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IN EDUCATION, the study of leadership has only recently gained much interest. It is motivated by the desire to gain a more nuanced appreciation of the anatomy of leadership in regard to its potentially wide array of patterns, applications and functions. Understandably, its attraction in education lies in its potential to bring about school improvement, especially in the changing educational landscape Singapore finds itself in.

Much research in this area has been conducted at NIE and has provided the impetus for this issue of ReEd. The empirical research projects featured in this issue focus on leadership as perceived by school leaders, educators and school practitioners.

Based on his research conducted on principals, Ng Pak Tee urges us to realize the increasingly important roles school leaders have in addressing the needs of many key school stakeholders. He shares how leaders need to balance the increasing complexities in these “uncertain times”.

Next, a team of researchers looks at different aspects of the leadership in Singapore schools. Along with Hairon Salleh, Ng Pak Tee, David Ng, Catherine Chua, Benjamin Wong, William Choy, Vicente Reyes, and myself, as well as many other collaborators from the Policy and Leadership Studies Academic Group, we explore the many facets of leadership, both at the organizational and the personal levels.

In the project on professional learning communities, Hairon discuss their importance in teacher development. This is, however, only the first part of the challenge. Ultimately, through teacher development, it is the aim of every educator to impact and improve student learning.

The project by David Ng on instructional leadership found that there is a knowledge gap on how the practices of effective school leaders in Singapore impact school success. It is, thus, paramount to address these issues. David’s study is part of a regional team involving academics from several East Asian countries to look at effective leadership.

Finally, researchers investigate critical but often unseen factors of school effectiveness. Hairon and I speak more about how middle-level managers play a crucial role in contributing to the daily, smooth operations of a school by bridging teachers and principals. William Choy shares on the influence of school culture and how leaders can put in place strategies to ensure a harmonious organization.

This issue ends off with an Afterword that posits how leadership must be contextualized to the Singapore milieu, as many of these projects also suggest. It is important for us to understand that contemporary leadership theories may be culture-bound. As such, what may be effective in Western contexts may not be so in non-Western contexts such as Singapore. At best, perhaps a hybrid model may be suitable, and leaders must display contextual intelligence in leading an organization to success.
Leadership Matters

PROJECT TEAM
Principal Investigator Ng Pak Tee, National Institute of Education, Singapore

AS OUR education system moves towards greater teacher autonomy and student-centred classrooms, how important are school leaders?

“More important than ever!” says Associate Professor Ng Pak Tee. As Head of NIE’s Policy and Leadership Studies Academic Group, he trains many of them as part of NIE’s Leaders in Education Programme.

Defining Leadership So, what makes a good leader? Pak Tee differentiates between leadership and management. Leadership is “moving the ship forward” while management is “keeping it afloat”.

Leadership is about energizing or influencing people. It is more complex and challenging.

In a good leader, both leadership and management must be balanced.

One of the biggest challenges for school leaders today is to handle complexity, says Pak Tee. “Leadership today is a much more demanding task because we live in times of uncertainty.”

Complexity pervades every part of the dynamic school environment. The decisions that school leaders have to make are no longer straightforward.

Pak Tee has noticed that school leaders in Singapore face a unique and rather paradoxical situation.

Paradoxes of Leadership School leaders play a critical role not only in leading but in transforming schools. This is all the more important in a climate of constant change.

Every day, they have to balance between professionalism and bureaucracy, accountability to the stakeholders and their own sense of responsibility in a system that is both centralized and decentralized.

But perhaps the most delicate balance to achieve is between that of being a leader and a teacher.

“A good principal must have the skills of a CEO but the heart of a teacher,” says Pak Tee.

As a CEO of a school, a principal must strategically and systematically address internal and external needs. But the principal needs to keep in mind that change is ultimately for the sake of the children. He calls it the “teacher’s heartbeat”.

“It’s not just the technical aspect,” explains Pak Tee. “School leaders must reflect so that they are not lost in a sea of change without purpose or direction.”

When it comes to educational reforms, school leaders need to be responsive and reflective.

Although there are many initiatives in schools, certain fundamentals must never change. “Don’t change just for its sake,” he says. “Change must be purposeful and meaningful.”

