

Instructional Leadership Practices in Under-Enrolled Rural Schools in Miri, Sarawak

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Abstract: This study focuses on teachers' perceptions of their headmasters' instructional leadership practices in under-enrolled rural schools of Sarawak, Malaysia. It also focuses on the issues and challenges faced by the headmasters in practicing instructional leadership roles as demanded by the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. The mixed method research employed the Instructional Leadership Model by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). The quantitative data was collected through a survey method using 'The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) adapted from Hallinger (2008) and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS IBM Version 22.0 software. The qualitative data from interviews were coded thematically and analysed to support the survey results. The study found the level of the headmasters' instructional leadership in the three dimensions as "medium high" (mean = 3.57, SD = 0.90). There is a statistically significant difference between male and female teachers' perceptions regarding their headmasters' instructional leadership practices. This study also revealed the headmasters' instructional leadership practices as "medium high" level among under-enrolled rural schools. However, the issues and challenges faced by the schools made it more difficult for them to improve their academic qualities.

Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Under-enrolled Schools, Rural Schools

1. Introduction

Our education and learning structures have always been tuned to the constant changes in education, parallel to the digital and technological needs of the global world market. Indeed, these changes had always been a challenge to our school leaders, teachers, and students. Our school leaders and school administrators are responsible for spearheading changes while focusing on the pursuance of excellence and accomplishment on the education front. It has been acknowledged that the responsibilities and the roles of school leaders have become more complex and challenging throughout the years. For schools to progress academically, school leadership plays a crucial role (Hoy & Hoy, 2006; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Hallinger, 2011). For a developing nation such as Malaysia, the aim and plans of achieving a developed nation status is stipulated in the National Transformation *TN50* agenda and the national education system. The eventual success of the vision, mission, and goals prescribed in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) would ultimately depend on the principals and headmasters' administration of schools in Malaysia, as they are deemed as the most significant

influencing factors (Azuraida & Oliver, 2016). The role of school leaders is among the shifts that is highlighted and documented in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025). The shift demands headmasters and principals to be high performing leaders. Based on the Blueprint (pp. 38), about 55 per cent of school principals or headmasters do not have proper or preparatory training as school leaders during their first 3 years of appointments. In other words, they were not fully prepared to function as school leaders. This issue must be addressed swiftly to ensure that the objectives and the aspirations stated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) are realised.

Headmasters should not only focus on their tasks as school managers, but they also need to focus on being instructional leaders in their schools. School leaders play a pivoting role in paving for generations that are of calibre, knowledgeable, hi-tech, competitive, skilful, high moral values and able to contribute towards the development and the progress of the nation (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013-2025). Instructional leaders should not only concern of teaching and learning activities in the classroom, they also should give emphasis on students' learning outcomes. Moreover, the complexities of today's world even require students as future workers, to be equipped with problem solving skills, technological literacy, and logical thinking (Mat Salleh, Md Nasir & Ismail, 2020). Past literature (Day et al., 2011; Young et al., 2013 cited in Singh, 2018; Nurul Huda & Azlin, 2017; Mohd Yusri & Aziz, 2014; Ghavifekr, Chellapan, Sukumaran & Subramaniam, 2014) showed that school leaders who practice instructional leadership improve students' achievement, i.e. there is a positive correlation between instructional leadership and academic achievement of the schools. There is a need to see the level of correlation in the context of schools with low- or under-enrolment.

1.2 Problem Statement

In Malaysia there are many schools with low enrolment, especially in the states of Sabah and Sarawak. The performance of these schools especially those under-enrolled rural students in the Primary School Assessment Test (*UPSR*) still shows poor achievements, more so for rural schools in Sarawak. Sarawak ranked 13 out of the 15 states and the Federal Territory, after Labuan and Sabah. Given the large number of under-enrolled rural primary schools in Sarawak, it is imperative to improve the academic performance of the schools and students. Based on the *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah*, a standardised test taken when pupils are in Year Six, these under-enrolled schools in rural Sarawak were often categorised as '*low achieving schools*' mainly due to the students' weaknesses in grasping basic skills at the primary school level (Abdul Said et al., 2014). Therefore, the primary schools in the rural areas may fail to attain the National Transformation 2050 (*TN50*) objectives if this issue is not resolved.

