

Instructional Leadership in Singapore and East Asia

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. Principals need to view school improvement not as a collection of changes but as interconnected elements that have mutual effects.
2. Principals must adopt a multidimensional view of teaching and learning where improvement involves the right teaching and learning methods, staff competencies, staff development and relationships with parents.
3. Principals must practise centripetal and centrifugal roles in negotiating challenges from competing forces of centralization and autonomy.

BACKGROUND

In attempting to understand how Principal Instructional Leadership contributes to high educational performance in Singapore, there is a tendency to oversimplify things, and see the cause and effect in linear terms. However, the reality is much more complex. In Singapore's context where we consider the national imperatives (economic, social and technological) and the Ministry of Education's influence on individual schools and principals, we can certainly appreciate the complexity of explaining the causes of school performance. Current evidence-based research on Instructional Leadership may be too generalized to embrace

the realities of competing forces within the country's context. The literature also does not provide clear explanation of how principals and staff skillfully work with and around the challenges and dilemmas of the competing forces in order to carry out Instructional Leadership for sustained school improvement.

FOCUS OF STUDY

This research sheds light on how principals in Singapore's context enact Instructional Leadership practices. It also provides insight on how principals work within and around the competing forces described above to influence and lead staff to consistently deliver good educational achievement for students.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Principals' efforts to lead and execute school educational reform could be based on three systems characteristics, which are important skills of a systems instructional leader.
 - Leading wholes: Principals who lead would view school improvement not as a collection of changes, but as a clear direction towards achieving a central national purpose.
 - Considering interconnections: When leading school improvement, principals

can take into account the mutual effects among school elements, understanding that one element of school can be improved by changing another supposedly unrelated element.

- Adopting a multi-dimensional view: Principals who uphold such a view would lead a desired improvement simultaneously in all of the various spheres with which it is associated. School improvement that is focused on students' acquisition of 21st century competencies, for example, requires a change in teaching and learning methods, staff competencies, staff development and training, relationships with parents and more.
2. The structural elements and processes of the centripetal force integrate dispersed ideas, knowledge, and information into collective action. They pull parts of the organization inward, toward its conceptual center. In the case of the Singapore principal instructional leader, ensuring that the school direction, programmes, processes and student outcomes fulfill the national agenda is a top priority.
 3. Schools as organizations are dynamic systems that require balance and equilibrium—not to remain stationary, but to maintain momentum and move toward their goals. Elements of the centrifugal force include gathering of information, interpreting and synthesizing information, and enabling action upon the information. The Singapore principal instructional leader work tirelessly to enable staff to overcome obstacles, providing support for staff to gain momentum in their work, ensuring that school processes and programmes are delivered efficiently and creating the best environment for student learning.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Implications for Practice

Creating a principal-led professional learning community will serve to provide the structure for the development of school leaders. This principal-led platform could facilitate sharing of (a) how successful school principals negotiate the challenges of national and school-based need; and (b) how effective instructional leadership practices are thought through and practised across different levels in the school.

Implications for Policy and Research:

The findings provided detail aspects of the roles of effective principal instructional leaders. Implicit in the roles are competencies that Singapore school principals ought to have that count towards their repertoire of leadership practices.

Specific competencies related to the roles of a systems leader, centripetal and centrifugal roles are crucial repertoire of leadership practices in the growing complexity Singapore education system. These competencies ought to be incorporated in current leadership programmes.

POPULATION

Thirty principals from primary schools participated in the study. From the 30 principals, a sample of 5 principals was selected for intensive observations/interviews over a period of 5 working days.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The first phase of the study involved reviews of the existing literatures and analysis of the Instructional Leadership findings in Singapore. In the second phase, a qualitative study through open-ended interviews with 30 primary school principals in Singapore was conducted. We build on the 2nd phase's interview study by selecting five principals through in-depth case studies

in the third phase. The principals were each “shadowed” over the course of 5 working days in an 8-week period in order to develop an in-depth picture of their instructional leadership practice

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