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Title	Vice-principals as leaders: Role ambiguity and role conflicts faced by vice-principals in Singapore
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## Vice-principals as Leaders: Role ambiguity and Role Conflicts Faced by Vice-principals in Singapore

### Abstract

**Purpose:** This article examines what vice-principals in Singapore experience as constraints to their leadership practice, and how they deal with these constraints, cognizant that role misalignment for vice-principals presents barriers to schools achieving optimal effectiveness.

**Methodology:** The qualitative study sought to hear the voices of vice-principals, to uncover the contextual richness of their experiences, via the interview of 28 vice-principals. Coding involved a mix of codes from the literature and grounded from the interviews, with member checking of the findings.

**Findings:** Vice-principals in Singapore face two main constraints: role ambiguity and role conflicts. These are mainly a structural issue, given the dual expectations of vice-principals to support their principals and to lead. The problems are heightened when there are clashes of values, with vice-principals conflicted between two sources of authority, administrative and professional.

**Significance:** Framing the constraints faced by vice-principals under role ambiguity and role conflicts raises these constraints to a theoretical and organisational level. The study proposes a link between the concepts of role ambiguity and role boundaries and illustrates how role ambiguity and conflicts can be disempowering. However, the study also shows that ambiguity need not always be a constraint but can be positive under some conditions.

**Keywords:** vice-principals, role ambiguity, role conflict, role boundaries, empowerment

## Introduction

Leaf and Odhiambo (2017) observe that as schools face an era of greater accountability, the vice principal's role in school effectiveness and improvement becomes more critical (2017). These roles include developing an appropriate school climate, supervising and evaluating teachers, encouraging innovation, and providing professional development (Hernandez et al., 2016; Gaston, 2005). Despite the recognition that vice-principals play a key role, there is a dearth of international and local Singapore-based research on their leadership roles (Dimmock and Tan, 2013; Goh et al., 2015; Militello et al., 2015; Tahir et al., 2019; Rintoul and Kennelly, 2014).

To address the limited research on vice-principals, a study was conducted in Singapore, involving 28 vice-principals. At the point the study was conceptualised and conducted in 2018, it was the sole Singapore study which focused on vice-principals. Vice-principals were asked what they understood to be their roles vis a vis principals, what factors enabled or constrained their enactment of leadership, and how they dealt with constraints. Findings for the study's research question on the leadership roles of Singapore vice-principals have been reported in two **articles** (authors, 2020). One **article** illustrates how Singapore vice-principals work with their principals to co-set directions, motivate staff, lead instruction, and promote a desired culture, while the other **article** explains how vice-principals lead from the middle as boundary spanners. In summary, while Singapore vice-principals enact leadership roles and contribute to the functioning of schools, they face challenges as their boundary spanning roles involve them connecting actors across hierarchical levels and translating policies to daily practices.

This **article** answers the research question on factors which constrained the vice-principal's enactment of leadership. Constraints consisted mainly of role ambiguity and role

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3 conflicts. How participants dealt with constraints also partially answered the research  
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5 question on enabling factors.  
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8 Authors (2020) demonstrate that the vice-principals are key actors worth studying  
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10 because of their close access to the principals, and thus the possibility of a productive  
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12 working relationship, with both parties providing leadership (Gronn, 1999; Ng and Ho,  
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14 2012), or a dysfunctional relationship with the vice-principal's leadership constrained (Baker  
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16 et al., 2018). It is important for policy makers and school leaders to understand what  
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18 constrains vice-principals from exercising leadership and how they can deal with such  
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20 constraints, given that they are the other partner in the senior leadership couple, and a key  
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22 member of the senior management team (Bush and Glover, 2012; Wallace, 2002). Cranston  
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24 and associates (2004) argue that role misalignment for vice-principals present barriers to  
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26 schools achieving optimal effectiveness. In addition, with the vice-principal's position as an  
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28 intermediary position to that of the principal's and success at the vice-principal level essential  
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30 to long-term leadership development and retention, more research is needed on the role of the  
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32 vice-principal as a distinct institutional position (Mitchell et al., 2017).  
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### 39 **Vice-Principals in Singapore Schools**

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42 As the context shapes how roles are defined and whether role ambiguity or conflicts  
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44 are temporary or inherent in the role (Tubre and Collins, 2000; Mitchell et al., 2017), this  
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46 section provides a brief description of the Singapore context, with references to the local  
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48 literature on school leadership where relevant.  
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52 There were 326 government and government aided primary and secondary schools in  
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54 Singapore in 2019 (Ministry of Education, 2020). Each primary school (grades 1-6) had on  
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56 average about 1300 students and 86 teachers, while each secondary school (grades 7-10) had  
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58 on average about 1050 students and 89 teachers. There were 297 vice-principals and 186  
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3 principals in primary schools, and 252 vice-principals and 141 principals in secondary  
4 schools, which translates into a rough ratio of 1.7 vice-principal to every principal. This  
5 means that some schools have two vice-principals, in addition to an Administration Manager,  
6 an Operations Manager, and in some cases, a vice-principal (administration).  
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13 In Singapore, vice-principals are handpicked from teachers who have performed well  
14 as heads of department or in leadership positions in the Ministry of Education (Ho and Koh,  
15 2017). This means that the transition to vice-principalship was not as difficult as for vice-  
16 principals in contexts where teachers are promoted to be vice-principals (Armstrong, 2012;  
17 Oleszewski et al., 2012).  
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25 Vice-principals are officially referred to as school leaders, same as principals, and  
26 they attend Director of School and Cluster Board Meetings with the principals. The Ministry  
27 of Education posts principals and vice-principals to schools. Both are rotated every 6-8  
28 years, with vice-principals generally remaining longer in a school, particularly if there is a  
29 change in the principal. Selected vice-principals who are assessed as having performed well  
30 are promoted to principalship.  
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40 While there is limited literature focusing on vice-principalship in Singapore, literature  
41 on school leadership consistently highlights the high-power distance culture in Singapore.  
42 Research found that Singapore principals practise bounded empowerment (Ng et al., 2015;  
43 Hairon and Goh, 2015) because they are the primary person accountable for what happens in  
44 schools. Even when they empower, Singapore principals expect subordinates to inform them  
45 of decisions made.  
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## Literature Review

The literature review outlines the general literature on role conflict and role ambiguity, problems faced by vice-principals, and how these problems can be framed under role ambiguity and role conflicts.