Building Down While balancing all these difficult decisions, school leaders must also be mindful of building strong foundations.

“When we wish to take education to greater heights, we must also remember to make sure our foundations are firm,” Pak Tee reminds us. “Build down, so that we may continue to build up.”

Some of these foundations include a sound values system, staff professional development, good working relationships with teachers, and a strong school culture. Strengthening these foundations allows a school to build upwards with confidence.

The fruit of these efforts may not be immediately visible, but good school leaders know they are building for the future.
WHEN WE mention “school leadership”, the first thing that come to mind is the “school principal”. In reality, leadership is not confined to just a role or a position, says Assistant Professor Hairon Salleh from NIE’s Policy and Leadership Studies Academic Group. “It’s also a continual interaction between one individual with another.”

**Domino Effect**  “Leadership is very crucial in setting the tone and the environment, for learning and development,” says Associate Professor Jonathan Goh, who is Associate Dean of the Office of Education Research of NIE. “The ultimate aim is to make sure students learn.”

To this end, school leadership should foster a conducive environment and provide the support structures for teachers to grow. “I see it as a domino effect: from good leadership to good teaching, which leads to good learning experience from students.”

Together with the initial team members (Clive Dimmock, Lee Ong Kim and Hairon Salleh), Jonathan conducted the first system-wide study of school leadership in Singapore. Their team collected data from a large sample of heads of department (HODs) and school principals. From there, they derived a much clearer picture of how leadership plays out in Singapore schools and the different aspects in schools (see Figure 1).

**Distributed Leadership** Although much has been written about school leadership, the research literature is mostly based in the Western context. Notions such as capacity building and empowerment are very popular. In Asia, people like to think of leadership in terms of positions within a hierarchy. But to Hairon, leadership is about interaction and influence. “It’s a relationship between the superior and the subordinate, and the degree of leadership is very much determined by how much this person can influence the other person, and who is influencing whom,” he elaborates.

Jonathan and Hairon are especially interested in “distributed leadership” because at the heart of this form of leadership is educational reform. The three facets they’re studying are: empowerment, interactive relations for shared decisions, and development of leadership.

**Enabling Empowerment** The notion of empowerment is very popular, but loosely defined, in the Western research literature. When applied in Singapore’s context, the duo caution that it has to be exercised with some caveats in mind.
The Ministry of Education has been implementing school-based curriculum innovations, which is closely tied to the “Teach Less, Learn More” initiative. Under this initiative, schools are encouraged to independently develop their own curriculum and niches. But for such bottom-up initiatives to work, autonomy has to be given to teachers. They have to be “empowered” to participate in decision-making.

Talking with the teachers and HODs, Jonathan and Hairon found that they have a threshold when it comes to empowerment. “Culture plays a part in how you see yourself in relation to significant others,” explains Jonathan. In Asia, people tend to link decision-making to hierarchical positions and roles. If tasked to take on a role or initiative that teachers feel is “inappropriate” or involves a higher level decision-making, they may feel uneasy and do badly as a result, even if they are competent individuals.

In other words, if teachers are made to go beyond their threshold, empowerment may turn into disempowerment. This is something that’s not often mentioned in the Western literature.

So while empowering teachers and HODs is crucial to distributed leadership, it has to be done while taking into account their current positions, past experiences and the context they’re in.

**Shared Decision-making** In distributed leadership, shared decisions are often made. How teachers, HODs and principals interact to make decisions together is a key component that the team studied.

This shared decision-making needs the interacting individuals to reach a point of agreement. “Here, I’m acting in relation to the significant other, and you find that such didactic interactions are more complex. It’s the congruence between the performances of two individuals.”

When asked about how their leaders interacted with them, teachers and HODs reported that their principals are nurturing in terms of helping them to develop their leadership capacity.

At the same time, Singapore’s principals also have to be pragmatic and are driven by strategic purposes when interacting with their staff.

However, the demographics of teachers are changing. They are getting more and more highly educated and sophisticated, and are likely to ask more questions. Many of them need to feel a sense of purpose in what they do, and they want to be challenged so that they can grow professionally. “They don’t want to be under-utilized. They want to find meaning in their job,” says Jonathan.

