

AN INVESTIGATION INTO PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP SOFT SKILLS PRACTICES AMONG BASIC EDUCATION HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to study principals' leadership soft skills practices in Basic Education High Schools of Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township, Yangon Region. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this study. The target population was all principals and teachers from Basic Education High Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township. Simple random sampling method was used. A total of 4 principals and 119 teachers in four High Schools were sampled. For quantitative study, questionnaires consisted of 40 items and were rated in a five point Likert Scale. For qualitative study, interview was conducted to 4 principals with 5 interview questions. Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples *t* Test were used to analyze the data in this study. In studying the principals' leadership soft skills practices, it was found that the principals have moderately high level of leadership soft skills according to teachers' perceptions ($M=3.55$, $SD=.27$). Then, there was no significant difference of teachers' perceptions on principals' leadership soft skills according to principals' personal factors as gender, services and qualifications and school related factors as school size, school grade and matriculation pass rate by the results of Independent Samples *t* Test. In qualitative findings, the informations from interview questions were complementary to the quantitative findings.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Leadership Soft Skills

Introduction

Education is seen as the backbone of development in any nation. Education has been seen as a tool for building a united, independent, wealthy and egalitarian society that can maintain its' tradition and values. The school principals and teachers are the key personnel to facilitate the necessary skills of 21st century demands for students through the teaching learning process. Educational administrators and school principals in current situation have to develop their soft skills while managing human resource and developing staff and teachers so that they committed themselves professionally for the organizational success. The power of soft skills cannot be neglected by educational administrators soft skills are the motivator in encouraging collaboration as a shared learning process and continuous development in order to achieve their school goal.

Significance of the Study

Soft skills can be defined as that related to human skills focusing on the competency in working with other individuals (Wilaipan, 2013). Wilaipan (2013) stated that leadership soft skills for instance thinking skills, interpersonal skills and motivation skills are those basic factors for followers to perform better in their workplace.

As a result educational administrators and principals need to complement both hard and soft skills in order to accomplish organizational goal. In other word, educational administrators not only use their knowledge, modern science, and management skills into many school management process but also participating, focusing on communication skills to develop organizational awareness and continuous improvement.

For decades, the focus of management and leadership was on the so-called hard skills. This means that technical skills are necessary and emphasized, so as to perform effectively within the organization. According to Buhler (2001), nowadays, employers need leaders with critical soft

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skills. These soft skills are more generic in nature and are the key skills to effective performance across all job categories.

In order to realize the aspiration of education, school leaders as a key person should lead the school so that it will function more properly and effectively to enhance the success of the school. However, the issue of leadership weakness among the school leaders is not a new issue. There are still a number of less-skilled school leaders due to lack of soft skills of the individual leaders (Lokman & Hairul Anuar, 2011, cited in Tang, K.N, 2012). Educational administration and leadership is the process of functioning with human resources to produce qualified and all round development of human products in teaching learning process. As people, they possess complex needs, strengths, weaknesses, biases, and not to mention, fears.

Nowadays, school principals and teachers try to get high achievement rate and academic and subject mastery for getting high marks in their respective subjects both science and art. Teachers emphasized hard skills and they missed 21st century demand for soft skills integration in teaching learning situations. So, today, many students have deficiency of communication skills, critical thinking skills, creativity and valuable soft skills in learning process. And then the relation between school principals and teacher focus on the completion of tasks and duties and some principals do not have sufficient time to create enjoyable mutual relationship because of numerous workloads. In that time, school principals have to emphasize the integration of soft skills in their management process for organizational effectiveness.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate leadership soft skill practices among Basic Education High Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township, Yangon region.

Research Objectives

(a) General objective

- To investigate the leadership soft skills practices among Basic Education High School Principals

(b) Specific Objectives

1. To study the level of teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership soft skill practices in Basic Education High Schools
2. To study the significant difference in teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership soft skill practices according to principals' personal factors
3. To study the significant difference in teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership soft skill practices according to school related factors.

Research Questions

This study is focused on the following research questions.

