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Spiritual Compass, Ethical Anchor: Redefining middle leadership in Malaysian education

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Abstract
This research uses the Fuzzy Delphi Method to explore the spiritual and moral foundations of leadership among middle leaders in Malaysian schools. Seven experts evaluated four key concepts via questionnaire, revealing a high agreement level (96%), with Spiritual Growth and Self-Awareness deemed most important. The findings underscore the need to incorporate spiritual and ethical elements into leadership development programs. By integrating Al-Ghazali's concepts with contemporary leadership principles, the study enhances middle leadership development in Malaysia's educational system, supporting a comprehensive framework to improve leadership efficiency in academic institutions.

Keywords: Spiritual Leadership, Ethical Decision-Making, Middle Leaders, Leadership Development

1.0 Introduction
Spirituality and ethics in education leadership are now receiving attention in society. These fundamental values are increasingly essential components of effective, ethical, and transformative leadership, especially among middle leaders in the educational field. The cultural and moral ideals that underpin leaders' views towards work, colleagues, and themselves provide their spiritual and ethical underpinning. This leadership strategy promotes organizational growth, individual advancement, and a sense of purpose to cultivate a more inclusive school culture (Morris et al., 2020). In Malaysian education, middle leaders are key personnel who bridge top management and teaching staff, including senior assistant teachers, senior subject teachers, head panels of committees, and head of the unit/department. They play crucial roles in implementing policies, mentoring teachers, and maintaining educational standards.

This is increasingly significant as culture, technology, and the global environment transform. Educational leaders are currently confronted with ethical challenges, diverse student demographics, and the advancement of educational institutions while making moral decisions for themselves (Puyo and Berges, 2022). Recent studies have focused significantly on the influence of ethical leadership in fostering trust, shaping organizational culture, and promoting ethical behaviour in the workplace. According to Liu and Yin (2023), ethical leadership improves educational trust, motivation, and performance.

Several critical challenges persist in Malaysian educational institutions. First, leadership development programs have an insufficient emphasis on spirituality and ethics. Second, middle leaders often lack structured ethical frameworks for decision-making, forcing reliance on ad-hoc experiences. Third, institutional priorities frequently favor administrative metrics over ethical leadership development. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened the gap between performance measures and ethical leadership practices (Puyo and Berges, 2022).

These issues require comprehensive solutions to promote the spiritual and ethical development of middle leaders in Malaysian schools. Initially, training is essential for cultivating spiritual and ethical management competencies. Through these programs, middle leaders must evaluate their values, engage in ethical reasoning, and incorporate spiritual principles into their leadership. Göçen (2020) asserts that ethical leadership based on care and justice improves job satisfaction and emotional commitment among educational professionals. Secondly, educational institutions ought to support ethical deliberation and collaborative decision-making. In 2020, Astakoni and his co-authors determined that spiritual leadership improves employee loyalty and performance through an ethical organizational culture. On the other hand, school organization barriers also play a significant role in middle leader challenges (Lipscombe et al., 2023; Beram et al., 2021). Understanding the organizational complexities and defining clear roles and responsibilities can help middle leaders navigate their roles more effectively.

This study aims to examine spiritual and ethical leadership frameworks for Malaysian middle leader teams (educators), identify organizational barriers affecting their roles, and develop recommendations for enhancing their effectiveness. The research focuses on creating comprehensive and empathetic leadership approaches to improve school climate, teacher well-being, and student academic performance. This study will inform Malaysian professional development programs and school policy development by examining current practices, challenges, and potential solutions.

2.0 Literature Review
The literature on middle leadership in educational settings has expanded significantly, yet a critical gap exists in integrating spirituality and ethics into leadership frameworks. While studies emphasize the importance of middle leaders' managerial competencies (Gurr and Nicholas, 2023; Nobile et al., 2024), frameworks incorporating spiritual and ethical dimensions within Malaysia's unique cultural-educational context are notably absent.

Current research on middle leadership development predominantly focuses on administrative and instructional aspects, often overlooking these leaders' daily complex ethical challenges. Spiritual leadership theory suggests that leaders who integrate moral values and spiritual principles demonstrate enhanced organizational commitment and performance (Göçen, 2020; Astakoni et al., 2020). This theoretical foundation aligns with Al-Ghazali's principles of ethical leadership, which emphasize moral development and spiritual consciousness in leadership practice (Al-Ghazali, 1997)

Integrating spiritual leadership theory with Malaysian educational contexts reveals unique opportunities and challenges. Studies by Arar and Saiti (2022) demonstrate how Islamic ethical principles enhance leadership effectiveness in educational settings. However, research specifically examining the application of these principles among middle leaders in Malaysian schools remains limited (Ahmad et al., 2024).

