

Vice-principals in Singapore

Key leadership roles, enablers and constraints

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Vice-principals (VPs) (Academic) contribute to distributed leadership by performing roles as transformational leaders, instructional leaders, people developers, culture builders, and boundary spanners who connect people, programmes and policies.
- While VPs show initiative in negotiating their leadership roles with the principals, principals play a key role in influencing the vice-principals' enactment, or otherwise, of leadership.
- VPs expressed the desire for more transparency and say regarding their posting and career progression, and more system level support for cross-level and career VPs.

BACKGROUND

The vice principalship is an important position in the Singapore school's organisation. In 2018, there were 558 VPs and 324 principals in primary and secondary schools, with the number of VPs almost double that of principals (Ministry of Education, 2019). The literature suggests that it is not possible for the principal alone to provide the leadership required for complex educational reforms. Leadership which is shared is more effective and sustainable, and optimises organisational capacity (Fullan, 2006).

FOCUS OF STUDY

It is thus important to understand if VPs have opportunities to perform leadership, what leadership roles they perform, and what enables or constrains VPs from performing leadership. The focus of this study is on VPs (Academic).

KEY FINDINGS

- VPs perform three key roles: a) supporter of the principal, b) co-school leader, and c) leader-manager.
- The principal is the main factor influencing the VPs' enactment of leadership: a) clarity of the VP's portfolio and boundaries, b) degree of empowerment by the principal, c) clarity of the principal's directions for the school, d) the culture set by the principal, and e) alignment of values and goals between the principal and vice-principal.
- The individual characteristics and agency of VPs also mediated their ability to lead, including their possession (or otherwise) of expertise, moral compass, understanding of self and of their subordinate role as a VP. At the system level, mediating factors included the provision of professional development, the deployment of VPs to schools, access to VP peers, and messaging which implies the system's valuing (or otherwise) of VPs.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Implications for practice

Since each school's context differs and school leaders differ in their expectations of VPs' work, school leaders need to discuss and establish clarity for the VP's portfolio and boundaries.

Implications for policy

Given the increasing number of career VPs, and younger VPs' desire for more transparency and say in their posting and career progression, the ministry might want to review the roles, career progression and system-level professional development of VPs, particularly career VPs and cross-level VPs.

Implications for research

There may be a need to research in more depth the perspectives of career VPs, and the distribution of leadership in situations where there is more than one VP (Academic) in schools.

Proposed follow-up activities

At NIE, the research team will explore how to share the findings with Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) participants.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 38 school leaders of 19 primary and 18 secondary schools in Singapore, comprising 28 VPs and 10 principals, participated in this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This exploratory qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews, with individual case studies of 28 VPs. Principals were interviewed to provide a frame of reference and comparison with the roles and activities the VP participants reported.

REFERENCES

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