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EXPLORING THE LEADERSHIP PREPARATION NEEDS OF MIDDLE LEADERS IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS: CASE STUDIES FROM VIETNAM

Article by Mark Atkinson

Abstract

This research aims to explore the perceived leadership preparation needs of middle leaders in international schools in Vietnam. Research and scholarship into the many dispositions and articulations of educational leadership in an international context has developed rapidly due to the expansion of international organizations worldwide. Nevertheless, research surrounding the leadership preparation needs of middle leaders continues to be relatively scarce.

Data was obtained using a two part data collection process. Firstly, an open-ended survey questionnaire was used as a preliminary method; followed by semi-structured focus groups, allowing for deeper exploration into the experiences of participants. Findings explored teacher perceptions that consisted of both positive and negative experiences in organizational knowledge, interpersonal skills, and pedagogic knowledge. Middle leaders' perceptions included positive experiences of informal support from senior leaders, whilst suggesting their negative experiences were a result of feeling ill-prepared to deal with the process-relational aspects associated to the role of the middle leader, and insufficient formal professional development provision.

Introduction

Given the competitive nature of international schools, there is a huge demand for effective leadership, not only by principals and senior leaders but throughout the many strands of leadership and management that exist. Whilst there is clearly a demand for mid-level or departmental leadership within schools, Bush (2008) indicated that to appoint school leaders without specific preparation is a gamble, and we should not gamble with children's education. Bush (2008) proposed that "there is a need to develop

leaders at all levels and career stages” (p. 1). The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceived leadership preparation needs of middle leaders in international schools. This research will be beneficial to middle leaders, senior leaders, and prospective or emergent leaders looking to increase their knowledge and understanding of, and develop skills in the complex genre of educational leadership and management.

Leadership in an international school context

Keller (2015) described the international school context as a loosely defined, yet rapidly growing specialty niche. Of which, the various strands of leadership appear to be “filled with ambiguity and complex tensions between opposing forces” (p. 1). Brunnell (2004) also suggested that international schools are “undefined and lack guidance due to their autonomous state”; highlighting the existence of an “isolationist and highly individualistic nature” (p. 385). Further literature identified a number of the shortfalls of leadership and management in international schools as being associated to governance or ownership as opposed to leadership and management within the school itself. Benson (2011) commented on the turnover of school administrators as being quite common, on average 3.7 years and as a result of the degree of control and autocracy exerted by the school board. Stout (2005) asserted that school boards in international schools have a notorious reputation for bad governance, whilst Brummit (2011) suggested there is no overarching international body or system to ensure establishments subscribe to recognizable standards of international education, to protect the wellbeing and professional status of members. Relatedly, Odland and Ruzicka (2009) studied expatriate teacher turnover and found the main reasons for teachers leaving a school was due to poor governance, poor leadership, and poor operational decisions being driven by profit incentive. Odland and Ruzicka (2009) also found that teachers had issues relating to the private ownership of their schools, including: conflict with school leadership; lack of support from senior leaders; poor communication between senior leaders and faculty; and a lack of teacher involvement in decision making. However, James and Sheppard’s (2013) research found that the head teachers they interviewed perceived governance in privately owned for-profit schools positively because they still possessed a considerable amount of autonomy over educational matters, despite in some cases being excluded from financial matters or discussions. The typically high degree of autonomy exerted in international schools in relation to national regulations “showed similarities to private non-maintained schools such as independent schools in the UK” (p. 5).

The development of the competitive and business-like international school market may mean leaders resort to unethical practice, self-serving power and self-interest to gain an advantage over rival schools. While the cultural context may mean the cultural capital of a school’s staff members may become even more prevalent, resulting in staff members being treated differently or becoming oppressed due to their ethnicity, age or background (Bourdieu, 1996). Further, the business type structure and hierarchical nature of a private international school in particular can often lead to a culture of being required “to obey superiors, their orders and their expectations”, but it may also be a ground for “conformism and similar group behavior” (Hinic, Grubor & Brulic, 2017, p.

504). Many studies focus on the characteristics of leaders, leadership style and leadership structures, but many neglect the personalities, relationships and interactions which contribute to effective leadership and management in educational contexts.

