

Leadership and Organizational Change in Singapore Schools: A Baseline Study

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. Effective leadership is not about adhering to a prescriptive list of ideal practices, but rather establishing congruence between leaders' and subordinates' performances.
2. Appreciating the contextual nuances of leadership practices in schools is crucial to our understanding of effective leadership in schools.
3. Building a learning culture to sustain school-based curriculum innovation and development.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain a broad understanding of school leadership and organizational change in Singapore schools. It aimed to provide a comprehensive data set of current values, knowledge, skills and dispositions across the full spectrum of leaders and leadership. The findings provided an interesting yet unique Singapore perspective on leadership. In particular, the results showed that micro leadership practices in schools are very much influenced by contextual forces that included include Asian notions of hierarchy, pragmatism and meritocracy.

INTRODUCTION

Literature review shows a lack of empirical knowledge about school leadership and organizational change in the Singapore education school system. This study aimed to provide a comprehensive data set of current values, knowledge, skills and dispositions across the spectrum of leaders and leadership in Singapore primary and secondary schools, as well as junior colleges. The researchers also sought to establish a strong empirical base documenting current practices on which to build further in-depth studies. The main research questions were divided into eight leadership themes and discussed in the proceeding sections.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A survey design was used for this study, and the study was divided into three stages:

Stage 1: Focused Group Discussions (FGDs)

18 FGDs were conducted with 6 cluster superintendents, 10 principals, 25 vice-principals, 14 heads-of-department (HODs),

and 10 teachers, to elicit “insider” perceptions and experiences of key issues congruent with the aims and objectives of the project. The interviewees were selected from different school types through convenience sampling.

Stage 2: Quantitative Survey

This stage involved collecting system-wide quantitative data across variables on leadership perceptions and practices. The survey consisted of three main question types—(i) demographic information of respondents, (ii) categorical variables (i.e., single item questions), and (iii) rating scales of selected leadership related variables. In all, 224 schools participated in the study, and included 224 principals, 322 vice-principals, 686 key personnel (i.e., HODs, subject heads and level heads) and 3,513 teachers. For common scaling, the items on the instruments were calibrated using the Rasch Model. This linearized the scores into measures so that statistical quantities will not be spurious. Further parametric statistical analyses were performed on the calibrated measures for hypotheses testing. For the categorical-type questions, non-parametric tests were performed. To examine relationships between key variables of this study involving teachers, middle level managers and principals, hierarchical linear models were used to investigate the nested effects of teachers and Key personnel in schools.

Stage 3: Follow-up Focused Group Discussions (FGDs)

Stage 3 explored the *why* and *how* questions in regard to principals’ practices. The sample comprised of 31 principals, 30 vice-principals, 27 HODs and 26 teachers. In total, 24 FGDs were conducted and participants came from different school types (primary and secondary schools, and junior colleges) and locations spanning different socioeconomic environments.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Principals’ Work Values

a. Principals placed great emphasis on respecting hierarchical relationships. This is contrary to the egalitarian approach espoused in many modern day leadership theories. Principals appeared to have a threshold on how much empowerment to give to staff.

b. Principals were generally more cautious and avoid taking risks. They seemed to be influenced greatly by strategic pragmatism.

Theme 2: Autonomy and Influence

a. Principals’ perception of autonomy in leadership areas

- Female principals felt they had more autonomy in “encouraging staff to take initiative”, “creating innovative schools culture”, “developing new curricular programs” and “introducing innovative methods of formative assessments”; while the male principals felt they had more autonomy in “taking risks” and “being entrepreneurial”.
- Principals from mixed levels (Integrated Program) schools and from junior colleges felt that they needed to seek the Ministry’s guidance more frequently to clarify policies.

b. Principals’ perception of influence of superintendents

- Male principals felt that their superintendents played an active role in “providing leadership”, “developing leadership capacity” and “identifying future leaders in schools”.
- Principals from secondary and government schools indicated that they wanted their superintendents to be more influential in “handling work-related problems” and “defining educational goals”.

Theme 3: Principal’s Perceptions of Time Management—Inside and Outside of School

a. Principals from primary and secondary schools reported that they were frequently interrupted by unplanned activities, mainly relating to community and parent relations, finances and school building issues.

b. Younger principals reported that they spent more time “managing student affairs and personnel issues”.

Theme 4a: Leadership Practices for School Improvement—Instructional Leadership (IL)

a. Teachers and Key Personnel felt that a better alignment of teaching and learning to the school vision was needed.