According to Hallinger & Murtphy (1985), the success of a school depends on the ability of its leaders to influence. Similarly, how a school leader managed the school can vehemently affect teachers teaching skills that are linked to many schools' improvement stories. If instructional leadership is seen as the answer to improve students' achievement, why are we still seeing inconsistent school academic performance among under-enrolled rural schools in Sarawak? Is the failure of these under-enrolled rural schools connected to the level of instructional leadership role of the headmasters or are there any other contributing factors? Surely, school heads are well equipped with the knowledge and training they had attended to enable them to manage their schools. They are regarded as the agent of change and development outcomes while school students' academic achievement is the barometer for success in school leadership. Notwithstanding that, headmasters are expected to be fully equipped and mentally prepared to handle the task that goes with the job as school administrator and strengthen their leadership capabilities to achieve the prescribed set of objectives based on our national education philosophy (*Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan*) and the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025). So, why are the under-enrolled rural schools not performing academically well and consistent? What could be the problem that hinders these schools to be academically successful? Could the headmasters be burden with task and responsibilities that they have no time to perform their instructional roles in school. More so when many of the students of under-enrolled schools in the rural of Sarawak are left to ponder about their future as headmasters' instructional leadership practices of these schools have yet to be fully ascertained and assessed. With the poor showing of many of these under-enrolled rural schools in public exams, it is necessary to look at the issue seriously. The issue of low achievement in academic has been one that beleaguered under-enrolled rural schools in Sarawak as they represent nearly half of the number of primary schools in Sarawak. Although the link between instructional leadership of

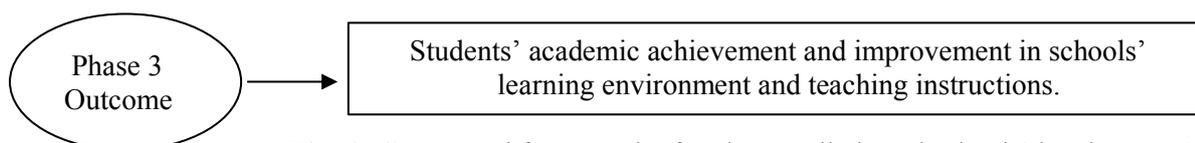


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework of under-enrolled rural schools' headmasters' instructional leadership.

2. Literature Review

Instructional leadership practices are still relevant and still contributing to school excellence in this 21st century (Hallinger, 2005). Instructional leadership has a positive impact on student achievement since the headmaster has immense influence over teachers, curriculum, teaching techniques and students (Coelli & Green, 2011). The studies of instructional leadership from past literature usually linked school effectiveness with the practice of school leaders who practised instructional leadership thereby improving the outcome of students' academic achievement. The academic achievement of a school depends on the quality of the teachers' teaching instruction and school leadership. The study on instructional leadership can be divided into 4 types of studies (Blasé & Blasé, 2000). These studies all linked instructional leadership with its (i) impact and effect on students and schools (ii) teachers and curriculum development activities (iii) impact on teachers' commitment and participation and (iv) effect on students and teachers.

The study on instructional leadership and commitment in Malaysia is increasingly important since the implementation of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) which is considered as a part of a new dimension in the Malaysian educational system. The role of the headmasters and principals as an instructional leader has been the focus of many, particularly the Ministry of Education because of their significant characteristics in producing effective schools. Likewise, internationally, there had been a growing number of researches done on instructional leadership as it is one of the pre-requisites to the study of educational management and administration (Mohd Muniam & Norlela Ali, 2015). In general, a study by researchers on instructional leadership is to link instructional leadership practices with a positive outcome to the students and schools itself. This includes linking instructional leadership practices with excellence and effectiveness of schooling, student achievement and increased students' achievement in certain subjects. In addition, the instructional leadership practices demonstrated by school headteachers are deemed integral in driving schools as learning organisations and towards becoming effective schools (Lim & Singh, 2020).