The role of the middle leader

Whilst the previous chapter provided an insight into leadership in an international school context, this chapter will turn attention to literature concerning the role of the middle leader; often referred to as department leader or subject leader.

Shaked and Schechter (2017) defined school middle leaders as “those teachers who have management responsibility, below that of senior leaders” (p. 670). Similarly, Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Ronnerman (2019) addressed the importance of middle leaders and understand the role of the middle leader to be “complementary to, but not the same as senior leadership” (p. 251). Middle leaders are therefore responsible for implementing decisions at ground level (Fleming & Amesbury, 2012). Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain (2011) suggested middle leaders are required to support teachers in doing their work effectively and to bring about measurable student achievement, whilst Fletcher-Campbell (2003) noted that middle leaders typically want to influence teaching and learning over being a member of the management team. On the contrary, research concerning middle leaders in an international school context, appear to contradict this statement, as middle leaders appeared to pursue control and exhibit power-relational behavior, which were been perceived as being detrimental to peers and ultimately teaching and learning (Atkinson, 2016).

Harris, Jones, Ismail, and Nguyen (2017) claim that there is a demand for “more sophisticated empirical studies and greater theoretical analysis” (p. 1), and whilst research into middle leaders in international schools is relatively unexplored, the remainder of this sub-section explores the role of the middle leader in similar educational contexts around the world. The lack of literature within this specific field may relate to the ambiguity surrounding the role of middle leaders, department leader or academic leader, in the often complex and “multi-dimensional” genre of educational leadership, particularly within the international school setting (Koen & Bitzer, 2010, p. 7). Further research into the operational aspects of a middle leader’s role in secondary schools, can be described by Adey (2000) as including the managerial tasks of “monitoring, evaluating, addressing problems of pupil performance and teacher competence, and the need to plan departmental developments” (p. 419).

Whilst the outcome of student achievement often remains the same in most educational contexts, the varying leadership processes, relationships and interactions, can often have a detrimental and negative impact upon a working environment when conducted ineffectively. Given the importance of middle leaders to well-performing schools, the exploration of new research and development strategies for middle leaders may be an extremely worthy and essential topic for scholars today.

Barriers, tensions, and challenges

Whilst this paper aims to explore the perceived leadership preparation needs of middle leaders, it is particularly noteworthy to review the current body of literature surrounding the barriers middle leaders face within their roles. Identifying the barriers middle leaders face may provide a further insight into the role, whilst providing a platform to build support mechanisms and frameworks to overcome any potential barriers. Whilst literature concerning the barriers middle leaders face in an international school is scarce, this chapter will draw from literature in similar school settings from around the world.

Branson, Franken, and Penney (2015) described the role of the middle leader as “a highly complex relational endeavor, characterised by compromises that are negotiated amidst leadership structures” (p. 128). Barriers and tensions exist in a number of forms, including those relating to the roles of the middle leader and skill competencies, team dynamics and organizational culture, and factors relating to senior leaders and governance, of which may be beyond the control of middle leaders (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain (2011) investigated the policy of governments and the impact they may have on middle leaders in English Primary schools; identifying the controlling attitudes towards leadership as a key contributor, whilst also commenting on the “positive inclusion of effective distributed leadership” as a potential support mechanism to overcome such autocracy (p. 871). Forde, Hamilton, Broithe, Nihill, and Rooney (2018) also identified issues surrounding the lack of policy in relation to the practice of leading learning with regard to middle leaders in Scottish and Irish education system, sharing similarities to the international school context.

Bassett and Shaw (2018) commented on the tensions between middle leaders and senior leaders in New Zealand Primary schools. Whilst middle leaders consider their teaching role to be their priority, senior leaders expect middle leaders to prioritize their leadership related aspects, without considering the administrative demands of middle leaders. Similarly, Adey (2000) described the effectiveness of middle leaders as being governed by the perceptions of senior leaders and “how far the teaching and admin burden can be lessened” (p. 419), to allow middle leaders to fulfil their roles more effectively. Further, Chow’s (2016) research related to both team dynamics and the impact of senior leadership, which identifies a lack of harmonious relationships, and a lack of opportunity for professional growth or leadership empowerment. Busher and Harris (1999) suggested that one of the biggest role requirements or difficulties surrounding the role of the middle leader is managing cultural change at departmental or whole school level. The international school setting in particular lends itself to cultural repositioning and reconstruction and the management of such change can be demanding for leaders, which may detract a leader’s focus from teaching and learning related aspects.

