Policy-tight, Practice-loose Principal Instructional Leadership

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In attempting to understand how Principal Instructional Leadership contributes to high educational performance in an apparently tightly coupled education system such as Singapore, there is always a temptation to oversimplify things and see the cause and effect in linear terms. The reality of course, is much more complex. Singapore’s education system is more accurately described as a ‘policy-tight, practice-loose’ system. Two competing forces consisting of centralization (common syllabus, examinations, initiatives and policies among others) and autonomy (unique school identity, school-based curriculum and school niches) are examples of the policy-tight and practice-loose system. As an example, in the case of curriculum, there are both common and different elements in each school. The common elements are directives from the Ministry of Education in the form of a national syllabus, national directives and national curriculum policies. At the same time, each school can strive to be unique and create a niche curriculum that will best suit the students and create an individual school identity.

We can cite directly from evidence-based research such as clear vision, aligning vision to teaching and learning, developing competent staff and creating a conducive learning environment as the common factors to explain high performance in schools. But evidence-based research on Instructional Leadership may be too generalized to embrace the realities of competing forces within the country’s context. The literature also does not provide clear explanations of how principals and staff skillfully work with and around the challenges and dilemmas of the competing forces in order to carry out Instructional Leadership for sustained school improvement. This session attempts to provide an insightful lens into the dual roles of centrifugal and centripetal practices of Principal Instructional Leaders on how they exert influence and lead staff to consistently deliver good educational achievement for students.