1. To what extent do the teachers perceive their principals' leadership soft skill practices in Basic Education High Schools?
2. Is there any significant difference in the teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership soft skill practices according to principals' personal factors?
3. Is there any significant difference in the teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership soft skill practices according to school related factors?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the main focus is on the principals' leadership soft skill practices among Basic Education High Schools. Soft skills are a set of personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people in the organization (Wallapa, A, 2012). Leadership soft skills are a cluster of productive personality traits that leader need to implement for their members to help them become more efficient executives and organizational improvement (Wijian, P, 2012).

Many researchers identified leadership soft skills with different dimensions for leadership soft skills. Wallapha, A (2012) identified seven soft skills. They are;

- Analytical thinking and problem solving skill
- Communication and presentation
- Lifelong learning and information management
- Team work
- Development and construction of innovation
- Morality
- Professional skills

Crosbie, R (2005) suggested leadership soft skills as follows;

- Communication and presentation
- Leadership competency
- Teamwork
- Analytical thinking and creative problem solving
- Professional and morality
- Learning
- Usage of information technology
- Development of interpersonal relationship

Somprach, K (2013) explained leadership soft skills as follow;

- Innovation development
- Thinking skills and problem solving skills
- Communication skills
- Lifelong learning and information management
- Leadership skills
- Teamwork force
- Ethics and professionalism

Somerset, F (2010) identified leadership soft skills as follow

- Communication skills
- Thinking skills and problem solving skills
- Team work force
- Lifelong learning and information management
- Entrepreneur skill

- Ethics, moral and professionalism
- Leadership skills

Among many researchers, leadership soft skill practices of principals theoretically based on Tang, K. N (2012) dimension of leadership soft skills. Tang, K.N (2012) newly developed Crosbie, R (2005) model of leadership soft skills with eight dimensions. These eight dimensions of leadership soft skills are;

- Leadership ability
- Communication skills
- Planning and organizing
- Personal effectiveness/mastery
- Presentation skills
- Initiative
- Collaboration/ team work
- Personal development/ coaching.

Scope of the Study

This study is conducted to Basic Education High Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township, Yangon Region.

Definitions of Key Terms

Soft Skills

Soft skills are a set of personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people in the organization (Wallapa, A, 2012).

Leadership soft skills

Leadership soft skills are a cluster of productive personality traits that leader need to implement for their members to help them become more efficient executives and organizational improvement (Wijian, P, 2012).

Review of Related Literature

Definitions of Soft Skills and Leadership Soft Skills

There are two kinds of skills: hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills are the skills that are learned abilities acquired and enhanced through practice, repetition and education. In contrast, soft skills are less tangible and harder to teach. Getting along with others, listening well, and engaging in activities can get soft skills from participation harmoniously (Klaus. P, 2008).

Soft skills are a set of personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people in the organization (Wallapha. A, 2012).

Leadership soft skills are a cluster of productive personality traits that leader need to implement for their members to help them become more efficient executives and organizational improvement (Wijian, P, 2012).

Leadership soft skills are a combination of interpersonal skills, social skills, communication skills, character traits, attitudes, career attributes and emotional intelligence quotient (EQ) among

others that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals with complementing hard skills (Sarita, R, 2017).

Soft skills are a cluster of productive personality traits that characterize one's relationships in a milieu. These skills can include social graces, communication abilities, language skills, personal habits, cognitive or emotional empathy, time management, and team work and leadership traits (Mangala, R, 2010).

A soft skill is a comprehensive concept with measures the ability and the capability of individuals and an organization's achievements (Erik, R. & Piet, S, 2007).

A soft skill is also defined from the view point of cognitive elements in the non- academic aspects such as positive values, leadership qualities, teamwork, communication skills as well as lifelong learning (Kagan, D. M, 1990).

Dimensions for Leadership Soft Skills

Among many researchers, leadership soft skill practices of principals conceptually based on Tang, K.N (2012) dimension of leadership soft skills. Tang, K.N (2012) newly developed Crosbie, R (2005) model of leadership soft skills with eight dimensions. These eight dimensions of leadership soft skills are;

- Leadership ability
- Communication skills
- Planning and organizing
- Personal effectiveness/mastery
- Presentation skills
- Initiative
- Collaboration/ team work
- Personal development/ coaching.