### *Role Conflicts and Role ambiguity in Organisations*

According to Tubre and Collins (2000), the theory of organisational role dynamics was first introduced in 1964. Based on classical role theory, organisational structure is designed assuming that each position has a clearly defined set of responsibilities (Rizzo et al., 1970). Role theory indicates that when the behaviours expected by role senders are perceived to be incongruent, or incompatible by the focal person, the latter is likely to experience role conflict. Rizzo and colleagues (1970) categorised role conflicts into the following:

- a) Conflict between the focal person's internal standards or values and the defined/expected role behaviours (intra-role conflict).
- b) Conflict between the time, resources or capabilities of the focal person and defined role behaviours (intra-sender conflict)
- c) Conflict between several roles for the same focal person which require incompatible behaviours (inter-role conflict)
- d) Conflicting expectations and organisational demands in the form of incompatible policies, conflicting demands from others, and incompatible standards of evaluation (inter-sender conflict).

House (1970), Rogers and Molnar (1976) observed that in professional organisations, professionals may find they are governed by two sources of authority, administrative authority and professional authority, which violates the principle of unity of command in which there is only one course of authority. This situation may give rise to inter-sender

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2  
3 conflict. Connolly and colleagues (2019) offer a similar concept of a boundary, and thus  
4 potential conflict, between delegated management responsibility and professional  
5 responsibility and accountability. Although they were referring to teachers, this conflict can  
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8 apply to vice-principals, who face dual expectations to perform delegated management roles  
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11 as administrators and instructional leadership roles as educational professionals (Tahir et al.,  
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14 2019; Petrides et al., 2014)..

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17 Role ambiguity occurs when the set of behaviors expected for a role is unclear, and when  
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20 the focal person has insufficient information to reasonably predict the consequences of his  
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23 actions (Pearce, 1981). Rizzo and colleagues (1970) defined role ambiguity as the  
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26 predictability of the outcome or responses to an individual's behaviour, and the clarity of  
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29 behavioural requirements. Pearce (1981) proposed four structural characteristics of positions  
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32 that could result in role ambiguity: unusual settings, changing job-related expectations,  
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35 performance being judged by the behaviours of others, and the delay/absence of relevant  
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38 information or feedback. When a role-as-position, such as the role of the vice-principal,  
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41 lacks clarity about the set of practices which are appropriate for the role, Cottrell and James  
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44 (2016) argue this is a form of ambiguity **in the role boundary**. This arguably applies to vice-  
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47 principals who need time to familiarise themselves with a new school setting, and  
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50 importantly, the often tacit expectations of their principals. Ideally, a role boundary should  
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53 inform the role incumbent of "legitimate practices" that are appropriate for a specific role-as-  
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56 position (Cottrell & James, 2016, p. 17).

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59 Role conflict and role ambiguity are established constructs, with extensive research  
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conducted on the relationships between these constructs and their correlates, including  
organisational commitment, job satisfaction and job performance, though there have been  
variations in findings on these relationships (Tubre and Collins, 2000). Although new  
constructs have been introduced, such as job demands, role ambiguity and role conflict are

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2  
3 still at the root of job hindrances (Wang, 2020). Role ambiguity and conflicts are still relevant  
4  
5 today, given more complex work environments, where the responsibility and performance of  
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7 job tasks is distributed amongst teams and team members, who hold positions/roles with  
8  
9 differences in power and authority (Crawford, 2012; Flessa, 2009).  
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12  
13 In a recent **article**, Shin, Hur, Park and Hwang (2020) observed that role ambiguity is  
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15 likely to be felt by managers who play a boundary role and have to deal with multiple role  
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17 senders. Certainly, the position of the vice-principal, located between the principal and the  
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19 staff, has traditionally been a delicate one involving boundary spanning (authors, 2020). The  
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21 literature has consistently highlighted problems faced by vice-principals, which will be  
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23 elaborated on in the next section.  
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#### 26 27 *Linking Problems Faced by Vice-principals to Role ambiguity and Role Conflicts* 28

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30 The literature has surfaced many problems vice-principals face in performing their  
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32 roles and exercising leadership. One issue is that these problems are usually presented  
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34 without any theoretical framing, particularly in the literature review sections. Consequently,  
35  
36 the problems can come across as a **'laundry list'**, which does not do justice to the significance  
37  
38 of these problems. This **article** suggests that there is utility in re-examining the problems  
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40 raised in the literature and framing them under the established constructs of role conflict and  
41  
42 role ambiguity, which would enable comparisons of the problems and efforts to resolve these  
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44 problems.  
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49 Role conflict and role ambiguity are explicitly mentioned by some (Armstrong, 2012;  
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51 Mitchell et al., 2017; Celik, 2013), but much of the time these constructs are mentioned in the  
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53 literature review section, in passing or implied (Grodzki, 2011; Schermuly et al., 2011;  
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55 Hernandez et al., 2016). Celik (2013) noted a dearth of studies researching how vice-  
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57 principals are affected by role ambiguity and role conflict.  
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3 Although they use the term “role vulnerability”, Mitchell and associates referred to  
4 Marshall’s 1992 book on “The Assistant Principal”, noting that the challenges of role  
5 ambiguity, conflict and overload identified by Marshall “continue unabated” (Mitchell et al.,  
6 2017: 4). Mitchell and associates (2017) view role vulnerability as exposure to  
7 psychological, emotional, or physical harm, which impacts the role incumbents’ ability to  
8 perform their role. They found two distinct sources of role vulnerability: structural  
9 vulnerability inherent in the position of the vice-principal and psychological vulnerability  
10 which is perceived by the holders of the position. Structural vulnerability is due to the vice-  
11 principal’s role being mainly assigned by the principal, similar to the concept of delegated  
12 management responsibility (Connolly et al., 2019), that exposes the vice-principal to an  
13 unclear work portfolio, which they might not agree with. Psychological vulnerabilities are  
14 linked mainly to the transition for vice-principals from teaching to administration, which  
15 involves new vice-principals in figuring out their role boundaries (Cottrell and James, 2016).