Middle leadership preparation

Despite the volume of leadership preparation research, it is mainly confined to current or prospective head teachers and principals, with seemingly very little in the way of formal preparation for middle leaders. There is becoming increasing interest in formal

leadership preparation for school leaders and as this paper demonstrates, that interest is not only concerned with senior leadership but also with the various forms of middle leaders who operate in a number of educational contexts. Harris, Busher and Wise (2001) claimed that despite the increasingly important role of subject leaders, preparation and training for such roles remains highly variable.

McCulla and Degenhardt (2016) have researched ways in which teachers are prepared for formal principal or senior leadership roles, whilst Walker, Bryant and Lee (2013) explored effective leadership programmes, suggesting that those considered exemplary included the “integration of theory and practise; action research; field based projects; journal writing; portfolios; substantial feedback; social and professional support; and formalized mentoring and advising by expert principals or senior leaders” (p. 559). Whilst Walker et al. (2013) suggested that there are a number of practises in place to prepare school leaders; they fail to identify the values which underpin such practise. Ng and Szeto (2016) investigated the perceived needs and expectations of a leadership preparation programme in Hong Kong, in which participants expected to be equipped with leadership skills such as: “empowering staff members; handling underperforming staff members; dealing with school management legal matters; and increasing their understanding and capacities of curriculum and instructional leadership” (p. 540). Ng and Szeto (2016) also found that staff members attributed networking with peers and working with mentors as invaluable in their early years of principalship. Bryant and Rao (2019) explored the support provision for teachers as reform leaders in Chinese schools and found that teachers were at their strongest when they had autonomy and opportunity to lead projects, and when mentorship systems were in place to assist reform enactment. Additionally, Larus-Dottir and O’Connor (2017) highlighted the demand for school middle leadership preparation programs and initial teacher education to “facilitate school leaders and teachers in understanding and adapting to a distributed mindset” (p. 423).

Other researchers have explored the experiences and feelings of school leaders with regard to their experiences of leadership preparation and training. Lovely (2004) and Dodson (2006) found that novice leaders were more prone to experiencing work pressures due to their increasing workloads, whilst Tahir, Nihra-Haruzuwan, Daud, Vazhathodi, and Khan (2016) found that novice leaders experienced role-based pressures due to a “lack of knowledge and skills involving decision making and problem solving in the school environment” (p. 421). Here, comparisons can be made to the feelings expressed in Atkinson’s (2016) research, in which some participants expressed feelings of isolation and desolation.

There appears to be a distinct lack of literature relating to the values and moralistic beliefs which underpin effective leadership preparations. This paper may contribute to knowledge within this specific field and draws comparisons to the neo-aristotolean practice explored in previous chapters, whilst also providing a framework for values-driven leadership preparation programmes.

Research Design

This section provides a brief overview of the philosophical stance which frames this research, the sample, and the data collection methods utilized. This research was conducted from a constructivist and interpretivist viewpoint, which suggested that “the realities we study are the subjective social products of the actors and their interactions, or constructed perceptions” (Flick, 2007, p. 12); data was drawn from the assumption that individuals at various levels within participating schools make decision based on their understandings, interpretations and experiences. Most definitions of leadership reflected the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organization (Yukl, 2006, p. 3).

Participants and participating schools

This study is an investigation of the perceived leadership preparation needs of middle leaders within two international schools in Hanoi, Vietnam. The two participating schools will be referred to as *School A* and *School B*. The two participating schools comprise a case study each. The schools were selected based on the schools’ prominence as successful international schools within Vietnam. The participating schools are similar in that they have similar appearance, infrastructure, and operate as private de-centralised institutions. Further, the schools’ ranging features and member societies reflect the intricacies of leadership in international schools more readily than others.

