

# What Are the Best Practices of Award-Winning Primary School Principals in Cambodia?

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## Abstract

This multiple-case study aimed to explore the best practices among award-winning primary school principals in Cambodia. This study purposively selected five award-winning primary school principals to participate in an in-depth semi-structure interview. They received award-winning titles from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) between 2013 and 2019. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyse the data. The findings revealed that the award-winning primary school principals possessed unique best practices to lead schools successfully, including setting a shared vision, developing capacity for teachers and other staff, establishing effective partnership and relationship, leading teaching and learning, earning trust, linking policy to practice, and leading with personal quality. The findings discussed practical insights and solid policy implications for improved management and leadership of school principals in Cambodia.

*Keywords:* Primary school; School principal; Best practice; Leadership; Award-winning; Cambodia

## 1. Introduction

To date, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) and Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) have strongly emphasised the effectiveness of leadership and management of educational staffs to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and its Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023 (ESP 2019-2023) and toward 2030. As indicated in the SDG 4 target 4.c, one of its indicative strategies is to strengthen school leadership to improve teaching and learning at schools (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 35, 37). Moreover, the SDG 4 target 4.1 implied that:

to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes, it needs to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of institutions, school leadership and governance through greater involvement of communities, including young people and parents, in the management of schools. (p. 35, 37)

To align with the SDG 4, MoEYS has set the second key policy in ESP 2019-2023 and toward 2030 on ensuring effective leadership and management of educational staffs at all levels (MoEYS, 2019). To ensure the effective leadership and management, MoEYS has adopted the School Based Management (SBM) approach into various school reform models in Cambodia for a last decade. Emerging school models have adopted and implemented SBM in different fashions at secondary education. Those school models are commonly known as the Secondary Resource Schools (SRS), Secondary Education Improvement Project (SEIP) schools, and New Generation Schools (NGS). For instance, SEIP focuses on strengthening educational system for SBM, enhancing effective teaching, and promoting community's participation in accountability and autonomy (MoEYS, 2018b). SEIP schools currently increased to 130 (lower secondary) consuming approximately 130 000 students in 25 municipality and provinces (MoEYS, 2018b).

Moreover, NGS concerns about the standard of teaching and learning in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) at secondary education. It also aims at enhancing school administration system as an autonomous school (MoEYS, 2016b). However, NGS schools have been somewhat established for the last few years. The last report said there were seven NGS schools which have the capacity to consume only more than five thousand students (MoEYS, 2022a). This number is still small if it compares to the number of students in the whole country that also need the education quality. Furthermore, SRS is the exemplary school in leading the teaching and learning activities at the secondary education level through research study, pedagogical teaching and learning innovation, being able to produce supplementary teaching materials which are available in the local communities. SRS commit to share experiences and cooperate with broader educational community to continue teaching and learning and make the whole school change and improve (MoEYS, 2008). Even though, the number of SRS schools were very limited to 50 only around the country. Interestingly, the common aspect of the three school models above was the transformation. The normal public schools were selected and equipped with extra programs, infrastructures, and facilities to

become one model rather than creating a new separated school. School leadership and management of each model was changed while the infrastructure and school programs were also improved.

The review showed that primary education is the basic of education and public schools more than 53% provided primary education services (MoEYS, 2022b). However, the educational reform program for the last decade seemed to primarily focus on secondary education through developing various educational improvement projects. Therefore, there is a severe lack of research ground on school leadership and management at primary education level in the phases of educational reform. The practical experiences and best practices of school leadership and management are not well-addressed and documented. It has been found that to date, a few studies have been conducted on the system of educational leadership context and leadership in the post conflict Cambodia (see Kheang, O'Donoghue, & Clarke, 2018), school leadership training (see Morefield, 2012), school leadership the exercise of legitimate power in Cambodia (see Sorm & Gunbayi, 2018), the role of school principal for school development (see SOKENG, 2020). Furthermore, a recent study of Om (2022) indicated two important roles of school principals: 1) leading school and 2) managing schools. Directorship of being school leader was the core element that enabled the school principals to affectively play the two main roles, adding by principals' qualification and ability to translate theories, policies and best practices to actual practices in school leadership and management (see Om, 2022). Therefore, to fill this gap, the present study aims to explore the best practices of leadership and management among outstanding and awarded primary school principals in Cambodia.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 School leadership practices in the global context**

For over the last two decades, research on school leadership practices of successful school principals has remarkably and increasingly deliberated. It has been viewed as a dominant factor of successful schooling. Researchers, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders in the field of educational leadership have discussed the best practices of successful school leaders and tried to put forward common prototypes (e.g., Day & Leithwood, 2007; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008a; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Despite its prominent growth, there is no single or universal components of best practices of successful school principals.