Leaders have to change their game, stresses Hairon. “Leadership becomes even more important now. You have to engage more with the people you’re working with.”

Leadership helps shape the school culture that these teachers work in, and ultimately, the educational experience of our students.
A CONDUCIVE learning environment, positive school culture, and high student achievements—these are some indications of a successful school. And it all starts with the principal.

Intrigued by the role a school principal plays, Associate Professor David Ng set out to study a particular leadership practice in school, known as instructional leadership.

**Filling the Gap** Singapore is known for its high-performing school system, and international research often praises the high standards of our teachers and the support provided by the Ministry of Education.

However, David thinks those are not the only factors contributing to Singapore’s education success. He believes principals contribute a significant part to that achievement.

But when he looked for evidence to support this, he realized there was a knowledge gap in the practice of instructional leadership in Singapore. Alarmed, he decided to study it closely.

“This is important because having the knowledge base will allow us to look further ahead in the practice of instructional leadership,” David says.

He hopes to build an important knowledge base that shows how local principals are directly related to this success. This will then allow him and other researchers to better understand the role principals play in ensuring whole-school effectiveness.

**Impactful Leadership** “Instructional leadership is about school effectiveness as impacted by the school leader—the principal,” David notes.

Contributing to school effectiveness are four factors that principals put in place: a strong and clear school vision, a conducive learning environment, a coherent teaching and instructional framework, and the continual professional development of teachers.

“So we are talking about a principal that has the ability to put these four components in a coherent manner in a school that will lead towards positive outcomes in student learning,” David explains.

He has shortlisted 30 high-ranking Singapore schools and will interview the principals to understanding their leadership practices in line with these components.

He hopes to identify the common trends or practices of effective principals. He will then narrow down to just five principals whom will be “shadowed” over a period of 2 weeks.

“This is to find out their thinking processes as well as the behaviour of these principals in their daily work,” he shares, “and the way they affect the learning environment of the school.”

**Asian Leaders** David hopes the knowledge base he creates will provide unique findings based in a local context.

“Whether we like it or not, many of these leadership theories—instructional leadership included—are written and applied in the West,” David stresses. “But I am sure we have been influenced by our own culture in the way we practise leadership.”

He intends to compare his findings to those from six other East Asian countries—Hong Kong, China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand—as part of a regional project.

Such a comparison allows us to take a step forward, in understanding local practices, he says. He wishes to use the comparison to impact new policies that will affect teaching, learning and principalship in a positive way.

Due to the cultural differences between the West and East Asia, he believes his research findings will provide a nuanced variant of instructional leadership, one that is distinct to Singaporeans.

And David is well on his way to seeking and sharing his newfound knowledge.
A Community of Leaders

PROJECT TEAM

Principal Investigator Hairon Salleh, National Institute of Education, Singapore
Co-Principal Investigators Jonathan Goh, Catherine Chua, Wang Li-Yi, National Institute of Education, Singapore
Collaborators Lin Tzu-Bin, National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan; Chan Yew Wooi, Sng-Wong Ching Yee, Cynthia Seto, Foo Kum Fong, Doreen Lim, Teo Chai Yaw, May Chong, Hon Shuzen, Academy of Singapore Teachers, Singapore

IT IS said that the quality of our schools can only be as good as the quality of our teachers. Because of that, the professional growth of teachers is paramount.

One of the best ways for teachers to grow is to share and learn from one another. To nurture this collaborative culture, Singapore’s Ministry of Education (MOE) encouraged schools to form professional learning communities (PLCs) in 2009. PLCs are popular with teachers and schools in other countries as well, and many researchers have documented and studied them.

But what’s been told is only “half the story”, says Assistant Professor Hairon Salleh and Associate Professor Jonathan Goh. What their research study on PLCs will do is to tell the other half.

The Other Half The intention of PLCs is to build teacher capacity and competency that would lead to improvements in teaching and student learning outcomes, Hairon tells us.

Most research on PLCs is qualitative, such as case studies of teachers’ experiences and reflections on their involvement.

Such studies are certainly useful, but what Hairon and Jonathan really want to find out is the missing half: the impact that PLCs have on student learning.

