Leading from the middle: Vice-principals in Singapore as boundary spanners

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Leading from the middle: Vice-principals in Singapore as boundary spanners

Abstract

**Purpose**: This paper examines leading from the middle, which is consistent with calls to distribute leadership, while expanding the direction of influence, from the normal top-down to include a bottom-up or lateral direction. The paper proposes that the position of the vice-principal enables the role incumbent to lead from the middle as a boundary spanner. The research question was what leadership from the middle looks like for vice-principals.

**Methodology**: The study consisted of interviews of 28 vice-principals and 10 principals in Singapore. A mixed case and theme-oriented strategy was adapted, with member checking with each vice-principal.

**Findings**: The findings indicate that in leading from the middle, vice-principals play boundary spanning roles of connecting, translating and brokering: a) connecting between organisational levels, b) translating between vision/direction and actualisation, c) connecting between middle managers, and d) brokering and translating between the ministry and the school.

**Originality**: Leading from the middle is a nascent concept which is worth exploring, given the complexity of educational systems with multiple ecological levels, and the need for leadership to create coherence between the levels.

**Keywords**: leading from the middle, boundary spanner, vice-principal, deputy-principal, assistant principal
Introduction

This paper examines the concept of leading from the middle, which is consistent with calls to distribute leadership while expanding the direction of influence, from the more typical top-down to a bottom-up or lateral direction. The paper argues that the position of the vice-principal enables the vice-principal to lead from the middle, acting as a boundary spanner.

The vice-principal occupies a unique position in the school’s organisational hierarchy: closest to the principal, with the responsibility to deputise for the principal when the latter is away, and with the potential to become a principal, but second in position to the principal. Our proposition is that while the position of the vice-principal might be subordinate to the principal, leading from the second chair (Bonem and Patterson, 2005; Deal, 2015) enables the vice-principal to exert influence upwards, to the first chair, and downwards to the rest of the school staff, effectively leading from the middle. Our research question was “What does this leadership from the middle look like for vice-principals?”.

The position of vice/assistant/deputy principal is an established one, starting in the 1940’s in the States (Scott, 2011) and in 1979 in Singapore (Ho and Koh, 2017). This study follows from Guihen’s (2019) suggestion to research the leadership practice of vice-principals as there is a lack of research on vice-principals, as affirmed by other researchers (Cranston et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2003; Militello et al., 2015).

Literature review

Educational leadership literature suggests vice-principals are subjected to the whims of principals (Arar, 2014; Celik, 2013; Rintoul and Kennelly, 2014), with fewer opportunities to lead in reality than desired (B. G. Barnett et al., 2012; Hausman et al., 2002; Militello et al., 2015), or stuck in the middle between management and teachers (Baker et al., 2018; Kwan and Li, 2016).
While acknowledging that vice-principals can sometimes be stuck in the middle, we suggest that the vice-principal’s position between the principal and the staff can be an advantage, enabling vice-principals to lead from the middle. The unique position of the vice-principal, with its proximity to the principal, while simultaneously being accessible to middle managers and teachers, accentuates the practice aspect of distributed leadership, in which the leadership that emerges is due to the interactions amongst leaders, followers and their situations (Spillane et al., 2004), and the same person can be a leader or a follower in different situations. From this perspective, the leadership practice of vice-principals is worthy of note, because the vice-principal can be both a follower of the principal and a leader to the rest of the staff, with the potential to influence the principal in certain circumstances.

**Leading from the middle**

The concept of leading from the middle is interpreted in two ways. The first, as interpreted by the National College for School Leadership in the United Kingdom (2002), sees leading from the middle as leadership by those at the ‘middle levels’ in school, referring mainly to heads of departments. For these middle leaders, their role is to translate strategic organisational goals to their unit’s operations (Farrell, 2014). In a school, the role of heads of department is to translate the macro vision and goals of the principal to the teachers’ micro functions of teaching students (Timperley, 2005). This translation of macro vision and goals into practice is also advocated as one key role of the vice-principal (Rutherford, 2003), and of persons leading from the second chair (Deal, 2015).