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34 Celik (2013) conducted a study to analyse the effects of role conflict and role  
35 ambiguity on the performance of vice-principals in two provinces in Turkey. He found that  
36 role ambiguity decreases job performance indirectly and directly, while role conflict  
37 decreases job performance indirectly, with the direct effect increasing job performance. The  
38 finding that the direct effect of role conflict increases job performance, while perplexing, is  
39 consistent with other studies which have reported mixed results between role conflict and role  
40 performance (Celik, 2013).  
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50 The literature highlights issues faced by vice-principals:

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53 a) Lack of any/a clear role description for the position. Vice-principals’ tasks and roles  
54 are determined mainly by their principals (Arar, 2014; Celikten, 2001; Grodzki, 2011;  
55 Guihen, 2019; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Rintoul and Kennelly, 2014), with a  
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3 corresponding lack of clarity how they are evaluated in this role (Searby et al., 2016),  
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5 resulting in work overload and strain (Barnett et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2017).  
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- 8 b) Execution of competing roles. This results from having to perform administrative,  
9  
10 operational, and managerial roles and a simultaneous professional desire to perform  
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12 strategic and educational leadership roles (Armstrong, 2012; Barnett et al., 2012;  
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14 Tahir et al., 2019; Petrides et al., 2014)
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17 c) Lack of alignment between real and ideal roles, which correspond with the  
18  
19 administrative (real) and strategic and educational leadership roles (ideal) mentioned  
20  
21 in b) (Cranston et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2009; Militello et al., 2015).  
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23
- 24 d) Tension between their previous identity as a teacher and new identity as an  
25  
26 administrator whose first accountability is to the principal and who has to evaluate  
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28 teachers (Hohner and Riveros, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Armstrong, 2012; Kwan,  
29  
30 2019), with vice-principals feeling conflicted about the two roles of standing by  
31  
32 management or siding with peer teachers (Kwan and Li, 2016).  
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- 35 e) Supporting versus leading roles. Tension between compliance to the principal who  
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37 may have a different vision/values from the vice-principal and desiring to exert one's  
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39 leadership or values (Baker et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017; Gonzales, 2019),  
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41 especially under a principal who micromanages (Hernandez et al., 2016).  
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45 There were other problems mentioned, including the position being a lonely one (Hohner  
46  
47 and Riveros, 2017), and vice-principals experiencing stress when dealing with school  
48  
49 inspectors and parents (Tahir et al., 2019). Although much of the literature on vice-principals  
50  
51 did not explicitly mention role conflict or role ambiguity, we argue that these constructs are  
52  
53 implied, and existing literature can be framed under the two role constructs, as proposed in  
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55 table 1:  
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6 In summary, role ambiguity and role conflict clearly influence vice-principals'  
7 performance and leadership. Although the two constructs are discussed separately, in reality  
8 the two constructs are interconnected. This is seen in the argument that role ambiguity can  
9 produce a lack of perceived empowerment and competence, which can lead to role conflicts  
10 (Schermuly et al., 2011).  
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### 17 *Resolutions to Role Conflicts and Role ambiguity*

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21 Resolutions to role conflicts and ambiguity can be categorised as individual,  
22 positional and network support.  
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26 **Individual Resolutions.** According to House (1970), in situations of role conflict,  
27 how these are resolved depends on the personality make-up of the individual, who chooses  
28 between an expedient or a perceived morally legitimate alternative. The expedient response  
29 seems to be manifested in a case study in which the vice-principal acted as instructed by the  
30 principal although he did not fully agree with her analysis of and solutions to a situation  
31 (Baker et al., 2018). In Cottrell and James (2016), we observe new principals struggling to  
32 figure out what constitute morally legitimate practices when faced with what are arguably  
33 role conflicts in two of the vignettes: a developmental approach to nurture a young teacher or  
34 to take strict disciplinary action for the teacher's negligence; to implement a mandate from  
35 local authority without question or to fight to ensure sufficient resources before agreeing to  
36 implement this mandate. Role conflicts and ambiguity can also be resolved through vice-  
37 principals' ability to mobilise personal resources, such as developing an aptitude for  
38 tolerance, flexibility, accommodation and perseverance (Mitchell et al., 2017; Hughes, 1999).  
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57 **Resolution based on Position.** Another possible response to role conflict is to accept  
58 the directions received because of the legitimacy of who has the best right to set the direction  
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3 (House, 1970), illustrated in vice-principals doing “what we’re told” (Militello et al., 2015: in  
4 the title). Armstrong (2012) referred to this as vice-principals accepting their place within the  
5 hierarchy.  
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11       Regarding role ambiguity, the main proposed solution is to define clearly role  
12 expectations for the position, both in the general literature (Rogers and Molnar, 1976) and in  
13 the literature on vice-principals, particularly the need to clearly distinguish the differences in  
14 roles between the principal and vice-principal (Militello et al., 2015; Arar, 2014).  
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21       Schermyly and colleagues (2010) observed that psychological empowerment for vice-  
22 principals includes feeling that their work as vice-principals is meaningful, having confidence  
23 in their skills and abilities to perform their job, feeling they have autonomy, and that they can  
24 significantly impact work outcomes. This suggests the joint importance of making the  
25 position clear and the vice-principal’s feeling of efficacy.  
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33       **Network Support.** Another common solution involved access to a network of  
34 support (Hohner and Riveros, 2017; Kwan and Li, 2016).  
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### 38 **Methodology**

