IIUM JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES, 10:2 (2022) 81-105

ISSN: 2289-8085

Leadership Practices among Islamic Private Secondary School Principals in Southern Thailand: Validating a Model of Strategic Educational Leadership

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Abstract

This study explored the levels of strategic educational leadership practices (PSELP) among the principals of 92 Islamic private secondary schools (IPSS) in Southern Thailand as perceived by teachers at the schools. It also sought to validate and confirm a hypothesized structural equation model of PSELP based on the data provided by 918 IPSS teachers from the districts of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. The survey instrument was a seven-point PSELP scale with 44 items adapted from five previous studies. Descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations) were used to summarize the perceived levels of PSELP in nine aspects or domains. Confirmatory factor analysis was applied on the data to test the adequacy of the proposed PSELP model. The results showed that the teachers had the perception that their principals effectively practiced all five factors of strategic educational leadership and exhibited the four characteristics of strategic leaders. This discovery contradicted previous findings that school principals' leadership practices were low or inadequate. The CFA results established the proposed nine-factor model of IPSS principals' strategic educational leadership practices as valid and reliable, confirming the presence of strategic orientation, strategic alignment, strategic intervention, strategic translation, strategic intervention, restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and leadership wisdom in the model. The findings have raised a new concern, that is, if the principals of the IPSS have actively and extensively been practicing strategic leadership, what then could be the causes of the poor performance of the IPSS in Southern Thailand? This concern has paved new directions for future research involving the quality of Islamic schools in the region.

Keywords: *Strategic leadership practices, strategic orientation, strategic translation, strategic competencies, wisdom, private Islamic schools*

INTRODUCTION

The private Islamic secondary schools currently operating in Southern Thailand today have their roots and origin in the traditional *pondok* system, which was transformed by the Thai government into proper schools using the integrated and more systematic national curriculum. *Pondok* is a name derived from the Arabic word *"fundoq,"* which means "a small hut." In Southeast Asian countries with large Muslim populations, *pondoks* used to function like a mosque that imparted knowledge and skills to local Muslims. They were specifically established to disseminate various types of Islamic religious knowledge, such as *tahwid*, *fiqh* and the Jawi writing system, throughout the 19th century to educate local Muslim communities.

As the years developed, the Thai government saw the need to align the education curriculum offered by the *pondok* system with Thailand's national education philosophy and formal curriculum. In addition to their system's lack of conformity with mainstream Thai education, the *pondoks* were also perceived by the Thai government to be limited in their ability to contribute to the nation in the social, economic, and financial spheres. Overall, it was asserted that the schooling provided in these *pondoks* could not keep up with the demands of the modern age and contemporary Thai society. On top of that, the Thai government also saw these *pondoks* as a threat to national unity and state security (Pherali, 2021).

Working on the premise that the *pondoks* were "backward-looking and medieval" (Hefner, in Liow, 2010, p. xiv), the Thai government began an aggressive reformation initiative in the 1960s and 1970s to transform these religious institutions into systematic Islamic private schools. Their curriculum, textbooks and pedagogy were overhauled to be more in line with the objectives of Thai national education and government policy. The gradual transformation of these *pondoks* into Islamic private schools was done both voluntarily and with force. Due to the need for federal funding and the desire to continue operating, many of the *pondok* principals acceded to the reform, while others were forcefully coerced into it with the threat of school closure (Niloh, 2004).

Thus, under the Thai government's transformation plan, all *pondoks* in Southern Thailand were gradually converted into Islamic private schools by the end of 1970. The aim of the plan was to facilitate the integration of the *pondok* system into the broader Thai system of education and of Muslims into the larger Thai culture and society. The plan was proven effective as there exist today about 120 Islamic private secondary schools (IPSS) in Southern Thailand with a total population of 5,000 teachers that are the legacies of the *pondok* institution (Hunter, 2021; Niloh, 2004; Liow, 2010; Hikmah, 2017; Pherali, 2021).

The Ministry of Education and the Muslim communities in Southern Thailand have very high expectations of the IPSS, especially after they were transformed into systematic schools that apply the integrated and more systematic national education curriculum. The schools are closely observed and monitored by the Education Ministry, which enforces quality assurance on all schools in the country once every five years to ensure that good quality education is provided to the public and ascertain that all schools are moving properly towards the

development, standards and goals stipulated in the 1999 National Education Act. Even though the quality assurance system has been set up for at least a decade, the IPSS in Southern Thailand remain to this day plagued with critical issues that affect their effectiveness, such as poor infrastructure, high failure rates, and lack of access to quality resources for teaching and learning.

A pressing issue with the present IPSS in Southern Thailand is their quality. They are reportedly ill-equipped and operate with minimal infrastructure. Classrooms are inadequate to meet the number of enrolled students. The libraries are poorly stocked and very few good quality teaching resources are available to teachers and students. The national curriculum is poorly taught at the IPSS and failure rates are high. Reports claim that very few graduates of these schools make it to university to pursue higher education (Hunter, 2021). Students tend to treat the schools more like a refuge rather than a serious academic institution, drifting in and out of society as they feel free to. Funding (i.e., grants and donations coming into the schools) is low, creating immense hardships for the schools to be effectively run and managed.

Multiple reports also show the IPSS facing the problem of low student performance. A study carried out by the Thai National Education Commission (2001) found the schools consistently underperforming and producing poor achievement results. In terms of academics, they have not been performing as well as other national schools in the country. Himphint (2009) discovered a similar problem—that the performance of the IPSS in Southern Thailand was lower than that of other national schools, specifically in the important subjects of Mathematics, Science and English that would give them their competitive edge and value in the global market (Himphint, 2009). The poor results and performance appear to suggest that the IPSS are lacking in professional development training that should be given to their teachers and school principals to achieve the targets of the 1999 Education Act.