- b. Principals' IL practices were more positively perceived in primary schools than secondary schools.
 - c. Leadership in Teaching and Learning was still predominantly based on proven practices rather than research-led practices.
 - d. Teachers' perceptions of their leaders' Distributed Leadership (DL) practices were strongly linked to their perceptions of Principals' IL practices.
 - e. Schools promoting academic achievement as part of school culture were positively related to Principals' IL practices.
- d. Male principals perceived themselves to have high self-efficacy in adopting appropriate strategies to motivate teachers, and recognizing and nurturing leaders and potential leaders.

Theme 6: Culture Building

Theme 4b: Leadership Practices for School Improvement - Distributed Leadership (DL)

- a. Hierarchy, collegiality and academic emphasis were strong predictors for empowerment in Singapore schools. Teachers and Key Personnel appear to have a threshold on how much empowerment they were like to be given. So long as empowerment did not mean over stepping certain perceived boundaries. They were however happy for the Principals to oversight on matters of curriculum development and innovation of both academic and non-academic subjects.
- b. School culture and instructional leadership were found to be closely related to the DL dimensions of 'interactive relations for shared decisions' and 'developing leaders'.
- c. Male teachers were generally more positive about their principals' DL practices.

Theme 5: Leaders' Self-Efficacy and Use of Feedback

- a. Older principals (> 50 years old) reported having self-efficacy in a range of activities associated with instructional and distributed leadership.
- b. Principals from autonomous and independent schools indicated that they had high self-efficacy in formulating clear goals that were agreed to by the whole school community. This was perhaps a result of greater freedom in developing school culture.
- c. School leaders judged their successes by the achievement of school goals and determined their performance through staff feedback.

- a. Empowerment had an impact on the extent of the hierarchical social relationships, hierarchical position and degree of the power relation between the senior and junior levels of the organizational management.
- b. Empowerment was also a positive predictor of Collegiality. The interdependency between teachers may give rise to a collective identity, such that the teachers' identifications with, or attachment to, certain groups within the school will lead to the establishment of group norms, attitudes and behaviors for collegiality to exist.
- c. Leadership development was a positive predictor with Nurturance. The notion of Nurturance stems from Singapore's strong commitment to the quality of its teachers. Not surprisingly, the Singapore education system has high professional development requirements and provides many opportunities for self-, peer-, and centre-led learning and development, such as collaborative practice amongst educators.
- d. Empowerment was a positive predictor along with Academic Emphasis. This is consistent with "academic socialization" which describes the way school leaders, teachers, and even parents, influence students' academic achievement by shaping their skills, behaviour and attitudes towards school.

- e. Empowerment was a positive predictor with People Orientation. People-oriented leaders place more emphasis on the satisfaction, motivation and general well-being of those in the organization. Thus, they tend to focus on supporting, motivating and developing the people on their teams and the relationships within their teams.

Theme 7: Leadership Preparation and Development

- a. Principals (more than vice-principals or key personnel) generally perceived that in-service courses at NIE, organizational visits

- and independent learning through reading, have influenced their leadership practices.
- b. Older principals (> 50 years old) perceived that their leadership practices were influenced by professional sharing (e.g. Communities of Practice, conferences and seminars), and professional associations (e.g. Academy of Principals). They also indicated that milestone leadership development programs were effective in improving professional sharing, and teaching and learning practices in schools.
 - c. More primary school principals indicated that their leadership practices had been influenced by the role-modelling of their leaders, and communities of practice.
 - d. More key personnel, than their leaders, indicated that formal milestone leadership development programs had improved their leadership practices in working with stakeholders, teaching and learning quality, motivating and nurturing teachers, developing school vision and building school culture with a focus on innovation.
 - e. Primary school teachers were also more positive about their leaders' being nurturing.
- b. Older principals (> 50 years) perceived that the normal rotation period of 5 to 7 years was too short to implement school-wide innovations.
 - c. Older principals (> 50 years) perceived that there were sufficient inducements for them to aspire to the next level of leadership seniority. Female principals, however, felt that their progression along the leadership track was rather long.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In education, the study of leadership has only recently gained attention. Leadership in education has the potential to bring about school improvement, particularly through student and school performances. The findings from our study indicate that micro leadership practices are very much influenced by macro contextual forces, including Asian notions of hierarchy, pragmatism, and meritocracy. Understandably, some of the findings may not be congruent with existing theories of leadership, which tend to be Western-based and prescriptive. Clearly, leadership and the nature and role of organizations within any society are determined by its particular cultural, historical and institutional context, which should be acknowledged and systematically examined.

Theme 8: Leader supply, career development and progression, rotation, and succession and sustainability

- a. Male principals perceived that standards expected for promoting leaders were unreasonably high, equitable and rigorous. They also felt that their school postings were well-matched to their capabilities.

About the authors

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