

# The Relationship between Senior Management Team (SMT) and Teachers' Attitude towards Achieving High Performing School (HPS) Status: A Case Study of Primary Schools at Johor Bahru

*Farhana binti Yaakub  
Ali bin Boerhannoeddin  
Muhammad Yazrin Zaifuddin bin Zainuddin  
Ani Juaini binti Bahrin*

*Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)*

## ABSTRACT

*The government has introduced the concept of High Performing School (HPS) as a new excellent school standard to be achieved by all schools in order to realise a national dream and vision to be a developed country in 2020 and to pursue educational development and improvement. However, the teachers perceived that the initiatives or changes would mean a heavier workload, a hindrance and a cause of confusion towards their profession. In Malaysia, a special committee was established to review the workload of teachers. Besides teaching, teachers had to deal with extra-curricular activities, classroom, student affairs, administration and clerical and other additional works. Therefore, in realizing the country's aims in education, assessing teachers' attitude towards these initiatives is paramount for its success. This study focuses on the association between Senior Management Team (SMT) and teachers' attitude towards achieving HPS status. Sample population used to analyze the association and correlations were primary schools teachers in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. In addition, the data collection was done through distribution of questionnaires. After the data analysis process had been completed, the results surprisingly, indicated that this factor have positively associated with teachers' attitude towards achieving HPS status. The result had proved on the importance of this element to influence the development of positive attitude of teachers to support the achievement of these initiatives. It is hoped that the results of the study may be useful to relevant government agencies, school's leadership and other parties involved directly or indirectly to further assess the needs and support that should be given to teachers who work hard to meet the nation's aspirations to improve the quality of national education.*

**Keywords:** *High Performing School (HPS), Teachers' attitude, Senior Management Team (SMT), Education*

## **Introduction**

To drive national development, further steps were taken by the government to improve the national education system. Education reform is top of the agenda of almost every country in the world (Schleicher, 2007). With the main intention and resources to upgrade the school's quality and performance, another initiative has been introduced in the Tenth Malaysian Plan for years 2011 to 2015. It was stated in Chapter 5 of the aforesaid plan, entitled "Developing and Retaining a First-World Talent Base". The government has allocated a total of RM280 million in 2011 and 2012 to revamp and improve government aided schools in this country (The Star, June 10, 2012). In fact, practically every country in the OECD substantially increased its spending on education. These countries also launched multiple initiatives to spend money more effectively in education system to achieve the highest return (Schleicher, 2007).

Currently, the education system in Malaysia has various categories of schools including Cluster Schools, Boarding Schools (SBPI), Premier Schools, Smart Schools, Technical Schools, Religious Schools, Daily Schools, Sekolah Bestari, Special Education Schools, Fel'da Schools and Native Schools. In their strategies, the government aims to raise quality of schools standards up to the International Level with the introduction of a new school category, which is the High Performing Schools (HPS) programme. High Performing School (HPS) will become schools that are able to maintain excellent and impressive achievement in both academic and non-academic pursuits. Other than that, the school is also marked to be the preferred choice of institution for the education of their children among parents and the community from within the country and abroad. The introduction of HPS ended up in creating a new standard of school excellence and became a benchmark for schools in the station to achieve.

Moving towards a status of HPS, the academic staff or teachers seem to hold different challenges in their profession. The teachers have to struggle with their capabilities to face this new big challenge in bringing their school to achieve the status. In realizing these aims, teacher's capabilities, specifically their knowledge, skills, attitudes and professionalism become significant requirements to be fulfilled first hand by school administrators. Teachers' responsibilities become wider and heavier with the new desire to bring schools towards HPS status. In this situation, teachers are facing increasingly bigger challenges in many situations such as preparation for better input of teaching; dealing with the schools' management and leadership; dealing and handling different types of students; and the need to develop their own capabilities to fit themselves into the needs of schools, ministry and Malaysian government. Since teachers are deemed as shouldering an important responsibility and their contribution is critical, therefore, the economics of teacher input into the economy deserves a substantial amount of investigation (Belfield, 2000). Over the past decade, many researches has identified that no in-school intervention has a larger impact on student learning than an effective teacher (NCATE, 2010).