As the transformation was a massive overhaul, it was fraught with issues arising from the inability of the schools to implement many of the reforms. Among the major concerns was the lack of effective strategic leadership practices in the management of the schools and the reform strategies. Chehdimae (2013) documented that the IPSS principals in Southern Thailand were acutely inexperienced in instructional leadership, a factor perceived to be associated with or accountable for their students' low academic performance. For instance, it has been reported that IPSS principals have failed to provide their teachers with relevant training to help them elevate student learning and achievement.

Lezotte (1991).wrote that instructional leadership is one of seven criteria for school effectiveness, in addition to clear school mission, school monitoring, school climate, parent involvement, school safety, and high expectations for students. However, research has revealed that out of the seven criteria, the IPSS have practised only five of them to some degree of effectiveness (Hunter, 2021; Pherali, 2021). As stated earlier, Chehdimae (2013) discovered that IPSS principals in Southern Thailand lacked instructional leadership. Of the seven Lezoot (1991) factors of effective schools, IPSS principals scored significantly lower on leadership performance than on any other effective school factors. It was explained that this could be due

to principals' insufficient knowledge of strategic leadership and their lack of such skills and inadequate training. Having both issues in the Islamic private schools is a critical problem that needed to be addressed in the present study.

Furthermore, principals of the Islamic schools in Southern Thailand need to be explicitly guided and extensively trained in their practices of strategic leadership, but it is not clear what the leadership content and components of the training should be (Hunter, 2021; Pherali, 2021). As modern educational leadership is complex, demanding and highly contextual (Lynch, 2016), the training content and components need to be ascertained by proposing, testing, and verifying a model on PSELP for IPSS school principals based on current theories of strategic educational leadership (Davies & Davies, 2016). According to Carvalho et al. (2021), scholarship in the issue of strategic leadership in education is still very much limited, particularly in the management of Islamic schools, where relevant models of leadership are scarce.

Research Objectives

The present study explored the levels of strategic educational leadership practices among the principals of the IPSS in Southern Thailand as perceived by their teachers. Specifically, the study determined whether the IPSS principals: (1) practiced all five organizational capabilities central to strategic leadership (i.e., strategic orientation, strategic translation, strategic alignment, strategic intervention, and strategic competencies) to bring about positive change to their schools; and (2) exhibited all four personal characteristics central to strategic leaders (i.e., restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and wisdom). Furthermore, the study sought to (3) propose a model of PSELP for IPSS principals and assess its validity and reliability so that the verified content and components of the model could be incorporated into professional training for the principals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Educational Leadership: Concept and Framework

Leadership is not a new concept or an emerging topic discussed in academia. Among ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Plutarch and Caesar, there was a tremendous amount of discussion centering upon the importance of this term (Bass, 1981; Nikezic et al., 2012). The debate continues till the present day, where in the current body of empirical research, the importance and significance of leadership is still fervently discussed, especially as it pertains to school leadership.

Leadership is the process of working with others and through others to attain a certain set of organizational goals (Owen & Valesky, 2011). It also entails the act of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to go about doing it (Yukl, 2010). In leadership, a social relationship is built between a leader and his/her followers, where the leader uses the relationship to influence the followers to work toward accomplishing the

objectives of their organization (Lussier & Achua, 2010). According to Munro (2008), leadership should be about guiding others toward a certain common goal via collective effort, fruitful collaboration, and flexibility.

Scholars have agreed on the important features and qualities that a good leader should have. First, good and effective leaders focus more on the quality of relationships they build with their subordinates, rather than just worrying about their leadership style. Second, being able to create a positive relationship with subordinates and a conducive working atmosphere for them is what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders. Third, good leaders exercise a lot of wisdom in their leadership practices (Bush, 2010). In short, positive, nurturing relationships, conducive working atmospheres, and proper exercise of wisdom are key elements to effective school leadership practices.

In managing learning institutions, educational leaders must practice more than mere leadership. Particularly, educational leaders and administrators must understand and embrace *strategic educational leadership*, a set of practices needed by all systems and organizations in order to thrive, proper and succeed (House et al., 2013). Principals' practice of strategic educational leadership is a critical component that contributes to better school management and increased school effectiveness (Davies & Davies, 2004; Adair, 2011). The function of school leaders is to work on improving their school performance and build strategic capability within the school community (Davies & Davies, 2009). In strategic leadership, leaders are duty bound to define the vision and moral purposes of their organization to followers and subordinates and translate them into action.

In other words, strategic leadership entails the conscious act of shaping the capacity of the organization and the direction it has to take to achieve the change it desires to make. This idea led to the development of the contemporary model of Strategic Educational Leadership, which comprised five aspects of organizational capabilities (i.e., strategic orientation, strategic translation, strategic alignment, strategic intervention, and strategic competencies), and four aspects of individual characteristics of a strategic leader (i.e., restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity and wisdom) (Davies, 2003, 2006; Hairuddin, 2012, 2016).

Organizational Capabilities

Organizational capabilities are what strategic leaders do (or must do) to ensure school effectiveness (Carvalho et al., 2021). The construct includes a mix of key activities and skills needed by strategic leaders to achieve a given task or fulfil the target goals of their organizations. The subconstructs of organizational capabilities include the following five components, namely *strategic competencies*, *strategic orientation, strategic translation, strategic alignment,* and *strategic intervention.*

Strategic competencies refer to a specific set of skills, expertise, and right attitude that strategic leaders must possess to enable them to understand and confront organizational (or school) challenges that hamper change. These competencies provide leaders with the competitive

advantages they need to propel their organizations forward. Some examples of strategic competencies are good organization and planning skills, personnel management, attention to detail and ceaseless innovation (Azainil et al., 2020; Kuswarno et al., 2022).

