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A STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL, HEADS OF  
DEPARTMENTS AND TEACHERS ON THE ROLE  
OF THE HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS:  
A CASE STUDY

BY

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to look at the roles and responsibilities of departmental heads and to explore underlying factors that may result in differences in the way such roles and responsibilities are perceived by others in the same organisation. The case chosen for this study is a large secondary school in the Gombak district of Selangor, where the parties involved are the principal, heads of departments, and teachers.

A comparison of the mean scores given by the three groups - the principal, heads of departments, and teachers revealed that there were significant differences in their perceptions of the roles, responsibilities, and duties of the heads of departments.

Based on the analysis of responses given, it appears that the delegation of power and authority appears to be differently understood by the parties involved. This may be explained by the fact that schools that have grown in size and responsibilities require not only more complex structures but greater management skills on the part of the leadership, that is, the principal. It is felt that in depth awareness of management concepts and skills can effectively overcome such problems. The paper recommends that greater emphasis ought to be given by the relevant authorities to management training and relearning for those who are eligible to shoulder greater administrative responsibilities prior to their appointment. This is especially so in large schools.

# APPROVAL PAGE

TITLE OF PROJECT PAPER: A STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL, HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS, AND TEACHERS ON THE ROLE OF THE HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS: A CASE STUDY

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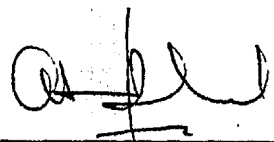
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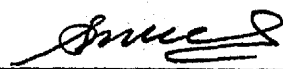
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# DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by reference notes and a bibliography is appended.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Problem

The secondary schools of today are bigger and more complex than ever before and as such their internal organisation is becoming more complex. The management of the schools of today too has become complex and more challenging. It is no longer possible for the principal alone to be held responsible for the administration of the school. Principals need a team of administrative personnel who will combine their efforts to make the organisation more efficient and effective. In secondary schools the principal is assisted by a team of administrative personnel comprising senior assistants and heads of departments.

While the role of the principal has been studied in great depth and much has been written on the subject in the context of the Malaysian school, the role of the heads of departments has been somewhat neglected. What is the role of the heads of department? The role of the head of department is multi faceted, the head of department is a teacher but at the same time he is also expected to support and encourage staff in his department. He will also be involved in planning, policy making and various other management functions. The head of department is a vital human resource in the school and the key to institutional vitality but it is also an ambiguous role. Callahan (1971) referred to the heads of departments as "the vital link between those who plan

and those who carry out the school policy." It is, however, a difficult and ambiguous role caught in the middle of the management hierarchy (Prucnal, 1982; Hammons 1984; Tucker, 1981).

There are differences in the perceptions of principles, heads of departments and teaching staff as to the degree of importance to the various duties of the heads of departments. There has however been very limited studies on the subject in Malaysia.

### **The School Head of Department**

The school heads of departments (guru kanan mata pelajaran or more often called the ketua bidang) are appointed by the Ministry of Education based on the recommendations of the principals. In an 'A' grade school there are 4 heads of department, each covering a different field - languages, humanities, sciences, and vocational and technical. The subjects under each field are as follows:

#### **Languages:**

- Malay
- English
- Chinese
- Tamil
- Arabic and other languages that are taught in schools
- Malay Literature
- English Literature

## **Humanities**

- Geography
- History
- Islamic Studies/Moral Studies
- Arts
- Physical Education and Health Education

## **Sciences**

- Science
- Additional Science
- Physics
- Chemistry
- Biology
- Mathematics
- Additional Mathematics

## **Vocational and Technical**

- Integrated Living Skills
- Living Skills (upper secondary)
- Home Economics
- Agricultural Science
- Commerce
- Principles of Accounting
- Basic Economy
- Economy
- Engineering Drawing

- Technical Engineering
- Any new subjects that may be introduced

The heads of departments are given an allowance RM80 a month for the additional administrative duties that they carry out. They are also given reduced teaching periods (eighteen periods compared to an average teacher's twenty-four periods).

Other than teaching duties, the heads of departments is also expected to carry out administrative duties, planning and managing the curriculum, and also planning and managing co-curricular activities. Teachers who are appointed to the position of head of department are given a guide as to their tasks and duties. They are sometimes also given a briefing by the state Department of Education.