The other interpretation of leading from the middle is by Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015), who are concerned with enabling system change, and view districts as leading system change from the middle. Although this concept of leading from the middle is from a system perspective, Fullan (2015) argues that it can be used at other levels. Depending on the ecological system being studied, schools can be in the middle (within a district) or vice-principals can be leading from the middle (within a school).
In both interpretations, the leading agent has the potential to influence both upwards and downwards, and to support changes from the top as well as ideas from the ground (Fullan, 2015; A. Hargreaves and Ainscow, 2015). This notion of influencing upwards is less emphasised in the literature on leadership, which tend to position influence as downwards (from the principal to the staff), though with opportunities for lateral influence (from informal teacher leaders to other teachers). We use the concept of boundary spanning to expand this notion of influencing upward and laterally. Boundary spanning occurs “when individual or collective agents connect entities separated by a boundary by negotiating the meaning and terms of relationship between them” (Kislov, 2018, p. 1).

**Boundary spanning**

The concept of boundary spanning is found in different settings: higher education (Prysor and Henley, 2018; Van Schyndel *et al.*, 2019), the health sector (L. Lee *et al.*, 2014), business (Marrone *et al.*, 2007), governance networks (D. H. Hargreaves, 2012; van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2018) and schools (Coldren and Spillane, 2007; Ho and Ng, 2017; Mayger and Hochbein, 2019). The literature informs us that boundary spanning involves connecting, brokering and translating. These practices may overlap, particularly brokering across communities, which usually involves some form of translation to enable sense making (Harris, 2003; Toh *et al.*, 2014).

**Connecting in Boundary Spanning.** Connecting separate entities links boundary spanning to leadership practice because it involves “engaging multiple diversely positioned individuals in a common cause” (Prysor and Henley, 2018, p. 2213). Indeed, Yip and colleagues’ (2016) definition of boundary spanning resonates with developing the organisation’s capacity and commitment to innovate (Leithwood and Duke, 1999) and raising people to “higher levels of motivation and morality” (Geijsel *et al.*, 2003, p. 230):

... the capacity to establish direction, alignment and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal (Yip *et al.*, 2016, p. 3)
Miller (2008) argues that all educational leaders serve as boundary spanners to some extent, including superintendents, principals, and counsellors. Although boundary spanning appears to be mainly across organisation boundaries, spanning across internal vertical and horizontal boundaries aims to break down functional silos (L. Lee et al., 2014; Prysor and Henley, 2018). In a school context, Coldren and Spillane (2007) identified the principal as the boundary spanner who connected management to teachers, linking leader and teacher practice. In another study, the principal and vice-principal acted as boundary spanners between the heads of department and lower ranking middle managers (Ho and Ng, 2017; Ng and Ho, 2012). In brief, leaders as boundary spanners help to connect actors across levels to work towards a common cause.

**Brokering in boundary spanning.** Brokering is about acting as an intermediary across boundaries, usually between policies and their implementation (Harris, 2003; Toh et al., 2014). In the school context, principals generally are the key persons brokering to reach consensus between schools and the wider community, including parents and the ministry (K. Barnett and McCormick, 2012). Toh and colleagues (2014) observed that principals were able to broker the ministry’s policies and the teachers’ interpretations and implementation of those policies, forging critical connections across subsystems. Brokering practices usually go beyond school’s organisational boundaries, involving leaders in managing relationships between external and internal stakeholders.

**Translating in boundary spanning.** Translating entails the operationalising of policies and high-level management decisions to daily practices (Busher, 2005; Farrell, 2014; Timperley, 2005). In translating the policies of senior management into the practice of individual classrooms, the department heads also represent their colleagues’ views about the challenges they faced to senior management. This is an example where brokering is within an organisation, across communities, and requires translation of information.

The vice-principal’s absence from the literature on boundary spanning is conspicuous, particularly since the vice-principal, like the principal, represents senior management and thus has
the potential to link leader and teacher practice (Coldren and Spillane, 2007). In Singapore’s context especially, many vice-principals stay in the same school for a longer period than the principals who are rotated very six to eight years. This means that vice-principals are likely to have more established relationships with the teachers, putting them in a position to connect teachers with a new principal or direction. In addition, since the Singapore vice-principal has similar access as the principal to the Ministry of Education’s policies and thinking, they potentially play a role in brokering the Ministry’s policies, and in helping their teachers to translate and operationalise these policies in the classrooms. Findings from our study suggest that the vice-principal performs boundary spanning and that this is possible because of their position in the middle between staff and the principal, between ground and policy.