Strategic orientation refers to how an organization (or school, in this context) adapts to its external environment and the direction it wishes to take (Avci et al., 2011). The skills and activities of strategic orientation involve building the school's vision, mission, and system of values, formulating its main goals and objectives, and developing a good procedural plan to achieve the competitive advantage for the school.

Strategic intervention refers to leaders' ability to lead the organization (i.e., school) toward effective change, or lead the effective change movement within the organization (Kotter, 2012, 2014). Leaders can only affect change when those under their charge are ready for the change or transformation to occur. *Strategic translation* is defined as the desired outcomes and the concrete plans devised by the leader to achieve the intended results. It involves a long-term effort by all members of the organization.

The final aspect of strategic leadership, *strategic alignment,* focuses on the elements of strategic conversation and dialogue among the staff to promote effective participation and produce innovative ideas that the organization can use to improve its strategic capability. In the school context, an effective school should strive to develop strategic conversations and dialogue with teachers and staff that involves discussions about school issues and future trends that will face the school over the next few years (Van der Heijden, 1996; Davies & Davies, 2006).

Individual Characteristics

These are the characteristics that strategic leaders should display, i.e., the personal characteristics that make them effective leaders. There are four specific domains of individual characteristics, which include restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and leadership wisdom (Davies & Davies, 2009; Hairuddin, 2012; Hairuddin, 2016). The first of these characteristics needed in a strategic leader, i.e., restlessness, refers to the ability of the leader to see the future and accept the current reality by applying strategic planning. It entails seeing problems for what they are and solving them by applying strategic creative methodology. A strategic leader must also be able to visualize the strategic leap that the organization wants to make and live with the current scenario of the organizational culture (Hickman et al., 2018; Kleiner et al., 2012).

Second, *absorptive capacity* is the leader's process of learning, where he/she absorbs new information or new techniques and learns to apply them in his/her organization (Cruz et al., 2014). This refers to the leader's ability to exploit external knowledge, how he/she makes sense of it based on his/her prior knowledge and utilizes the knowledge effectively for the benefit of the organization (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). In the school context, schools depend on principals' absorptive capacity to bring in innovations from outside and use them to propel the schools forward.

Third, *adaptiveness* or *adaptive capacity* refers to "a leader's ability to respond with purposeful, positive regard to an unexpected shock or challenge, such as the pandemic. It's grounded in an attitude rather than an action plan" (Gorter, 2020, p. 1). Leaders who exhibit strategic adaptiveness respond to shock situations well, are resilient 6 and know how to mitigate damage and restore stability to the organization. The fourth characteristic is wisdom, which is defined as the leader's ability to implement his/her decisions at the right time. It is a capability that is manifold in nature and can be learned. Thus, to be strategic leaders that can ensure school success and effectiveness, it is very crucial for the IPSS principals in Southern Thailand to have the five skills of strategic leadership and four attributes of effective leaders.

The Practice of Strategic Educational Leadership among School Principals

Cherian (2015) claimed that "improvement in teaching and learning depends on the development and empowerment of heads of schools and their teachers," and that "outstanding school leaders are capable of turning around underperforming schools and dramatically lifting student achievement levels." This is not impossible to achieve if leaders engage in strategic educational leadership practices. An extensive body of research has verified the role and importance of the nine components and attributes of strategic educational leadership on school outcomes and effectiveness (Ahmad, 2017; Emiroglu et al., 2014; Kriger & Zhovtobryukh, 2013; Theodore, 2014; Williams & Johnson, 2013; Enas, 2016), where strategic leadership as a package is an essential ingredient for the sustainability of schools and various other bodies and organizations (Sarfraz, 2017).

Zakaria et al. (2021) examined the practices of strategic leadership (SL) of 374 principals at 85 secondary schools in a Malaysian state and discovered that their level of SL was very high (M = 4.32, SD = 0.42), correlating positively with students' outcomes (M = 4.53, SD = 0.37). The pattern showed that when principals are high in SL, students' performance and outcomes will likely be high as well, indicating the positive influence of SL on school effectiveness. Similarly, in a study involving 32 school leaders and 217 teachers from 11 different schools, Daeboonmee and Ariratana (2014) found a strong positive relationship between strategic leadership and school effectiveness, at $r = 0.721$.

Hairuddin (2012) explored the nine-point strategic leadership characteristics of Malaysian primary school leaders based on a sample 600 senior school managers. It was reported that the leaders possessed six out of the nine characteristics proposed by Davies and Davies (2004, 2009), and lacked the capacity for strategic intervention, strategic competencies and leadership wisdom. These inadequacies posed a huge challenge to effective school management and leadership. In Hairudin's (2012) study, Davies and Davies' (2009) nine-factor model of strategic leadership was verified. According to Zuraidah (2013), principals and the school community need to improve their sharing of the school's mission and vision, give cohesion to school orientation or goals and increase students' self-esteem in order to promote and sustain student excellence. Her observations support many of the components of strategic educational leadership. However, principals' practices of strategic leadership may be confounded by a number of mediating or moderating contextual factors such as organizational bureaucracy, in-