There had been numerous studies on instructional leadership both inside and outside of the country. Many of these studies were either qualitative or quantitative which put the focus on the principals as instructional leaders to see their relationship with students' academic achievement and focus has been on schools in the urban areas. Moreover, their practicality and application to local setting such as under-enrolled rural schools in Sarawak may not fit, taking into consideration the local culture, and surrounding. On the other hand, the researchers felt that there is a need for a study to gauge the instructional practice of headmasters' serving in under-enrolled rural schools in Sarawak based on the teachers' perception; as this type of study which gives focus to rural under-enrolled schools in the interior of Sarawak is rare. This warrants a study parallel to the need and context of under-enrolled rural schools which is important to clearly identify the issues besieging these schools especially on instructional leadership and low academic performance.

3. Methodology

A mixed method research design was used for this study. A mixed methods research design is mixing both quantitative and qualitative research and methods in a single study to understand a research problem (Creswell, 2009). The target population that participated in this study consisted of school teachers and headmasters serving in under-enrolled schools, in the district of Miri, Sarawak. The respondents were serving actively in the twelve such schools in the district. Based on the *List of under-enrolled rural schools in Sarawak* retrieved from the Sarawak Education Department (JPNS) website, these schools had similar characteristics. The demographic data contained in the surveys questionnaire

of this study formed the independent variables for this study. From 132 survey questionnaires sent to the twelve under-enrolled rural schools, the researcher was able to get back about 124 survey questionnaires. Thus, there are 124 respondents ($N=124$) for the quantitative study.

This study has used different instruments to obtain quantitative and qualitative data. It uses two methods of data collection, the survey method and interviews. To collect quantitative data, the *PIMRS* questionnaire (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012) was used and to collect qualitative data, interview instruments adapted from Yunita (2015) were used. The instrument has five main questions, with accompanying sub-questions each. The data collected was then analysed using Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (*SPSS*) Version 22. To test the significant differences between genders in this study, *t*-test was used. The *t*-test, which is a type of inferential statistic, was chosen to provide an analysis that goes beyond just describing the numbers provided by data from a sample but seeks to draw conclusions about the significant difference of these numbers among populations. The Mean Score Interpretation Table constructed by Nunnally & Bernstein (1994) was used in this study to measure the mean score of the respondents' questionnaires. For qualitative data analysis, the process of data qualitative analysis involves making sense of the text data obtained during the interviews with the respondents. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting analyses to identify the emerging themes, going farther into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. The data collected for this study went through several processes based on Creswell's (2009) qualitative data analysis.

4. Results

The results of this study are discussed based on the research questions stipulated.

4.1 What is the perception level of teachers towards the instructional leadership practices of headmasters in under-enrolled rural schools based on the ten functions of instructional leadership?

Based on the overall available data, the perception of the teachers serving in under-enrolled rural primary schools of Sarawak, the teachers perceived their headmasters' instructional leadership practices functions in all the ten functions at "*medium-high*". In Table 1, the teachers regarded the dimension of "*communicating the school goals*" by the headmasters produces the highest mean score ($M=3.84$, $SD=0.81$). The second highest function from the perception of the teachers was the headmaster's dimension of "*framing the school goals*" with a mean score of ($M=3.80$, $SD=0.81$). The lowest of the mean score from among all the ten dimensions as perceived by the teachers was the function of headmasters "*providing incentives for teachers*" as the mean score is at ($M=3.27$, $SD=1.05$).

Table 1. Mean interpretation of teachers' level of perception of headmasters' instructional leadership practices in the ten functions.

| Function | Mean | SD | Mean Interpretation |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|---------------------|
| Framing the School Goal | 3.80 | 0.81 | Medium High |
| Communicating the School Goal | 3.84 | 0.84 | Medium High |
| Supervising & Evaluating Instruction | 3.57 | 0.80 | Medium High |
| Coordinating the Curriculum | 3.63 | 0.84 | Medium High |
| Monitoring School Progress | 3.61 | 0.94 | Medium High |
| Protecting Instructional Time | 3.53 | 0.94 | Medium High |
| Maintaining High Visibility | 3.31 | 1.08 | Medium High |
| Providing Incentives for Teachers | 3.27 | 1.05 | Medium High |
| Promoting Professional Development | 3.58 | 0.94 | Medium High |
| Providing Incentives for Learning | 3.56 | 0.96 | Medium High |