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41 This study sought to examine vice-principals’ understanding and performance of their  
42 leadership roles, and the factors which enable or constrain the vice-principals’ enactment of  
43 their leadership. A qualitative approach was adopted because the study’s main objective was  
44 to hear and represent the voices of vice-principals, which the literature acknowledges has  
45 largely been forgotten (Cranston et al., 2004; Rintoul and Kennelly, 2014). A qualitative  
46 method was chosen to uncover the contextual richness (Yin, 2015) of the vice-principals’  
47 experiences, and how vice-principals make sense of their experiences (Creswell, 2005).  
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49 Therefore, the researchers sourced for a range of vice-principals, from both primary and  
50 secondary schools, with varied years of experiences, who had worked with different  
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3 principals, and in different school settings. The 28 vice-principals were sourced through a  
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5 mix of personal contacts (5) and through seeking potential participants through university  
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7 colleagues (the remaining 23). Refer to Table 2 for the profiles of these participants.  
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### 13 *Data Collection*

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16 Semi-structured interviews of about 1.5 hour were conducted for each participant. To  
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18 understand the vice-principal's general work environment and to address the research  
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20 question on what factors enable or constrain vice-principals' enactment of leadership tasks,  
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22 the following questions were asked:  
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27 a) Please describe the work arrangements between you and the principal. How do you  
28  
29 normally work with your principal?  
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31 b) Can you share a context/occasion when you felt supported as a vice-principal?  
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33 c) Can you share a context/occasion when you felt you were not supported/could have  
34  
35 been better supported as a vice-principal?  
36  
37 d) Can you share a context/occasion when you disagreed with your principal? How was  
38  
39 that issue resolved?  
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42 e) Describe some challenges/constraints in executing your roles as a vice-principal.  
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45 The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed except in 5 cases when the participants  
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47 declined to be audio-recorded. In these cases, field notes taken by two interviewers were  
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49 used to facilitate analysis.  
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### 52 *Data Analysis*

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55 Coding of the data was done independently by two researchers using Nvivo 12 software, with  
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57 a mix of codes generated from the literature and directly from the interviews. Role  
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3 ambiguity/lack of clarity of roles and bounded empowerment (Hairon and Goh, 2015) are  
4 examples of codes derived from the literature. Most of the codes were grounded in that they  
5 were based on the interviews. Table 3 provides a summary of some of the relevant codes  
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10 with an example to illustrate each code.  
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20 After the grounded analysis of the data, a write up was created for each of the 28 participants  
21 for member checking (Carspecken, 1996), including factors which enabled or constrained the  
22 participant's enactment of his/her role. 18 participants responded, with minor changes  
23 suggested. Following the within-case analysis, the researchers performed cross-cases  
24 analysis to compare and contrast the findings (Creswell, 1998), using Excel spreadsheet to  
25 input the findings for each participant for each research question to facilitate comparison  
26 across the participants.  
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36 Although the analysis surfaced several constraints, a closer examination of the data and a  
37 comparison with the literature suggested that many of these constraints could be classified  
38 under role conflicts and role ambiguity. For example, the persistent issue of insufficient time  
39 to fulfil all the role expectations could arise from role ambiguity in which there is a lack of  
40 clarity of what roles a vice-principal needs to perform and how to prioritise these; it could  
41 also be a form of intra-role conflict between the time and resources of the vice-principal and  
42 expected role behaviours. Administrative details can also overwhelm if vice-principals prefer  
43 to spend their time performing strategic and educational leadership instead, illustrating inter-  
44 role conflict.  
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## Findings

This article sets out to investigate factors that constrain vice-principals' enactment of leadership. The qualitative analysis thematised the constraints to include:

- Role ambiguity with unspoken, unclear and changing expectation;
- Conflicts due to differences in professional judgement or values between leaders that could influence how issues can be resolved;
- Conflicts when lack of empowerment restricted vice-principals from acting independently.

This study also examined how the vice-principals addressed these constraints by enabling themselves to enact leadership that contributed to their schools.

### *Role Ambiguity with Unspoken, Unclear and Changing Expectations*

Although the vice-principal position was introduced in Singapore in 1979, the findings indicate that there is still a lack of clarity about the role, by both the principal and the vice-principal. This role ambiguity is accentuated when a newly appointed young principal "only has the contextual knowledge of how a vice-principal should be like based on his short stint" as a vice-principal (VP18S). Role ambiguity is also an issue for newly appointed vice-principals who accept the role "but don't realise ...the role expectations" (VP20S). As VP20S shared, she knows of a vice-principal "who is fairly young. She struggles and she is so stressed. Because she has a very fierce principal who has a lot of expectations. And so, she every time cries for help".

