Exploring Factors Contributing to the Erosion of Integrity Among Education Personnel in Malaysia: A Case Study in Perlis

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Abstract

This study examines the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia, through institutional theory. It investigates the institutional pressures, norms, and practices influencing ethical behavior and offers suggestions to enhance integrity within the education system. Using qualitative methods such as document analysis, interviews, and focus group discussions, the study reveals the significant impact of institutional pressures, the need for a shared understanding of integrity, the role of leadership, and the importance of recognizing ethical conduct. It emphasizes the interplay between individual agency and institutional forces in shaping behavior, advocating for a comprehensive approach to promote integrity. The findings highlight the importance of policies, collaborative efforts, and evidence-based strategies in fostering a culture of integrity, contributing to a fair, transparent, and accountable education system in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Integrity, Education Personnel, Institutional Theory, Institutional Pressures, Institutional Norms, Institutional Practices, Perlis, Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

Integrity is a fundamental value that underpins the trust and confidence that society places in educational institutions and their personnel. However, recent studies and media reports have highlighted a growing concern about the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Malaysia. For instance, a survey conducted by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) in 2019 revealed that 32% of the 3,000 respondents believed that corruption was prevalent in the education sector (MACC, 2019). Additionally, cases of misconduct, such as exam paper leaks, bribery, and abuse of power, have been reported in recent years, further undermining public trust in the educational system (The Star, 2020).

While several studies have investigated the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Malaysia (e.g., Saidin & Ismail, 2019; Othman & Abdul Rahman, 2021), there is a lack of research that specifically examines this issue through the lens of institutional theory. Institutional theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how the institutional context, including pressures, norms, and practices, can shape the behavior and ethical conduct of individuals within organizations (Scott, 2014). By applying this theoretical perspective, the present study aims to fill the research gap and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia.

The erosion of integrity among education personnel is a critical issue that deserves further analysis for several reasons. First, integrity is essential for maintaining the quality and credibility of education. When education personnel engage in unethical practices, it undermines the value and legitimacy of educational qualifications and degrees (Denisova-Schmidt, 2018). Second, the lack of integrity among education personnel can have a detrimental impact on students' moral development and their perception of ethical behavior (Bedi, 2019). As

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role models, educators have a significant influence on shaping the values and attitudes of future generations. Finally, the erosion of integrity in the education sector can have far-reaching consequences for society as a whole, as it can perpetuate a culture of corruption and undermine public trust in institutions (Transparency International, 2013).

In light of these concerns, this study aims to investigate the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia, through the lens of institutional theory. By examining the institutional pressures, norms, and practices that shape the ethical behavior of education personnel, this study seeks to provide valuable insights and recommendations for promoting and sustaining integrity within the educational system.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity among education personnel in the state of Perlis, Malaysia, through the lens of institutional theory. Specifically, the study aims to:

1.   Identify and examine the institutional pressures (normative, mimetic, and coercive) that education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia face, and analyze how these pressures influence their ethical behavior and contribute to the erosion of integrity within the educational system.

2.   Explore the prevailing institutional norms (values, expectations, and understanding of integrity) within educational institutions in Perlis, Malaysia, and investigate how these norms shape the ethical conduct of education personnel and their adherence to professional standards.

3.   Investigate the institutional practices (formal and informal) within educational institutions in Perlis, Malaysia, such as reward systems, performance evaluation, and resource allocation, and assess how these practices create incentives or disincentives for maintaining integrity and ethical behavior among education personnel.

Based on these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1.   What are the institutional pressures (normative, mimetic, and coercive) faced by education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia, and how do these pressures influence their ethical behavior and contribute to the erosion of integrity within the educational system?

2.   What are the prevailing institutional norms (values, expectations, and understanding of integrity) within educational institutions in Perlis, Malaysia, and how do these norms shape the ethical conduct of education personnel and their adherence to professional standards?