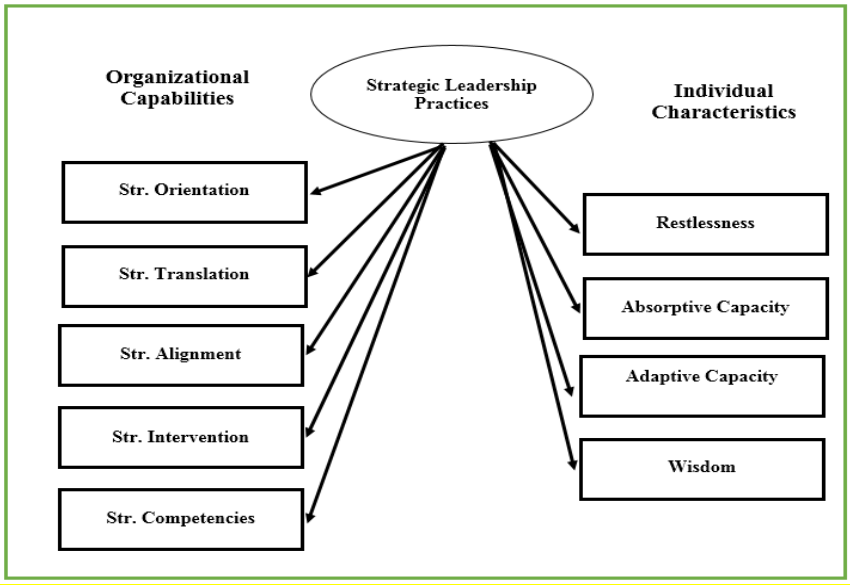
service training effectiveness, and school leaders' tenure and functional tracks (Eacot, 2010). This requires that models of strategic leadership be continuously tested and verified. As asserted by Carvalho et al. (2021), strategic leadership in education is very much under-researched and contextually relevant models of principal leadership are, by and large, scarce.

Proposed Strategic Educational Leadership Model for Southern Thailand's IPSS Principals

From the examination and synthesis of all nine constructs proposed by Davies and Davies (2006 & 2009) and Hairuddin (2012 & 2016), the following model of strategic educational leadership for Islamic private secondary school principals in Southern Thailand was proposed to be tested and verified in the present study (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Proposed Model of Strategic Educational Leadership Practices for Southern Thailand's IPSS Principals



Previous findings have managed to confirm seven of these PSELP factors (i.e., strategic orientation, strategic alignment, strategic intervention, restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptiveness, and wisdom) (Hairudin, 2012; Hairudin & Inas, 2017; Nasruddeen, 2015), while failing to verify the components of strategic competencies and strategic translation. This renders the empirical evidence inconclusive and warrants the issue to be addressed in a systematic study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was a quantitative, cross-sectional survey of the *ex post facto* (after the fact) research design focusing on understanding the prevalence of two social phenomena, which included the practice of strategic leadership aspects (e.g., strategic orientation, strategic translation, strategic alignment, strategic intervention, and strategic competencies) and the display of four personal characteristics of strategic leaders (e.g., restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity and wisdom) among Islamic private school principals in Southern Thailand as perceived by their teacher subordinates. The design was also confirmatory as it involved hypothesis and theory testing, aiming to test the validity and reliability of the proposed PSELP model for IPSS principals in Southern Thailand.

Population and Sample

In total, there were 5,000 teachers teaching in 120 Islamic private secondary schools in Southern Thailand. From this population, 1,060 teachers were identified and shortlisted as the respondents. They represented 92 schools that were randomly selected from the total population of 120 schools in the southern district. The sample size of 1,060 was decided based on a ±2% margin of error and 95% level of confidence, which also complied with Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) minimum sample recommendations.

The sample was justified as a representative sample of teachers in the entire population of Islamic private schools in Southern Thailand as their selection into the study was done through the process of simple random sampling (Fink, 1995; Creswell, 2014; Edwards et al., 1997). However, out of the 1,060 questionnaires distributed to the shortlisted target respondents, only 1,030 were returned. After the process of data cleaning and data correction, 112 had to be discarded due to non-responses and missing values, hence leaving the study with 918 usable cases for the analysis.

Instrument

The study employed a seven-point Likert scale with 44 items adapted from five previous studies on strategic leadership (e.g., Davies & Davies, 2004, 2006 & 2009; Hairuddin, 2012 & 2016) as its research instrument. The anchors used were *Strongly Disagree* (1), *Slightly Disagree* (2), *Disagree* (3), *Neutral* (4), *Slightly Agree* (5), *Agree* (6), and *Strongly Agree* (7). Specifically, five factors of organizational capability (i.e., strategic competences, strategic orientation, strategic translation and strategic alignment) were modified from Hairuddin (2012, 2016), while four factors of personal characteristics (i.e., restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptiveness, intervention and wisdom) were taken from Davies and Davies (2004, 2006 2009). Some sample items reflecting each construct and subconstruct, along with their internal consistency estimates, are listed in Table 1.

The items were content validated by leadership experts, checked for clarity and comprehensibility, and pilot tested twice for reliability. The first pilot test was carried out in Malaysia in the English language with 50 Malaysian teachers. The researchers followed it up with a second pilot done in the Thai language in Southern Thailand with 100 Thai teachers. The purpose of repeating the pilot test was to ensure that the questionnaire was unambiguous, well translated and had high fidelity to the original version. Reliability estimation was performed on the pilot data, yielding good estimates of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ for all constructs.