Where leaders must navigate diverse ethical considerations while maintaining organizational effectiveness, this gap is particularly significant given Malaysia's distinctive multicultural educational environment. This research addresses these theoretical gaps by proposing an integrated framework that combines spiritual leadership theory, Al-Ghazali's ethical principles, and contemporary educational leadership approaches. This synthesis offers a culturally responsive model for developing middle leaders in Malaysian schools, contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical application of ethical leadership in educational settings.

3.0 Methodology
This Design and Development Research follows Richie and Klein's (2014) methodology, utilizing the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) to develop and validate a middle leadership framework.

3.1 Research Design
The study comprised two phases: (1) analysis of significant literature on middle leadership challenges in Malaysian education and (2) framework validation through FDM expert consensus.

3.2 Expert Selection and Sampling
Seven experts were purposefully selected based on established criteria (Mustapha and Darusalam 2017):
• Minimum eight years of educational leadership experience.
• Diverse expertise spanning Islamic studies, educational administration, and school leadership.
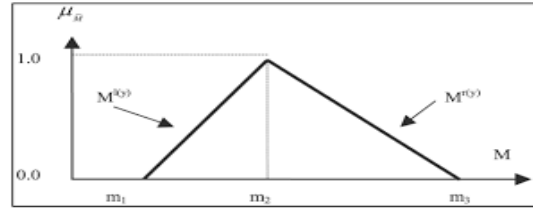• Current roles in public universities, educational institutions, and schools.

Table 1: List of Experts

Expert	Field of expertise	Institution
1 Doctorate	Islamic studies	Public university
2 Senior Lecturers	Administrative & Management	Educations Institution
2 Middle leader teachers	Teaching and Management	Secondary School
2 Principal	Principal/Main Leader	Private School

3.3 Fuzzy Delphi Step
Below are steps of Fuzzy Delphi Method.

Table 2: Fuzzy Delphi Step

Step	Formulation
1. Expert selection	• This report features a group of seven experts. A committee of scholars gathered to assess the significance of analytical criteria regarding the aspects that will be studied using language aspects.
2. Determining linguistic structures	• This method involves converting all linguistic variables into the quantification of fuzzy triangles (triangular fuzzy numbers). This action also integrates fuzzy numbers into the translation of linguistic variables (Hsieh, Lu, and Tzeng, 2004). Here, the Triangular Fuzzy Number represents the values m1, m2, and m3, expressed as (m1, m2, m3). m1 denotes the minimum value, m2 signifies a rational value, and m3 indicates the maximum value. The Triangular Fuzzy Number is then utilized to create a Fuzzy Scale for transforming linguistic variables into fuzzy numbers.

Figure 1: Triangular fuzzy number

Step	Formulation
3. The Identification of Linguistic Variables and Average Responses	• After receiving feedback from the assigned expert, the researcher then transforms all measurement findings into fuzzy scales, which are commonly identified as recognizing every response (Benitez, Martin & Roman, 2007).
4. The determination of threshold value "d"	• The threshold value is vital for evaluating the degree of consensus among experts (Thomaidis, Nikitakos & Dounias, 2006). Moreover, the distances for each fuzzy integer m = (m1, m2, m3) and n = (m1, m2, m3) are calculated using the formula: $$d(\bar{m}, \bar{n}) = \sqrt{\frac{1}{3}[(m1-n1)^2 + (m2-n2)^2 + (m3-n3)^2]}$$
5. Determine the alpha cut the aggregate level of fuzzy the process of assessment	• Upon reaching an expert consensus, a fuzzy number is allocated to each component (Mustapha & Darussalam, 2017). The following describes the methodology for calculating and evaluating fuzzy values: Amax = (1) /4 (m1 + 2m2 + m3)
6. Defuzzification process	• This procedure uses the formula Amax = (1)/4 (m1 + 2m2 + m3). When the researcher employs Average Fuzzy Numbers or average responses, the resultant score falls within the range of 0 to 1 (Benitez et al., 2007). This method is based on three formulas: i. A = 1/3 * (m1 + m2 + m3); ii. A = 1/4 * (m1 + 2m2 + m3); iii. A = 1/6 * (m1 + 4m2 + m3). Here, α-cut value is the median of '0' and '1', calculated as α-cut = (0 + 1) / 2 = 0.5. If the resultant A value falls below the α-cut value of 0.5, the item will be eliminated due to a lack of expert consensus. Tang and Wu (2010) highlight that the α-cut value must exceed 0.5.
7. Ranking process	• The ranking process includes defining aspects according to defuzzification values derived from expert consensus, and identifying the element with the highest significance as the paramount decision-making consideration (Fortemps and Roubens, 1996).

