

An Investigation of the Impact of Leadership Practices on Student Learning and Development Outcomes in Singapore Primary Schools

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Effective leadership is perhaps all about establishing congruence between leaders' and subordinates' performances, rather than following a prescribed set of rules.
- Appreciating the contextual nuances of leadership practices in schools is crucial to our understanding of effective leadership.
- Building a 'learning' culture helps to sustain school-based curriculum innovation and development.

BACKGROUND

Policymakers and the public in many developed countries have demanded for greater public school accountability in the hope of improving academic and non-academic school outcomes, as well as decreasing the achievement gaps among subpopulations of students (Heck & Moriyama, 2010). In response, educational-effectiveness researchers have attempted to link (directly and/or indirect) existing research with theory about educational processes to identify contextual, school factors (including leadership), and classroom factors (including teacher effectiveness) to student learning and 'achievement' outcomes (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). While previous studies on educational effectiveness research have been admirable,

they still suffer from several shortcomings. Essentially, more is needed in building and testing the theories that could explain the observed inter-relationships between leadership, and teaching and learning constructs.

FOCUS OF STUDY

In view of the shortcomings in current leadership research, the purpose of the study is to investigate the relationships between school leadership practices, teacher and organizational capacities, and student learning and development in a Singapore context.

KEY FINDINGS

General findings and implications for school leadership, in relation to Primary 5 (P5) students' learning growth in Mathematics

One of the key levers that could potentially improve students' learning outcomes is dispersed leadership practices in school. While teachers observe and maintain hierarchical relationships with their school leaders, they would like to see greater involvement in participation of leadership decisions. This is especially so when the leadership decisions affect their scope of work. This involvement may

include a more collaborative staff learning culture in the development of teacher leaders. This would in turn lead to greater teacher ownership of school/student outcomes, and motivating students both extrinsically and intrinsically.

General findings and implications for school leadership, in relation to P5 students' learning growth in English Language

While teachers are clear about the MOE policies, they would like to have more autonomy in interpreting and implementation policies in the classroom especially when it involves their teaching and learning practices. The teachers however, acknowledged the key role of SLs in making the final decisions. It is interesting to note that while the teachers possess values that are consistent with many Asian societies (i.e., observing hierarchical work relationships, promoting harmony in work teams, and being more long-term oriented), there are evidences to believe that these values may be changing. Teachers indicated their need to pursue personal interests and greater freedom in expressing their views. At the same time, they indicated the need to exercise pragmatism in view of the many competing demands (e.g., focusing on long-term and/or short-term outcomes). Similar to the findings for Mathematics, a more dispersed form of leadership is needed to impact student learning outcomes. In this way, teachers can explore ways to engage their students in learning.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

The findings presented some interesting notions on school leadership practices in schools. While the teachers may possess values that are consistent with many Asian societies (e.g., observing hierarchical work relationships, promoting harmony in work teams, and being more long-term oriented), there are some evidences to suggest that these 'Asian' values may be changing. The MOE as policy makers and resource providers now have some evidence-based knowledge of current school leadership practices (i.e., values, skills

and knowledge) across schools, and how they can affect students' learning outcomes. More importantly, school leaders and teachers would have a better understanding of how leadership practices can 'translated' into classroom teaching and learning practices.

PARTICIPANTS

In total, 58 school leaders (i.e., including principals and vice-principals), 225 key personnel, 468 teachers and 1,888 students from 28 primary schools in Singapore participated in the study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A survey design was used, and data was collected from principals, vice-principals, key personnel and teachers, and students from primary schools in Singapore. All rating scales (for the variables of interests to the study) and tests (i.e., Mathematics and English Language) were calibrated and validated using Rasch Analysis. Students' learning growth over three time points in the two subjects were determined using Rasch common-items test equating techniques. The relationships between school leadership practices, teacher and organizational capacities, and students' learning and development were investigated using hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) analysis.

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