**Methodology**

This study employed purposive sampling (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to select Singapore vice-principals with varied age range, school grade level, years of experience as a school leader and number of schools served (Table I). One key selection criterion was the participant’s work experience as a vice-principal, with a minimum criterion of one year as a vice-principal. We chose 17 vice-principals who had served more than 6 years as vice-principals. Of the remaining 11 who had fewer years of experience, 7 had served at least two principals.

**Table I**

While this study’s focus was on vice-principals, principals were interviewed to triangulate the practices reported by vice-principals. To encourage vice-principals to share candidly, we avoided recruiting principals and vice-principals from the same school. We interviewed 10 principals, again with varied profiles, but with at least five years as a principal so that they could share their experience working with vice-principals (Table II). The diversity in vice-principals’ profiles and experiences and the inclusion of principals to provide the latter’s perspectives supported data triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
This exploratory qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to examine the leadership activities performed by the vice-principals. Each participant participated in a 1 to 1.5-hour interview, which was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis and validation process

The interview data collected were coded independently by two researchers using Nvivo 12. The analysis was mainly grounded in approach. The concepts of leading from the middle and boundary spanning arose from the generated codes, which included the codes in Table III. There were other codes which indicated that the vice-principals perform more traditional leadership activities like observing lessons, giving feedback on teachers’ performance, vetting papers, checking students’ files, and developing staff. However, the three sets of codes in Table III stood out in that they suggested leadership practices not usually indicated in the existing literature on vice-principals, and thus the motivation for this paper.

Table III

To minimise the danger of analysing the multiple interviews at too high a level of inference, which may result in the loss of context specific details, we adapted a case-oriented and variable-oriented strategy (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Individual narratives outlining the roles of the vice-principals were constructed for each vice-principal, followed by developing a cross-case narrative based on common themes, then verifying with the individual narratives if and how the common themes were demonstrated. Each narrative was sent to the corresponding interviewee for member checking (Carspecken, 1996). There were 18 responses, which mainly agreed with the analysis or suggested minor changes. The findings from each narrative were input in separate cells in an excel spreadsheet, facilitating easy comparison across the narratives for confirming or disconfirming
evidence. Key findings were discussed during monthly meetings, which involved two other researchers, enabling investigator triangulation (Janesick, 1994).

After analysis of the first 20 vice-principals’ interviews, in addition to the established interview questions, preliminary findings were shared during the interviews of the remaining 8 vice-principals to check the transferability of these findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). All 8 vice-principals affirmed that the leadership practices were comprehensive and performed by them, though to varying degrees depending on the contexts.

**Context of study**

As the context in which vice-principals work is key in mediating the leadership they perform, we will briefly explain the context for Singapore vice-principals. In Singapore, vice-principals are referred to as “school leaders” by the ministry, by staff and in official documents, together with the principals (Ho et al., 2019). Vice-principals attend Director of School meetings, monthly Cluster Board meetings, and the annual Work Plan Seminar where major ministry policies are discussed, thus having access to the ministry’s communication of key policies, same as the principals.

Second, the bulk of Singapore vice-principals were previously Heads of Departments (HOD) and so they are familiar with the roles of these middle managers. If the vice-principal is assigned to the school where s/he was previously a HOD, s/he may know the HODs more intimately than the principal, particularly if the principal is newly rotated to the school. Another context which is noteworthy in Singapore schools is the large number of middle managers, comprising on average of 10-12 HODs, who form the senior management committee. This includes Year Heads who take care of student welfare and a Head who oversees student discipline, relieving Singapore vice-principals of what is perceived to be a supervisory function (Celikten, 2001; Hausman et al., 2002; Hernandez et al., 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012). The large middle management layer also suggests a need to coordinate, negotiate and mediate between the various middle managers, given evidence that
departments tend to operate in silo and also exhibit sub-cultures (Bennett, 1999; Ho and Ng, 2017; Pryor and Henley, 2018).

In general, vice-principals in Singapore are chosen from the pool of HODs, based on their performance, and a selection process which includes being interviewed by top management in the Ministry of Education. All newly appointed vice-principals must attend an induction programme which is spread over their first two years. Vice-principals who are assessed as performing well by their principals and cluster superintendents may be nominated to attend a Leaders in Education Programme, which to date remains the key programme to prepare potential principals (Ho and Koh, 2017; National Institute of Education, n.d.).

With respect to officially defined roles, the Ministry of Education provides a role profile for vice-principals. However, this role profile mainly repeats the roles in the principal’s role profile, with the additional phrase “partners principal in/to”, leaving it ambiguous what it is that vice-principals do in practice. This is what partly what motivated the design and conduct of this study on vice-principals in Singapore, to hear directly from vice-principals what it is that they do in the espoused practice of partnering their principals.