3.4 Instrumentation
The researcher developed the Fuzzy Delphi research framework based on existing pertinent literature. Researchers might design instrument items out of referenced literature and previous pilot work. Questions for the FDM came from research findings and expert discussions. Okoli and Pawlowski (2004) argued that compiling study items and content must start with examining relevant literature.

By studying past literature on middle leadership development, researchers compiled critical insights. With a 7-point scale, a few expert questions are developed. The 7-point scale was implemented as an increase in the number of scales utilized to enhance the accuracy and precision of the results (Chang et al., 2011). To encourage responses from professionals on the questionnaire, the researcher adjusted the Fuzzy value in Table 3 to a 1–7 scale value, as shown below

Table 3: Fuzzy scale

Item	Fuzzy number
Strongly disagree	(0.0, 0.0, 0.1)
Disagree	(0.0, 0.1, 0.3)
Somewhat Disagree	(0.1, 0.3, 0.5)
Neutral	(0,3, 0.5, 0.7)
Somewhat agree	(0.5, 0.7, 0.9)
Agree	(0.7, 0.9, 1.0)

Strongly agree	(0.9, 1.0, 1.0)

3.5 The Main Construct for Developing Leadership Among Middle Leaders (Educators) in Malaysia

Table 4: The primary construct of the professional development for the middle leader in academic institutions

Early item rank	Construct For Leadership Development
CDMLT1	Organizational Barriers
CDMLT2	Ethical Decision-Making Framework
CDMLT3	Spiritual Growth and Self Awareness
CDMLT4	Core Leadership Competencies

Table 4 above is a construct element for developing leadership for middle leaders. Researchers highlighted key qualities needed for the development of middle-leader leadership. The FDM will apply to assess the validity and agreement among experts on whether to include this factor in the model.

4.0 Finding

4.1 Expert Validation Through Fuzzy Delphi Method
This section will present experts' consensus on key aspects of middle leader development frameworks. Seven experts in education received fuzzy Delphi questions, after which their answers were gathered. The subsequent conclusions of the investigation are as follows:

Table 5: Analysis Result 1 Fuzzy Delphi, Defuzzification Report, Expert Consensus for Constructs

Findings	Item1	Item2	Item3	Item4
Expert-1	0.17321	0.07423	0.03299	0.02474
Expert-2	0.05774	0.0165	0.03299	0.09073
Expert-3	0.11547	0.07423	0.14021	0.19795
Expert-4	0.05774	0.07423	0.03299	0.02474
Expert-5	0.11547	0.09897	0.02474	0.09073
Expert-6	0.17321	0.07423	0.03299	0.09073
Expert-7	0.11547	0.21444	0.03299	0.02474

Table 6: Analysis Results 2 Fuzzy Delphi, Construct Rank From FDM Analysis

Statistics	Item1	Item2	Item3	Item4
Value of the item	0.11547	0.08955	0.04713	0.07777
Value of the 'd' construct				0.08248
Item < 0.2	7	6	7	7
% of item < 0.2	100%	85%	100%	100%
Average of % consensus				96
Defuzzification	0.8	0.87143	0.94286	0.65714
Ranking	3	2	1	4
Status	Accept	Accept	Accept	Accept

The expert validation process revealed robust consensus on critical elements for middle leadership development in Malaysian educational institutions, demonstrating strong alignment with established methodological thresholds (Cheng & Lin, 2002; Cheng et al., 2011). The analysis yielded an overall d-value of 0.08248 (<0.2) and a 96% agreement rate, exceeding the required 75% consensus benchmark. Notably, Spiritual Growth and Self-Awareness emerged as the paramount construct (0.94286), reflecting Malaysia's cultural emphasis on spiritual values in educational leadership (Beram et al., 2021). This prioritization, followed by Ethical Decision-Making (0.87143), Organizational Barriers (0.80000), and Core Leadership Competencies (0.65714), illuminates a distinctively Malaysian approach where spiritual and ethical dimensions supersede traditional Western-centric leadership competencies. These findings suggest that effective middle leadership development in Malaysian education must be anchored in cultural and spiritual values while addressing organizational challenges.

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5.0 Discussion
The FDM analysis provides essential insights into the development of middle leadership within Malaysian educational institutions. The high prioritization of spiritual growth and self-awareness (0.94286) signifies a notable departure from Western-centric leadership models,

highlighting Malaysia's cultural focus on internal development. This finding enriches contemporary educational leadership theory by illustrating how cultural values can fundamentally shape leadership development frameworks.

The prominence of ethical decision-making (0.87143) as the second priority underscores the convergence of traditional Malaysian moral values, particularly the principles of Al-Ghazali, with the demands of modern educational leadership. This synthesis offers a significant contribution to understanding how cultural frameworks can enhance ethical leadership development in educational contexts.

