
Title	The relationship between instructional leadership and distributed leadership of middle leaders in a Singapore secondary school context
Author(s)	Janice Mee Yoong Khoo, Alastair Pek and Salleh Hairon

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This is the published version of the following conference paper:

Khoo, J. M. Y., Pek, A., & Hairon Salleh. (2022). The relationship between instructional leadership and distributed leadership of middle leaders in a Singapore secondary school context. In *Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference 2022: Transforming education & strengthening society: Conference proceedings* (pp. 167-183). Nanyang Technological University, National Institute of Education (Singapore).

The relationship between instructional leadership and distributed leadership of middle leaders in a Singapore secondary school context

Janice Mee Yoong Khoo^a, Alastair Pek^a and Salleh Hairon^b

^aMinistry of Education, Singapore; ^bNational Institute of Education, Singapore

Abstract

The concepts of instructional leadership (IL) and distributed leadership (DL) have been featured prominently in much of the recent discourses on educational leadership research and are considered as key factors for school effectiveness. However, a review of the literature revealed few attempts that empirically establish the link between these two leadership-related constructs. The purpose of this study was to address this gap and investigate the relationship between dimensions of IL and DL. The dimensions of DL include empowerment, collective engagement, shared decision-making, and developing leadership; while the dimensions of IL are aligning teaching practices to the school vision, leading in teaching and learning, developing a conducive environment for teaching and learning, and promoting professional development. The study sets out the qualitative methodological approach to uncover possible intricate links between the dimensions of the two leadership constructs within a Singapore secondary school context. Leadership practices enacted by the middle leaders demonstrated value for pragmatic efficiency, teacher autonomy and teacher agency which land well in the Singapore education system that values teachers' innovation and contribution in a fluid education system for the twenty-first century education. Elements of situations like routines, tools, structures and functions shaped the leadership practices of DL and IL.

Keywords: distributed leadership, instructional leadership, leadership practices, middle leadership

Introduction

School leaders play an important role in supporting educational innovations and impacting learning outcomes. Literature review shows that school leadership is a critical factor for school effectiveness and improvement (Mulford, 2003; Spillane, 2015). A review of the findings by Mulford (2003) as well as Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins

(2008) on the claims of successful leadership shows that instructional leadership (IL) is the crucial factor for successful school leadership and appears to be the more dominant aspect of school leadership. However, scholars also contested that relying on one single heroic leadership is no longer viable and argued that effective school leadership must go beyond the single school principal as the instructional leader. Therefore, research on school leadership needs to look beyond a single school leader, and to include others such as vice-principals, middle leaders, and teacher leaders. This has led to a call for the need to revisit the conception of IL in terms of its scope and focus (Busher & Harris, 1999; Robinson et al., 2008).

Meanwhile, distributed leadership (DL) being a key development on the perspective of leadership has gained prominence as a construct to support IL (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Scholars have claimed that DL has the potential for school improvement (Hairon & Goh, 2015; Harris, 2007; Spillane & Healey, 2010). The rise of importance and prominence of both DL and IL both are highly relating to each other.

Purpose of the study

While scholars have asserted that IL practices are now more distributed in a school organization, the understanding on how leadership practices are distributed in relation to IL is still filled with gaps. Besides lacking in empirical knowledge on how IL and DL relate to one another, the elusive DL construct lacks clear conceptual and operationalization definitions which had led to some confusion among scholars (Hairon & Goh, 2015).

Figure 1

An analysis of the leadership practices of successful school leaders



There is also a vacuum in literature on how these two constructs are conceptualized and operationalized in relation to each other. Unless these gaps are filled, the understanding on the relationship between IL and DL remains elusive. Moreover, as perspective of theory is contextual (Goh, 2009), with an empirical study in a different cultural and local contexts, new perspectives of theory may form. Therefore, the study of this paper was set out to distil the connectedness of the IL and DL practices of middle leaders and to investigate how the dimensions of DL are perceived to be enacted by middle leaders in a Singapore secondary school context, along the dimensions of IL.