Limitations

Although 28 vice-principal participants constitute a relatively big number for a qualitative study and there was a variety of profiles and experiences, this number represents less than one percent of the number of vice-principals in Singapore (over 500 in 2018). However, despite slight variations in the leadership practices shared by the vice-principals, the key leadership practices highlighted were consistent. Finally, interviews of the principal participants affirmed these practices. While no one participant provided a complete picture of the vice-principal’s leadership practices, we contend that the combination of 28 vice-principals and 10 principals provides a sufficiently comprehensive and trustworthy picture of how the vice-principals lead from the middle in Singapore.
Findings

The findings indicate that in leading from the middle, vice-principals perform boundary spanning practices: a) connecting between organisational levels, b) translating between vision/direction and actualisation, c) connecting between and across middle managers, and d) brokering and translating between the ministry and the school. All the boundary spanning practices were corroborated by at least five participants (both vice-principals and principals).

The concept of “leading from the middle” was mentioned by one vice-principal, Kamsida binte Musa, who was familiar with the work of Michael Fullan (2015). She perceived leading from the middle as possible due to the vice-principal’s “proximity” to two constituencies, commenting that when one leads from the middle, one gets “a certain impact and role”. Although Kamsida was the only one who mentioned “leading from the middle”, there were other vice-principals and principals who expressed similar concepts, albeit using different metaphors. The main metaphor used was the vice-principal as a “bridge” (5 vice-principals) to “connect” different stakeholders or information (4 vice-principals), which resonates with boundary spanning. Principal Marie Lim referred to the vice-principal as the “middle person or the communicator, if not the messenger, of the school leadership team” who engages the middle managers and the teachers.

For each boundary spanning practice, we will share at least one vignette, as described by the participant, which illustrates the practice. We have chosen this approach so that readers have access to the raw data and can judge how transferable the boundary spanning practices are to their contexts, and how credible our interpretations are (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). All names mentioned are fictitious.

Connecting Between Organisational Levels

Vice-principal Phang Yee Mun commented that a “pretty obvious” role for a vice-principal was to “support” the principal. This support appeared to be two-pronged; to support the principal in his/her
role as head of the school “to bring the whole school forward”, as explained by vice-principal Michelle Palmer; and to support the principal as an individual, with his/her peculiar idiosyncrasies, philosophies and leadership styles.

Regarding the first, vice-principals perceived themselves as an important bridge between the principal’s vision and the staff who help to realise this vision. To play this bridging role, vice-principals had to first be a follower to the principal, accentuating how the situation impacts who constitutes the leader and the follower and how these can interchange (Spillane, 2006; Spillane and Orlina, 2005). Various vice-principals saw it as their responsibility to try to understand their principals, “catch their vision”, “incorporate” and “unpack” messages and ideas from their principals into their communication with staff. The principals agreed that the vice-principals play a key role in helping the middle managers and staff to connect the dots between what the staff are doing and what the principals desire to be done.

Principal John Ang explained his expectations of the vice-principal:

Plan well and know the pulse of the principal and what we consider important. So, being aligned to what I’m doing, being able to build on what I’ve said. For example, I’ve shared something at contact time and at every opportunity, contact with other people that I don’t have contact with, to be able to make whatever I said come alive and help them to see the connect. Because sometimes they don’t see the connect, so we need different layers of people, and so, alignment is number one [role of the vice-principal].

While vice-principals articulate their role in supporting the principal in fulfilling the latter’s role as head of the school, it is perhaps revealing that the stories they tell seem to be more about helping staff to adapt to a new principal or to a principal whose leadership style or thinking was not aligned to the staff’s thinking. Tan Siew Lian shared how she had to spend effort engaging her staff to work with a new principal:
You need to understand your principal. So when she [the principal] does that, when the staff don't understand, you got to learn how to ... engage that teacher to explain... more of influencing them individually if they have problem with the new principal. ... I mean I always tell them, I may not agree with her [the principal] totally hundred percent, but I will still bring my point across to her and after that, it’s her call. She is still the principal.

However, the influence is not unidirectional. While vice-principals try to influence their staff to understand the principal’s thinking and direction, they also try to influence upwards their principals, such as by using data and statistics to “try to impact” the principal’s thinking and decisions (5 vice-principals). Nur Azli Binte Johan explained that she kept her principal updated so that her principal trusted her and left her to independently lead.