Case studies and participating schools

Given the subjective nature of this research, multiple exploratory case studies are considered to be the most appropriate method as this research aims to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context whilst depicting what it is like for actors within a relevant situation (Cohen & Manion, 2000), especially if the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2010). Multiple case studies allow for theories and contradictions to emerge across cases, whilst also maintaining the subjective nature of each individual case.

School A

School A’s student population consisted of 520 students from 20 nationalities. *School A*’s staff population consisted of 50 academic staff members, including 12 middle leaders, 18 teachers and 20 support staff members from eight nationalities. *School A* offers the Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Program (MYP) and International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBDP) to students from Grade 1 (5 years of age) to Grade 12 (18 years of age). The participants in *School A* included one senior leader, four middle leaders, and five teachers and support staff.

School B

School B’s student population consisted of 580 students from six nationalities. *School B*’s staff population consisted of 55 academic staff members, including 10 middle

leaders, 25 teachers, and 15 support staff members from seven nationalities. *School B* also offers the Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Program (MYP) and International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBDP) to students from Grade 1 (5 years of age) to Grade 12 (18 years of age). The participants in *School B* included one senior leader, four department leaders, and six teachers and support staff.

Data collection

Firstly, an open-ended survey questionnaire was administered to participants as an initial method to obtain preliminary findings in what can be described as the first component of a linear-sequential data collection process. The survey questionnaire was used in the same way as what Piot and Kelchtermann (2016) described as an “advance organizer” (p. 638), to collate preliminary data which was utilized to develop emergent themes, and to prepare participants for more descriptive and rich discussions thereafter, during focus groups. In addition, this process allowed for data to be obtained over different points in time to support triangulation. Survey questions were designed to be open and exploratory in nature, designed to prevent the data from being “hampered by theoretical preconceptions” (Flick, 2018, p. 50). Sample questions included: *How do middle leaders impact upon, or influence your role as a teacher? What barriers do you face within your role as a middle leader? What would enable you to fulfil your role more effectively as a middle leader? What professional development or leadership preparation would support your middle leader in their role?*

Secondly, semi-structured focus group sessions were conducted to allow for more descriptive, rich and meaningful data to be obtained, concerning the feelings and experiences of participants. The data obtained from the preliminary surveys provided the basis from which to form a subjective and more focused, focus group schedule (see Appendix A), designed to elicit meaningful constructions of interactions through clarification and verification, within respective participating institutions. All participants were invited to take part in a focus group, therefore four focus groups were constructed and participants were categorized into the following groups: *School A Middle Leaders*; *School A Teachers*; *School B Middle Leaders*; and *School B Teachers*. Each focus group was conducted separately and independent of all other groups. Further, focus groups were conducted within respective sites and was recorded and transcribed electronically to further improve reliability, and to further allow for “researcher reflexivity”(Flick, 2018, p. 24), in which the researcher has an opportunity to become part of the social world we explore.

Reliability and validity

Such an extensive approach to data collection, combining multiple methods over a varied and longitudinal timescale, contributes to ensuring that the data obtained is sufficient in achieving and extending the knowledge base within this relatively scarce field.

The data obtained was therefore credible, and powerful in addressing the representations and constructions of participants within their respective institutions, “integrating participant perspectives” (Flick, 2007, p. 102) through a consistent and comprehensive iterative process.

Findings

Each individual response within each case study was categorized and analysed thematically, and findings emerged inductively. The key emergent themes and trends are consolidated and presented within this section.

Current leadership preparation provision

The findings begin by describing the current leadership preparation provision in place at both School A and School B. Teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders felt that there were support mechanisms or leadership preparation provision in the form of well-developed policies and the impact policy had on practice; leadership preparation to enhance teaching and learning; and sufficient informal guidance from senior leaders.

Policy guidance

Participants felt that both schools had well developed policies to assist and guide school practice, ranging from daily organizational practice, to subject specific teaching and learning based policy guidance. Participants felt that there was a significant amount of clarity surrounding most practice in school, including “*safeguarding and child protection, teaching and learning practice, staff conduct and general miscellaneous policies to enhance the daily operation of the schools*”.