Leadership ability

Leadership ability refers to administrators provide and communicate strategic vision to employees in order to mobilize others to act, assign individuals suited to the job based on competencies and delegate responsibilities to optimize staff's skills. Apart from that, administrator takes smart risks to achieve innovative and effective solutions encourages wide participation in goal setting, decision making, and problem solving. Leadership ability also refers to administrator gives employees the authority and support to make decisions, appropriately uses and personalizes recognition and incentives to reward, sets a personal example, shows consistency and maintains high standards of integrity and ethical conduct during both good and tough times, learns from experience, gains insights from mistakes, and analyzes both successes and failures for clues to improvement (Tang, K.N, 2012).

Communication skills

Communication skills refer to that administrator adapts communication to listeners' needs, checking listeners' understanding by listening attentively to the complete message, restating and questioning listeners to ensure comprehension. In addition, administrator is considered as seeking to negotiating win- win solutions to issues, clarifying problems and resolving conflicts by being open and using employees productively to enhance quality of decisions (Tang, K.N, 2012).

Planning and Organizing

Planning and organizing refers to administrator defines short and long-range objectives, uses other resources to achieve planned goals, prioritizes quickly in an environment with many variables, pursues tasks and goals with persistence despite daily distractions, achieves established goals by assigned deadlines, meet commitments, fulfills promises, and responds to change with flexibility and appropriate speed (Tang, K.N,2012).

Personal Effectiveness/mastery

Personal effectiveness/mastery refers to administrator seeks to understand and exploits personal strengths and strives to build competency in areas of weakness. Similarly, an administrator having this characteristic is personally committed to and actively works to continuously improve oneself, actively pursues learning/self-development to enhance performance, actively seeks and is open to new information and feedback from others, adjusts one's view point and/or behavior according to the situation, functions effectively, and maintains good relationships even under stressful conditions (Tang, K.N, 2012).

Presentation Skills

Presentation skill refers to administrator has good presentation skills, presenting himself/herself in a professional manner, and creating a good first impression. Apart from that, administrator as effective in presenting ideas to others whether in individual and/or group situations, makes effective use of visual aids in presentations, thinks carefully about effect of words, vocal quality and nonverbal actions, uses appropriate methods of persuasion to convince others to accept an idea, plan, or activity. Presentation skills also refer to administrator having good presentation skills such as invites input/questions from others, encourages open dialogue/exchange of information and ideas, listens actively, and addresses the emotional position of audience members (Tang, K.N, 2012).

Initiative

Initiative refers to that administrator recognizes and reacts to problems, is self-starting, takes actions to achieve goals beyond specific job responsibilities, is not bias in taking action, readily faces up to and takes a stand on difficult issues. Initiative also refers to that administrator makes decisions and takes actions before directed or forced, and does things proactively (tang, K.N, 2012).

Collaboration/teamwork

Collaboration/teamwork refers to that administrator finds common ground and cooperates to solve problems. In the same token, administrator effectively participates in meeting and groups, encourages and values diversity through understanding and appreciation of others' personalities, concerns, feelings, thoughts, motives, needs, skills and competencies. In addition, administrator is considered as establishing consensus through group discussions, helping each person to articulate his/her own option, sensitive to the needs of groups and individuals, open and honest in expressing his/her thoughts, ideas and feelings, while remaining sensitive to the thoughts, ideas and feelings of others (Tang, K.N, 2012).

Personal Development /Coaching

Personal development/coaching refers to administrator recommends and supports appropriate education/training programs, recognizes employee's performance with positive feedback and corrective feedback to motivate employees, and focuses feedback on specific

behavior not on the individual. In addition, administrators with personal development/coaching recognize exceptional contributions, and evaluate employees accurately, consistently, and on time (Tang, K.N, 2012).