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

One model of IL which has been claimed as one of the most fully tested model was proposed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). The model highlights three dimensions of IL which involves framing and communicating the school's goal as the school's vision; promoting a positive school learning climate; and managing the instructional programme by coordinating and supervising the curriculum and instruction. In a deliberate effort to fill the knowledge gap of IL in non-western societies, Ng and his colleagues (2015) conducted studies in IL functions enacted by school leaders of Singapore primary schools and identified four IL functions which include developing school vision, leading teaching and learning, promoting a positive school climate, and leading professional development.

While there are many different perspectives of DL from scholars, Spillane and colleagues (2004, 2006) conceptualized the DL construct as a practice-centred distributed model of leadership that focuses upon the interactions, rather than the actions, of those in formal and informal leadership roles. The theory postulates that leadership practices are the products of the web of interactions among leaders, followers and the situations, as shown in the Figure 2. Hairon and Goh (2015), in a deliberate effort to further understand the practical application of the construct of DL, delineated four dimensions of DL which were revealed in a study on Singapore school leaders. These practical dimensions include empowerment, leadership development, shared decision-making and collective engagement.

The potential to unleash the success in IL for school improvement seems to be pointing towards DL and yet, no empirical evidence has been established to show the relationship between the two constructs. This study postulates that IL and DL practices are inter-related, as shown in Figure 3.

To establish empirically a link between these two constructs, IL and DL, a research study was carried out to answer the research question: How do dimensions of IL and dimensions of DL relate to each other, specifically in the leadership practices of middle leaders in a Singapore secondary school context?

Figure 2

The conceptual theory on DL

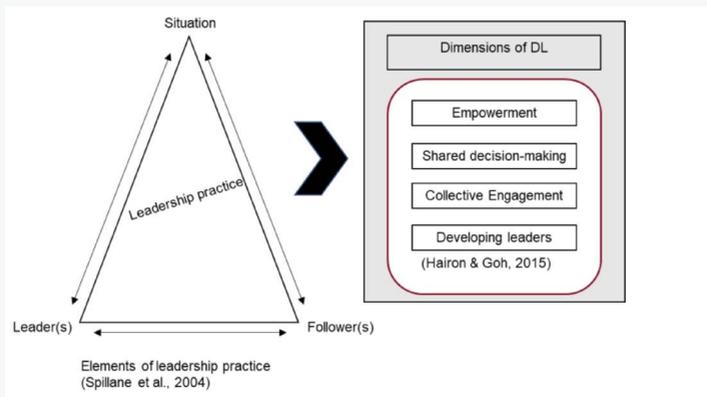
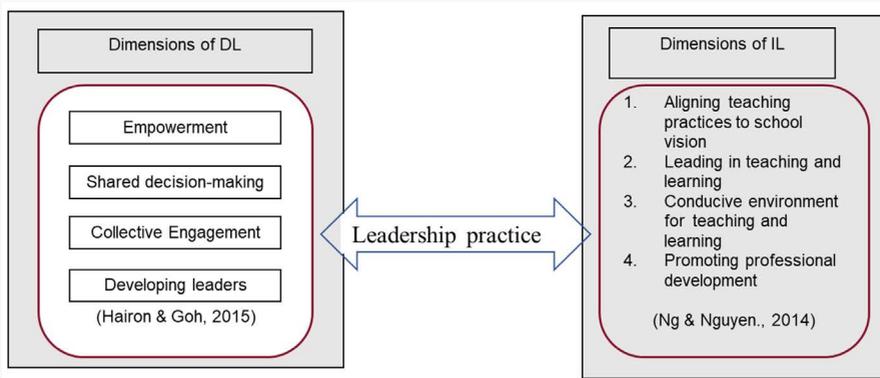


Figure 3

Linking IL to DL



Research design and data source

A qualitative study which involved a convenient sampling of eight middle leaders and nineteen teachers from a mainstream secondary school in Singapore was carried out. The study analysed the data collected from the semi-structured interviews of middle leaders and the focused-group-discussions (FGDs) of teachers from the respective departments of the school.