It would seem that teachers are facing with pressures of coping with an overcrowded curriculum due to frequent new initiatives (Galton and Macbeath, 2002). HPS also outlined the professionalism actions of teachers as one of the challenges. It is closely related to professional knowledge, attitude and skills of the teachers. If the teachers know how to do it and could do it, then the teacher is in a high professional level (Kamal, 2010). In Malaysia, a special committee was established to review the workload of teachers who are now forced to do excessive work, including administrative and clerical duties to interfere with the responsibility of educating students. Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, The Deputy Prime Minister in responding to complaints of the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP), said

that besides teaching, teachers had to deal with extra-curricular activities, classroom, student affairs, administration and clerical and some other additional work (Khairul, 2010, April 1). Therefore, this study will basically focus to determine the association between Senior Management Team (SMT) and teachers' attitude towards achieving the HPS status.

## **Literature Review**

Attitude is defined as a tendency based on psychological reactions which is expressed through the evaluation of an entity, objects, people or events with varying degrees of favour ranging from favourable responses to unfavourable responses (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Guilford, 2004; Robbins, 2005). People possess thousands of kinds of attitude. However, there are three major work related attitudes that have been classified. The work related attitudes can be classified into job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment (Robbins, 2005).

High Performing School (HPS) are schools with a distinct and unique image. These schools normally strive for excellence in all aspects of education for their students. They have a very strong school culture which focuses on continuous improvement with strong networks linkages abroad which allows students from HPS to compete internationally. HPS is the primary school choice in the nation and they will receive a tailored package of benefits such as greater freedoms to enable them to excel further (EPU, 2010).

The school's Senior Management Team or School Management Team (SMT) or School Leadership Team (SLT) become one of a body which responsible to lead the school. The personnel composition within this team is often school specific. This teams are normally comprises senior personnel in school such as the Principal or Head, Deputy Principal(s) or Deputy Head(s) and other key officers (Ehrich & Cranston, 2004). In United Kingdom, the SMTs membership is extended beyond the principals and deputy principals to include one or more senior teaching staff (Wallace and Hall's, 1994). It has been observed that the team-based structures in schools reflect the shared democracy ideology and the belief that teamwork has the potential to achieve results that cannot be achieved otherwise individually (Drach-Zahavy and Somech, 2002). A study done in Queensland and New Zealand secondary schools has indicated that teamwork and leadership characteristics of SMTs are important element of teachers' levels of role satisfaction (Cranston, et. al, 2002; Cranston, Tromans and Reugebrink, 2002). Here, the SMT dynamics becomes an important factor in supporting, maintaining and promoting the leadership and management skills and aspirations of SMT members (Cranston, et. al, 2002).

In many countries, the SMTs' responsibilities are important for school's success. Their responsibilities as decision makers about any school's policy and practice and the overall activities of school is very important (Wallace and Hall, 1996). Here, they become an important group of people who will lead the school and make any decision to achieve the school's objectives. The relationship between the SMTs and teachers are viewed as highly important and it has to be healthy, symbiotic relationship which will further enhance the teamwork leading into the right direction of development to ensure the school's effectiveness. Leadership is closely linked to and is reflected upon their subordinates' attitude. It is an important factor that is associated with the subordinates' attitude. Previous research has identified that the competencies of each SMT members become an important aspect which leads to the team effectiveness (Wallace, 2002). Evans (1998) distinguished the negative attitudes of teachers were due to the weak credibility of SMT. For instance, it was reported that the principal was labelled as an "exceptionally poor manager" and inadequate in terms of

knowledge pedagogy and educational-related issues. In addition to that, other SMT members are observed to make irrational decision making approach which has been labelled as lack of credibility.

In contrast, other research has identified significant positive relationship between the SMTs and its subordinates. Top down decision approaches applied by the SMT, has been viewed as the best by the subordinates (Greenfield, 1991). Here, the subordinates' negative views about the SMT's competencies lead to negative influence and low professional respect for them. Other than that, another study has identified that the enthusiasm of SMT members to the changes will influence subordinates to give their high priority towards it (Jones and Anderson, 2001). Here, the commitment showed by the SMT towards new initiative will result to positive attitude of their subordinates.