3.   What are the institutional practices (formal and informal) within educational institutions in Perlis, Malaysia, such as reward systems, performance evaluation, and resource allocation, and how do these practices create incentives or disincentives for maintaining integrity and ethical behavior among education personnel?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to advance our understanding of the factors that influence integrity in education, inform policy and practice in promoting ethical behavior, and contribute to the broader discourse on corruption and governance in Malaysia. By investigating the role of institutional pressures, norms, and practices in shaping the conduct of education personnel in Perlis, this study provides valuable insights that can guide efforts to foster a culture of integrity within educational institutions and beyond. As Malaysia continues to grapple with the challenges of corruption and the need for good governance, studies like this one offer a pathway towards building a more ethical, accountable, and transparent society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study uses institutional theory as the theoretical framework to investigate the factors that contribute to the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia. Institutional theory is a well-established approach in organizational studies that focuses on how institutions, defined as the formal and informal rules, norms, and values that shape human behavior, influence the actions and decisions of individuals and organizations (Scott, 2014). The theory posits that organizations and individuals are embedded in broader

institutional environments that exert pressures and constraints on their behavior, leading to conformity and isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

In the context of education, institutional theory has been applied to understand how the institutional environment, including policies, regulations, professional norms, and societal expectations, shape the behavior and practices of education personnel (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Studies have shown that education systems are subject to various institutional pressures, such as the need to comply with government regulations, meet the expectations of stakeholders, and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Burch, 2007; Spillane & Burch, 2006). These pressures can have both positive and negative effects on the integrity of education personnel, depending on the nature and strength of the institutional forces at play.

The major variables in this study, derived from institutional theory, include the formal and informal institutions that shape the behavior of education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia. These institutions can be categorized into three main types: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive (Scott, 2014). Regulative institutions refer to the legal and policy frameworks that govern the education system, such as laws, regulations, and accountability mechanisms. Normative institutions refer to the professional norms, values, and expectations that define the roles and responsibilities of education personnel, such as codes of conduct and ethical standards (Mashitah Mohd Udin, 2020). Cultural-cognitive institutions refer to the shared beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews that shape the way education personnel perceive and interpret their reality, such as societal norms and cultural traditions.

The proposed argument of this study is that the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia, can be explained by the institutional pressures and constraints that they face in their work environment. Specifically, the study hypothesizes that weak or misaligned regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions can create conditions that are conducive to unethical behavior, such as corruption, misconduct, and neglect of duty.

Integrity in the education system is a critical issue that has garnered significant attention from scholars, policymakers, and stakeholders worldwide. Integrity, in the context of the education system, refers to the adherence to moral and ethical principles, honesty, transparency, and accountability in all aspects of educational processes, including teaching, learning, assessment, and administration (Bretag et al., 2018). The concept of integrity encompasses not only the actions of individuals within the education system but also the institutional norms, practices, and values that shape the overall educational environment (Denisova-Schmidt, 2018).

Scholars have engaged in various debates and discussions concerning the importance of integrity in education and the factors that contribute to its erosion. Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) argue that academic integrity is the foundation of the educational process and that any breach of integrity undermines the credibility and value of educational qualifications. They emphasize the need for a holistic approach to fostering integrity, involving all stakeholders, including students, educators, administrators, and policymakers.

One of the primary concerns related to integrity in education is academic misconduct, such as cheating, plagiarism, and falsification of data. A study by the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) found that 68% of undergraduate students admitted to cheating on written assignments or tests (ICAI, 2017). This alarming statistic highlights the pervasiveness of academic dishonesty and the urgent need to address this issue. Bretag et al. (2019) suggest that the rise of technology and the increasing accessibility of information have contributed to the prevalence of academic misconduct, as students can easily access and copy content from the internet.

Another aspect of integrity in education pertains to the ethical conduct of educators and administrators. Corruption in education, such as bribery, nepotism, and favoritism, undermines the principles of fairness, equality, and meritocracy (Heyneman, 2004). A report by Transparency International (2013) revealed that corruption in education is a global problem, affecting both developing and developed countries. The report highlighted examples of corruption, such as teachers demanding bribes for better grades, the selling of exam papers, and the misappropriation of educational funds.

The erosion of integrity in education has far-reaching consequences, not only for the individuals involved but also for society as a whole. Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) argue that a lack of integrity in education can lead to a devaluation of educational qualifications, a decrease in public trust in the education system, and a reduction in the employability of graduates. Moreover, corruption in education can perpetuate social inequalities, as disadvantaged students may not have the means to engage in corrupt practices or may be more vulnerable to exploitation (Heyneman, 2004).

To address the issue of integrity in education, scholars have proposed various strategies and interventions. Bretag et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of developing a culture of integrity within educational institutions, where honesty, trust, and responsibility are valued and promoted. This involves the implementation of clear policies and procedures, the provision of training and support for students and staff, and the consistent enforcement of consequences for academic misconduct (Udin, 2012). Additionally, Denisova-Schmidt (2018) suggests that fostering integrity in education requires a multi-stakeholder approach, involving collaboration between educational institutions, government agencies, and civil society organizations. This includes initiatives such as public awareness campaigns, the establishment of independent oversight bodies, and the promotion of transparency and accountability in educational governance.