In the Singapore context, where vice-principals may be rotated to a different school every 6-8 years or where principals may be rotated to the vice-principal's school every 6-8 years, this

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3 role ambiguity can be heightened since different principals have different expectations, and  
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5 the system level role profile for vice-principals simply adds “partners principal in” to the role  
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7 profile for principals (Ministry of Education, n.d.: 1-2)  
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11 So certain things that school leaders may do in one school, you go to another school, you  
12  
13 realize another school leader may not be doing exactly the same thing. So there is that  
14  
15 lack of clarity in terms of what is expected. The individual school leadership practice  
16  
17 seems to change [based] on the experiences they went through... this issue of how  
18  
19 practices differ between school leaders is a constraint. (VP26P)  
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23 ..., wherever principals change, the ground will change. So as VPs not easy lah [laughs] –  
24  
25 that’s the bottom line, (VP24P)  
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29 The role ambiguity which vice-principals face each time they work with a different principal  
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31 is heightened when the principal does not make explicit his/her expectations of the vice-  
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33 principals and the boundaries between the principal’s and the vice-principal’s roles:  
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36 “there are certain principals whom I have to figure out. So it is very dependent,  
37  
38 ...certain principals have certain power distance kind of a thing. ... Certain things  
39  
40 must be fronted by her or him. Different styles. So I have to find my own feet  
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42 (VP27P)  
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45  
46 At least from my experience, that's the one thing that I felt could have been improved  
47  
48 on. I felt that the boundary was not well-explained to me. I’ve worked with six  
49  
50 different principals ... So the issue more is that we're okay to act within the  
51  
52 boundaries as a VP but we need to know the boundaries (VP26P)  
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55  
56 Thus, role ambiguity is closely related to role boundaries, which Cottrell and James  
57  
58 (2016) define as the demarcation between a set of practices which are considered appropriate  
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3 for a role-as -position and practices which are not. It is difficult for vice-principals to perform  
4  
5 their roles when their role boundaries are not clear.  
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9 Furthermore, a vice-principal (VP24P) observes that ambiguity regarding the  
10  
11 autonomy he has as a vice-principal hinders him from exerting the leadership impact he  
12  
13 hopes to exert as a school leader. Thus, role ambiguity is not just about the lack of clarity as  
14  
15 to what practices one can or should perform in one's position; it is also about the extent of  
16  
17 autonomy one has in that position, particularly important for someone ostensibly holding a  
18  
19 leadership position (Schermyly et al., 2011).  
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22  
23 Personally I felt the moment your hands are tied, you would always play the second  
24  
25 guessing game you know. ... What the principal would say?. It's not about whether  
26  
27 the principal is going to appraise me high or what. That's not even my concern. As a  
28  
29 VP how you actually impact lah. You go into school and you don't impact. Can you  
30  
31 imagine you're just wasting your time. So that's the that's the thing that bothers me  
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33 most  
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36  
37 VP26P expresses a similar sentiment when he shared  
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41 how when [there is] that lack of clarity of the empowerment, it affects how well you  
42  
43 are able to perform your role as a vice-principal.... But it's when you don't know how  
44  
45 much you can do on your own. That's where you always hindered from working fast  
46  
47 enough to be able to effect a certain change. So that's to me, can either make or break  
48  
49 your effectiveness as a VP.  
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### 52 *Role Conflicts*

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55 In the Singapore context, role conflict was not experienced between expectations to role  
56  
57 model through teaching and to provide instructional leadership to teachers as opposed to  
58  
59 performing management and appraisal roles (Table 1, item d). Vice-principals in Singapore  
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3 do not need to teach and thus can spend some time developing their teachers. As most vice-  
4 principals were previously heads of department, they were also accustomed to appraising  
5 teachers.  
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10  
11 **Conflicts due to Differences in Professional Judgements or Values.** The few  
12 examples of conflicts raised were mainly due to tensions between vice-principals' assigned  
13 role of supporting their principals and their interpretations of their role as an educational  
14 leader based on their professional judgements as an educator, particularly when they had  
15 different values or beliefs from their principals (Table 1, item e):  
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23 There were changes that I believe we needed to make. It was very hard to propose those  
24 changes and get those changes accepted at Exco level because the principal didn't have  
25 the same beliefs. So even things like ... the role of lesson observation and the role of  
26 school leaders in lesson observation, we didn't have the same beliefs. (VP16P)  
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33 ... in fact I just had a disagreement last week. I did ask him to consider again, to consider  
34 putting in more punitive action for certain segments of students, which we know have  
35 already done their time in the boys' home, but I think my principal's approach is that we  
36 want to retain the students in school. Same as me, I want to retain the students in school.  
37 But the disagreement is that he does not want to go through the punitive, even though it  
38 has reached a point where I feel that it has reached a point where we need to come in a  
39 little bit more strongly, but he has his reasons. For me, I have my reasons also. Mainly  
40 because I feel that the teachers are watching, and ... the signalling to the students is very  
41 important. (VP18S)  
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54 **Differences in values occurred in areas beyond managing teachers and students. For one**  
55 **vice-principal, VP15P, there was a fundamental difference between the organisational culture**  
56 **which he desired to promote and the culture he perceived his principal to be promoting. To**  
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3 illustrate this difference, VP15P shared an analogy in which the ‘whole school is very cold’ and ‘in  
4 a cold weather, you must act in a very cold way – you can’t act as if you are so happy – you have to  
5 align with the tone in the school’.  
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9  
10 **Conflicts between Supporting Role and Leading Role.** Another role conflict was  
11 between the vice-principal’s officially delegated supporting role and his/her role as a co-  
12 school leader who needs to lead change (Table 1, item e). This can be an issue especially if  
13 the principal likes to micro-manage or has a leadership style different from the vice-  
14 principal’s  
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22 but if you see that the principal wants a hand in everything and everything you have to go  
23 to the principal, then I find that our role as VP ... is very limited. I would say because you  
24 will always wonder whether what I said was right or not because at the back of the head,  
25 you know that the principal will be asking you or the principal will override you. When  
26 the principal overrides you, how do the KPs [key personnel] see you? (VP24P)  
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34 The principal’s style is that she wants things to be done immediately. So, whenever it is  
35 said, it has to be done and ... she would want everyone to come aboard ... as soon as  
36 possible, ... of course, I see the things that she wants to do, I think there is an educational  
37 value and I believe that it would benefit the students. But then, the thing is the style that  
38 she wishes it to be done. My style is that I want to work with the people and ... engage  
39 them and give them some time. But, for her, she would ‘choing’ [push] ahead and say  
40 okay, just do it now. (VP28S)  
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51 While VP28S agreed with the principal that what she wanted to do had educational value, and  
52 he wanted to support her, his preferred style of leading was different from the principal’s.  
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54 In leading from the middle, vice-principals sometimes felt like they were stuck in the middle,  
55 conflicted between their role of supporting the principal, which means acting as desired by  
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3 the principal, and their role of leading through working with their key personnel (Ho et al.,  
4  
5 2020).  
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8 For me, personally, staff engagement is an area that I really value .... So I would have  
9  
10 my own opinion in terms of what a school leader needs to do, in terms of raising the  
11  
12 level of staff engagement. So among the various principals that I have worked with, I  
13  
14 have very strong opinions in terms of what I feel needs to be done towards raising  
15  
16 staff engagement. That's where at times it run contrary to what the principal wants.  
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19  
20 (VP26P)  
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22