Data analysis and findings

Findings were categorized into six situations where interactions of IL with DL were distilled. According to Spillane, a situation constitutes leadership practice and defines leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers. The situations are as follows:

- Situation 1: Aligning department work plan to school vision
- Situation 2: Aligning teaching practices to the school vision through envisioning exercise
- Situation 3: Leading teaching and learning
- Situation 4: Promoting a positive teaching and learning environment
- Situation 5: Promoting professional development of teachers
- Situation 6: Learning on the job

Situation 1: Aligning department work plan to school vision – a hybrid of top-down and consultative approach

In aligning department work plan to the school vision, data shows that the middle leaders practiced a hybrid of top-down and consultative leadership approach. Teachers were involved in collective engagement and shared decision making through the structures and routines put in place, such as the regular department meetings and review sessions. Participants quoted that there were a lot of discussions that took place to plan the department work plan, as shown in the following quote.

We do have structured meeting every month or so, every time during the department meeting, we set aside time for teachers' discussion. (...) So, the first meeting was mainly discussion of the school's Science department work plan. We took stock of the things that were done in previous years and took note of the things that we wanted to keep and replace. (HOD Science, MM01, Female)

Middle leaders are not the master of all. They need to tap on the expertise of their teachers. Data shows that the middle leaders empower the informal leaders such as the subject coordinators or the subject experts.

It was not very much given by our HOD, it was a decision made as a group because in some sense we are the subject masters. We have the autonomy so we will decide what would best fit the pacing of our students and that we are competent and able to deliver as well. (FGD Humanities, FGD10, Male)

Middle leaders also empowered teachers such that the teachers played an active role in drafting curriculum programme and designing curriculum strategies to stretch and enhance students' learning.

We are given the autonomy, the discussion space within our various units to meet and decide what programmes that we want to be aligned to whatever bigger picture that we want to have. For example, one of the things that we want to have is self-directed learners (...). The departments setting aside for example home-based learning is one way to engage self-directed learner. (FGD Humanities, FGD10, Male)

This coheres with Hairon (2017) that the autonomy to craft curricula should reach the teachers' level as they are the implementers and teachers of the curriculum. Having said this, while middle leaders embrace collective engagement and shared decision-making, the participants perceived that the middle leaders were the ones who set the baseline target and the overarching direction for the department.

For example, the former HOD Humanities had this quote to say:

I mean, if you are talking about how they [teachers] can have greater contribution, sometimes as department head, you know that when you do that, sometimes you definitely lose control over certain things, (...). That's why I told you the idea about setting baseline target or ceiling target, but there are certain things where when it's non-negotiable, I will also let them know. (Former HOD Humanities, MM04, Male)

This situation illustrates a hybrid approach in aligning department plan to the school vision. Therefore, in leading teaching and learning, like what Mulford (2003) had said, middle leaders are still in control over the bigger instructional matters and teachers are empowered in decision-making only in areas like implementation of the programmes, choice of pedagogy and selection of curriculum content within the national curriculum.

Situation 2: Aligning teaching practices to the school vision through envisioning exercise – collective engagement and shared decision-making at school level

A situation which the participants spoke strongly about is their involvement in the school envisioning exercise. When middle leaders align teaching practices to the school vision through the envisioning exercise, they also embrace collective engagement and shared

decision making. Teachers perceived that the middle leaders recognize teachers' voices and inputs in making shared decision, as mentioned in this quote.

What we did is quite similar with what we have done before because it's not like one where Principal with the whole staff. We actually break up into groups because I think we want to hear our teachers' voice, so in small groups it's where we get a chance to listen to every staff so we can get a better picture. (HOD Mathematics, MM02, Female)

Participants also perceived that such platform helps to develop themselves in implementing policy that impacts the whole school, a form of leadership development of teachers.