According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003) and Leithwood (2005) there are three fundamental elements of successful school leadership practices, including setting vision, developing people, and developing organization. These findings were added another vital component termed “managing the teaching and learning program” by groups of authors (see Day & Leithwood, 2007; Day & Sammons, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2006; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008b). It has been observed that four common components of core practices of successful school leadership include building vision and setting direction, understanding and developing people, designing the organization, and managing the teaching and learning program (see Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020).

Moreover, a large volume of literature has shown that studies from different contexts have attempted to understand the best practices of successful school principals, including Europe (Møller et al., 2005; Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra, & Angelidou, 2011), Africa (Steyn, 2014), America (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2010; Leigh Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011), Australia (Drysdale, Goode, & Gurr, 2009; Drysdale & Gurr, 2011; Wang, Gurr, & Drysdale, 2016), Southeast Asia (Noman, Hashim, & Shaik-Abdullah, 2017; Raihani, 2008; Wang et al., 2016). For instance, the best practices of successful school leadership require several critical quality, including defining school vision and value, improving teaching and learning conditions, redesigning the organization, focusing on curriculum and teaching quality, building relationship inside and outside community, and focusing on value (Day & Sammons, 2013). Gurr (2015) believed that there are four core practices of successful principals, including setting direction, developing people, leading change, and improving teaching and learning. However, there are also other components, including such as strategic problem solving, building trust and visible presence in the school, building safe and secure environment, introducing productive forms of instruction to staffs, and the promoting equity, care, and achievement.

In the context of Australia, Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford (2006) showed that school principals could improve students’ learning outcomes by improving teaching and learning quality in accordance to their values and school’s vision and missions, building school capacity through personal, professional, organizational, and school-community involvement, working closely within the school context, and using evidence-based information to monitor and reflect for change and transformation.

Drysdale et al. (2009) claimed that the four main components of Leithwood et al. (2006) remain important to the success of school leadership. However, some conditions have been

proposed to take school performance to a higher level, including a change in school direction, various leadership approaches, and new improvement strategies (Drysdale et al., 2009). Moreover, it is important to have a devoted and skilful principal to overcome the challenges (Drysdale et al., 2009). Furthermore, Drysdale and Gurr (2011) discussed three factors crucial for successful school leadership, including outcome-teaching and learning, school capacity building, and other influences driven by the school context such as vision, mission, culture, structure, people, and process, which are intervened by the personal qualities and competency of the school principals.

In the United States (US), Crum et al. (2010) found five central components that made school principals become successful, including leadership with data, honesty and relationship, fostering of ownership and collaboration, recognition and development of leadership, and instructional awareness and involvement. Similarly, the common practices in the US middle schools that helped school principals to lead effectively were found as sharing leadership, facilitating professional development, leading with instructional orientation, and acting openly and honestly (Leigh Sanzo et al., 2011).

Furthermore, it has been found that there are some unique and noticeable characteristics of school leadership practices in Asian countries. For instance, in China, school principals are required to understand the school system and a good decision maker following a top-down decision-making approach (Wong, 2007). Moreover, the Indonesian school principals are to embrace Muslim values and cultural values (Raihani, 2008). Previous studies have shown that the success of school leadership rely on the different contexts and individual school climates.

According to a case study by Noman et al. (2017), outstanding school principals in Malaysia were found to hold five components of school leadership practices, including giving specific goals and targets, improving academic achievement, developing teacher and staff members, creating meaningful coalition, and creating a positive, and conducive school climate responding to specific school context. Another reflection from school principals in Singapore also showed that the success of school principals was determined by their personal quality, beliefs, and values. School principals could improve school capacity by redesigning school structure, promoting professional capacity for both teaching and non-teaching staffs, developing partnership with stakeholders, including internal and external school community, and growing their leadership based on the legacy from the previous principals (Wang et al., 2016).