Table 1

Questionnaire Content by Construct, Subconstruct, Item and Reliability Estimate

Construct	No of Items	Sample Items	α
Organizational Capability (Hairuddin, 2012, 2016)			
▪ Strategic Competencies	5	1. The principal understands how to enhance the basic competencies of the school 2. The principal can solve problems in the school as a team through discussion with teachers.	0.94
▪ Strategic Orientation	5	1. The principal shares his organizational strategies with teachers. 2. The principal always reminds teachers to strive/work hard for the development of the school.	0.89
▪ Strategic Translation	5	1. The principal seeks and proposes new strategies to overcome weaknesses in the daily implementation of teachers' duties. 2. The principal discusses and makes collective decisions with teachers on the new strategies for developing the school	0.90
▪ Strategic Alignment	5	1. The principal practices interpersonal skills with teachers 2. The principal motivates teachers to perform their duties well	0.90
▪ Strategic Intervention	4	1. If teachers deviate from the goals of the school, the principal immediately corrects them. 2. The principal is capable of and smart in making adjustments to the school's strategic plans	0.90

Table 1
Continued

Construct	No of Items	Sample Items	α
Personal Characteristics (Davies & Davies, 2004, 2006 & 2009)			
▪ Restlessness	5	1. The principal states his intention to work collectively 2. The principal does not simply praise teachers.	0.92
▪ Absorptive Capacity	5	1. The principal strongly emphasizes the use of new information in enhancing school excellence 2. The principal shows the initiative to learn from past mistakes	0.91
▪ Adaptiveness	5	1. The principal can make significant strategic changes towards school excellence 2. The principal is creative and flexible in decision making and problem solving.	0.93
▪ Wisdom	5	1. The principal consults the key stakeholders on quality achievement 2. The principal treats quality service as his responsibility	0.90

Data Collection

Data were collected manually with the help of two assistants. All 92 schools in the three provinces of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat were visited prior to the survey. Each school was presented with a letter of introduction from the researcher's university for the purpose of acquiring their permission for the questionnaire distribution. In each school visit, the researcher explained the purpose and objective of the study to the person in charge for each school and ensured the confidentiality of the teachers' responses. A token of appreciation was given to all respondents. The data acquisition process took three full months to complete with several follow-ups being made to increase the response rate.

Data Analysis

Data were received from 918 Thai teachers from 92 IPSS in Southern Thailand. The study used SPSS version 21 for data cleaning and preliminary data analysis, and AMOS 21.0 for the advanced analysis involving structural equation modeling (SEM). In AMOS 21.0, the analysis utilized the maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) to generate the estimates of the proposed full-fledged SEM model and assess its covariance matrices. To examine the hypothesized model

of IPSS strategic educational leadership practices, the analysis used a covariance-based SEM and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the convergent validity of the PESLP model.

Based on expert recommendations (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2019; Segars & Grover, 1993), the estimated PSELP model was evaluated by considering at least three model fit indicators from the following: Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Comparative Fit of Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), normed chi-square (x2 /(df), the chi-square (x2), degree of freedom (df), and Root Mean Square of Error Approximation (RMSEA). To obtain an adequate model fit, the value of RMSEA has to be equal to or less than 0.08, while the values of GFI, TLI, and CFI should be equal to or more than 0.90 (Byrne, 2010). Finally, the value for the normed chi-square (x2 /df) should be less than 3.0 (Hayduk, 1987).

RESULTS

Respondents' Profile

The respondents were 918 teachers from 92 Islamic private secondary schools in Southern Thailand. The sample was acceptably balanced in terms of gender (i.e., 52.5% male and 47.5% female) and was made up of relatively young teachers between the ages of 31 and 40 (43.8%) and 20 and 30 (25.6%). About one third were slightly older, i.e., between 41 and 50 (25.1%), and 51 to 60 (5.6%). Most of these teachers hailed from the Narathiwat province (40.4%) and had either been trained or involved in various aspects and levels of school leadership (e.g., decision making, dealing with parents, and managing tasks and programs). In terms of experience, a majority were novice teachers with less than 10 years of teaching engagement (60.8%), while the more experienced ones constituted 27.1% (i.e., 11 to 20 years) and 11.3% (i.e., 21 to 30 years) of the sample. Only 0.8% were veteran teachers (i.e., more than 30 years of teaching experience). Table 2 summarizes the respondents' demographics.

Table 2
Respondents' Demographics (N = 918)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	482	52.5
	Female	436	47.5
Age	20-30 years old	235	25.6
	31-40 years old	402	43.8
	41-50 years old	230	25.1
	51-60 years old	51	5.6
Teaching Experience	1-10 years	558	60.8
	11-20 years	249	27.1
	21-30 years	104	11.3
	30-40	7	0.8
Province	Pattani	257	28.0
	Yala	290	31.6
	Narathiwat	371	40.4

Levels of Principal Educational Strategic Leadership Practices in Southern Thailand's Islamic Private Schools: Teachers' Perceptions

Means and standard deviations were computed on the levels of principals' educational strategic leadership practices (PESLPs) as perceived by the selected teachers of 92 Islamic private schools in Southern Thailand (Table 3).

Table 3

Perceived Levels of PESLPs in Southern Thailand's Islamic Private Schools Based on a 7-Point Likert Scale (N = 918)

Construct	No of Items	M	SD	Level
Wisdom	5	5.73	.82	High
Restlessness	5	5.68	.83	High
Strategic Alignment	5	5.63	.85	High
Absorptive Capacity	5	5.63	.86	High
Strategic Orientation	5	5.61	.83	High
Strategic Intervention	4	5.60	.88	High
Strategic Competencies	5	5.56	.86	High
Adaptive Capacity	5	5.55	.88	High
Strategic Translation	5	5.43	.85	High

Notes: Levels = Low (M = 1 to M = 1.66); Medium (M = 1.67 to M = 3.33); High (M = 3.34 to M = 5.00)

All scores indicated high levels of principals' engagement in strategic leadership practices as the mean values exceeded the threshold of M = 3.34 for high level practices. To summarize, the highest mean score for PESLPs was wisdom (M = 5.73, SD = 0.82) and restlessness (M =5.68, SD = 0.83), followed by alignment (M = 5.63, SD = 0.85), absorptive capacity (M = 5.63, SD = 0.86), strategic orientation (M = 5.61, SD = 0.83), strategic orientation (M = 5.60, SD = 0.88), strategic competencies (M = 5.56, SD = 0.86) and adaptive capacity (M = 5.55, 0.88). Strategic translation was rated as the lowest PESLP domain by the respondents (M = 5.43, SD = 0.85).