23 This new principal was young, lacked experience but thought she was very capable.  
24  
25 She kept saying the KP [key personnel] were not capable and was finding fault. As a  
26  
27 VP, I was in the middle, have to support the KP, to help why the KP had to do certain  
28  
29 things. (VP15P)  
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33 **Conflicts when Empowerment is too Tightly Bounded.** Role conflict may also  
34  
35 arise when the principal's defining of the vice-principal's boundaries appears to be too  
36  
37 restrictive. Ironically, in such a situation, while there is no role ambiguity, the vice-principal  
38  
39 feels conflicted in having to limit his/her role. For example, VP24P shared that his principal  
40  
41 "made it very clear that you don't touch student development, you just look at academic".  
42  
43 VP24P commented that "I find that it actually was very difficult because you can't look at  
44  
45 student development without looking at academic. There's overlap, right?". On the one  
46  
47 hand, the vice-principal was told explicitly to provide leadership for students' academic  
48  
49 performance. On the other hand, he was told not to interfere with student development  
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51 although student's development and academic performance overlap.  
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### *Coping with Role Ambiguity and Role Conflicts*

Vice-principals shared different approaches in dealing with the problems raised, which corresponded with the individual and positional resolutions in the literature.

#### Positional

One common approach was understanding and accepting one's place as second in charge (Armstrong, 2012), provided boundaries are set, and there is no clash of values. For VP26P, the principal has the moral legitimacy to make the final decisions (House, 1970) because as VP26P explained, "the principal is answerable to everything in the school". Thus, from VP26P's perspective, he does not perceive any conflict "as long as the boundaries are set, you'll have no issue doing what is expected of you as a VP".

For other vice-principals, when they experience some disagreements with their principals, they resolved this by acknowledging the higher responsibility and rank of the principal and their subordinate supporting role, though after voicing their opinions:

I may not agree with the decision, but I always feel that as a partner, I have the right to voice my disagreement. ... And finally, when that decision is made, I have to respect that decision because of the position that the person has - whether or not I am in total agreement. (VP16P)

I may not agree with her totally 100%, but I will still bring my point across to her and after that, it's her call. She is still the principal. She is answerable. I cannot go against what she does... So I agree to disagree.... So because of her position, because of the title that she is given, you need to respect that title (VP21P).

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3 There were also vice-principals who resolved differences with their principals simply by  
4 choosing the expedient route of following “what the principal says...If she thinks good idea,  
5 then proceed, if not good idea, then don’t do” (P15P).  
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### 10 Individual Agency

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13 Some vice-principals emphasise the agency of the vice-principal in mobilising their personal  
14 resources or in strategising how to work with their principals (Mitchell et al., 2017; Hughes,  
15 1999). Vice-principals mentioned how adaptability was a useful resource to have since the  
16 vice-principal is “always playing the adaptive role...to adapt [to the principal’s  
17 expectations]” (VP24P). VP 21P observed that the vice-principal needs to make the effort to  
18 “know your boss”, to know what the principal likes to be consulted on. VP2S made a similar  
19 observation, sharing that she takes care to “report back to her [the principal] every time we  
20 have finished with macro discussions at the ground level”, understanding that the principal  
21 “wants clarity as to why I am proposing it in certain ways”. She views this as ‘managing’ the  
22 principal so that the principal usually approves what she proposes, and she continues to have  
23 autonomy. The vice-principals appeared to understand that Singapore principals were more  
24 comfortable with bounded empowerment (Hairon and Goh, 2015), and would be more  
25 willing to empower if vice-principals kept their principals in the loop of their decisions and  
26 actions.  
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46 A few vice-principals (VP12S, VP19P): alluded to the importance of possessing their own  
47 moral compasses, to help them deal with any challenge by helping them to focus on what  
48 makes their job meaningful (Schermuly et al., 2011): it goes back to your own sense of  
49 purpose, like why are you here, why are you doing the work that you’re doing” (VP27P). In a  
50 context where the “clash in values” was perceived by the vice-principal as against her  
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3 principles, or moral compass, the vice-principal “stood up” against the principal, resolved the  
4 situation but “got myself transferred out” to minimise further conflicts (VP20S).  
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#### 8 When Role Ambiguity can be Empowering 9