One of the participating schools in particular was a relatively new school and had only been open for four years. Some participants felt that the school had progressed well given its age and that is due to the clear guidance and operating standards in place for middle leaders, to be used as a point of reference where necessary. Such standards also support the development of expectations in a multitude of areas, such as wider school contribution or departmental and whole school staff wellbeing aspects which ultimately relate to the schools’ organizational culture.

Teaching and learning

Participants felt that teaching and learning was at the forefront of most practice and central to each department’s vision. The current provision for middle leaders was perceived as being tailored to enhance teaching and learning, and student outcomes.

Working parties or collaborative meetings were in place for middle leaders to discuss teaching practice and ways to improve teaching and learning. These working parties also assisted with performance management and lesson observations to improve teaching and learning further.

Teachers, middle leaders, and senior leaders claimed to have positively experienced lesson observations and received effective feedback. Middle leaders claimed that this is due to continuous shared best practice across departments. However, some teachers felt that these processes were restricted to middle leaders only, and some teachers felt that they could be included in professional development sessions which feature the sharing of best practice, even at departmental level, or within Key Stages.

Informal guidance from senior leaders

Middle leaders and senior leaders felt that there was a positive organisational culture, coupled with excellent relationships which allowed for informal or “*ad-hoc*” discussions. Middle leaders felt they were able to speak to senior leaders about any concerns or potential issues, or that they were able to seek advice when required. One middle leader described a senior leader as having “*an open door policy*” which provided staff members with the “*comfort and confidence*” to discuss anything necessary.

Middle leaders felt that they were able to discuss the past experiences of senior leaders which enabled them to deal with particular situations, for example, “*dealing with difficult parents*”, or they felt that they could simply use their senior leaders as a font of knowledge, perhaps surrounding “*recent examination developments*” or “*changes to curricular*”, as examples.

Some middle leaders claimed that they did not need to seek advice from senior leaders but they felt supported and that they were part of a caring environment because they knew they had a support mechanism in place, should they need to rely on it. Relatedly, research by Roberts and White’s (2010) research investigated teacher turnover in New East South Asia (NESA) international schools, and identified the most important factor as being the support of the senior leaders.

Leadership preparation needs

Whilst participants reported on a number of positive aspects relating to current middle leadership preparation provision, they also discussed a number of areas which could assist middle leaders, or prepare them to fulfil their role further. The remainder of the findings section explores the emergent perceived leadership preparation needs of middle leaders.

Pastoral and cultural awareness training

A significant number of middle leaders and teachers felt that teaching and learning preparation within respective departments was a clear strength of both organisations. However, a significant amount of participants felt that there could have been more pastoral support. The majority of participants also undertake pastoral duties in addition to their academic duties, typically as a “*home-room teacher*” or “*form tutor*”, yet they feel ill-prepared to do so as a result of the lack of support or guidance within that area. Additionally, middle leaders claimed pastoral duties are not discussed in the same

manner that academic duties are discussed. One middle leader claimed that they discuss pastoral care with regard to *“the one period of extended tutor time activities per week, as opposed to the pastoral care requirements to nurture and care for children on a daily basis”*. Another middle leader claimed that they felt there was an emphasis on academic performance because *“the organisation can promote tangible grades easily in order to attract prospective parents...whereas pastoral care is a little more difficult to quantify”*.

The lack of leadership preparation within this area is evident, and it clearly has an impact upon how teachers and teaching assistants undertake their pastoral duties, and as a result, there appears to be a lot of ambiguity surrounding the perceived pastoral duties of staff members.

Further, a significant number of participants felt that this extended to the lack of preparation of cultural awareness. A large number of participants were expatriate or “overseas” staff members and they felt that the school could have prepared them for the Vietnamese society or culture a little more. Middle leaders in particular felt that a large percentage of their role was concerned with parental liaising, yet there was no preparation for such activity, and the processes and interactions are largely dissimilar to what they were usually required to deal with in their previous context.

Mentoring and coaching from senior leaders or other experienced middle leaders

A number of participants described the positive school climate as a clear strength of both participating schools, and the manner in which that culture allows for impactful, informal discussions with senior leaders. However, a number of participants from both participating schools felt they would benefit from more formal and structured coaching or mentoring programs. Bajunid (2008) claimed that *“through mentoring by experienced leaders, novice leaders can learn to construct their own understanding of the nature of leadership and define their own construct harmonies and values frame”* (p. 221).