In some other contexts, successful school principals need to adhere to their cultural beliefs and values that guide school leadership and strategies, including the ability to fully develop school vision, set up school strategies, build capacity, and establish an extensive network to foster school improvement (Raihani, 2008).

Overall, the components determining successful school leadership practices in different parts of the world appear to vary in common although the contexts of the schools might slightly or majorly differ.

## **2.2 Awarding system for outstanding school principals in Cambodia**

In Cambodia, to strengthen effective school leadership, MoEYS has issued various policies and projects to support school principals. For example, school leadership training program for upper-secondary school principal (MoEYS, 2018a), standard of school principal (MoEYS, 2017), and various school principal training packages (MoEYS, 2009) have been deemed as crucial means for effective educational leadership development. Especially, a remarkable initiative of MoEYS was the development of awarding system for outstanding school principals, which was established in 2013. It aims to ultimately promote effective school leadership and management at the school level in line with the second key education policy 2019-2023 (MoEYS, 2016a). Awardees were selected based on a complete set of specific criteria.

The awarding system consists of ten core evaluation indicators, including basic qualification, working skills, ability of planning, leading teaching and learning, professional development, school-based management, ensuring school accountability, communication with communities, professional code of conduct, and result-based management. Each indicator is measured by the evaluation criteria consisting of sixty elements. The result of the evaluation is ranged from the top to the lower in five different stages by different committees, including school-cluster committee, district committee, provincial committee, and national committee. The processes of selection are started at the individual school of the candidate. Even though, each committee is invited to visit the candidates' schools accordingly and thoroughly check based on their evaluation tool. After receiving the report on the result of evaluation and selection from provincial committee, the national committee will double check on the result by visiting the field and meeting directly with individual candidate. The awardees are acknowledged by the minister's announcement.

For the last decade, it has been observed that the awarded outstanding school principals has become well-known and acknowledged among educators, leaders, principals, and relevant stakeholder as great successful school leaders. However, the model of best practices of those school principals has never been documented or shared widely among practitioners, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employed a multiple case study approach by focusing on the emergence of an in-depth description and analysis of each case as suggested by Creswell (2013). It aimed to explain the current phenomenon and how or why a social phenomenon works (Yin, 2018). A case study emphasised the “detailed inquiry of a unit of analysis as a bounded system (the case) over time within its context” (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). Therefore, the current study explained the core values of best practices and how it worked among outstanding school principals in the context of Cambodia.

#### **3.1 Samples**

Five out of twelve primary school principal awardees were purposively selected to participate in the study. The participants were recruited from a group of primary school principals who have received awards as outstanding primary school principals between 2013 and 2019. They represented five different public primary schools from different municipalities and provinces in Cambodia. Three of them were from three primary schools located in three rural districts of three different provinces. Moreover, one of them was from a primary school located in an urban area, and the last one was from a primary school located in Phnom Penh. To comply with the confidentiality, their names were given as pseudonyms. The participant in this study were named as participant from school 1, participant from school 2, participant from school 3, participant from school 4, and participant from school 5.

#### **3.2 Instrumentation**

To collect the data, an interview guide was developed. The interview guide was carefully designed for a face-to-face interview through semi-structure interview method at the five selected primary schools. The interview guide was widely discussed and developed under the light of previous studies, especially the elements related to the core practices of successful school leadership by Leithwood et al. (2006). The interview questions were grouped into four

main themes, namely setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program.

### **3.3 Procedure**

The current study sought for official approval from MoEYS to collect data from the five selected awarded school principals in the five different provinces and cities in Cambodia. After the approval was granted, the data collection was conducted twice. The first field visit was in May 2018. The researcher interviewed an awarded school principal to have a comprehensive understanding of the topic and pilot the interview guide. Based on the first field visit, the questionnaire was minorly revised for the second field visit. The second data collection was conducted with four awarded school principals in January 2019 respectively.