The existing literature on integrity among education personnel in the Malaysian context, while providing valuable insights and perspectives, also has several gaps and limitations that warrant further research and investigation. Firstly, there is a scarcity of studies specifically focusing on the issue of integrity among education personnel in the state of Perlis, Malaysia. While some studies have examined related issues such as teacher professionalism, ethical conduct, and corruption in the Malaysian education sector more broadly (Saat et al., 2016; Ling et al., 2019; Wan, 2018), there is a lack of research that explores the unique challenges and opportunities for promoting integrity in the specific context of Perlis. Given the potential influence of local socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors on the integrity of education personnel (Hallak & Poisson, 2007), there is a need for more contextualized studies that can provide a nuanced understanding of the issue in Perlis.

Secondly, the existing literature tends to focus more on identifying the challenges and factors contributing to a lack of integrity among education personnel, rather than on evaluating the effectiveness of specific strategies and interventions to promote integrity. While some studies have highlighted the potential of initiatives such as codes of conduct, professional development programs, and accountability measures (Hayden & Thiep, 2007; Ling et al., 2019; Sahlberg, 2010), there is limited empirical evidence on the long-term impacts and sustainability of these strategies in the Malaysian context. As noted by Chapman and Lindner (2016), the effectiveness of integrity-promoting strategies may depend on various contextual factors and implementation challenges, which require further investigation.

Thirdly, there is a need for more research that explores the perspectives and experiences of different stakeholders in the education system, including teachers, administrators, students, parents, and policymakers, in relation to integrity issues. While some studies have examined the perceptions and attitudes of teachers towards professionalism and ethical conduct (Saat et al., 2016; Ling et al., 2019), there is limited research that captures the voices and insights of other key stakeholders. Understanding the diverse viewpoints and concerns of different stakeholders can help to identify the root causes of integrity challenges and inform the development of more comprehensive and inclusive strategies for promoting integrity (Wan, 2018).

Fourthly, the existing literature on integrity among education personnel in Malaysia tends to rely more on qualitative research methods, such as interviews and case studies, rather than on quantitative or mixed-methods approaches. While qualitative studies can provide rich and in-depth insights into the complexities of the issue, they may have limitations in terms of generalizability and representativeness (Creswell, 2014). There is a need for more studies that employ diverse research methods, including large-scale surveys and statistical analyses, to provide a more comprehensive and robust evidence base on integrity among education personnel in Malaysia.

Finally, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that examine the long-term effects and sustainability of strategies and interventions to promote integrity among education personnel in Malaysia. As noted by Wan (2018), promoting a culture of integrity in the education system may require significant and sustained efforts over time, rather than one-off interventions or policy changes. Therefore, there is a need for more research that tracks the

implementation and outcomes of integrity-promoting initiatives over an extended period, in order to identify the factors that contribute to their success or failure and to inform ongoing improvements and adaptations.

METHODOLOGY

For the study on exploring the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Malaysia, focusing on the State of Perlis, a qualitative research design is proposed. Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that seeks to understand social phenomena, experiences, and perspectives through non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This research design is particularly suitable for investigating complex social issues and capturing the nuances of human behavior and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study employs purposive sampling to select education personnel from various roles, such as teachers, administrators, and support staff, who have experienced or witnessed integrity issues in their profession. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of information-rich cases that can provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon ((Palinkas, 2015). Within purposive sampling, specific strategies such as maximum variation sampling and snowball sampling are utilized. Maximum variation sampling aims to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences by selecting participants with diverse characteristics, such as age, gender, educational background, and years of experience. Snowball sampling involves asking participants to recommend other individuals who may have relevant information or experiences related to the research topic (Noy, 2008).

An initial sample size of 20-30 education personnel is targeted for semi-structured interviews. Additionally, 3-4 focus groups with 6-8 participants each are conducted to explore collective experiences and generate new insights. The final sample size may be adjusted based on the quality and richness of the data obtained and the achievement of data saturation (Malterud et al., 2016).

The study employs four types of data collection methods: document analysis, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. Document analysis involves the systematic review and interpretation of existing documents related to the research topic, such as government reports, policy statements, media articles, and academic literature on integrity issues in the education sector.