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11 There were indications that role ambiguity was not always negative. Precisely because the  
12 vice-principal’s roles are not cast in stone, there is plenty of room for negotiation, provided  
13 there is a positive relationship between the vice-principal and his/her principal and the  
14 principal is willing to empower the vice-principal. VP08P shared that she would tell her  
15 principal her plans and her principal would say “go ahead and do it. So she gave me a lot of  
16 autonomy”. VP13S observed that “there are a lot of negotiations, a lot of room for  
17 discussions and deliberations”, while VP15P shared how he managed to convince his  
18 principal who was “willing to listen...willing to adopt good ideas” to implement a system he  
19 had conceptualised to support student development. Similarly, VP17P shared that her  
20 principal “gives me the freedom to propose, plan and ideate”. Obviously, there were  
21 principals who were willing to share leadership with the vice-principal, which enabled the  
22 latter to enact leadership (authors, 2020). Such principals created a culture which enabled  
23 their vice-principals to express and exert their own visions and leadership.  
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#### 42 Discussion 43

44 First and foremost, framing the problems faced by vice-principals under role conflicts and  
45 role ambiguity raises the significance of these problems to a theoretical and organizational  
46 level (Rizzo et al., 1970). It enables an understanding that many of these problems are  
47 systemic or structural in nature (Mitchell et al., 2017), requiring solutions involving but also  
48 beyond the capacities or resources of individual principals or vice-principals.  
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56 With respect to role ambiguity, the study shows that when role boundaries for vice-principals  
57 are unclear, it makes it difficult for vice-principals to establish what are legitimate role-as-  
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3 practice for their role-as-position (Cottrell and James, 2016). Cottrell and James (2016)  
4  
5 examined socialisation for new headteachers. We argue that socialisation for vice-principals,  
6  
7 including experienced vice-principals, is even more challenging because they must be re-  
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9 socialised each time there is a change in their principals. It is important as a system to  
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11 establish clear role boundaries for vice-principals, without which they cannot determine for  
12  
13 themselves what constitute legitimate behaviours in different contexts and under different  
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15 principals.  
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20 In addition, the impact of role ambiguity goes beyond the individual being unable to predict  
21  
22 the consequences of his/her actions (Pearce, 1981). Our findings indicate that role ambiguity  
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24 can also stop a role incumbent from acting in the first place, which for a person in a  
25  
26 leadership position limits his/her effectiveness as a leader, supporting the negative impact of  
27  
28 role ambiguity for vice-principals on their job performance (Celik, 2013). Relatedly, role  
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30 ambiguity can negatively impact the vice-principal's sense of autonomy, which according to  
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32 Schermuly and colleagues (2011) is a critical component of psychological empowerment for  
33  
34 vice-principals.  
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39 However, the study shows that role ambiguity need not always act as a constraint to vice-  
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41 principals' exertion of leadership. In contexts where the principal is willing to empower  
42  
43 his/her vice-principal and open to ideas, the fact that the vice-principal's roles are not **strictly**  
44  
45 **specified** means that there is room for negotiation and for vice-principals to take on  
46  
47 leadership roles based on their expertise and interest. In addition, when role boundaries are  
48  
49 too clearly defined and restrictive, this can lead to vice-principals feeling conflicted in having  
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51 to limit his/her leadership roles within the narrow boundaries set.  
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55 With respect to role conflict, perhaps because the Singapore vice-principal shares  
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57 administrative duties with other staff, which is proposed as one strategy to enable vice-  
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3 principals to have the time to provide instructional leadership (Celikten, 2001), Singapore  
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5 vice-principals do not appear to face much conflict performing both educational management  
6  
7 and educational leadership (Table 1, items b and c) (Connolly et al., 2019). However,  
8  
9 consistent with the literature, there are occasions when the Singapore vice-principal perceives  
10  
11 a conflict between their officially assigned role of supporting the principal and their  
12  
13 responsibility to lead in ways consistent with their professional values and beliefs (Baker et  
14  
15 al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017; Gonzales, 2019). This conflict may also be explained by  
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17 Roger's and Molnar's (1976) observation about professionals feeling conflicted when there  
18  
19 are two sources of authority, administrative and professional, and the two clashes. Vice-  
20  
21 principals usually resolve such conflicts by acknowledging their principals' legitimate higher  
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23 management responsibility and accountability (House, 1970; Connolly et al., 2019), or by  
24  
25 focusing on a moral purpose which gives meaning to their work (Schermuly et al., 2011).  
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32 In situating the findings in the local Singapore literature, the study affirms that Singapore  
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34 principals are willing to empower others but that empowerment is bounded (Hairon and Goh,  
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36 2015), even for vice-principals, in that principals expect their vice-principals to keep them  
37  
38 informed of key decisions and actions. The high-power distance culture in Singapore (Ng et  
39  
40 al., 2015) is also evident in the vice-principal's respect for the title and higher authority of the  
41  
42 principal, although many would voice their opinions to their principals when they disagree  
43  
44 with the latter. It is plausible that this high-power distance and basic respect for authority  
45  
46 accentuates the role conflict experienced when the values and beliefs of Singapore vice-  
47  
48 principals clash with those of their principals. On the other hand, this same high-power  
49  
50 distance culture appears to enable vice-principals to resolve role-conflicts by rationalising  
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52 that ultimate responsibility lies with the principal, who thus should make the final decision,  
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54 even if the vice-principals do not agree with this decision.  
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3 At the school level, there is evidence that the principal has a strong influence on the school  
4 culture (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006), and that this culture can result in role conflict if it is a  
5 culture that is in opposition to the vice-principal's values. On the other hand, the culture  
6 created by the principal can also enable the vice-principal's leadership. This suggests that  
7 while there presumably is a national culture, such as a preference for a high power distance,  
8 there are local work cultures which may either reinforce or differ from the national culture  
9 (Myers and Tan, 2002).

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20 One limitation of the study was that it focused on the roles, enablers, and constraints of  
21 individual vice-principals, in relation to their principals. During the study, some vice-  
22 principals mentioned their co vice-principals. Although these references generally positioned  
23 their co vice-principals positively as sharing their workload and being mutually supportive,  
24 there are indications that the two vice-principals' work overlap, which under certain  
25 conditions could accentuate the problems caused by role ambiguity and role conflicts. Future  
26 research on vice-principalship in the Singapore context needs to consider the presence of co  
27 vice-principals.