Validity and Reliability of IPSS Principals' Strategic Educational Leadership Model

Figure 2 shows the results of the CFA with maximum likelihood estimation. Although the study expected all 44 items to successfully load into every sub-factor of the nine SEL constructs, the preliminary findings fell short of the expectation, as the fit statistics (i.e., GFI = 0.820, CFI = 0.890, and TLI = 0.880) all fell below the accepted thresholds. Thus, a modification was necessary as the measurement model of PSELP did not fit the data (Hair et al., 2019). As depicted in Figure 2, 32 items (out of the original 44) loaded into nine factors of the PSELP measurement model. Following the suggestion by Hair et al. (2019), all items lower than 0.7 were removed. Therefore, out of the five items that measured *strategic orientation,* two were eliminated. Likewise, two *wisdom* items, and three items each from *strategic alignment* and *strategic translation* were dropped. One item each was eliminated from *absorptive capacity*

and *adaptiveness*. In total, 12 items from the original pool of 44 items were deleted in the revised analysis to improve model fit.

Following the modification, the re-specified model demonstrated a significant increase in goodness of fit, demonstrating a sufficient tie between the observed data's covariance matrix and the model's predicted covariance matrix. The fit statistics (i.e., CFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.940 and GFI = 0.904) were now greater than the cut-score values of > 0. 90. Similarly, RMSEA = 0.054 was within the appropriate range of <.08, while the normed x^2 /df = 3.626 was above the recommended value of 3. Table 4 shows a comparison of the fit indicators between the generated and revised models of PSELP.

Figure 2

Measurement Model of IPSS Principals' Strategic Educational Leadership Practices

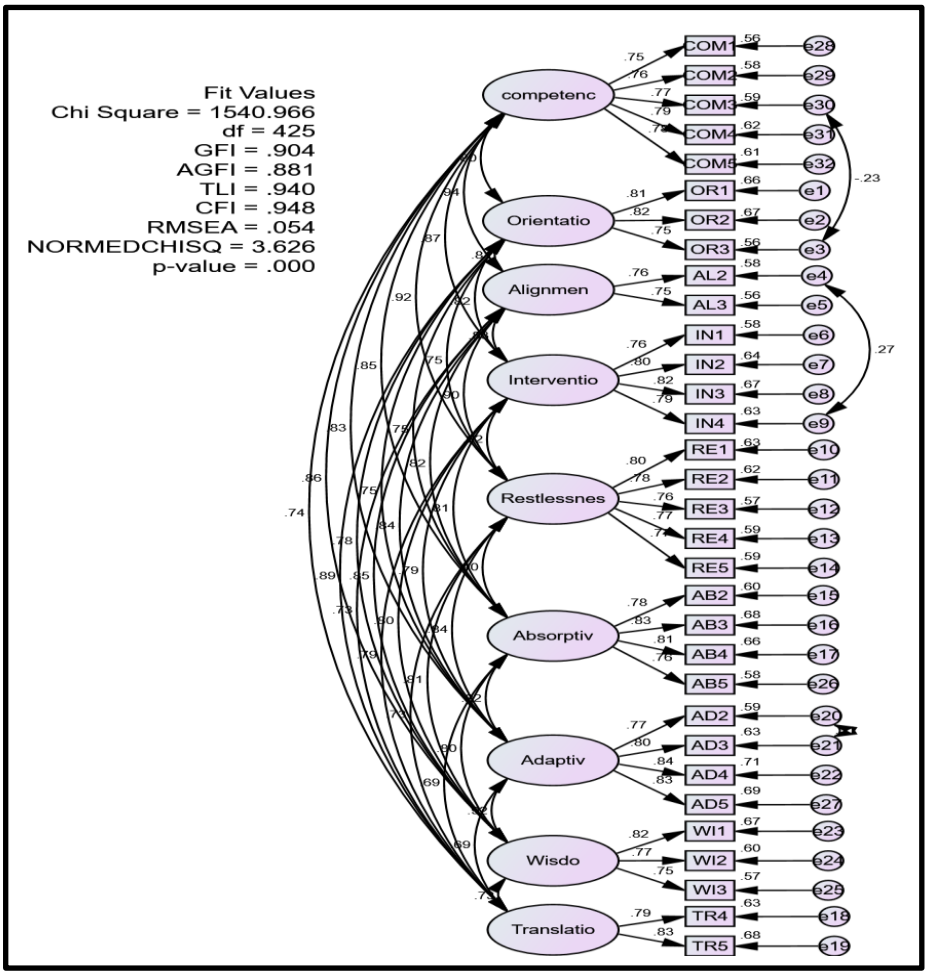


Table 4

Comparison of Goodness of Fit Indicators between the Generated and Revised Models of PSELP

Fit Index	Generated Model	Accepted Fit indices	Revised Model
p-value*	<.001	0.001 ≤p ≥0.05	<.001
Chi-square	4175.696	Insignificant	1540.966
CFI	.890	≥.90	.948
GFI	.820	≥.90	.904
CMIN/DF	4.822	≤ 3	3.60
RMSEA	.065	≤.08	.054
TLI	.880	≥.90	.940

*Notes: Sources: Kline (2010), *Statistically significant at 0.05*

To establish the convergent validity of the revised model of IPSS principals' strategic educational leadership practices, the model's average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), internal reliability, and factor loadings were computed. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Convergent Validity of the IPSS Principals' Strategic Educational Leadership Practices model