This study employed thematic analysis to analyse the data from the interview with four main themes indicated in the section above. The completed interview guides were recorded and transcribed. With thematic analysis method, the patterns were systematically identified, analysed, and described within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Therefore, the data of this study were synthesised and analysed by generating the initial codes and categories to develop the emergent themes. The data analysis process involved five steps. Firstly, the researcher repeatedly read the data to familiarize its contents. Secondly, the codes were highlighted to indicate the data patterns. Thirdly, integrating codes and shorting the themes were conducted. Next, the researcher reviewed the sorted themes whether they were relevant to initial themes, namely setting a shared vision, developing teachers and staff, establishing effective partnership and relationship, leading teaching, and learning programmes, earning trust, recognizing policy and context, and leading with high personal quality. Lastly, each of the emerging themes was presented and discussed in the following sections.

## **4. Findings and discussions**

### **4.1 Setting a shared vision**

The current study found that principals recognized the school goals, school capacity, and the needs of local communities in their children's education. All educational staffs at schools bared responsibilities to represent and provoke the common interest, challenges, responsibilities, and relevant stakeholders of the communities. Beyond the school, the award-winning school principals knew that the effort of parents and communities had a significant influence on school development and their children's education. Active participation of all



community members played a crucial role to solve common problems and enable schools to provide quality education to children.

In line with those findings, it reflected that a shared vision of award-winning school principals in this context referred to a vision that school principals and other educational staffs communally established and accomplished it as part of their schools' endeavours. Leading schools with a shared vision was commented as a crucial leadership aspect to lead their schools to achieve the country's educational goals and visions. A shared vision was not set by only principals. It required all school-community members' voices and decisions. For instance, a participant from the school 1 said that 'we need a shared vision... I conduct meetings with committees, so we use shared ideas... because we need to solve them out together...'.

A shared vision was defined as a clear vision for schools within its contexts. When a shared vision was set, everyone would work hard to collectively achieve it. School principals were the good listeners for all members of the school communities, teachers, parents, students, and other relevant stakeholders. The principals led them to share their ideas and encouraged them to participate in all school activities, especially a school development plan. At the beginning of every academic year, school principals conducted meetings teachers, other educational staff, parents, and school supporting committees (SSC). Most of school activities, for example school development plan, were proposed and discussed in-depth. As a result, school visions and goals were set. The achievements and outcomes set school goals and visions resulted from and belonged to every member of schools and communities, not only for school principals.

On the other hand, it was found that a good decision-making in leading and setting a share vision was significantly influenced by school principals' knowledge, experiences, and their own educational philosophy as a participant from the school 5 said '...leadership was based on specific point of views, missions, and plans used as a leading path'. Basically, a shared vision was found to be more likely influenced by school principals' philosophy that was consistent with what Bennis (2009) pointed out that 'leadership without perspectives and point of views isn't leadership—and of course it must be your own perspectives, your own point of views'. Moreover, the findings also denoted that school achievements depended on the strength and involvement of teachers, other educational staff, students, and local communities.

Therefore, setting a shared vision has been deemed as one of the essential leadership and management aspects that need integrating into school principals' practices. A participant

from the school 3 illustrated that “first of all, we need to have a specific vision, ... shared vision, if I am not here, others will proceed with our work and ensure sustainability of our school...”. This finding was also maintained by a few international and local studies by Day (2011); Leithwood et al. (2006); Leithwood et al. (2008a); Leithwood and Riehl (2003); Noman et al. (2017).

#### **4.2 Developing capacity for teachers and other staff**

To build a healthy and strong school foundation, it is impossible to avoid developing the quality and capacity of teachers and other educational staff so that they are productive in their tasks. Teachers have a direct influence on students’ learning outcomes. This study found that the award-winning school principals always considered taking care of staff’s well-being and promoting their career professional development. The school principals in this study created an effective working environment to ensure an opportunity for their teachers and staff to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Teachers and staff were encouraged to upgrade their qualification to higher level. A principal from the school 4 maintained that ‘We always meet and encourage our staff to pursue their study and build working capacity.... The quality of our student depends on the quality of teachers. They can teach students with better quality’. The influence of technological advancement also forced teachers to update skills for solving current students’ leaning issues. A school principal from the school 4 added that ‘All of my staff went to a university to get a degree and extra skills such as IT, English language.... Nobody stops learning here. I play as a role model... before, I was a teacher in Teacher Cadre C, but now I am in A category’.