Mwiria (2006) has highlighted that the positive relationship between the SMT and educators will be able to influence the educators' attitude towards school. It will also positively affect the school practice and create a climate conducive to teaching and learning. Here, the positive attitude of teachers will often contribute freely (Keeves, 1972) in staff meetings and be cooperative upon request from the SMT (Mwiria, 2006). Therefore, the relationship between SMT and teachers' attitude is significant. The positive influence of SMT will lead to positive attitude of educators to achieve the school's aims. It is able to create an excellent learning and teaching environment. Teachers' attitude towards achieving HPS status will be based on their perceptions of their SMT which will become important factors that will determine the positive or negative attitude of teachers.

## Research Methodology

A Cross-Sectional study is a type of research study in which the data is gathered just once (stretched though it may be over a period of days, weeks or months) to answer the research question via a self-administered questionnaire distributed by the researcher to the respondents (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). In this study, the respondents are asked to fill the questionnaires themselves and the completed questionnaires are then collected by the researcher.

This study aims to collect response from national primary school teachers in Johor Bahru. Referring to the national schools list in Johor Bahru published by the Ministry of Education (MOE), there are a total of 83 national primary schools in this area including national Chinese and Indian schools. There are a total of 4556 teachers teaching in national primary schools of this area of which will automatically become the population of the study. Therefore, in selecting the most suitable sampling to represent the population, the researcher will select a sample size for a given population size as calculated by Sekaran and Bougie (2010). The sample size is calculated using the " $\mu = X \pm K S_x$ " formula. Based on a total population of 4556 teachers, the suitable sample size is 354 teachers.

The study uses questionnaires to gather data for the study. The questionnaire was self-administered by the researcher. A number of questions from several sets of questionnaires and sources were adopted to develop a suitable set of questionnaire for the study. The questions designed for the study were adopted and revised from the study done by Boyd, et al (2009); Senior & Swailes (2007). The questionnaire's reliability was evaluated with the Cronbach's Alpha method and the suggested minimum acceptable value for Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 (Gardner, 2001). Reliability coefficient was good, as can be observed, the alpha value for the independent variable (SMT) is  $\alpha = 0.928$ .

## Research Hypothesis

Effective leaders who are able to bring schools to success understand the mechanics of how attitude influences behaviour. They are also able to move organizations forward (Fritz, 2008). Consequently, if the school's leadership team, also known as Senior Management Team (SMT) is keen in playing their roles positively for achieving HPS, the probability for teachers' positive attitude towards HPS may also be high. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant relationship between Senior Management Team (SMT) and teachers' attitude towards achieving the HPS status*

*H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between Senior Management Team (SMT) and teachers' attitude towards achieving the HPS status*

## Findings and Discussion

This study involves a target group or segment of the population. Therefore, using the table of sample size for a given population size proposed by Sekaran and Bougie (2010), the researcher distributed a total of 354 questionnaires randomly to primary national type of schools' teachers around Johor Bahru directly by the researcher and appointed liaison. However, only 287 completed questionnaires were returned by the targeted respondents which lead to 81.0 per cent response rate.

All questions in this sub-section analyse the views of teachers about the school's management team or school's leadership. It represents the roles played by the school's leadership as perceived by the primary school teachers in directing their subordinates to achieve HPS status. For this variable, most of the teachers in Johor Bahru perceived that the school's management team has a positive influence to their attitude.