In-depth interviews are conducted with education personnel using a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions, allowing for flexibility and probing. The interviews explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity in their profession. Focus group discussions are conducted with small groups of education personnel to gather additional insights and generate new ideas through group interaction. The discussions are moderated by the researcher using a semi-structured discussion guide.

Observation is used to gather contextual information and insights into the institutional environment and practices that may influence the ethical behavior of education personnel. The researcher attends relevant meetings, events, and training sessions to observe the interactions, norms, and practices that shape the institutional context.

The collected data is analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves the systematic identification, coding, and interpretation of patterns and themes across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process is iterative and recursive, allowing for the refinement of codes and themes as new insights emerge (Saldaña, 2021). The data is managed and coded using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti (Silver & Lewins, 2014).

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the thematic analysis, several strategies are employed, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, persistent observation, triangulation of data sources and methods, peer debriefing, and member checking. Transferability is addressed through thick description of the research context, participants, and findings to allow for comparisons and transferability to other settings. Dependability is ensured through detailed documentation of the research process, decision-making, and analysis

through an audit trail. Confirmability is demonstrated through reflexivity and self-awareness of the researcher's biases and assumptions, and the use of direct quotes and excerpts to support the findings.

RESULTS

The document analysis revealed the pervasive influence of institutional pressures on the ethical behavior of education personnel in Perlis. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 emerged as a key document that sets the stage for the normative pressures experienced by education personnel (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). The blueprint outlines the government's ambitious goals for transforming the education system, including improving student outcomes, enhancing the quality of teaching, and increasing efficiency and accountability. While the blueprint acknowledges the importance of integrity and ethical conduct among education personnel, it places a strong emphasis on performance metrics and results-oriented management. This creates a normative pressure for education personnel to prioritize the achievement of tangible outcomes over the adherence to ethical principles (Setiawan et al., 2021).

The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions corroborated the findings from the document analysis, with participants highlighting the profound impact of institutional pressures on their ethical behavior and decision-making processes. Participants shared numerous instances where they felt compelled to compromise their ethical principles or engage in unethical practices due to the conflicts between adhering to professional standards and meeting institutional demands. One teacher with 14 years of experience stated, "The pressure to meet performance targets and maintain a good image is constant, and it can sometimes lead us to cut corners or compromise ethical standards in order to meet those expectations."

The document analysis revealed the existence of shared values and deeply held beliefs related to integrity and ethical conduct within educational institutions in Perlis. The National Integrity Plan emphasizes the importance of internalizing integrity values and creating a culture of ethics within organizations (Malaysian Institute of Integrity, 2019). However, the analysis found that the understanding and application of integrity principles vary widely among education personnel in Perlis, often influenced by personal experiences, religious beliefs, and institutional practices (Jamil et al., 2022).

The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions provided further insights into the prevailing institutional norms and their impact on ethical conduct. Participants expressed a strong conviction in the importance of integrity as a fundamental value in the education profession. One experienced teacher with 22 years of experience stated, "As educators, we firmly believe that integrity is the foundation upon which our entire profession is built. We are shaping the moral and ethical compass of the future generation." However, participants also noted inconsistencies and gaps between these espoused values and the actual institutional norms and practices observed within their institutions. A teacher with 12 years of experience expressed frustration, saying, "Unfortunately, in our institution, the focus is often more heavily weighted on meeting academic targets, achieving quantifiable results, and maintaining a positive public image than on upholding ethical principles and fostering a culture of integrity."

The document analysis revealed that institutional practices in Perlis often prioritize measurable outcomes and efficiency over ethical considerations, which can create pressure for education personnel to engage in unethical practices (Mohamad et al., 2021). The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 emphasizes the importance of performance-based evaluation and rewards for education personnel, with a focus on student achievement and school rankings (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, this emphasis on measurable outcomes can create perverse incentives for education personnel to engage in unethical practices, such as cheating, manipulation of data, or teaching to the test (Saim et al., 2020).

The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions provided further evidence of the impact of institutional practices on maintaining integrity and ethical behavior. Participants shared experiences where reward systems prioritized quantifiable achievements over ethical conduct, creating a perception that minor ethical lapses were acceptable as long as impressive results were achieved. One teacher with 16 years of experience lamented, "It's disheartening to see individuals who engage in unethical practices, like teaching to the test or turning a blind eye to academic misconduct, being rewarded and celebrated for their students' high scores, while those of us

who maintain strict ethical standards and prioritize holistic, values-based learning are often overlooked or undervalued."