Some of them [the teachers] were made to lead teams. They themselves are teachers but with potential and [together with] other colleagues. They would talk about forming the school that they would like. (Former HOD Humanities, MM04, Male)

I think firstly it helps to understand about bigger picture. I think when you want to input one policy or one measure that impacts the whole school, there are many different layers that you have to consider. (...) And that [participating in envisioning exercise] allowed me as a young teacher to see that to develop myself, to understand that when we work with different people we must understand where they are at, what they see and therefore we are able to eventually work to a more stable common ground. (FGD Humanities, FGD10, Male)

Yes, to a large extent in terms of developing leadership because we are brought out of our own individual IP or non-IP areas to look at things from a bigger context. We would also have to contribute to a bigger vision and mission, we would have to play respective roles as a community. (SH Humanities, MM05, Female)

Situation 3: Leading teaching and learning with empowerment, shared decision-making and collective engagement of teachers

Findings show that both middle leaders and teacher participants perceived that the middle leaders tend to lead teaching and learning by consultative approach. Participants of the study expressed that a lot of discussions had taken place before decisions were made pertaining to department work plan. With such approach, teachers felt consulted and that they were given the autonomy to decide on the curriculum design matters.

So, a lot come from the teachers, since I am new, then I will discuss further, if there is a need to make decision, we will discuss as a big group (...). (HOD Science, MM01, Female)

The teacher participants from the FGD Humanities perceived that the decisions made were not top-down but the teachers were consulted by HOD at department meetings. In the quote below, he reported that decisions made in the department were never top-down.

I think what is interesting in the meetings is like what [FGD10] said – it's never top-down. There are no unilateral decisions. Decisions are made consulting each other as to what needs to be set, how is it going to be set and things like that, we actually discussed and talked about it. (FGD Humanities, FGD09, Male)

Participants reported that they appreciated the empowerment and autonomy given to them in designing instruction and running department programmes. The autonomy and trust placed on the teachers allowed the teachers to be more efficient, thus, allowing room for teachers' exploration of new ideas.

It's more efficient because I mean with a leader who is always pro managing, there is little room for our own exploration. I feel, with such autonomy, we are free to explore different ideas on our own and work. Just make sure we work within her timeline, and expectations. It's a good way for us to explore and learn. (FGD MTL, FGD12, Female)

My HODs are not those who micro-manage, they won't check like every week not give me a text every few days; they are not that kind (...). That makes me feel that they have the trust in me. They allow me to do all the coordinating and monitoring of the progress of the teacher's work. To me that is the confidence they give me to run this myself. (LH Mathematics, MM02, Female)

Situation 4: Promoting a positive teaching and learning environment through empowerment, shared-decision and collective engagement of teachers

Data shows that participants of this study perceived the presence of a very positive teaching environment and a strong teacher collegiality in the school. Middle leaders practised collective engagement and shared decision-making among the members of the department. Examples of tasks that promoted collaborative work were paired-teaching, designing lesson packages, standardization of marking rubrics and professional learning.

Some of the things that I will put in place are like paring of teachers. You have pairing of less experienced teachers with more experienced teachers. Reason being is that the inexperienced teachers will be able to learn but sometimes it's interesting, there is two-way learning. (...) And of course, one thing we realise is that when we do this, we actually create a lot of opportunities and contact point between them, so that's how they can also build collegiality in the same unit or within the same department itself. (Former HOD Humanities, MM04, Male)

Others felt that the middle leaders did not micro-manage them but gave them the trust to carry out their responsibilities. Such trust and autonomy given to the teachers helped to build a positive working relationship and collegiality among the teachers. According to literature, when the teachers feel being valued, their personal importance is reinforced (Alvarez, 1992), as shared in the quote below:

For one, I'm more willing to do work because knowing that somebody trusts you, your inputs are valued and it also grooms me because I'm not afraid to fail per say. (FGD MTL, FGD11, Male)

Situation 5: Professional development of teachers through empowerment and collective engagement

In this study, findings show that the school had established a structure and system to facilitate teachers' professional development (PD). Teachers were empowered to learn and share through Professional Learning Teams (PLTs). Learning festivals were conducted once at the beginning of the year, once in the middle or end-of-the year for teachers to present their research to their colleagues. Every teacher is involved in at least one team-initiated PLT of their own choice. As it is team-initiated, the team of teachers work collectively on an action research or a project to improve teaching and learning.