Construct	Item	Cronbach's Alpha	Item Loadings	AVE	CR
Strategic Orientation	OR1	.84	.814	.63	.84
	OR2		.821		
	OR3		745		
Strategic Alignment	AL2	.73	.763	.57	.73
	AL3		.749		
Strategic Intervention	IN1	.87	.761	.63	.87
	IN2		.798		
	IN3		.820		
	IN4		.791		
Restlessness	RE1	.87	.796	.60	.88
	RE2		.784		
	RE3		.756		
	RE4		.769		
	RE5		.771		
Absorptive Capacity	AB2	.87	.777	.63	.87
	AB3		.825		
	AB4		.811		
	AB5		.762		
Strategic Translation	TR4	.80	.792	.67	.79
	TR5		.828		

Table 5
Continued

Construct	Item	Cronbach's Alpha	Item Loadings	AVE	CR
Strategic Translation	TR4	.80	.792	.67	.79
	TR5		.828		
Adaptive Capacity	AD2	.90	.770	.67	.89
	AD3		.797		
	AD4		.844		
	AD5		.833		
Wisdom	WI1	.83	.817	.61	.83
	WI2		.774		
	WI3		.755		
Strategic Competencies	COM1	.88	.751	.60	.88
	COM2		.764		
	COM3		.769		
	COM4		.786		
	COM5		.783		

All items had loadings greater than 0.7 and all strategic leadership factors had CR values greater than 0.7 and AVE values above 0.5. The values show that the revised model of IPSS principals' strategic educational leadership practices has sufficient and defensible convergent validity.

The study proceeded with the analysis of the revised PSELP model's discriminant validity to further verify its psychometric properties. To clarify, a measurement model is considered valid if there are minimal associations between its main factors. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) was used, as recommended by experts (e.g., Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). In short, the HTMT value should be ≤ .90. Table 6 presents the discriminant validity indices of the improved IPSS principals' strategic educational leadership model, showing all constructs meeting the discriminant validity requirements.

Table 6
Discriminant Validity of the Revised IPSS PSELP Model

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(2) Alignment	.82							
(3) Intervention	.83	.85						
(4) Restlessness	.76	.90	.82					
(5) Absorptive	.75	.82	.81	.90				
(6) Translation	.89	.73	.80	.73	.68			
(7) Adaptive	.74	.83	.77	.83	.82	.68		
(8) Wisdom	.78	.85	.80	.81	.80	.74	90	
(9) Competence	.80	.90	.87	.90	.85	.74	.83	.86

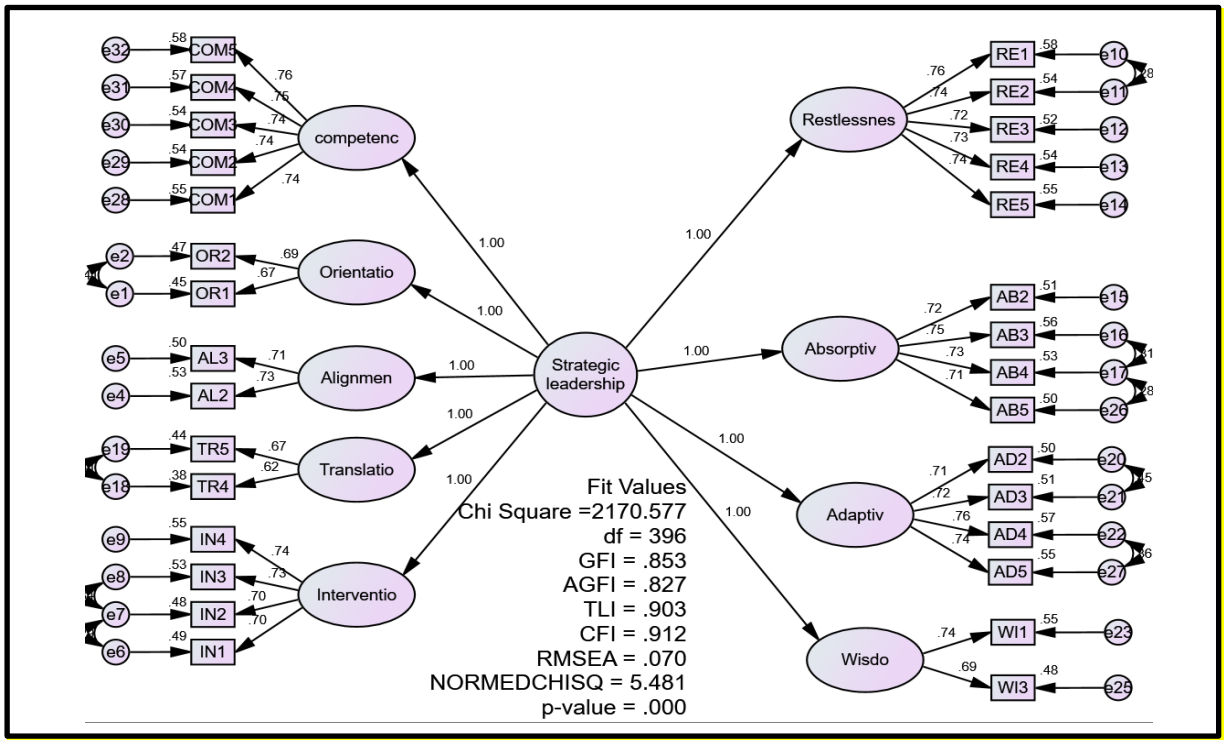
Second-Order Factor of IPSS Principals' Strategic Educational Leadership Practices

Figure 3 illustrates the output of the second-order measurement model. The model can be considered adequately fit, with TLI = 0.903, CFI = 0.912, and RMSEA = 0.070, all of which are above the required cut-off criteria. The presence of a second-order component enabled the study to establish a rather strong link between first-order factors. The fit indices in this situation allowed the researchers to conclude that the IPSS PSELP model fit the data and was thus valid and reliable.