Middle leaders from both schools felt that they would benefit from a leadership preparation program that includes *“dealing with staff members, dealing with difficult situations, and promoting departmental wellbeing or general staff welfare”*. It is evident that middle leaders are not equipped to deal with the process relational aspects of their roles and there are insufficient preparation programs to support such aspects. One middle leader in particular felt that some relationships within their department were *“beginning to wane because team members were a bit bored or did not perhaps have the freedom to fulfil their teaching role to the best of their ability”*. Whilst some teachers felt *“restricted”* by a controlling leadership team and that their middle leader could not exercise any autonomy due to fear from *“autocratic senior leaders”*.

If senior leaders could implement a structured program which incorporates different aspects from all areas surrounding the role of the middle leader, it will equip them with the vital tools and experiences to enable and empower their team members. It will also promote values which will help them to understand their department members’ needs,

typically related to the amount of professional autonomy one needs to perform to the best of their ability. Similarly, Grojean and Resick (2004) revealed that coaching and mentoring provision which included feedback focused on specific aspects of ethical conduct, will enhance leadership practise and further contribute to the development of a positive organisational culture.

Further, senior leaders may also offer a wealth of knowledge and experience, whilst also being able to facilitate critical discussion or activity which may allow middle leaders to acquire the skill set and a range of experiences, should they be required to conduct such practice within their roles.

Collaborative action research

Relatedly, context-specific action research enables staff members to explore a range of media in order to critically explore a subjective or contextual issue surrounding their own practice, or that of their department. Greany (2015) highlighted the demand for teachers and school leaders to engage in research evidence in order to enhance their practice.

In the previous section, participating middle leaders were cited as claiming they felt ill-prepared to deal with some of the issues they encountered within their role. Action research into solutions for such issues may reveal coping mechanisms to assist with or to develop resolutions, or they may contribute to a knowledge base which could enable middle leaders to share best practice, or draw upon experiences they have previously encountered. Heng and Marsh's (2009) research noted the importance of action research in that it supports the development of personal capacity in knowledge, skills and values, and further learning by understanding people, context and change as being key contributors towards leadership preparation.

Conclusion

International school owners and governors can often build barriers that school leaders and faculty members must overcome. Within these two participating schools, such barriers appear to be minimal, yet participants feel that senior leaders could assist with leadership preparation and professional development further, which would enable middle leaders to fulfil their roles more effectively.

It has become common for senior leaders and middle leaders to be driven by the academic performance of students in order to adhere to the regimental demands of senior leaders, governors or owners; often resulting in their team members and colleagues becoming neglected; which may be the case within these two participating schools. School leaders must move beyond tasks related to organizational maintenance or those solely related to academic performance, and aim to achieve a pluralistic and workable society, whilst developing a positive school culture by creating a cohesive, supportive and nurturing working environment. Senior leaders can achieve this by equipping middle leaders with the knowledge, skills and experiences required to

improve the departmental culture, whilst achieving a balance of academic performance and staff support and well-being.

Leaders and academic professionals at all levels of the participating schools would benefit from a formalized professional development process, including: coaching, guidance, mentoring, collaborative action research, and subject specific training; specifically related to values-driven, process relational leadership practice.

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Appendix A

Focus group lead questions

Could you describe the different support mechanisms in place for middle leaders?

How do they support you in your role?

What leadership preparation provision is currently in place for middle leaders or prospective middle leaders?

Could you describe the leadership preparation provision in place to prepare leaders for the teaching and learning aspects of your role?

How could this be developed to incorporate teachers as opposed to only senior leaders?

How is best practice shared among peers and colleagues?

Could you describe the impact of advice or guidance offered by senior leaders?

How could the pastoral programme be supported further?

How could leaders be prepared for the pastoral duties they are required to undertake as part of their role?

How would a mentoring or coaching programme help you?

What would you like to see in a mentoring programme?

Is there anything else that could be done to support or prepare middle leaders in enhancing the schools culture or atmosphere?