There were different ways of promoting staff’s capacity such as pursuing a degree at a university, learning from their peers in technical working groups, taking specific training courses, joining training and workshop, and conducting field-visit for research. Most teachers in their schools went to public and private universities and registered for their specialised subjects. A principal from the school 5 claimed that ‘... we cannot stay the same, while the other countries in the region get their teachers ‘capacity higher. ...now 90% of my teachers and staff are holding bachelor’s degrees. And, next year, this number will be increased to 100%.’

Moreover, the award-winning school principals developed an internal mechanism to promote teachers’ capacity to improve teaching and learning by sharing their knowledge and experience. For instance, they were requested to regularly lead technical-working-group

meeting in schools. This working groups provided an opportunity for teachers to help and share knowledge, experiences, and best practices with their peers. All the five school principals in this study were claimed to establish a supportive learning environment for teachers and staff. Furthermore, the school principals played a role as a mediator to coordinate and harmonize educational staff's communication by developing a good relationship among teachers and staff. The school principals created positive environment for staff of schools to work closely together and mainly focus on students' learning outcomes. A school principals maintained that

Before I start my principal job here, ...the school had problems among the staff. ... different groups and challenge each other. ...conflict occurred. ...now I try to facilitate and get them to work together. The main strategies for solving conflict depended on my sacrifice, energy, understanding, communication, and transparency...  
(A school principal from the school 4)

All award-winning school principals were reported to comprehensively know their staff's profile and care more about staffs' needs in the workplace. A school principal from the school 4 continued in the conversation that 'we care about our staff, as example, when they have problems, we always support them in terms of material and finance depending on what we can do for them'. Furthermore, knowing teachers and other staff well was beneficial for school principals to assign tasks effectively in line with their potential.

Previous studies on successful school principals emphasized on developing staff as one of key factors for successful school leadership (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2008a; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Noman et al., 2017). School principals need to work collaboratively with teachers and other staff to empower them to make a decision in an interconnected manner (Leigh Sanzo et al., 2011).

### **4.3 Establishing effective partnership and relationship**

The award-wining principals in the study knew that building good relationship with different partners was a key factor helping them to promote school improvement. The school principals used various strategies to develop good relationship among school communities through communication with relevant stakeholders such as teachers, parents, monks, school support communities, and local authorities to support school activities. The school principals believed that the sustainable school development did not rely only on schools or support from the government, but it largely depended on the contribution and involvement from local

communities and relevant stakeholders. They maintained that school development could not be separated from local communities, authority, donors, and NGOs. A school principal from the school 1 mentioned that ‘this success is not from only me. I am only a leader here, but it was from the participation of all relevant stakeholders such as local authorities, parents, communities, and our teachers...’. Most of award-winning school principals relied on their relationship to promote education quality of their schools. However, they struggled to get all relevant stakeholders involving in their activities.

...First, I got challenge with parents and communities, but now it is okay... they participate. My strategy is to make them believe and trust in my leading. Firstly, they trust in my effort for their students’ learning.... second, they saw the achievement in school. They see they children become good students, good school environment... and principal was awarded then they started to come with us.... school support committee always support my activities in the school (A school principal from the school 3).

All school principals defined the main features of school partnership for sustainable school development as a three-side relationship: schools (principals, teachers, other staff, and students), local community members (parents, school support committees, religious organizations, donors, and NGOs), and local authorities (local administration and offices of education). The strong connection among these stakeholders would make schools ensure better students’ learning outcomes. A school principal from the school 5 explained that

My education strategy is called VPS strategy; it means that Village, Pagoda and School. Village, who are in village? community, families, parents..... School, who are in the school? teachers, directors, students...Pagoda, represent religious units. all religion educates people to be good and they also support school education, too (A school principal from the school 5).