Based on Table 2, the teachers ($N=124$) serving in the under-enrolled rural primary school in Sarawak had rated the dimension of “*Defining the School Mission*” as the most dominant dimension of their headmasters' instructional leadership practices within the “*sometimes*” range with the mean score of ($M=3.82$, $SD=0.83$). The dimension of “*Managing the School Instructional Programme*” was set as the second most dominant dimension of their headmasters' instructional leadership practices within the “*sometimes*” range with the mean score of ($M=3.60$, $SD=0.93$). The lowest instructional leadership dimension practised by the headmasters as perceived by the teachers is in the dimension of “*Developing the School Learning Climate*” with a mean score of ($M=3.31$, $SD=0.95$) which is at the “*sometimes*” level or in the “*medium-high*”.

Table 2. Most dominant dimension of instructional leadership practices of headmasters' in under-enrolled rural primary school from the teachers' perception

| Dimension | N | Mean | SD |
|---|-----|------|------|
| Defining the School Mission | 124 | 3.82 | 0.83 |
| Managing the School Instructional Programme | 124 | 3.60 | 0.93 |
| Developing the School Learning Climate | 124 | 3.31 | 0.95 |

4.2 Is there any significant difference in perception between male and female teachers of under-enrolled rural schools regarding their headmasters' instructional leadership practices?

To answer this research question, an independent t -test was used. An alpha level (p) of .05 was set for this analysis. Based on Table 3 an independent t -test and the Levene's Test output showed that the degrees of freedom (df) is at (122) while the group means are statistically significantly different because of the value in the "Sig. (2-tailed)" row is less than 0.05. The t -value is (2.963), while the $p = .004$ ($p < 0.05$) which indicated a significant difference between male and female teachers in perception regarding their headmasters' instructional leadership role. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternatives hypothesis is accepted. T -test analysis showed that there is a significant difference in perceptions of male and female teachers serving in under-enrolled rural schools of Sarawak on their headmasters' instructional leadership practices.

Table 3. Independent Samples t -test for significant differences between genders

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|------|-------|----------------|------------------------------|-----------------|---|--------|---------|
| | Sig. | t | df | Sig.(2-tailed) | Mean Diff | Std. Error Diff | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | |
| | | | | | | | Lower | Upper | |
| Equal variances assumed | .67 | .073 | 2.963 | 122 | .004 | 1.8559 | .62629 | .61619 | 3.09578 |
| Equal variances not assumed | | | 3.021 | 12 | .003 | 1.85598 | .61445 | .63955 | 3.07241 |

4.3 What are the challenges and issues faced by the under-enrolled rural primary school headmasters in practising their role as instructional leader in their schools?

The challenges of administering under-enrolled rural schools showed how much they were neglected in terms of basic access to proper facilities school. It is difficult for the headmasters when even most basic amenities are not available to pupils and teachers and a ‘thorn on their side’. As

lamented by a headmaster respondent, “...as you can see, we also faced lack of standard and conducive classroom and facilities in our school that make our task more difficult...” (H1). Another respondent explained their daily turmoil in dealing with inadequate facilities “...when we talked about facilities, rural schools have the same problems and it is something that we have to deal on a daily basis...” (H2).

Parents’ low involvement in schools’ activities and students’ attendance contributes to part of the challenges being a school administrator. Respondents in the interview identify the lack of awareness among parents as one of their challenges as instructional leaders. “...I have been in this school for three years and it is difficult to see parents coming to help us to get actively involved in our school programmes...” (H1). “... it is basically just leaving everything to the school to do...parents in my school are not as involved as I would want them to be.” (H2).

Another challenge of these headmasters is the low budget given to their schools. Lack of financial resources is a common problem that often times beleaguers under-enrolled rural schools. The limited budget for low enrolment schools affects the running of academic activities and programmes. “...we do have problem with funding in organising more meaningful educational activities for our students...it is hard for us...” (H2). With the lack of fund available for these schools, immensely it had impacted the quality of the students’ learning. It makes managing these schools more difficult and challenging as shared by the respondents “...the allocation to run the school is very limited because the allocation given is based on school enrolment...so our school is run on a small budget...”(H1).