Methodology

In this study, quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. A set of questionnaire to collect the required data was developed based on eight dimensions of Soft Skills of Leaders and School Improvement in High Performing Schools of Tang, K.N (2012). For quantitative study, a questionnaire has 40 items and 5 interview questions for qualitative study. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach alpha) was 0.87 for principals’ leadership soft skills practices questionnaire which was developed based on literature.

Simple random sampling method was used. The four principals and 119 teachers from Basic Education High Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township participated in this study. The descriptive statistics and Independent Samples *t* Test was used to analyze data. The level of principals’ leadership soft skills practices that perceived by teachers were determined as mean values and standard deviations. Independent Samples *t* Test was used to determine whether there were significant differences in teachers’ perceptions on principals’ soft skill practices according to principals’ personal factors and school related factors.

Findings

Findings on the level of principals’ leadership soft skills are based on teachers’ perceptions in selected Basic Education High Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township, Yangon region.

Table 1 Mean Values and Standard Deviations for the Level of Principal’s Leadership Soft Skills of Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township (N=119)

No	Dimensions	Mean (SD)	Level
1	Leadership ability	3.73(.57)	Moderately High
2	Communication skills	3.56(.67)	Moderately High
3	Planning and organizing	3.90(.41)	Moderately High
4	Personal effectiveness/ mastery	3.63(.41)	Moderately High
5	Presentation skills	3.45(.66)	Moderately High
6	Initiative	3.63(.69)	Moderately High
7	Collaboration/ Team work	3.53(.68)	Moderately High
8	Personal development/coaching	3.81(.54)	Moderately High

Scoring direction: 1.00–1.49 =Low 1.50– 2.49 =Moderately Low 2.50 – 3.49 =Average
3.50 - 4.49=Moderately High 4.50 – 5.00 =High

According to Table 1, principals in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township has moderately high level of leadership soft skills according to teachers perceptions.

Table 2 Mean Values and Standard Deviations for the Level of Principals’ Leadership Soft Skills of Among Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township (N=119)

No	Schools	Mean(SD)	Level
1	School A	3.65(.43)	Moderately High
2	School B	3.79(.21)	Moderately High
3	School C	3.81(.28)	Moderately High
4	School D	3.69(.13)	Moderately High
	Total	3.75(.27)	Moderately High

Scoring direction: 1.00–1.49 =Low 1.50–2.49 =Moderately Low 2.50 – 3.49 =Average
3.50–4.49=Moderately High 4.50 – 5.00 =High

According to Table 2, the mean scores among schools were slightly different. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the principals of Basic Education High Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township have moderately high level of leadership soft skills respectively.

The comparison of total mean values for the level of principal’s leadership soft skills of Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township were shown in the following Figure 1.