The relative positioning of organizational barriers (0.80000) and core leadership competencies (0.65714) challenges conventional hierarchies in leadership development. This ordering suggests that Malaysian experts regard character formation as essential for addressing systemic challenges, aligning with transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) while incorporating a culturally specific dimension in educational settings. The high expert consensus (96%) further validates this integrated approach for Malaysian middle leaders, which is particularly significant considering the education system's evolution to meet 21st-century challenges.

The "Spiritual Compass, Ethical Anchor" model, figure 1 below, represents an integrated framework for middle leadership development in Malaysian educational institutions. The model flows from Spiritual Growth and Self Awareness (1), which establishes the foundation for ethical leadership, to the Ethical Decision-Making Framework (2), which guides leadership actions. These elements inform how leaders address Organizational Barriers (3), ultimately enhancing Core Leadership Competencies (4). This cyclical design emphasizes the interconnected nature of spiritual-ethical development with practical leadership skills in educational contexts.
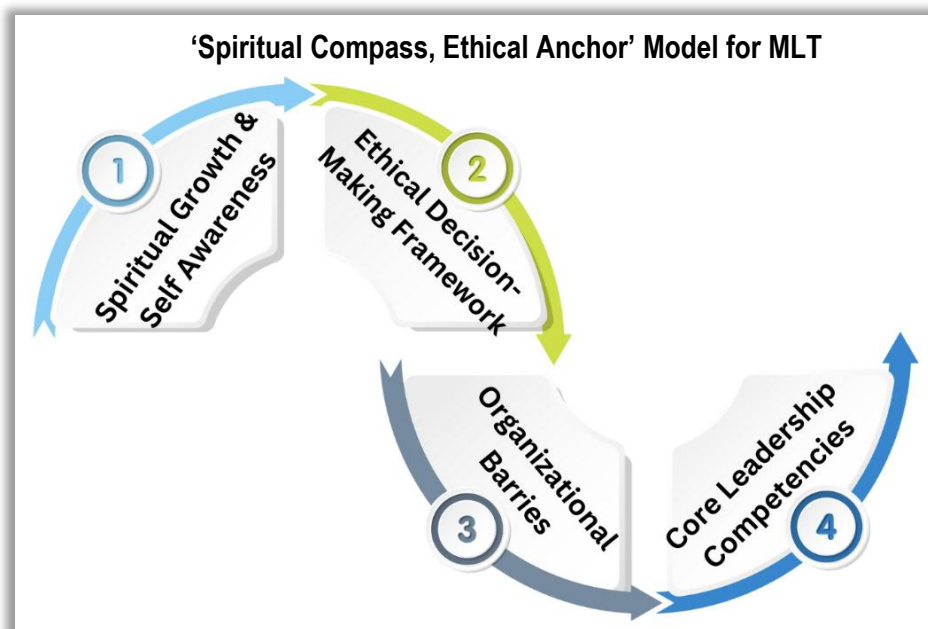

Figure 1: Middle Leadership Model

6.0 Conclusion and Future Research

"Spiritual Compass, Ethical Anchor": This study represents a paradigm shift in leadership development for Malaysian educational institutions, focusing on redefining middle leadership. Our FDM analysis prioritizes spiritual growth, self-awareness, and ethical decision-making over traditional competencies, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach.

This study establishes a culturally informed framework for middle leadership development, integrating Al-Ghazali's spiritual principles with contemporary leadership methods. This validated framework addresses the gap between traditional competency-based models and culturally specific leadership needs (Bush & Ng, 2019). While the research demonstrates theoretical robustness, limitations such as the size of the expert panel (Kanbul et al., 2020) suggest the need for broader validation. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the framework must be tested through implementation studies in diverse educational settings (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Institutional recommendations include the establishment of structured programs that integrate spiritual and ethical leadership components alongside traditional competencies (Beram et al., 2021). At the policy level, existing leadership frameworks should be revised to include spiritual and ethical dimensions with management skills. Mentoring programs and regular ethical decision-making practices could support effective implementation (Walker & Hallinger, 2019).

This research significantly contributes to the educational leadership literature by demonstrating how cultural and spiritual dimensions enhance middle leadership development within Malaysia's evolving educational landscape. It establishes a foundation for future studies, particularly in examining how spiritually informed leadership practices transform organizational dynamics and institutional effectiveness. Cross-cultural comparative studies could investigate how this Malaysian model resonates across different Asian contexts (Ehrich et al., 2015), while the exploration of emerging educational technologies could promote innovative professional development approaches (Nguyen et al., 2019), addressing Malaysia's diverse geographical and institutional needs. Ultimately developing educational leaders

who are both competent managers and inspirational leaders capable of fostering positive school cultures and driving meaningful educational reforms, encapsulated in the concept of "Spiritual Compass, Ethical Anchor."

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research.

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