Mismatch teaching staff certainly makes it more difficult for under-enrolled rural schools to excel in academic. It remained as one of the constant issues and challenges faced by under-enrolled rural schools. It is exacerbated by the notable rapid or frequent turnovers of teachers. The teachers posted to these schools were usually not congruent to the need of the school itself. “...our school need teachers to teach critical subject such as Maths, Science and English...but for a few years now we only get teachers not majoring in these critical subjects. So that is why I have to teach English for example...” (H2). This is echoed by another respondent, “...we do lose well experienced teachers every few years and their replacement usually doesn’t match our school requirement and it is frustrating as it does affect our academic achievement every year...”(H3).

Overwhelming workload shouldered by the headmasters is also a typical challenge that sees no end. Headmasters have had to deal with these problems daily and it is taking much of their effort. It stifles their time to supervise and evaluate teaching and learning processes in their schools. “...I do find that I have less time to make quality observations with my teachers about their teaching. Sometimes there are just too many schools and administrative work for me to do...” (H1). Adding to that, it undermined the role of headmasters as instructional leaders in giving quality of supervision and evaluation on teaching and learning processes. “...it is sometimes very difficult to do as I have to really find the time to supervise classroom activities of the teachers...”(H3).

Digital communication accessibility is another major stumbling block for teaching and learning in under-enrolled rural schools. Online teaching and learning resources should be easily accessible by under-enrolled rural schools too. The internet plays a major part of headmasters and teachers’ professional task. According to the headmasters, amenities such as internet and stable supply of electricity are either not available or unreliable. These were said to have affected their role as instructional leaders and academic performance of their schools. “...what we would love to have is...of course a reliable internet connection to ease the burden of teachers in their teaching and learning...and of course much of our work that we need to perform now require internet access...” (H2). Compounded with issues of internet access is the problem of unreliable electricity to schools. “...electricity is a major problem as we experienced few ‘blackouts’ constantly every day...and we don’t really know how long these ‘blackout’ is going to last sometime...”(H1). Under-enrolled rural schools’ crucial concern as shared by the respondents are said to be affecting their role as instructional leaders contributing to the low quality of teaching and learning.

5. Discussion

This study points towards the challenges and issues of under-enrolled rural schools and the instructional leadership of the headmasters. Finding of the study shows that emphasis is evident in the importance of headmasters' instructional roles and leadership skills in managing under-enrolled rural schools. This study supports the need to have a continued investigation and discussion on headmasters' instructional leadership practices in under-enrolled rural schools in Sarawak and its effect upon pupils' learning and school academic achievement. This study shows that most of the teachers perceived their headmasters do perform or practised their instructional roles. However, there were statistically significant differences in perception of the headmasters' instructional practices as perceived between male and female teachers. But, on the same note, it is important to know that the headmasters were confronted with issues and were struggling to perform their instructional practices as was revealed by this study.

The teachers' perceptions of their headmasters' level of instructional leadership practices in the dimension of defining the school mission among under-enrolled rural school in Sarawak are at a medium-high level. This is the highest mean score from among all the three instructional leadership dimensions practice. Although at a medium-high level, it shows that their headmasters do practice their role as instructional leaders when it comes to setting the direction for the schools. They also agreed that their headmasters were mindful on the significance of sharing the school goals with the teachers and other stakeholders. It defines the direction of the schools and it is considered as an important element by the headmasters as perceived by the teachers.

The teachers perceived their headmasters' instructional leadership practice in terms of *managing the school instructional programme* as *medium-high* could indicate why some of the instructional programmes in the schools were not as successful as it should be. The notable weakness was in the element of *supervising and evaluating instruction* as one of the lowest mean score in this dimension. It indicates the reason behind the lack of academic achievement among under-enrolled rural schools as it showed that the headmasters were not doing enough formal observation or as frequent as they should to help the teachers improve their classroom instruction. The finding of this study seems to contradict the finding of the study by Mohd Munaim Mahmud and Norlela Ali (2015) as their earlier study had revealed that "*supervising and evaluating instruction*" of head teachers instructional leadership practices in 25 primary schools in Simunjan Sarawak as the most dominant as it was rated as a very high mean score of 4.97 as compared to this study where the mean score is at 3.60.