### **Need for the Study**

As schools become increasingly complex, it is no longer possible for the principal alone to be held responsible for the administration of the school. The heads of departments serves a vital link between teachers and administrators. Heads of departments also perform dual roles of teaching and administration. These roles, however, are often not clearly defined and the degree of importance placed on specific activities that comprise the role is ambiguous. There has to date been very few studies concerning the role that heads of department should play in schools. In the fast changing school environment today, there seems to be an urgent need for a study on the

consistency of opinions among principals, heads of departments, and teachers regarding the duties of the heads of department.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Every secondary school in Malaysia has heads of departments, whether they are appointed by the education office or internally, by the principal. Thus the need for heads of departments is acknowledged but very often the duties of heads of departments are not clearly spelt out. The heads of departments therefore tend to interpret his role based on his own perceptions. This lack of role definition and job description leads to role conflict and role strain which could lead to job related stress. There has been very few studies conducted on the role of heads of departments in Malaysia.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to compare the perceptions of secondary school principals, heads of departments and teachers on the role of the heads of department, specifically the "Guru Kanan Mata Pelajaran".

### **Research Question**

Are there differences in the way principals, heads of department and teachers perceive the role of the heads of departments in secondary schools?

### **Specific Objectives**

1. To determine if there is a difference in the degree of importance that principals and heads of departments attach to selected duties of the heads of departments.
2. To determine if there is a difference in the degree of importance that teachers and heads of departments attach to selected duties of the heads of departments.
3. To determine if there is a difference in the degree of importance that principals and teachers attach to selected duties of the heads of department.

### **Definition of Terms**

Operational definitions of terms used in this study:

Role	The typical behaviour that characterises a person in a specific social context.
Actual role	The specific activities (functions) performed by an incumbent in a particular position; the duties of the job performed.
Perceived role	Those particular activities (functions) which are expected to be performed by an incumbent in a particular position; the expectations that specific duties should be performed.
Role expectation	The behaviour expected of someone in a particular role.



Role ambiguity	Confusion arising from not knowing what one is expected to do as a holder of a role.
Principal	The administrative head and professional leader of a school unit.
* Head of department	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A member of the teaching staff whose duties include the supervision and co-ordination of instruction in a department within a school and is responsible directly to the principal (Good, 1973).</li> <li>2. One who has to carry out the following duties; establish an overview of the subject under his charge, plan and implement a comprehensive program of instruction in the subject, improve student performance, carry out continuous assessment and evaluation, and increase the skills and knowledge of the teachers (circular 4/1986, Ministry of Education, Malaysia).</li> </ol>
Administrative duties	Those particular activities (functions) in which heads of department execute the policies of the school and manage the business of the department.
Supervisory duties	Those particular activities (functions) in which the heads of department advises and evaluates the teachers in the department.

\* There seems to be no one definition for the role of the head of department.

## Significance of the Study

The heads of department are a vital link between the teachers and the principal. The role of the heads of department is therefore a very important one in school. However, each group - the principal, heads of department and teachers perceive the role of the heads of department differently. Although a job description exists, it is rather general in nature and covers a wide scope, it is thus open to interpretation by the three groups concerned. The differences in perceptions could lead to misunderstandings and differences of opinion. The resulting conflicts could undermine the effectiveness of the heads of department.

# CHAPTER TWO

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to compare the perceptions of the principal, heads of department and teachers in secondary schools on the role of the head of department. There has been many studies done on the role of the principals but there is a lack of studies on the role of the head of department in Malaysia. However there has been research on this subject in the United States and in the United Kingdom. This chapter reviews the related literature on the role of the heads of department. The review of literature provides the conceptual framework of the study.

### The Concept of Role

A general definition of role by P. Selznick(1966) "A role is a way of behaviour associated with a defined position in a social system. Every society, and every group within society assigns positions to members. These positions carry expectations regarding the behaviours of those who fill them. We learn how to be sons, teachers, clerks, neighbours citizens. Some of these roles are accepted consciously and formally, others unconsciously and responsively; some are peripheral, others central to our self conceptions. Especially relevant here is that role taking connotes an adaptive process, a mode of conscious self structuring."

A less general definition is given by A.G. Sorensen (1963) " A society may be regarded as structured into a number of positions, statuses or offices. Each of the positions designated by a single term such as a father, policeman, or teacher is a collection of rights and duties. The actions of the individual are organised around the positions and comprise the role. The role is linked with a position and not the person who occupies the position. To the extent that the actions of a person in a particular position are perceived as conforming to the expectations (preferences) of the members of his society, he may be said to be successful in fulfilling that role. To the extent that he fails to behave in the prescribed manner, that he does not conform to the role expectations, he is subject to censure".

Although the concept of role was introduced prior to 1900, there seem to be many different meanings that were used. Neiman and Highes (1951) wrote :

"The concept of role is at present rather vague, nebulous and non definitive. Frequently in literature, the concept is used without any attempt on the part of the writer to define or delimit the concept, the assumption being that both the writer and the reader will achieve immediate consensus."