In addition, vice-principals view their ability to sense the ground and to advise the principal based on this sensing as important in enabling the principal to make decisions which, as Mohamed Razali put it, are “closely related to what the teachers wanted”. Consistent with the practice of a boundary spanner, vice-principals view themselves as representing a constituency, serving as “a voice of the teachers” (2 vice-principals) to bridge the needs of the teachers and of the school.

Vice-principal Jeffrey Ong shared how “I will give my piece, my advice [to the principal], on the ground, what are the sentiments like? Because what you have in mind, while it is very beautiful, there are certain parts may not gel so well. I will advise my principal.” Hayati binte Munir explained how when it comes to dealing with student discipline and wellbeing, because “that’s the part where I know more about the students, because I work directly with the teachers and the year heads, ... So that’s when I feel a little bit like I am a partner [to the principal] rather than just taking the cue from the principal... Rather than, he says, and I carry it out”. In such cases, Hayati feels that she influences her principal with her more intimate knowledge of the students and she co-makes decisions with him.
Tan Lee Yong provides an example of the vice-principal influencing downwards and upwards, from the middle. Lee Yong spoke to the Humanities head about the need to enhance the students’ general knowledge. Having secured the head’s agreement to give his suggestion “a thought”, Lee Yong then shared the idea with his principal who gave the “go ahead to work with the head”.

**Translating Between Vision/Direction and Actualisation**

Although the role of the vice-principal is to support the principal, the Singapore vice-principal is acutely aware of his/her simultaneous role as school leaders who need to drive the school’s direction. Thus, the vice-principals shared having to influence and motivate their staff to understand “why” there is a need for change (5 vice-principals), by reminding staff of what Albert Tan referred to as “the strategic picture, the bigger picture”. Vice-principals unanimously expressed concern to “secure [staff’s] buy in” to the school’s/membership’s vision and initiatives (5 vice-principals). As explained by vice-principal Dennis Aw, this boundary spanning practice is two-pronged, involving the vice-principal in simultaneously doing strategic planning with the principal and working with the ground, ‘connecting’ the two.

Vice-principal Suhaimi bin Hassan explained this bridging between vision and actualisation, comparing it to the work of grassroot leaders who have a duty to influence upwards, by providing members of parliament with realistic feedback on what is happening at the ground:

> We also say this, we are the bridge. You take us out, then there will be this break in terms of communications. Usually for principals..., they talk about envisioning and so on, they have a lot of ideas what they want to do. We as vice-principals, we try to make this vision into reality. ... Sometimes you are the planner, you plan, but you don’t have someone who communicate in terms of how it should be enacted... Sometimes MP [Member of Parliament] thinks everything is okay with the constituency, because grassroots leaders always feed with the good things. Then when comes to election, they [MPs] are not voted in.
They don’t know there are a lot of unhappiness on the ground. So there must be really trust and honesty and openness about what is really happening. So basically, that’s our role.

However, this boundary spanning practice is not a simple matter of breaking down the school’s/ principal’s vision and operationalising it by dictating what staff should do, thus the word ‘actualisation’ instead. Actualisation indicates that effort needs to be taken to turn something into action (dictionary.com). Suhaimi alludes to this effort in pointing out that a plan is simply a plan until someone “communicate[s] how it should be enacted”. Denise Lim expresses a similar sentiment in noting that “when the principal says certain things, it’s like broad directions, ... but then how is it going to work in your context, as a classroom teacher, as a department head, I think that is our job to contextualise [the directions] for them”.

Beyond leading staff to translate and contextualise a given direction, the vice-principal may also influence the direction through negotiating with the middle managers and proposing changes in direction to the principal, as shared by Denise:

The big ideas will come from the principal, like what directions you know, she wants us to take, but because I’m so called the expert in this area [on formative assessment] ... So I am the one that actually provides all the flesh, the meat, and the key directions. ... so for example, I collated all the plans, and then I realised that there are certain direction that we need to take with regards to assessment....So I will have a consensus with all my HODs to say that this is a stand that we should take in the true spirit of formative assessment, are we together on this? So then when I hear from all of them, that I know that ... they are agreeable to go towards this direction, I will bring back to my P and explain the rationale and then she agrees, and then we will go ahead.