## 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 Conclusion

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42 If the vice-principalship is still an important role which has the potential to contribute to  
43 school's overall leadership capacity in an increasingly more complex education landscape,  
44 there is scope for more research in this area. This study was limited to vice-principals in  
45 Singapore, while vice-principals in other contexts could experience other forms of role  
46 ambiguity and role conflicts and could have derived other strategies to figure out their role  
47 boundaries (Cottrell and James, 2016) or how to balance their roles as educational managers  
48 with their equally important roles as educational leaders (Connolly et al., 2019). In order for  
49 vice-principals to continue to exert their leadership influence and contribute to school

effectiveness and improvement (Leaf and Odhiambo, 2017), it is vital for future research on vice-principalship to go beyond identifying constraints, of which there are already a lot in the literature, to investigating in more depth how systems, vice-principals and principals work to resolve these constraints.

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Table 1: Reframing problems faced by vice-principals under role conflict and role ambiguity

Problems faced by VPs	Role Conflict /Role Ambiguity	Examples of References
a) Lack of any/a clear role description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role ambiguity occurs when the set of behaviors expected for a role is unclear.</li> <li>• Role boundaries, or the set of legitimate practices for the role, are unclear.</li> </ul>	(Pearce, 1981; Cottrell and James, 2016)
b) Execution of competing roles and c) lack of alignment between real and ideal roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict between roles which require different or incompatible behaviours               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflicting expectations (to manage and to lead) (inter-role conflict)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Conflict between assigned managerial roles and desired professional leadership roles</li> </ul>	(Rizzo et al., 1970; Connolly et al., 2019)  Tahir et al., 2019;
d) Tension between their previous and new identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict between internal (e.g. professional) standards or values and the expected role behaviours (intra-role conflict)</li> </ul>	Petrides et al 2014;  Shin et al 2020
e) Supporting versus leading role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Similar to d) - Intra-role conflict</li> <li>• Conflicting expectations to support the principal as a follower and to lead (inter-role conflict)</li> <li>• Conflict between assigned role as assistant or deputy to the principal and leading independently based on one's professional values.</li> </ul>	

**Table 2***Vice-principal (VP) Participant Profile*

ID	Age Bracket	Sex	Years as VP	Years in Current School	Schools Served As VP	Principals Worked With	School Level	No. of teachers in current school
VP01P*	45-54	M	3.5	3.5	1	1	Pri	80
VP02S#	45-54	F	6.5	4	2	4	Sec	120
VP03P	45-54	M	5.5	1.5	2	3	Pri	80
VP04S	55+	M	12	6	4	3	Sec	91
VP05S	45-54	M	9	9	1	3	Sec	80
VP06S	55+	M	9.5	4	3	5	Sec	100
VP07S	45-54	F	3.5	3.5	1	2	Sec	105
VP08P	45-54	F	4	4	1	2	Pri	105
VP09P	45-54	M	8	8	1	2	Pri	100
VP10S	45-54	F	8	3	2	2	Sec	100
VP11P	45-54	F	9.5	5.5	2	4	Pri	98
VP12S	55+	M	13	5	3	5	Sec	125
VP13S	35-44	M	6	3	2	3	Sec	103
VP14P	35-44	M	4	1	2	2	Pri	89
VP15P	55+	M	19	12	2	5	Pri	80
VP16P	45-54	F	9	7	2	4	Pri	75
VP17P	45-54	F	2	2	1	1	Pri	80
VP18S	45-54	F	4	4	1	1	Sec	90
VP19P	35-44	F	2	2	1	1	Pri	85
VP20S	45-54	F	9	5	3	4	Sec	102
VP21P	55+	F	9	9	1	2	Pri	80
VP22S	35-44	M	3	3	1	2	Sec	100
VP23S	35-44	M	7.5	1	3	3	Sec	100
VP24P	35-44	M	6	1	2	3	Pri	80
VP25S	45-54	F	5	5	1	2	Sec	110
VP26P	35-44	M	7	1	3	6	Pri	80
VP27P	35-44	F	7	1	3	5	Pri	120
VP28S	35-44	M	1.5	1.5	1	2	Sec	80

\* P indicates Primary School (grades 1-6);

# S indicates Secondary School (grades 7-10)

Table 3: Main codes related to constraints and enablers with examples

Codes	No. of interviews & data points	Sample data VP: short form for vice-principals
Bounded empowerment	8 (18)	“As a Head, ... you have certain authority over your department. When I became a VP, my wings are all cut” (VP24P)
Caught in the middle	9 (17)	“And it’s really not easy being a VP, because you are always sandwiched in between” (VP12S)
Clash of values, beliefs or leadership styles	13 (40)	“The other one will be the differences in values and priorities with the principal Yes, that can be a major constraint as well” (VP26P)
Administrative duties overwhelm	9 (17)	“As a HOD, I was excited about setting direction – then moved on [as a VP] to something that seemed so administrative/operational (VP10S)
Role ambiguity/lack of clarity	9 (20)	“I felt that the boundary was not well explained to me. I’ve worked with six different principals” (VP 26P)
Time demands	9 (21)	“When I became a VP, you are not like juggling 3 balls, but you are probably juggling 10 balls” (VP03P)
A positive relationship with the principal	26 (65)	“though sometimes we have a lot of differences, the beautiful thing is we can talk it through. We can talk about differences” (VP05S)
Clear direction, expectations or boundaries	12 (39)	“She actually made very clear that you know, I will support you, the decisions you make, ...but do keep me informed” (VP24P)