Ribbins (1988) noted that ' role is often taken to mean a designated position within a structure of positions. For the organisational theorist a role is more than just position or a structure; it is the behaviours associated with it which those in other positions expect the role incumbent to engage in. Roles

are therefore defined in the relationships between positions in a structure expressed in the behaviours considered appropriate rather than merely in the designated positions themselves'.

Peeke (1983) suggests that each role be conceived as three separate sets of perceptions. One set is characterised by the perceptions of the 'organisation' in that the role is the ascribed role, with a set of behaviours often identified in a job description. ....Another set is identified by the perceptions of those who interact with the occupants of roles..... The third perception are those of the occupant of the role.

Role too, is associated with status

" Each of these statuses carries with it a set of rules or norms which prescribe how the person who occupies it should or should not behave under particular circumstances. That cluster of norms is called a role. Status and role are thus two sides of a single coin. Status is socially identified position; role is the pattern of behaviour expected of persons who occupy a particular status" Ely Chinoy, (1963).

Linton (1945) an anthropologist, proposed a distinction between status and role. "A status as distinct from the individual who may occupy it, is simply a collection of rights and duties..... A role represents the dynamic aspect of a status .....When he (an individual) puts the rights and duties which constitutes the rights and duties into effect, he is performing a role." According to Linton

role and status are quite inseparable, and a distinction between them is only of academic interest. There is no role without status or status without role.

### Role Conflict

The concept of role conflict and role strain is closely tied to the notion of expectation. Role strain and role conflict are often used as if they were interchangeable. Peeke (1983) suggests that : "Role strain occurs when expectations are contradicted or actors do not hold expectations in common."

Getzels and Guba (1954) give the following definition of role conflict :

"Role conflict ensues whenever an actor is required to fill two or more roles whose expectations are inconsistent". Morgan and Turner argue that 'Role conflict refers to the incompatibility in the demands and expectations a role incumbent faces".

Hargreaves (1972) identifies eight sources of role conflict which Peeke (1983) lists as follows :

1. Where an actor simultaneously occupies two positions whose roles are incompatible.
2. Where there is a lack of consensus amongst the occupants of a position about the content of a role.
3. Where there is a lack of consensus amongst the occupants of one of the complementary role positions.
4. Where an actor's conception of his role conflicts with the expectation of a role partner.
5. Where various role partners have conflicting expectations.
6. Where a single role partner has incompatible expectations.

7. Where role expectations are unclear.
8. Where an actor lacks qualities required for adequate role performance.

Ribbins (1988) noted that " Some level of role conflict, may be explained within a functionalist approach. The model of social life upon which it is based is essentially an 'ideal type'. In practice some degree of variation always exists in ways in which people play the roles they are allotted".

Woodland distinguishes two levels at which an individual may experience role conflict, first, within his body of roles and second between his own roles and that of other actors. Peeke (1983) views role conflict at three different levels : the social system, the individual personality level and the cultural level. At the social system level role strain could be caused by the expectations of groups or individuals are unclear, incompatible and competing expectations or it could be the social system itself. At the individual level there are three main sources of role strain. The first is that an individual attribute may affect the production of expected role behaviour. The second source is when the role expectations of the actor are incompatible with the actor's self concept. The third source of strain is that where a role which a person occupies is within his capabilities but not suited to his needs. At the cultural level role strain can arise from a conflict of ideology.

Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn and Snoek suggest that when behaviours expected of an individual by others in the organisation are inconsistent, that individual will be in a state of conflict and will experience stress, become dissatisfied,

and perform less effectively than if the expectations did not conflict. Role theory also predicts that role ambiguity will result from a lack of information about role tasks.

### **Role and Functions of Heads of Department**

What is a department and what is a head of department? Bailey (1981) holds that:

In principle, a department begins to exist

1. when two or more teachers begin to teach a subject formerly taught by one;
2. when those teachers begin to co-ordinate their work together they can perform tasks which no one of them could perform singly; and
3. when, however informally, one teacher begins to lead and another to follow.

Ribbins (1988) defines department as existing only where deliberate collaboration takes place, enabling an exchange of ideas and knowledge and facilitating some specialisation of task through division of labour.

Bayne-Jardine and Hanham (1972) notes that modern comprehensive schools differ greatly from the grammar schools where there was little emphasis on the notion of team. Heads of department tended to be appointed for their seniority and their skills as a subject teacher, and not for perceived managerial skills or aptitude. Holt (1981) recognises that it is still possible for