P1)

“We monitor ... based on the result, we will do improvement ... the senior assistant or the senior teacher will carry out the task on my behalf if i am not around...” (P2)

“He will check teachers record book to make sure that the curriculum is completed. The monitoring is done by the principal, SA, and ST. We monitor and review student exercise books... We do have discussion, interview, and prepare a reports.” (ST1)

“In the meeting, principals will remind and emphasize that teachers must go to class on time, including relief class ...” (ST2)

“ ... if there is no teacher in the classroom, I'll call them... I supervise senior teachers and brilliant teachers. I have a checklist ... everyone cannot avoid from being supervised.” (P6)

“To ensure that teaching and learning is being prioritized, the principal will monitor the process himself...” (SA4)

“We make observation while teaching and learning in progress, to make sure all students are in class ... before school ends ... he walks around school. If he is not in school, he will empower senior assistant to do so...” (ST3)

This study found that principals often empower monitoring to the senior assistants and senior teachers. However, P1 says that he monitors his own because he dont want to face difficulties in the future. According to P2, he not just waiting for the report, but instead ran after teachers to get job done. P5 empower senior assistants and senior teachers to do the job because teachers feel uncomfortable being supervised by their own principal. ST2 says that frequent meetings and external jobs caused P5 fails to follow his own schedule, including to teach. However, P5 likes to walk around the school. P6 says that the weakness of principals' supervising by himself is he dont have time to do other job. However, a checklist and special files for monitoring result helps him to ensure that the task is being implemented. The report allow him to identify problems and take actions to overcome.

“... I empower my senior assistant to observe. But if I empower, I ll still ask for report... if we just leave it, it may cause a problem.” (P1)

“Every time when he met us, he would ask what was happening in our department, and does we get things done. He would ask for feedback, direct from the teachers incharge without waiting for official reports.” (ST1)

“... for monitoring, I hand over to senior assistant, because I can see teachers are not comfortable observed by principal... I ll make sure all senior assistants and senior teachers do the monitoring. I myself do not have the opportunity to supervise teaching and learning as scheduled ... so I empower 100% to the senior assistants.” (P5)

“... What she did was walking from one class to another. Sometimes he teaches ... but I think most of his time is for meetings... he does not have time to supervise himself... he has a lot of commitment...” (ST2)

“Sometimes teachers do not want me to supervise... they ask for senior teacher. So I compromised. It is very important to be supervised. I ll make special files for every teacher under me. I will ask for their progress, and if there is a problem, I will call. No teachers are missing in action because we have a checklist.” (P6)

iv. Emphasis Teamwork on Curriculum Implementation

Teamwork is emphasized by all principals. P1 also emphasizes on helping each other in carrying out teaching and learning. He himself has his own time table for teaching and learning and do the teaching alternately with his senior assistants or senior teachers. SA2 acknowledges that P3 encourages teamwork in carrying out school projects, while P4 and P7 in administration job. P7 also promote teamwork in teaching and learning by ensuring readiness among junior teachers to take over teaching and learning time of their seniors.

"We create a culture of help each other in implementing teaching and learning. For example, for Mathematics and Science. My partner to teach Mathematics and Science is my senior assistant. When I'm in school, I will go to class. Otherwise, the he has to help." (P1)

"He encouraged team work. In whatever project, he usually asked for a specific work group. We like to work in group ..." (PK2)

"He pointed out that teamwork is very important... he emphasize on having discussion... the team leader need to inform members of the team what to be done ..." (PK3)

"Teamwork is encouraged especially when it comes to the second session of the school..." (P7)

"Teamwork is emphasized, for example in finding a replacement for a maternity leave teacher ... Form One or Form Two teacher will take over form three teacher timetables while their schedule will be taken over by other teachers who may not be trained ... all to ensure that teaching and learning is running normally." (KB3)

Teamwork among new teachers with experient teachers tried to be nurtured by P2 by asking new teachers to learn from experient teachers, while experient teachers guide new teachers. Based on KB2, P5 encourages teachers to talk to each other to improve curriculum performance. P5's cooperation can be seen by observing his involvement in teachers' discussion.

"... this school has many experienced teachers... so I stressed on young teachers to learn from experienced teachers. Experienced teachers need to guide new teachers ... the role of the principal is a provoker! I will say "Why we are not there yet?"... I am the leader, I can ask my senior assistant to resolve the problems." (P2)

"... Normally, principals ask us to have discussion on how to improve the performance of the subjects or the relevant tasks, but sometimes principal also join the meeting..." (KB2)

P6 have a different principles in promoting teamwork. In each task, he empowers teachers to choose their own team members. He believes that feeling comfortable with each other is very important, therefore teachers can form their own group or choose their own team members.

"... we cannot work alone, must be in team. In every assignment, I give freedom for teachers to select their own

team members because I believes that they should feel comfortable with each other." (P6).

V. DISCUSSION

Findings shows that all principals have a high personality qualities, knowledge and skills to manage the curriculum. Besides being committed, they also focus on implementing programs that can improve curriculum achievement, ensuring teachers to give priority to their core business, promoting teamwork, and showing patience as a problem solver. Principals also explain why change is needed especially to those who are against change, working with teachers to make change and persistently monitor the change. In conclusion, principals with high personal qualities, knowledge and skills are able to demonstrate best practices in management.

According to Chan (2004), neglection of the curriculum by principals normally caused by their time constraint and because of being bounded by various tasks. From a positive point of view, the principals' empowerment shows that principals have confidence in subordinates' ability. The willingness of subordinates to help each other reflects that principals have succeeded in creating a teamwork culture.

Ramaiah (2002) said the diversity of task being a reason for principals to assign their task to their assistant. The inability to complete task because of time constraints is not only experienced by principals in Malaysia but in other countries as well. Principal management activities in United States and Korea are said to be interrupted and require principals to manage time effeciently as they have to spend time for their management responsibilities and others (Chung 1987; Peterson 1998). However, from all the interviewed principals, there are principals who admit that they are able to perform all tasks without any problem with the help from subordinates.

This is in line with Ramaiah (1999) who stated that managing time efficiently avoid being stucked in work load and Trump (1981) who stated that principals should be competent in instructional leadership. MOE has giving mandate to principals to allocate a minimum of 5 times a week for teaching. The fact that principals can carry out teaching responsibilities is reinforced by Mohd Suhaimi et al. (2007) who said that besides professional experience, principals' creativity will influence principals' leadership practice.

Principals' relationship with pupils will be better if they engage in classroom (Short and Spencer in Moses 2000). This is in line with the fact that in classroom, principals have the opportunity to approach students. By approaching students, principals are able to know students' needs. In his study, Amran (2002) found that the root cause of management pressure in school is due to problems in curriculum management. The study also conclude that loving, caring, responsible and friendly principals are the one who are approachable by students are the one who understands the needs of students. All principals face challenges to retain or enhance students' academic excellence.



However, responsible, initiative, innovative, proactive, competent, committed, creative, diligent and thoughtful principals can lead for strategic planning to improve curriculum achievement. Another problems faced by all principals is "disruption" by outsider ie. district, division and Ministry of Education. To overcome, teacher are being asked to replace their teaching at another time and preparing materials for the relief teacher.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, This study conclude that challenges face by principals in managing curriculum are lack of funds, lack of facilities, superiors' inteferece and teachers personal problems. Therefore, principals need support from superiors and subordinates. Principals also need to improve their personal qualities in order to address the challenges and problems and being able to do the best practices in management without rely heavily on others. In conclusion, this study shows that the human management knowledge and skills of principals are at a high level. Support from subordinates has enable principals to do their best in their management.

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