Principals commented that vice-principals need to use their creativity to think through how to translate the broad directions and goals of the school. Principal Gerard Tan stressed that the vice-principal’s role is not just about operationalisation, management or just being a “postman”.
Connecting Between Middle Managers

In the literature, it is usually the middle managers who act as the bridge between top-down initiatives and implementation by teachers in the classroom (Bush and Harris, 1999; Gunter, 2001; Timperley, 2005). This is likely the case when the initiative concerns mainly one department. A ministry initiative on the teaching of algebra, for instance, is likely to involve the Head of Mathematics in playing a boundary spanning role. However, many ministry or school initiatives are broad and involve many subject areas. For example, a school may decide to implement differentiated instruction or Harvard’s thinking routines, which can be applied across subjects. If each department works in silo to interpret and implement these school-wide initiatives, this can result in a lack of coherence.

While the two earlier boundary spanning practices involve the vice-principal in crossing mainly vertical boundaries, boundary spanning between middle managers involve the vice-principal in crossing the horizontal boundaries of departments (L. Lee et al., 2014) to build inter-disciplinary or multi-functional alliances (Prysor and Henley, 2018). As a vice-principal, who has a higher status in the hierarchy compared to middle managers, the vice-principal works to influence middle managers to look beyond their silos: working together “towards the same direction” as explained by Chua Kim Ho, or like a conductor coordinating the various section leaders as described by Gerard Tan. Principal Bernard Lim agreed that one key role of the vice-principal is to ensure that the departments “all work in sync”.

As vice-principal Dennis Aw explained, middle managers focus on their job scope whereas the vice-principal looks across departments and committees, to “connect the dots” for coherence and optimise the use of resources and effort:

I think for vice-principals, you able to see the bigger picture, definitely. As a [department] head..., most of the time you are focusing on your job scope. But as a vice-principal, you are looking across, you are looking across the departments, across the committees, and from
there, how do you integrate, how do you innovate, ... if you are looking at your own
department, or your own committee, it is difficult to understand what other committees are
doing.... But as a vice-principal, at least you can draw the alignment. ... for vice-principals, we
are looking at the bigger areas. How to connect the dots, how to streamline the events. .... If
I find that there are so many common things they are doing, then ask them to do some
pruning.

A good example of connecting between middle managers is shared by Zoe Tay who
explained how she had to oversee and standardise practice across the three Year Heads, who were
in charge of different levels of students, to create “one coherent SDT [student development team]”.

So right now since I am working with my year heads. Sure, they are very clear this is what
they are supposed to do, but if you don’t have somebody overseeing them or standardising
practice across, it is going to be very difficult for the three of them to work together as a one
coherent SDT. There could be a possibility of each of them doing their own thing, then we
have different practices at the different levels.... They are more concerned with their own
levels.... So to pull it together, erm requires someone. So I supposed I mean that is the role
that I play.

The boundary spanning capacity of the vice-principal is especially helpful to a middle
manager who oversees an area that requires the collaboration of different heads. In Singapore, for
example, the information communication technology head and the school staff developer need to
garner the support of the heads of the different subject areas, which can sometimes be difficult. In a
high-power distance culture (Hofstede, 2003) like Singapore, this is where the vice-principal can play
a role in negotiating amongst the HODs or helping a HOD to push for a particular agenda. Principal
Sarah Sahib observed that the vice-principal’s “leadership is [demonstrated] when they make the
connection with other heads and said OK, this group needs this, what do you think you can do about
it?”.
Brokering and Translating Between the Ministry and the School

The vice-principal’s boundary spanning role between the ministry and the school is likely shared with the principal, since in the literature the principal is usually identified as the person who brokers the ministry’s policies with the school’s implementation of these policies (Rutherford, 2003; Toh et al., 2014). Principal Ashikin binte Sazali suggested this role is shared between the principal and the vice-principal:

I think the role of the principal and the vice-principal is to translate the policy in a language - in a way that the HODs and the teachers can understand why we are doing what we are doing.

A few vice-principals shared about the need to influence teachers’ thinking and mindsets about ministry’s policies/initiatives, to help teachers find meaning in and connect the ministry’s policies/initiatives to existing initiatives. As explained by Dennis Aw

Because we are the one connecting the schools and what is happening up there. ... So we have to draw the connection for them, ... the [ministry’s] every good school movement actually is linked to our [existing] thinking school learning nation. So, we have to draw and connect the dots for them, or else they find that “hey it’s something new, we have to restart the engine, ... we have to re-design what we are doing again”. So our job is really to try to mitigate all this tension they have and all these misconceptions, misapprehensions.