SEM is a statistical method that can be used to assess the hypotheses of a multivariate investigation (Byrne, 2010; Tabachnick, Fidell, Tabachnick, & Fidell, 2014). The hypotheses can be evaluated at the 0.05 significance level if the modified measurement model (Figure 2) and the second-order factor of IPSS Principals' Strategic Educational Leadership practices (Figure 3) are shown to be valid. The results of the analysis confirmed that the proposed nine-factor measurement model of IPSS strategic educational leadership practices was valid and reliable.

Figure 3

The Second-Order Factor Model of IPSS Principals' Strategic Leadership Practices



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Levels of Strategic Educational Leadership Practices among IPSS Principals in Southern Thailand

Based on the descriptive results, teachers of the IPSS in Southern Thailand perceived that their principals engaged in high levels of strategic educational leadership practices in managing their respective schools. All nine factors of PSELP were reported to be highly practiced, with the highest ones being *wisdom* and restlessness, and the lowest being *strategic translation*. The results support the conclusion that IPSS principals in Southern Thailand incorporated the components of strategic educational leadership in their school management and exhibited the four characteristics of a strategic leader. While the results corroborated the findings of Adelakun (2015), Ali (2013), Chehdiame (2013), Hairuddin and Inas (2017), Hemathy (2022), Nazifah (2012), Nasruddeen (2015), and Zakaria et al. (2021), all of whom had discovered the levels of strategic educational leadership practices among educational leaders to be considerably high, they fall short in explaining why the IPSS in Southern Thailand are underperforming. If principals are indeed practicing SEL, school effectiveness should be reasonably high or at least moderate, and not fall below expectations. The high levels of PSELP found in the study seem to contradict Zuraidah's (2013) observation that principals need to be more strategic in sharing the school mission and vision with teachers to achieve greater success. Zuraidah (2013) also found principals lacking in strategic orientation, an observation that ran counter to the findings of the present study. To clarify the discrepancies, further research is warranted.

Validity and Reliability of the PSELP Model for IPSS Principals in Southern Thailand

The study confirmed a nine-factor second-order model with 32 indicators of PSELP, having dropped 12 items from the original pool of 44. Basically, the model supports the SEL theory of five strategic leadership domains (comprising strategic competencies, strategic orientation, strategic translation, strategic alignment, and strategic intervention) and four strategic leader characteristics (comprising restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptiveness and wisdom) that need to be adopted by Thai IPSS principals to work toward school effectiveness. The model was established to be valid—as its CR values were greater than 0.7 and AVE values were all above 0.5— and reliable with composite reliability estimates ranging between 0.7 and above for its nine factors.

The nine-factor PSELP model has extended previous findings (i.e., Hairuddin, 2012) which reported that school principals mostly practiced only six of the nine factors of SEL. Hairudin's (2012) work confirmed the validity and reliability of a six-factor Strategic Educational Leadership practice model. Similarly, Nasruddeen (2015) had managed to confirm only four of the PSELP factors (i.e., wisdom, strategic competences, strategic orientation, and strategic translation), while Hairuddin and Inas (2017) had confirmed seven of the PSELP factors.

However, data from the Islamic school principals in Southern Thailand have verified a broader nine-factor model, thereby giving significance to strategic orientation, strategic alignment, and strategic intervention, the roles of which were unverified in previous research. The model also emphasizes the need to train IPSS principals specifically in leadership wisdom. The validated PSELP model can be used to guide the further development of Southern Thailand's Islamic schools through the extensive strategic leadership training of their principals.

Collectively, the results imply that school leaders must have the five abilities and four characteristics to steer their schools toward success and effectiveness. They must have a big-picture view of their schools and understand the socio-cultural context in which the schools are operating in order to manage them effectively toward their stated goals (Davies, 2003; Davies & Davies, 2004, 2006 & 2009). In particular, the IPSS in Southern Thailand would benefit tremendously from their principals' strategic orientation and strategic alignment, which are needed to run the schools based on their mission and vision.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite the study's contributions, one aspect of the findings cannot be clearly explained, and that concerns the link between two things, i.e., IPSS principals' reportedly high engagement in PSELP and the poor condition the Islamic schools in Southern Thailand are in and their lack of student achievement. What is not understood is how did good principal practices in strategic leadership—if indeed they were good— lead the schools down the road of poor achievement and performance? In fact, the opposite should be true. What contextual factors were at play in bringing about this phenomenon? The fact that its results cannot explain this link is a major limitation of the study. This may be due to how the items in the questionnaire were phrased which could have invited socially desirable and positively skewed answers from the respondents that deviated from the reality on the ground. Another possibility is that there might have been a disconnect between what the respondents perceived to be strategic leadership practices and what the theory says what the practices are and should be. Another limitation of the study is that the proposed model of PSELP has been validated earlier by Hemathy (2022) with almost the same findings being replicated. This has in a way reduced the novelty of the present study's results.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To address the study's inability to explain the bizarre link between high PSELP on the part of school principals and IPSS' low academic performance, future efforts need to employ a combination of more rigorous inquiry methods such as interviews with principals, analysis of school records and documents, and non-participatory observation of the school dynamics. The employment of such methods will give us a better comprehension of how PSELP and IPSS performance are interlinked to lead to good or poor performance of the Islamic private schools in Southern Thailand. In addition, the roles of school culture and climate as the likely predictors of achievement, as well as teachers' pedagogy in use, should also be considered in untangling the association between PSELP and school performance.

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