Table 1: Frequencies of Senior Management Team (SMT)

Statement	Disagree		Agree		Total (%)
	f	%	f	%	
The SMT has exhibited the desirable leadership quality in achieving HPS.	45	15.7	242	84.3	100.0
The SMT is continuously motivating the teachers to attain HPS.	43	15.0	244	85.0	100.0
The SMT has effectively organized teaching method session to improve teacher's teaching performance.	44	15.3	243	84.7	100.0
The SMT has communicated clearly all the pertinent information related to HPS.	77	26.8	210	73.2	100.0
The SMT serves as a role model in achieving HPS.	55	19.2	232	80.8	100.0
The direct involvements of the	50	17.4	237	82.6	100.0

SMT encourage the teacher to work hard on bringing our school towards HPS.					
Enthusiasm shown by SMT has made me actively involved in helping school to attain HPS.	39	13.6	248	86.4	100.0
The SMT fully understands the needs and difficulties faced by teachers in achieving HPS.	48	16.7	239	83.3	100.0
The SMT has given adequate support and assistance to teachers in attaining HPS.	53	18.1	235	81.9	100.0
The SMT possesses necessary skills and knowledge to enable the school to achieve HPS.	45	15.7	242	83.4	100.0
Teachers' contributions to HPS achievement were rewarded by the school.	68	23.7	219	76.3	100.0
<b>N=287</b>					

Table 2 indicates the frequencies of teachers' attitude towards achieving HPS status. The purpose of this section is to test the overall teachers' attitude in relation to their reception, commitment and participation towards the schools aims to achieve HPS status.

Table 2: Frequencies of Teachers' Attitude towards Achieving HPS Status

Statement	Disagree		Agree		Total (%)
	f	%	f	%	
I am definitely positive towards achieving HPS.	33	11.5	254	88.5	100.0
I am personally supporting the idea of HPS.	35	12.2	252	87.8	100.0
I believe my efforts to achieve HPS will result in improved students' development and excellence.	32	11.1	255	88.9	100.0
I am continuously committed towards achieving HPS objectives and goals.	40	13.9	247	86.1	100.0
I am willing to handle documents that need to be process for the school to achieve the HPS even if I had to bear the brunt of the increasing number of tasks.	62	21.6	225	78.4	100.0
I am willing to sacrifice time with my family as I need to work more at school to achieve HPS.	53	18.5	234	81.5	100.0
It is worth to work on achieving HPS.	45	15.7	242	83.4	100.0

Working on HPS status is very valuable.	43	15.0	244	85.0	100.0
<b>N=287</b>					

The output as shows in Table 3 confirms that there is a significant positive relationship between leadership and teachers' attitude towards achieving the High Performing School (HPS) status where  $r = 0.56$ ,  $p < .01$ . It explains higher school's leadership scores are associated with higher teachers' attitude towards achieving HPS status score. Therefore,  $H_0^1$  is rejected. The bivariate correlation was undertaken between these two variables. The  $H_1$  hypothesized that there is a significant relationship between the school's leadership and teachers' attitude towards achieving the High Performing School (HPS) status. This result indicates that the school's leadership involvement, motivation, enthusiasms, communication, leadership quality and understanding are able to influence teachers' commitment and involvement to help the school to reach HPS.

Table 3: Relationship between SMT and teachers' attitudes towards achieving HPS status

Variables	Pearson Correlation	Sig (2-tailed)	Decision
SMT	0.557**	0.000	Reject $H_{01}$

\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The result, consistent with previous researches, shows that the association between leaders and employees has a positive impact on employees' attitude towards their organizations. Leaders play an important and irreplaceable role in retaining employees and promoting their organizational commitment (Pan, Zhou and Zhou, 2010). Based on the Leader - member exchange theory, it believes that when leader have established close relations with some subordinates, these subordinates become "in-group". Here, the leaders will give more trust and care to the "in-group", communicate consistently, lead and motivate the group. In return, the leader will receive more support and respect from their subordinates. In the process of mutual exchange, they tend to have more expressive communications. As agents of organizations, leaders are channel and connection between organizations and employees. Therefore, employees' affection to leaders will be interpreted into emotional dependence and commitment towards organizations (Pan, Zhou and Zhou, 2010).

In line with the result, the study done by (Greenfield, 1999) indicates significant positive relationship between the SMTs and its subordinates. The study indicates that the principals are having its influence through a high commitment. Top down decision approaches applied by the SMT, has been viewed as the best interests by the subordinates. Similarly, teachers' perceived that the SMT or SLT has been perceived as providing good, established and trusted leadership in relation to progression towards teachers. This situation leads the teachers to have a clear, consistent sense of the distinctive ethos and values defining their school, a vision for the school and a sense of where it is going, and can clearly express what their school is trying to achieve (Johnson, et al., 2009). The key success factor in a successful high performing school is their school leadership (Jamilah and Yusof, 2011).