Over the course of a year, the team will administer four diagnostic tests in Math to Primary 5 pupils. They will be analysing the results from these tests with the teachers to find out which are the areas pupils are weak in and discuss how teachers can teach these topics better.

“Without that insight, schools are in fact shooting in the dark,” says Jonathan. He believes PLCs can help light the way forward.

Value-adding Research The team set out to help three experimental schools improve on PLC practices, processes and frameworks as a way of adding value to the professional development of teachers. There are also eight control schools.

“At the very start, what we had in mind was that we don’t just want to collect data and come and go. We want to value-add, so we think this is a great value-adding to schools,” says Hairon.

Hairo has been assisting the PLCs in these experimental schools by providing insights on how to improve the PLC practices, process and frameworks.

“You must encourage every one of the teachers to talk about their day-to-day teaching experiences; whether certain pedagogy has worked or not. The next question is: How do you know it has worked? You must collect some data or make some observations,” says Hairon. “This is what PLCs are, rather than just talking about a project.”

This type of facilitation helps to make a crucial contribution to teacher development. “Now the teachers have to go back and ask themselves what did they do pedagogically wrong,” says Jonathan.

“In doing so, you’re linking what they’ve learned or experienced in the classroom, and then bringing it to the teacher learning in the PLC,” adds Hairon.

High-calibre Teachers Their research is very timely for policymakers to see how PLCs are getting on since MOE formally launched the initiative, and what changes can be made to improve the processes.

The idea of PLCs is consistent with the idea of schools and teachers having more professional autonomy.

“If you want to encourage bottom–up initiatives in terms of curriculum or pedagogy, you do need teachers of high calibre. And you cannot work individually; you have to work collaboratively at the school level,” Hairon explains.

PLCs are still evolving and the research is still relatively new. But Hairon and Jonathan believe that teacher learning and sharing in PLCs will make an important impact in student learning experiences in time to come.
LEADERSHIP IS not just about principalship. To NIE researchers Jonathan Goh and Hairon Salleh, leadership refers to the ability to influence people in a positive way. “Leadership, in a broad sense, is about influencing people in a positive way. As such, teachers can also exhibit leadership qualities,” says Jonathan.

In other words, not only principals and vice-principals are leaders—teachers are too.

Teacher-leaders “We have a group of teachers that provide the boundary-spanning role in schools,” Jonathan says. “They are the middle-level managers.”

These middle-level managers Jonathan is referring to are the heads of departments, subject heads and level heads. They are teachers who assume the role of a leader in school, contributing to the school’s overall daily operations and effectiveness.

The relationship between a school and the middle-level managers is such—the more complex a school becomes, the greater the responsibilities for these teacher-leaders.

To understand them better, Jonathan and Hairon embarked on a study to elicit their perceptions of leadership and the leading roles they play in schools.

Bridging Role Middle-level managers are taking on more roles and responsibilities that are usually associated with principals and vice-principals, says Hairon.

On top of their immense teaching workload, this group of teachers also has multiple roles and responsibilities as leaders at the ground level. On the one hand, they have to lead their department or level; and on the other, they have to collaborate closely with the school principals.

“They work closely with their principals and understand the ‘constraints’ while, at the same time, provide an honest perspective of the situations in schools,” Jonathan notes.

This unique position the middle-level managers are in enables them to have more balanced views about school policies and the concerns of the teachers—making them more relatable.

Team Success Due to their “boundary-spanning” roles in schools, middle-level managers contribute greatly to a school’s success. Their balanced views on school-related issues allow them to participate in designing school policies that satisfy both the teachers and school leaders.

“They form the link between the principals and the teachers,” Jonathan says. “This is crucial not only for policy implementation, but also for the smooth daily operations of the school, especially since the teacher-leaders are curriculum specialists.”

This means that the roles they play to ensure the school’s effectiveness is even greater.

Restating its importance, Hairon says, “Although school leaders are naturally given credit for school achievements, I believe most, if not all, principals know that it is indeed a team effort that makes the difference.”