The teachers' perception of their headmasters' role in *developing the school learning climate* is in the *medium-high* category. Among the three instructional leadership dimensions of instructional leadership of the headmasters, *developing the school learning climate* was the least being practiced among all the three instructional leadership practices. The element of *maintaining visibility* and *providing incentives for teachers* were rated the lowest from among all the five elements found in *developing the school climate* dimension. The teachers had placed the element of *providing incentives for teachers* as one of the lowest among all the 10 elements. The teachers felt that their headmasters are not giving them enough incentives for their effort which may lead to teachers' motivation and commitment in teaching. Obviously, the impact it has on under-enrolled schools is massive. This implication to schools due to motivation and commitment of teachers had been debated and supported by many studies done locally and internationally (Chudgar & Luschei, 2013; Lai, Wong, Chai & Ling, 2014; Linggoh Untan, Abd. Latif, K., Ishak, S. & Arumugam, N. 2016).

The study revealed that the elements of *framing the school goals* and *communicating the school goals* in the dimension of *defining the school mission* as the most dominant dimension of instructional leadership. The teachers overwhelmingly perceived that *framing and communicating school goals* as the most dominant dimension of their headmasters' instructional leadership practices. This study finding is similar to the findings made by Jameela and Jainabee (2011) that showed that school leaders in Pahang practiced a high level of "*developing school goals*" dimension together with their teachers.

The qualitative data collected from the interviews with the headmasters as respondents on their views on challenges affecting headmasters in administering under-enrolled rural schools while pursuing their role as instructional leaders had positively identified the challenges. The data had indicated that there were several pressing issues that need to be addressed. If their role as instructional leaders as warranted by the MEB 2013-2025 were to be effective, there is a need to pursue solutions for the

challenges as highlighted by the headmasters. It was clear that the issue and challenges were beyond their control thereby providing difficulties for the headmasters to perform some of their instructional roles effectively in their schools. They cited several factors such as (i) parents' involvement in children academic matters (ii) knowledgeable and skilful administrator (iii) the amount of workload (iv) accessibility to internet and basic infra-structures (v) financial allocation (vi) mismatch teaching staff had limited their ability to perform their instructional roles effectively.

The role of a headmaster in under-enrolled rural schools is huge; as expectation comes from parents, district education offices and the ministry for them to deliver. The parents in these schools relied heavily on these headmasters to shoulder all the responsibility to educate their children; thus, giving them added pressure while at the same time society demand that the headmaster and the school do their best to equip students with future skills needed to survive. The headmasters' acknowledged parents' involvement in schools' activities were very poor. They don't put much effort to get involve in their children's learning at the school level. It is important that parents are involved in their children's learning because that will encourage the children to learn.

Under-enrolled rural schools must be led by qualified, talented, determined, knowledgeable, capable, and effective leaders. These are the essential skills needed to impact students' learning. Their main role is to elevate teachers' instructional skills and equally important, to be able to manage the whole affairs associated with pupils and stakeholders who are an integral part of the schooling community.

The headmasters lamented about their workload (related and not related) to their professional duties had restricted their function as instructional leaders. The workload had taken away most of their time and energy directly and indirectly from their professional duties, responsibilities, and interests. Due to the amount of work that they had to perform, hinders them from being effective instructional leaders. As such, the quality of the school and students' academic achievement maybe affected as there is less focus on the quality of teaching due to workload and time factor. The unending demand from the ministry, education department, teachers, parents and students heap more pressure on the shoulders of headmasters. Many local studies in recent years, with regards to the element of "*supervision & evaluation*" (Aniza Baharuddin & Zaidatol Akmaliah Lope Pihie, 2013; Abdul Said Ambotang, et.al. 2014; Yen & Abdullah, 2017) concluded that factors such as time constraint and workload as the main benefactor of Malaysian school leaders' failure to practice their instructional role effectively. Thus, it is inevitable that instructional role of school leaders in under-enrolled rural schools based on this study have the same finding.