Every year we have this learning festival but that arises from PLT. (...) During the learning festival, the different group of teachers will present their research to the other staff and perhaps pick up something that is useful for their own teaching or strategies. So far, our learning festival are conducted once at the beginning of the year, once in the middle or end of the year. (LH Mathematics, MM01, Female)

My PLT last year was myself and two other teachers, the three of us we wanted to see how close reading can be achieved because Literature is not a very assessable subject, what happened was that we did a research-based approach Action Research. We did Action Research, so we came together and we did some reading, find problems and we went about to try out different methods to achieving it. (FGD Humanities, FGD10, Male)

The culture of sharing was also reported by other participants in this study. For example, the HOD Science mentioned that she allocated time during department meetings for teachers to share teaching and learning practices. She also made an effort to identify teachers with good teaching strategies to share so that it would benefit other teachers in the department.

*Yes, every department meeting, I have an allocated time for teachers to share. So, I will open to the teachers, if they had attended any workshop, which they think is useful.
(HOD Science, MM01, Female)*

Situation 6: Learning on-the-job in school committees or department work develops leadership

In the last IL dimension on professional development, findings show that the school developed teachers in both professional and leadership development through their involvement in school committees. Participants expressed that their leadership skills are developed even as they develop themselves professionally in their roles and responsibilities in managing a committee work. As the teachers work on the job, such as in running a department programme or a school programme in teaching and learning, they are being developed in their professional job scopes as well as in their leadership skills in planning, organizing as well as in leading a team of teachers.

I think my development is by... it's not by choice, it's just circumstances happened. For example, there are two persons [who impacted me in my development], so the other one she was the CPA coordinator but she become the HOD of CCE so she decided that I should take over the role because there are too many things that she is doing; so, now I am the CPA coordinator. (FGD Mathematics, FGD06, Female)

Then the other one that is my RO (reporting officer). So, what happened was that we were in the same class, same Form Teacher. At that point of time, he was also just appointed the Subject Head of Partnership and he was really busy so he asked if I wanted to join him the following year. I said "okay" since we could work together as FT well; so, I thought why not give it a try. So, that's how I ended up [being a coordinator in VIA (Values-in-Action)]. (FGD Mathematics, FGD06, Female)

Summary

In summary, DL exists seamlessly with the IL practices of middle leaders in a Singapore secondary school context. As structures drive behaviour, the routines and structures in place helped to drive leadership practices such as encouraging collective engagement of teachers in contributing ideas at the regularly scheduled department meetings. Such collective contribution is consistent with the concept on collective teacher efficacy – a collective belief of teachers that they can impact students learning more positively if they see themselves working as a team (Donohoo, Leary, & Hattie, 2020).

The interdependency of the middle leaders on the subject experts coheres with Spillane's argument that school leadership does not equate to an individual leader but

involves “an array of individuals with various tools and structures” Spillane (2005, p. 143). As teachers work together such as in sharing ideas, materials and in planning together, teachers became more cohesive. This is bearing in mind that teaching could be seen as an isolating activity where teachers had few opportunities to discuss together (Alvarez, 1992). However, what can be seen in this study is the deliberate effort of the school, particularly the middle leaders, in developing structures and processes that promote teachers’ collaboration and collegiality.

Figures 4a-4d show the inter-relatedness of the dimensions of IL and DL, as had been presented in the six situations above.

Future study could involve a larger sample size with a quantitative research design. Findings from this study can provide some insights to practitioners on how DL can unleash the instructional leadership practices of middle leaders. School leaders could leverage on middle leaders’ DL practices while middle leaders could also deepen their DL competencies.