However, it is not just about the principal and vice-principal unpacking the ministry’s policies on their own and getting the teachers to implement. As vice-principal Kamsida said, while it would be easy for her to say “Ok, so let’s do this [this policy/initiative] but no lah, you know…, you’re not communicating. You’re communicating, but you are not communicating” [emphasis by Kamsida]. Kamsida explained how, as a follower of the Ministry, she had to first understand the rationale for the national policy and what it meant for her school’s unique context, and then as a school leader,
she had to think through the best timing and method to communicate and discuss the policy with her school staff:

But I think now [as a vice-principals] it’s a lot more of I’ve to know why the national aspiration is like that, ... and then I’ve also got to process it, what exactly does this aspiration translate to into my own school context, and then bear in mind my people and the team, how this messaging ought to be communicated and translated into. So that complexity I didn’t have when I was a HOD. I just have to know that my principal said certain things, ... you kind of follow certain guidelines. ... But as a school leader, ... you need to give that weight or that thinking ... while they [the Ministry] tell me this is the message, I’ve got to think in a very oblique manner like when’s the right time to do this, ... how many percentage of the messaging do they get? If it’s an exam period, stay away from it [communicating the policy]. ... And the thing is, we need to process it because that’s what we do. The teachers have other things so that’s our job you know.

It is revealing that Kamsida differentiated her role as a vice-principal from her previous role as a head of department. While both vice-principal and department head can be seen as leading from the middle in translating policies to practice, Kamsida realised that the vice-principal also plays an important role as senior management in facilitating her heads to understand the rationale behind the policy and strategise how to communicate the policy to the teachers. It is not simply top-down sense-making by school leaders and telling staff what to do –staff need to be involved in the sense-making process.

One example of the vice-principal performing boundary spanning between the ministry and implementation in the classroom was vice-principal Jennifer Ho working with her middle managers to break down the Ministry’s desired outcomes of education into outcomes to achieve at each grade level and translating these into a lesson observation template so that teachers are “very clear whether or not your lesson plan is achieving those desired outcomes”.
Constraints to Leading from the Middle

Although there was evidence of vice-principals leading from the middle, some constraints were raised. The main constraint is posed by a micromanaging principal who works directly with the middle managers, bypassing the vice-principal. In such a context, instead of leading from the middle, the vice-principal “disappear[s]”, s/he is “not needed, because all the decisions will be made by the principal”. As Nur Azli Binte Johan elaborated, “You don’t exist. Or it’s harder to exist”. Tan Lee Yong provided a similar example in which an ex vice-principal shared he had been “cold storaged, inverted commas” by his principal, observing that “in the school context, I think the principal holds the key” to empowering, or not, the vice-principal.

Another major constraint is when what the vice-principal believes needs to be changed is different from the principal believes in. In such a situation, as Jennifer Ho explained “it was very hard to propose those changes and get those changes accepted at Exco level because the principal didn’t have the same beliefs”. Dennis Tay explained how although his teachers were tired of doing community work and he tried to negotiate on their behalf with the previous principal, the latter insisted the teachers still had to do it. Dennis observed that “this [previous] principal, the values are a bit different...so I find it’s much easier to work with the current principal because we have the same philosophy”.

Constraints may also arise when the principal does not trust a middle manager, whom the vice-principal has no problem working with. As Siew Lian explained, this leaves the vice-principal stuck in a “kind of a struggle between these two [the principal and the middle manager], with the principal accusing her of “favouritism” and the middle manager accusing her of “siding the principal”, lamenting that “it’s that kind of struggle that as a vice-principal I think I am facing”.

Summary of Findings
The boundary spanning practices that Singapore vice-principals perceived themselves as performing are captured in Figure 1. Figure 1 illustrates how in leading from the middle, vice-principals connect different groups and functions, influencing upwards, downwards as well as laterally across middle managers, translating visions or policies into actions and brokering between the Ministry and schools. Figure 1 can be explored further through the gathering of survey data to operationalise the brokering, connecting, and translating dimensions and to determine the level of spanning involved.