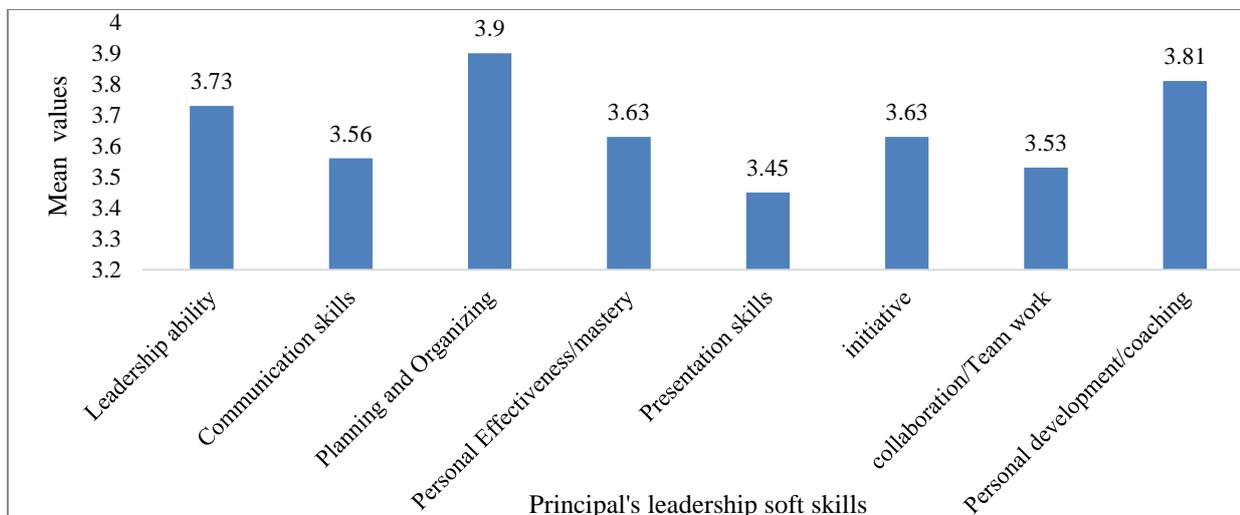


Figure 1 The Comparison of Total Mean Values for the Level of Principal’s Leadership Soft Skills of Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township.

The comparison of total mean values of principals’ leadership soft skills among schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township were shown Figure 2.

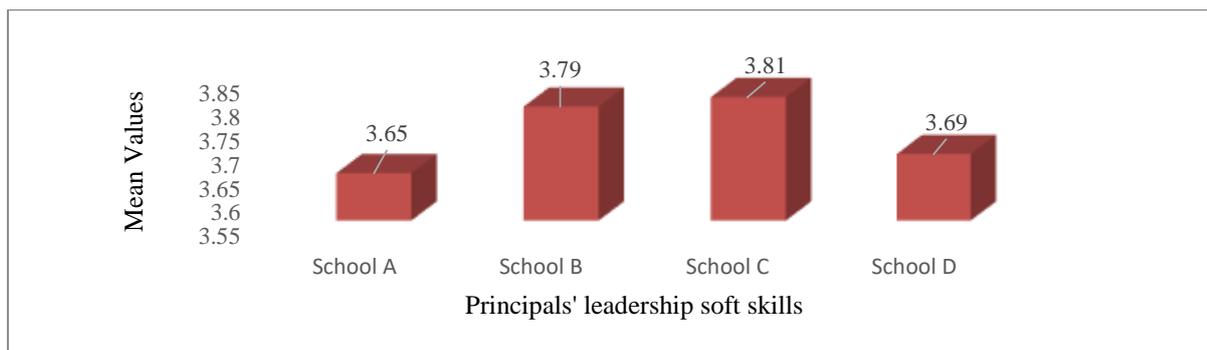


Figure 2 The Comparison of Total Mean Values for the Level of Principals’ Leadership Soft Skills Among Schools in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township

Findings of the difference of the teachers’ perceptions on principals’ leadership soft skills according to principals’ personal factors were based on gender, services and qualifications and school related factors as school grade, school size and matriculation pass rate were shown below.

Table 3 Independent Samples t Test Result Showing for Teachers’ Perceptions of Principals’ Leadership Soft Skills Grouped by Gender (N=119)

Dimensions	Gender	Mean (SD)	t	df	p	Mean difference
Principals’ leadership soft skills	Male	3.75(.23)	.25	117.23	ns	.01
	Female	3.74(.31)				

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 at significant level and ns= not significant

According to Table 3, there was no significant difference in principals' leadership soft skills between male group and female group.

Table 4 Independent Samples *t* Test Result showing for Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Leadership Soft Skills Grouped by Services (N=119)

Dimensions	Services	Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean difference
Principals' leadership soft skills	5-10	3.67(.32)	2.32	75.67	ns	.12
	10 and above	3.79(.23)				

p*<.05, *p*<.01, ****p*<.001 at significant level and ns= not significant

According to table 4, there was no significant difference in principals' leadership soft skills between services of 5-10 and 10 and above group.

Table 5 Independent Samples *t* Test Result showing for Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Leadership Soft Skills Grouped by Qualifications (N=119)

Dimensions	Qualification	Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean difference
Principals' leadership soft skills	Education degree	3.72(.31)	1.25	115.01	ns	.06
	Without Education degree	3.79(.22)				

p*<.05, *p*<.01, ****p*<.001 at significant level and ns= not significant

According to table 5, there was no significant difference in principals' leadership soft skills between qualifications with education degree and without education degree group.