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Appendixes

Table 3.1

Composition of Participants

Participants	Number of staff interviewed	Number of staff in school	Percentage of participation
Principal	1	1	100%
Vice Principals	2	2	100%
Middle leaders (i.e., HODs, LH and SSD)	8	10	80%
Teachers	19	83 (excluding MMs)	23%
Total number of participants	30	-	-

Table 3.2

Identification of participants

s/n	Department	Position	Interview Type	Gender	ID Code
1	School Leaders	Principal	Individual	Female	SL1
2		Vice-Principal	Individual	Female	VP1
3		Vice-Principal	Individual	Female	VP2
4	Science	HOD	Individual	Female	MM01
5		Teachers	FGD	Female	FGD01
6		Teachers	FGD	Female	FGD02
7	Maths	Teachers	FGD	Male	FGD03
8		LH	Individual	Female	MM02
9		Teachers	FGD	Female	FGD04
10		Teachers	FGD	Male	FGD05
11		Teachers	FGD	Female	FGD06
12	English	HOD	Individual	Female	MM03
13		Teacher	FGD	Female	FGD07
14			FGD	Male	FGD08
15	Humanities	HOD	Individual	Male	MM04
16		SH	Individual	Female	MM05
17		Teacher	FGD	Male	FGD09
18		Teacher	FGD	Male	FGD10
19	MTL	HOD	Individual	Female	MM06
20		Teacher	FGD	Male	FGD11
21		Teacher	FGD	Female	FGD12
22		Teacher	FGD	Female	FGD13
23	CCE	HOD	Individual	Female	MM07
24		Teacher	FGD	Male	FGD14
25		Teacher	FGD	Female	FGD15
26		Teacher	FGD	Female	FGD16
27	Senior Teachers	SSD	Individual	Female	MM08
28		ST1	FGD	Female	FGD17
29		ST2	FGD	Female	FGD18
30		ST3	FGD	Male	FGD19

Figure 4a

Relating DL to aligning teaching practices to school vision

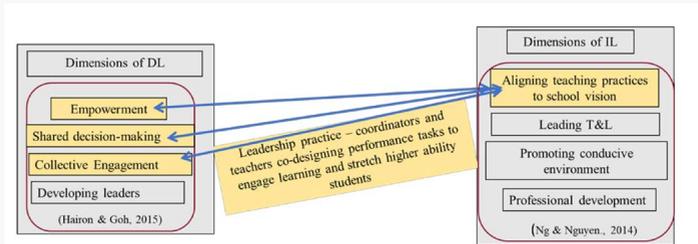


Figure 4b

Relating DL to leading teaching & learning

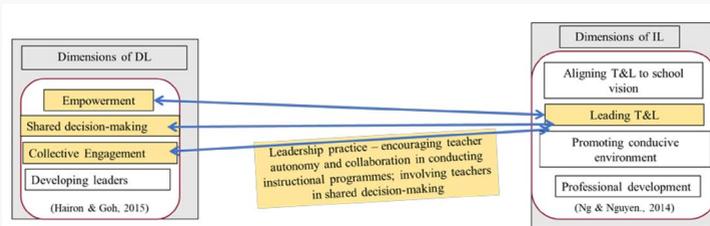


Figure 4c

Relating DL to developing conducive teaching environment

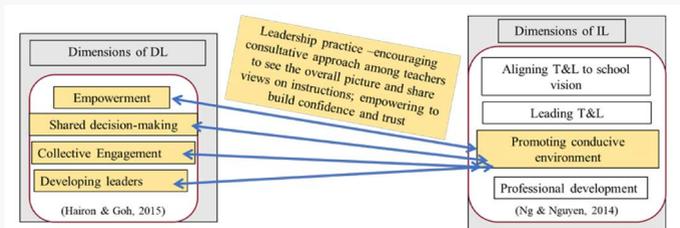


Figure 4d

Relating DL to promoting professional development