These findings were consistent with Day (2011) who mentioned that school principals were supposed to strengthen community by creating links and collaborate the whole school community to promote collective responsibility and contribute to the quality education service.

#### **4.4 Leading teaching and learning programs**

A significant role in school leadership and management is to promote students learning outcomes to meet the goals set by MoEYS. The findings showed that the award-winning principals were engaged in two main practices to promote student’s learning outcomes. First,

they focused on curriculum implementation and development. They developed flexible curriculum by integrating local contents, including work skills, foreign languages, ICT, and life skills that might be helpful for students in their livelihood. Extracurricular activities were also added to the main course outline. It depended on the requirement of each local area. For example, the schools located in tourism sites might need to learn more on different foreign languages. Second, it was about improving quality of teachers and teaching by encouraging career professional development, conducting regular inspection on teaching practices, giving feedbacks, and holding regular technical meetings. This study found that a school principal from the school 3 claimed that ‘...we work hard with technical work by providing technical meetings, sharing teaching practices, classroom management skills, experiment... we learn new teaching methods and apply with our students...’

The school principals needed to strengthen effective teaching methods with new teaching methods and textbooks. For example, a school principal started to guide teachers to integrate new technology into their teaching such as utilizing slide presentations, doing research, and upgrading their knowledge and teaching techniques by using social media. This finding strongly supported by various studies on successful principals (e.g. Drysdale et al., 2009; Gurr, 2015; Leigh Sanzo et al., 2011; Leithwood et al., 2006; Noman et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016). However, this practice was found to contrast to Morefield (2012). It was found that by adopting this practice, it was hard for Cambodian school principals to think as they were considered as instructional leaders with very little knowledge and skills to share with teachers in terms of teaching and learning methods.

#### **4.5 Earning trust**

Trust in Khmer (Cambodian language) is called “*tom nuk chhet*”, which was commonly used by the school principals participated in this study. To become a successful school principal, he/she needed to primarily earn trust from people around them. The findings showed that the award-winning school principals in the current study started to build trust among relevant stakeholders if they resumed management position, including their own family, teachers, other staff, parents, and members of communities. All school principals maintained similarly that earning trust was the main root of support and participation generating from school community members, especially parents. However, they denoted that changing people mind believing in their new ways of leading was tough. A school principal from the school 5 mentioned that ‘changing traditional ways of leading was not easy.... thousands of problems, I meet before, I

earn trust (*tom nuk chhet*) from the school communities....’.

According to the findings, the award-winning school principals used different strategies to earn trust and belief from people around. It required school principals’ great effort and sacrifice. The school principals spent almost all their time to work for schools. The school principal used all their potential to lead their schools with fairness, transparency, carefulness, good communication, accountability, participation, and opening to all relevant stakeholders.

Moreover, the findings showed that to earn trust, it started from the principals sacrificed for public interest and school benefits that make them the best models to attract teachers, students, parents, and the communities to involve in school development. The school principals were found to believe that trust was a strong bridge for building both external and internal relationship between school members and local community members. When communities were connected and worked together, the school performance was promoted, and it provided more benefits to students’ learning outcomes. Each school principal was reported to have different strategies to build trust. A school principal noted that

My strategy is to make them believe and trust in my leading. Firstly, they trust in my effort for the children’s learning... second, they saw the achievement in school... see their children got good result, good school environment.... principal got some award then they start to come with us. They always support my activities in the school (A school principal from the school 3).

Moreover, the findings revealed that it required a long time for school principals to promote the understanding among school leaders, communities, parents, teachers, other staff, and relevant stakeholders. Many attempts were fails, but the school principals reported to never give up.

....We need a long time to understand each other not just one time or short time.  
...then to build trust (*tom nuk chhet*) we need time. I need to take it step by step before they believe and trust in my leadership.... I sacrifice all my time...I serve as a good model (A school principal from the school 2).

Earning trusting represented a vital element of successful school principals. It has been deemed as the hardest task for school principals. These findings were also in line with some previous studies such as Leithwood and Riehl (2003), Ramalho, Garza, and Merchant (2010) and Day (2011) who found that trust was a part of successful school leadership.