Discussion and Conclusion

In boundary spanning, three activities are highlighted: interpret environmental conditions and relay that information to those who make decisions (Farrell, 2014; Leifer and Huber, 1977); represent a particular constituency within the organisation or represent the organisation; negotiate and coordinate the performance of tasks to achieve common goals (Kislov, 2018). Based on our study, vice-principals interpret what is happening on the ground and share that information with the principal to support the latter in making decisions which consider staff’s needs. However, vice-principals also help stakeholders make sense of and act on information from the top (the principal) or from beyond the school boundary (the ministry). As leaders in the middle, vice-principals represent both senior management and the rest of the staff, connecting leader and teacher practice, linking direction with actualisation of the direction. In addition, vice-principals negotiate and coordinate amongst the various heads of departments to ensure that different departments work towards common goals. The vice-principal’s boundary spanning practices are more than just about managing people and co-ordinating task performance. Leadership is required since there is a need to influence people’s thinking and practice, with the further need to influence upwards and downwards.

This study indicates how the vice-principal can lead from the middle as a boundary spanner and still serve his/her role as supporter of the principal, without being relegated to being just an
administrator or manager (B. G. Barnett et al., 2012). Admittedly, the degree to which the vice-
principal can lead from the middle depends on several factors, including the degree to which the
principal is willing to relinquish authority and empower the vice-principal, the vice-
principal’s expertise and exercise of agency, and the vice-principal’s capacity to make sense of and
communicate contextual information on both sides of the boundary (Farrell, 2014). Based on our
study, the principal is the main enabler and inhibitor of vice-principals’ effort to lead from the
middle, which is similar to findings in other studies on vice-principals (Celikten, 2001; Hernandez et
al., 2016; J. C. K. Lee et al., 2009).

The other significant finding is the close link between the concepts of leading from the
middle and boundary spanning. Leading from the middle is a particularly powerful concept if one
considers that one plausible reason why initiatives from the top have not been successful is because
of the many intervening ecological levels, and the likelihood that there were leadership gaps in the
middle. For any initiative to impact the micro level of the classroom, there are multiple ecological
levels which need to provide leadership, interact and create coherence (Toh et al., 2014): minimally
the principal, the vice-principal, and the heads of departments. It is no longer enough for influence
to percolate downwards; influence also needs to percolate upwards (A. Hargreaves and Ainscow,
2015) or even sideways.

With respect to the capacity building of vice-principals, this study suggests that vice-
principals need to be equipped with an understanding of national policies if they are to assist in the
translation of these policies. Vice-principals need to possess systems thinking (Senge et al., 2015)
since they need to operate at a higher level than heads of departments and co-ordinate various
heads to work towards a common direction. In addition, vice-principals need to be able to
communicate with empathy for their teachers and be able to motivate their teachers to adopt
desired changes. They also need to be able to manage their boss, the principal, so that they can
influence upwards.
Finally, this paper focused on vice-principals leading from the middle. It would be useful to investigate how vice-principals work with middle managers to lead from the middle, and how leadership is distributed between the vice-principals and the middle managers. There has been interest in team leadership in the literature but the focus has been on how senior management teams of middle managers worked with principals (K. Barnett and McCormick, 2012; Bush and Glover, 2012; Day et al., 2004; Liljenberg, 2015). Understanding how the senior management teams work with vice-principals in leading from the middle to support the principal and the teachers would enable schools to optimise the leadership capacity in our schools, and thus maximise the potential for school improvement (Muijs and Harris, 2003).

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Table I. Vice-principal (VP) participant profile

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<th>ID</th>
<th>Age Bracket</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Years as VP</th>
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<th>Principals Worked With</th>
<th>School Level</th>
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* P indicates Primary School (grades 1-6);
# S indicates Secondary School (grades 7-10)
### Table II. Principal (P) participant profile

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### Table III. Codes which suggest boundary spanning

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<td>Link between principal and other stakeholders</td>
<td>“the bridge between the middle managers and the new principal” (VP07S)</td>
<td>16 (41)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“sensing the ground…and giving her [the principal] the correct information” (VP27P)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicate or contextualise MOE or school policies</td>
<td>“they [VPS] are responsible for cascading [the school’s direction]” (P09P)</td>
<td>14 (34)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“to unpack it [a ministry policy] for my teachers” (VP01P)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mediating between key personnel</td>
<td>“you play the role of the conductor” (VP3P)</td>
<td>21 (48)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“the job is to try to bring them [the KPs] together” (VP12S)</td>
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</table>
Figure 1. Vice-principals leading from the middle as boundary spanners