Table 6 Independent Samples *t* Test Result showing for Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Leadership Soft Skills Grouped by School Grade (N=119)

Dimensions	School Grade	Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean difference
Principals' leadership soft skills	Grade B	3.76(.31)	.98	74.17	ns	.06
	Grade C	3.69(.13)				

p*<.05, *p*<.01, ****p*<.001 at significant level and ns= not significant

According to table 6, there was no significant difference in principals' leadership soft skills between school grade B and grade C group.

Table 7 Independent Samples *t* Test Result showing for Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Leadership Soft Skills Grouped by School Size (N=119)

Dimensions	School Size	Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean difference
Principals' leadership soft skills	Below 1000	3.67(.32)	2.12	74.67	ns	.16
	Above 1000	3.79(.23)				

p*<.05, *p*<.01, ****p*<.001 at significant level and ns= not significant

According to table 7, there was no significant difference in principals' leadership soft skills between school size of below 1000 and above 1000 group.

Table 8 Independent Samples *t* Test Result showing for Teachers' Perceptions of Principals' Leadership Soft Skills Grouped by Matriculation Pass Rate (N=119)

Dimensions	Matriculation Pass Rate	Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean difference
Principals' leadership soft skills	Below group	3.77(.34)	2.32	75.67	ns	.12
	Above group	3.79(.30)				

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ at significant level and ns= not significant

According to table 8, there was no significant difference in principals' leadership soft skills between matriculation pass rate of below group and above group.

Discussion

In this study, the levels of principals' leadership soft skills in each school in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township were moderately high. Therefore, this finding is closely associated with the finding of Tang, K.N (2012). According to the mean values of teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership soft skills among schools, the principals need to have higher level of leadership soft skills.

In this study, the Independent Samples *t* Test results showed that there were no significant differences of teachers' perceptions on principals' leadership soft skills according to principals' personal factors and school related factors such as gender, services, qualification, school size, school grade and matriculation pass rate.

According to Sarita, R (2017), leadership soft skills are a combination of interpersonal skills, social skills, communication skills, character traits, attitudes, career attributes and emotional intelligence quotient (EQ) among others that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals with complementing hard skills. Therefore, leadership soft skills slightly depend on principals' personal factors and school related factors.

Suggestions

Based on the results of this study, the following facts are suggested for principals' leadership soft skills in Basic Education High Schools.

- Principals should provide suitable leadership to teachers in order to mobilize others to act, assign teachers suited to the duties based on competencies and delegate responsibilities to optimize teachers' abilities.
- Principals should communicate teachers by seeking to negotiate win- win situations to problems, clarify problems and resolve conflicts by being open and using teachers productively to enhance quality of decisions.
- Principals should have high level of planning and organizing skills to achieve the tasks and activities of school flexibility and appropriately and pursue tasks and duties with persistence despite daily distractions.
- Principals should seek new information and effective ways to improve school functions, accept others ideas and suggestions for school improvement and imitate the performances

of others experienced principals and adjust these performances according to the real situations of school.

- Principals should have good presentation skills to motivate and persuade teachers and community members to participate in school activities and open and honest in expressing his/ her thoughts, ideas and feelings.

Needs for Further Research

As the suggestions for further research, it is necessary to study principals' leadership soft skills in other dimensions. This study is limited to study the principals' leadership soft skills in Basic Education High Schools from only one township because of the time constraints. This study should be applied to study principals' leadership soft skills in other Townships, States and Regions extensively and deeply. Further study should expand elementary and middle schools to study principals' leadership soft skills deeply. Further study should focus on integration of soft skills in teaching learning process not only Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township but also other Townships extensively.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my respectful gratitude to Dr. Pyone Pyone Aung (Acting Rector, Yangon University of Education), Dr Kay Thwe Hlaing (Pro-Rector, Yangon University of Education) and Dr Khin Mar Ni (Professor, Head of Department, Department of Educational Theory, Yangon University of Education) for their valuable expertise, support, constructive suggestions and criticism to complete this study.

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