So while many may look to principals and vice-principals for stories of school success, we must not forget that there are other leaders in a school who have stories to share too.
Surprisingly, collegiality was found to be a predominant characteristic of Singapore schools, which is very much in line with the Asian culture of collectivism. “There was more a ‘we’ than an ‘I’ culture in the schools,” notes Hairon. “I did not expect it, given the influence of Western culture.”

What was encouraging is that this same mind-set is being inculcated in the children. “Teachers put their personal needs aside for the overall and societal benefits,” notes William, “and our teachers are exemplifying it.”

This bodes well for the future as we seek to cultivate students with character and a concern for the community.

No Right Culture
It goes without saying that school leaders play a critical role in shaping a school’s culture and thus, the work environment for teachers. “School leaders shape school culture simply because of their power and position,” Hairon explains. They are, “by default”, a key influence in a school’s culture. But there is no “right” culture, qualifies William. “It depends on the school context. What works for one may not work for the other.”

And as much as school leaders influence the school culture, the teachers and students they lead also affect them as leaders. “Leadership is contextual. We need to change strategies based on who the followers are,” Hairon points out. “That’s why leadership is so challenging!”

William suggests that school leaders use an overarching organizational culture to bring people together. In some schools, the school’s mission statement and values serve this purpose.

“This is to see how different people fit it,” he explains. “They have to mould their own values to the values of the school.”

Different schools will eventually have their own culture. But whatever its culture, it’s good to know we have common ground.

William and Hairon are interested in studying the dynamics of school culture.
Since the middle of the 20th century, there has been increasing interest in the concept of leadership in organizations. Early leadership theories have focused on qualities that distinguish between leaders and subordinates, while subsequent theories focused on others aspects such as skill levels and situational factors.

Interestingly, many of these theories of leadership reflect Western cultural assumptions characterized by consumerism, individualism, competitiveness, toughness, rationality and self-sufficiency. Many scholars attribute the upsurge of these Western-based leadership theories to the political, technological and economic superiority of the United States in the post-war years.

At the same time, such theories have also been exemplified in some non-Western countries as being new, modern, scientific and results-oriented. This has prompted some scholars to remain cautious in embracing such “universal” leadership concepts, principles and practices across cultures.

The importance of understanding leadership has not gone unnoticed in education. Theories such as instructional leadership, distributed leadership and transformational leadership remain intuitively attractive, compelling and positive in the education literature; and there have been claims that they impact school climate and environment, and the instructional capacities of teachers.

A review of the literature, however, shows that the educational leadership discourse remains mainly broad, and, to a lesser extent, contested. Ironically, the elusiveness of its meaning has somewhat contributed to its appeal.

Surely, theoretical theses on effective leadership in schools and organizations are more than just clear direction-setting and adherence to the list of normative (or prescriptive) practices. In other words, the intellectual traditions and practices of certain cultures (such as in Singapore) should not be judged without questioning the inherent assumptions espoused in Western cultures.

Therefore, the articulation of leadership theories in Asian contexts needs to be made more deliberate and with greater clarity—not so much that it is non-existent in Asian societies, rather, its understanding and enactment may have different cultural meanings and nuances.

The findings from NIE’s research projects seem to indicate that micro-leadership practices are very much influenced by macro-contextual forces, which include Asian notions of hierarchy, pragmatism and meritocracy.

As an illustration, the enactment of instructional and distributed leadership (both of which were borne out of Western discourses) are moderated by the need for respect for hierarchical relationships and task orientation to achieve efficient use of resources and to sustain our exam-oriented meritocracy.

The empirical findings of these projects would certainly contribute to current knowledge on educational leadership by questioning our previous assumptions about leadership. Rightly or wrongly, leadership and the nature and role of organizations within any society are determined by its particular cultural, historical and institutional context. At best, a hybridization thesis seems more plausible.

Bearing this in mind, successful leadership in schools should be judged on its contextual merits and not on a universal, prescriptive framework. There is much evidence to suggest that effective leadership should be seen as the congruence in psychological constructs (e.g., motivations, perceived performances and work values) of individuals working together in schools. To this end, I believe our leaders have succeeded to some extent in providing an effective leadership in our Singapore schools.
## Research Highlights

**CONGRATULATIONS TO** our NIE colleagues whose research projects were approved for funding in the 9th Request for Proposals by the Office of Education Research.

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