Schools' leadership has frequently emerged in discussions and arguments as a significant catalyst of teacher's attitude such job involvement and commitment. Past studies resulted and supported that positive attitude of teachers was positively related to their leader. Leadership predicted positively and directly to teachers' organizational commitment (positive

attitude) towards achieving school's objectives (Boonyarit, Chomphupart, and Arin, 2010). The school's leadership especially influential over the organizational climate of the school where they are able to foster trusting, cooperative, and open environments where input from staff is welcome. These researches also identifies that the trusting, cooperative, and open characteristics in schools generate higher levels of satisfaction, cohesion around school goals, and commitment among teachers (Bryk, et. al, 2010; Louis, et. al., 2010; Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998; Rosenholtz, 1989). Through this study, it is proved that the school's management team is a significant body which can influence the teachers' attitude. Through their direct involvement, adequate support and assistance, the teachers are motivated to actively involve in helping school to attain HPS.

A study conducted by Sophia (2011) indicates that the school's leadership appears to have a fairly consistent and significantly positive effect on teacher's attitude. It is correlated at the level of the individual components of attitudes. It also indicated that the leader's attitudes have a significant relationship ( $r = .383$ ) with the subordinate's productivity. The positive attitude of workers will be better if the leaders are always concerned about their subordinates (Noorhafaiza and Ferlis, 2010). Therefore, the SMT team which showing their concern and support, lead to the positive attitude shown by the subordinates with increasing level of motivation.

In addition, Nilpan (2000); Chongvisal (2002); and Newchantuek (2002) have found that organizational commitment which refers to teachers' positive attitude was positively associated to the school leadership. The results emphasize that supervisors (usually the school management team) who show an excellent leadership can inspire organizational commitment of the teachers by supporting goal attainment, linking their efforts with their performance, creating teachers' personal commitment to the organizational vision, mission, and goals. Other than that, this situation will motivate the teachers to get involved and challenge their potential for school performance.

## **Study Limitation and Suggestion for Future Research**

Although all efforts have been made to plan and execute the study, the following limitations should be considered. The limitations are highlighted in four main areas. First, the study was in a cross-sectional design. The data are gathered and taken one time only within the study duration. Therefore, this study did not capture the developmental issues such causal connections between the variable of interest.

In this study, the researcher has used a self-administered questionnaire. Since this study involved the views and perceptions of target respondents, there are possibilities that respondents may misinterpret the statements and it then affected their responds towards it. The limited direct interaction between the researcher and respondents also may contribute towards this situation to be happen.

There are a number of shortcomings of a cross-sectional research design. Thus, other research designs such as longitudinal studies should be applied as a procedure for collecting data and describing the patterns of change. It also may able to tell the direction and magnitude of causal relationship between the variables of interest. The comparison between HPS and non-HPS schools also need to be considered for future studies to enable researchers to have better understanding of the factors associated with teachers' attitude towards achieving HPS status.



## Conclusion

The findings implicated also towards school practice. The findings has identified that many school's elements are having its significant association to form teachers' attitude towards achieving better school performances. School related factors namely Senior Management Team (SMT) or also referred to Senior Leadership team (SLT), teachers' work peers and administrative staff are other school's element that been identified having its own influence towards teachers' attitude formation. Heavy responsibilities are being placed on the SMT or SLT team which they are an important group that leads and shapes the school's overall environment and cultures.

The research on educational bodies makes significant contribution and provides insight comparison for future researchers. Since HPS standard will be a long term aim for the non HPS schools, viewing teachers' reactions and receptivity towards it are rather important to strengthen the national education. The criteria that have been introduced will be a main guide for all schools, leaning towards it will need a high commitment and participation of teachers, who mainly become the big players to realize it. Therefore, this study provides guidance for future research that may cover different perspectives and coverage.

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[farha5472@sabah.uitm.edu.my](mailto:farha5472@sabah.uitm.edu.my)