#### **4.6 Linking policy to practice**

To improve the leadership to respond to the new education reform agenda, the school principals were required to transform their schools by linking policy goals and vision to actual practices. The findings showed that although the changes were important, there were two significant aspects that ensured the success implementation. The award-winning principals were primarily required to be capable of understanding and translating educational policies and guidelines for practices. A school principal from the school 5 maintained that ‘...we need to understand the educational policies, laws, regulations, and guidelines of the Provincial Department of Education (PoE) .... then we develop our own school development plan so that we can implement it successfully’. In this sense, award-winning principals accepted that the policy guidelines were quite broad and sometimes not flexible for an effective implementation at school level. It was risky for the school principals to decide without fully understanding the implications and applications of educational policies. A school principal from the school 5 admitted that

I met four storms...my first storm was the challenge to education offices (PoE)...on our way, we did not follow their guidance, but we also archived the goals. They needed... you understand that...they were not happy? The second storm was my staff who were not happy with my new reform...The third storm was parents who never understand the new ways of teaching their children receive...and the fourth storm was my wife who was not happy with my scarify and workload.

The school principals acknowledged that school characteristics were not the same in terms of size (e.g., number of teachers, staff, students) and locations (e.g., rural, urban area or town/city). Outside of the schools, there were parents and local communities that the school principals needed to be aware such as their socioeconomic and culture. The school principals could effectively implement the policy and weight between the needs of the schools and local communities. The effective implementation relied on the school principals’ flexibility. For instance, all school principals maintained that schools could not make any fundraising activities directly from students or parents. Instead, the role of SSCs was crucial to mobilize resources from the communities to support schools.

A school principal from the school 1 claimed that ‘they (parents) help and support our school, but some from poor family also complain. ...but we talk with them. We never force

them to participate. It is voluntarily... we understand about that (family living condition) ...'. There was a little difference from schools located in the city where most of the family had a better understanding of their children's education. This finding was also consistent with Leithwood (2005). It was explained that crucial external factors that may influence on successful school principals was locations, school sizes, and school status.

#### **4.7 Leading with personal quality**

An important key indicator influencing successful leadership practices was the personal quality of school principals. The award-winning principals' characteristics were shaped through their hardship that they experienced throughout their lives. They led their schools with strong commitment, values, honesty, patience, hard-work, self-confidence, care for the public interest, and especially ownership. All award-winning school principals described their leading and managing job as a time-consuming job that required them to stay in schools for a long hour on regular basis. They were the highly committed persons and worked hard to fulfil country's educational goals and visions. A school principal expressed his commitment as 'here, there are many challenges, but we need a strong will and commitment. ...whatever we decide to do, we will make it happen. We will never change ...'.

The findings showed that school principals' characteristic was one of the key successes of school principals' job. Previous studies maintained that the characteristics of successful school principals were related to their personal qualities, beliefs, and values which determined their leadership practices (Gurr et al., 2006; Ng, 2016; Noman et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016; Wendel, Hoke, & Joekel, 1993).

### **5. Conclusion**

Overall, with the seven key best practice quality of primary school principals, including setting a shared vision, developing capacity for teachers and other staff, establishing effective partnership and relationship, leading teaching, and learning, earning trust, linking policy to practice, and leading with personal quality. The school principals are required to identify the specific situation of teachers, staff, parents, local community, socio economic contexts, culture and even policy and/or political aspects before applying new concepts or introducing reform. Building a strong school community and good partnership with local people were to ensure sustainable school development. Even though, the award-winning primary principals were highly considered to be different from other organizational leaders as they needed to have extra



ability in leading teaching and learning programs directly. School principals play a central role in creating the strong belief and trust among the school communities. The successful practices consist of trust from the school community through empowering teacher, staff, and local people to cooperate and participate in school activities. The last aspect of the best practices was influenced by personal quality of the principals who come up with values, belief, strong commitment, sacrifice, patience, and independence. These exceptional characteristics influenced teachers, staff, and the school communities, which result in the achievement of the school goals. These findings would be the basic information for policymaker, practitioners, and relevant stakeholders to improve and implement policies in educational leadership including sharing the best practices with all school principals.

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