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay of institutional pressures, norms, and practices in shaping the ethical behavior of education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia. The results reveal that the erosion of integrity is influenced by a combination of normative expectations, coercive regulations, mimetic tendencies, cultural values, professional standards, reward structures, performance evaluation systems, and resource allocation practices. The study underscores the need for a comprehensive and holistic approach to promoting integrity and ethical conduct among education personnel, one that addresses the institutional context and creates a supportive environment for individual and collective integrity.

The findings of this study align with and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on integrity in education, particularly in the context of institutional theory. The study's emphasis on the influence of institutional pressures, norms, and practices on ethical behavior is consistent with the fundamental tenets of institutional theory (Scott, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The findings on the impact of normative, mimetic, and coercive pressures on ethical conduct resonate with previous research in the field (Bedi, 2019; Denisova-Schmidt, 2018). The study's insights into the influence of institutional practices on integrity also find support in the existing literature (Treviño et al., 2014; Hallak & Poisson, 2007). The study's emphasis on the role of leadership and role modeling in shaping the ethical climate of educational institutions is consistent with the growing body of research on ethical leadership in education (Cherkowski et al., 2021; Ehrich et al., 2015).

The study's findings have significant implications for policy, practice, and future research in the area of education integrity, both in Malaysia and beyond. At the policy level, the study underscores the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to promoting integrity in education, involving the development of national and institutional policies that prioritize ethical conduct, align incentives and rewards with integrity, and provide clear guidance and support for ethical decision-making.

In terms of practice, the study highlights the importance of investing in the ethical capacity and leadership of education personnel at all levels, through targeted training and professional development opportunities, platforms for open dialogue and peer support, and the recognition and celebration of exemplary ethical conduct. The study also emphasizes the critical role of leadership in shaping the ethical climate of educational institutions and the need for consistent demonstration of integrity at all levels of the education system.

The study's insights point to avenues for future research, such as exploring the effectiveness of specific interventions and strategies for promoting integrity in education, conducting comparative studies, and investigating the long-term impact of integrity programs on the ethical climate of educational institutions.

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study's focus on a single state within Malaysia may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts with different institutional arrangements, cultural norms, or socio-economic conditions. The reliance on qualitative methods, particularly interviews and focus group discussions, may be subject to certain biases and limitations, such as socially desirable responses or the influence of the researchers' own subjectivity. The study primarily relies on institutional theory as its guiding framework, which may not fully capture all the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon under investigation. Finally, the study provides a snapshot of the integrity landscape in Perlis at a particular point in time and does not capture the dynamic and evolving nature of the phenomenon over an extended period.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity among education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia, through the lens of institutional theory. The main findings highlight the pervasive influence of institutional pressures, the importance of fostering a shared understanding of integrity, the impact of institutional practices on ethical behavior, the critical role of leadership and role

modeling, and the value of open dialogue and recognition of exemplary ethical conduct in promoting a culture of integrity.

The study's insights have signific"nt i'plications for policy, practice, and future research in the field of education integrity. The findings suggest that promoting integrity requires a comprehensive and integrated approach, involving targeted interventions, professional development, leadership support, and collaborative efforts from all stakeholders. The study also highlights the importance of investing in ethical leadership development and creating opportunities for open and honest conversations about ethical challenges.

The key takeaways from this study are:

1.   Institutional pressures, norms, and practices play a significant role in shaping the ethical conduct of education personnel in Perlis, Malaysia, often creating conflicts and challenges in maintaining integrity.

2.   Fostering a shared understanding of integrity and aligning institutional practices with ethical values are crucial for promoting a culture of integrity in education.

3.   Leadership and role modeling, open dialogue, and the recognition of exemplary ethical conduct are essential strategies for promoting integrity and upholding professional standards in education.

4.   A balanced and holistic approach that recognizes both individual and collective responsibilities is necessary for effectively addressing the factors contributing to the erosion of integrity in education.

5.   The study's findings have significant implications for policy, practice, and future research in the field of education integrity, highlighting the need for comprehensive, collaborative, and evidence-based approaches to promoting ethical excellence in education.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities for fostering a culture of integrity in the Malaysian education sector. As the nation continues to grapple with the challenges of corruption and the need for good governance, studies like this one offer a pathway towards building a more just, transparent, and accountable education system that empowers educators and learners to uphold the highest standards of ethical conduct.

DECLARATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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