The poor accessibility to utilities such as the internet and other facilities is a common occurrence among many rural schools in Sarawak. This situation is due to its location. Many of these schools are difficult to reach. With limited access to proper road and transportation, many under-enrolled schools can only be reached via river transportation and dangerous timber roads. This led to teachers and students not able to focus their energy towards fulfilling their full potential. This situation affects the school in terms of poor academic performance, poor learning surrounding and poor amenities. With the national education mission and focus as stipulated in MEB (2013-2025); the first implementation of the *Gelombang 1* (Wave/Phase 1) was to ensure that every school has the basic essentials such as sufficient physical infrastructure and has access to digital utilities such as internet; it looks like under-enrolled schools in Sarawak are yet to enjoy these planned physical infrastructures, utilities and digital connection. This study seems to point towards the assertion by Norasibah et.al., (2016) that the culmination of heavy workload and the failure to have access to many basic infra-structures leads to school head failure to perform their instructional duties effectively.

At the present, the financial allocation of under-enrolled schools is based upon school enrolment as stipulated in the financial circular no. 8 (MOE, 2012). This is still the basic factor that determines the amount of allocation for under-enrolled rural schools and most of the time it is inadequate. For under-enrolled rural schools, the small allocation set is always insufficient to run school programmes. The headmasters revealed that this is one of the challenges that under-enrolled rural schools faced year on year. The finding of this study echoes an earlier study by Kenayathulla, et al., (2018) which highlighted that the problem of financial allocation has beleaguered under-enrolled schools and it has become a major factor in contributing to failures of these schools to organise and implement meaningful educational programmes.

The right teachers' quality that matches the need of the school is essential if the improvement of the students' education in rural school is to be a part of the improvement envisaged. The right match of teachers must reciprocate the need of the schools and this should be a priority if the rural under-enrolled schools' standards were to be elevated. Besides, change leaders or managers also need to employ various strategies to help employees to adjust to the change process (Nusrah & Chan, 2020). This is a task entrusted on a school headmaster. However, the headmasters find this task daunting as the type of teachers being sent to these schools usually did not match what the schools need. As experienced teachers are transferred out of the schools, new teachers that are posted to these schools do not match the option needed by the school. They ended teaching certain subjects they were not trained for. This finding in this study adds on to the on-going discussions for years on the mismatch of teachers among the under-enrolled schools (Adi Badiozaman, A., 2004; Abd. Hamid, et al., 2012; Suffean, H., 2014; Louis, et.al., 2016; Esmali Bari 2017).

6. Conclusion

The existence of under-enrolled rural schools in Malaysia is due to the demand for the democratization of our education system that adheres to provide free basic education for all. Now, there are about 2,700 schools in the remote (Malaysia Educational Statistics, 2015) in Malaysia. These schools represent a large portion of our educational landscape while at the same time, under-enrolled schools are defined mostly in the context of rural and small populations, but under-enrolled schools may also exist in urban populations. Under-enrolled rural schools have been and will continue to provide the opportunity of education and access to literacy for children in rural areas as it continues to be needed by the people in the interior even though the cost of managing these schools is high. The children studying in already disadvantaged rural schools are at risk of not completing the full cycle of primary education. Thus, it is important and urgent to provide greater support to these under-enrolled rural schools.

With regards to the perception of teachers who are serving in under-enrolled rural schools of Sarawak, this study has given a basis to make a conclusion about the level of headmasters' instructional leadership practices as perceived by the teachers. This study has added on to the contribution of new information towards increasing the knowledge of instructional leadership practices of under-enrolled rural school headmasters' in Sarawak that hasn't been thoroughly researched in recent years. Even though literature had recognised the effect of instructional leadership on school's improvement, but yet, there were limited studies conducted specifically on Sarawak under-enrolled rural schools. In addition to that, the study was done for the purpose of adding to the pool of information of studies available with regards to the level of rural under-enrolled school headmasters' instructional leadership.

The results from this study conclude that there is an emphasis by the headmasters to practice instructional leadership and skills in administering under-enrolled rural primary schools in Sarawak. With the challenges faced by these under-enrolled rural schools, it would be difficult for these schools and their students to progress academically if these issues with regards to basic facilities and infrastructure are not dealt with immediately. It is paramount that these rural students acquire an adequate amount of education to prepare themselves for future challenges.

Although the education achievement of under-enrolled rural schools is still lagging in many aspects compared to mainstream schools, its existence had led to an increase in the levels of literacy and numeracy, especially among children in the rural areas. However, the study has found that these school headmasters do practice instructional leadership while at the same time, various human and physical aspect has made it difficult for them to perform it more frequently.

7. References

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