



香港教育大學

The Education University
of Hong Kong

Research Brief **EPL IMPACT**

Presented by

Dr C. Y. TAN

Prof Clive DIMMOCK

Prof Allan WALKER

What Should School Leaders Focus on to Enhance Student Learning? Insights from a Meta-analysis



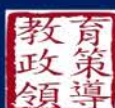
adwalker@eduhk.hk



<https://www.eduhk.hk/apclc>



FACULTY OF EDUCATION
and HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
教育及人類發展學院



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION POLICY
AND LEADERSHIP

教育政策與領導學系



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Introduction

Since 1999, the Hong Kong government has carried out reforms related to school-based management including the streamlining of administrative procedures and the devolution of more responsibilities to schools in personnel management, financial matters, and the design and delivery of curriculum. There are expectations for school leaders to be involved in a plethora of leadership practices in order to address the unique educational needs of their schools and achieve the desired aims of the educational reforms. Examples of these practices are defining responsibilities, widening participation, developing professionalism, setting goals, evaluating effectiveness, and developing unique school characteristics. These different expectations require school leaders to optimize their resources and identify leadership practices that contribute maximally to student achievement.

This research brief presents results of a meta-analysis aimed at identifying such impactful school leadership practices. The meta-analysis generates broad insights from the large corpus of literature on the associations between a comprehensive range of nine school leadership practices and student outcomes in different school contexts.

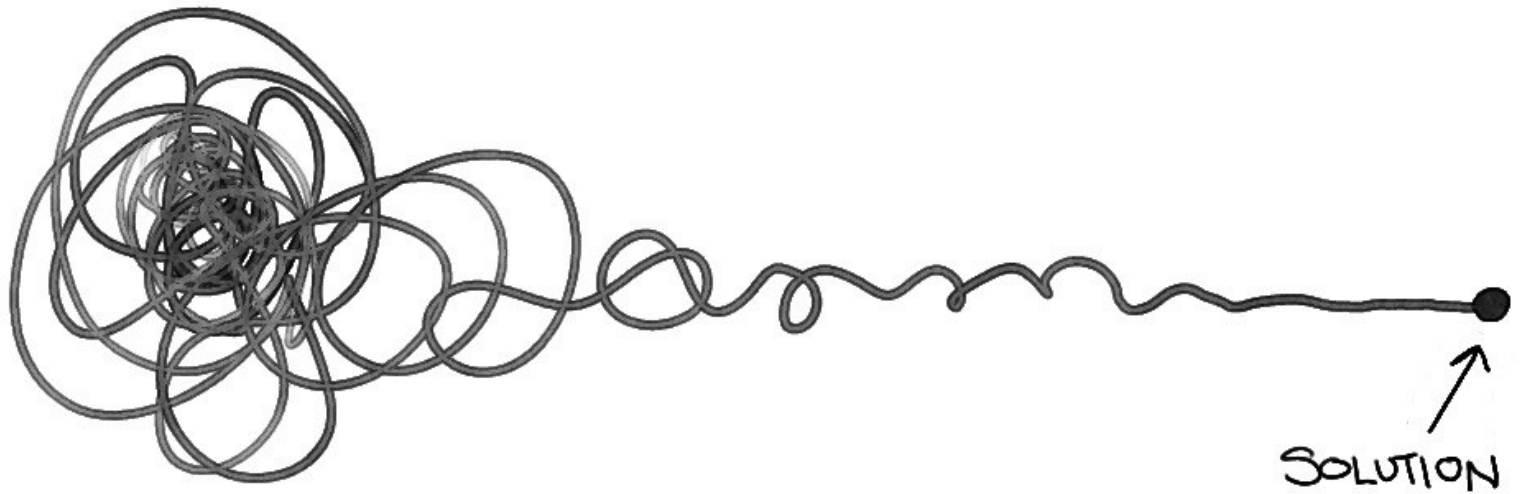




In the meta-analysis, we define school leaders to encompass principals, vice-principals, and teacher leaders and student learning outcomes to include academic and non-academic domains. The leadership practices examined are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Nine Categories of School Leadership Practices

Leadership practices	Examples
Enhancing teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalizing the environment to reflect students' backgrounds • Developing, monitoring, and improving curricular, instructional, and assessment programme • Monitoring student progress • Supervising and evaluating instruction • Protecting instructional time • Maintaining safety and orderliness
Building shared vision and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting high academic expectations of teachers and students; strengthening school culture • Maintaining high visibility • Modeling aspirational and ethical practices
Providing professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing learning opportunities and intellectual stimulation • Fostering responsibility for promoting learning • Creating communities of practice • Promoting continuous learning
Empowering teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing collaborative processes for decision-making • Sharing and distributing leadership and accountability
Motivating teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging teachers • Encouraging teachers • Fostering commitment • Providing individualized consideration and support • Building trusting relationships; supporting, buffering, and recognizing staff • Providing contingent rewards; managing by exception
Managing resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring and allocating resources strategically to achieve vision and mission • Selecting for the right fit • Promoting data use for continual improvement • Considering school context to maximize organizational functioning
Redesigning the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering participation in school improvement
Engaging families and community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building productive relationships with families and external community partners • Engaging families and community to strengthen student learning • Promoting parental and community involvement • Anchoring schools in the community
Managing external accountability and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting state's performance goals • Cultivating relationships with education officials and influential individuals



Research Design

The meta-analysis comprises three stages: identifying relevant studies from the literature, coding the studies for key leadership and student outcome variables, and performing the meta-analysis (see Figure below).

Stage 1:

Relevant quantitative studies comprising doctoral dissertations and published journal articles examining the relationship between school leadership practices and student outcomes in G1-12 schools published 2000-2018 were searched using:

- five computer databases (Academic Search Complete, British Education Index, ERIC, TOC Premier, and ProQuest Dissertation & Theses);
- reference lists in review articles on school leadership;
- eight key school leadership-related journals (*Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *International Journal of Educational Management*, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, and *School Leadership and Management*); and
- the name of eight influential scholars in school leadership research (namely Alma Harris, Doris Jantzi, James Spillane, Joe Murphy, Kenneth Leithwood, Philip Hallinger, Ronald Heck, and Wayne Hoy).

The search process eventuated in a final pool of 108 studies comprising 23 journal articles and 85 doctoral dissertations for analysis.

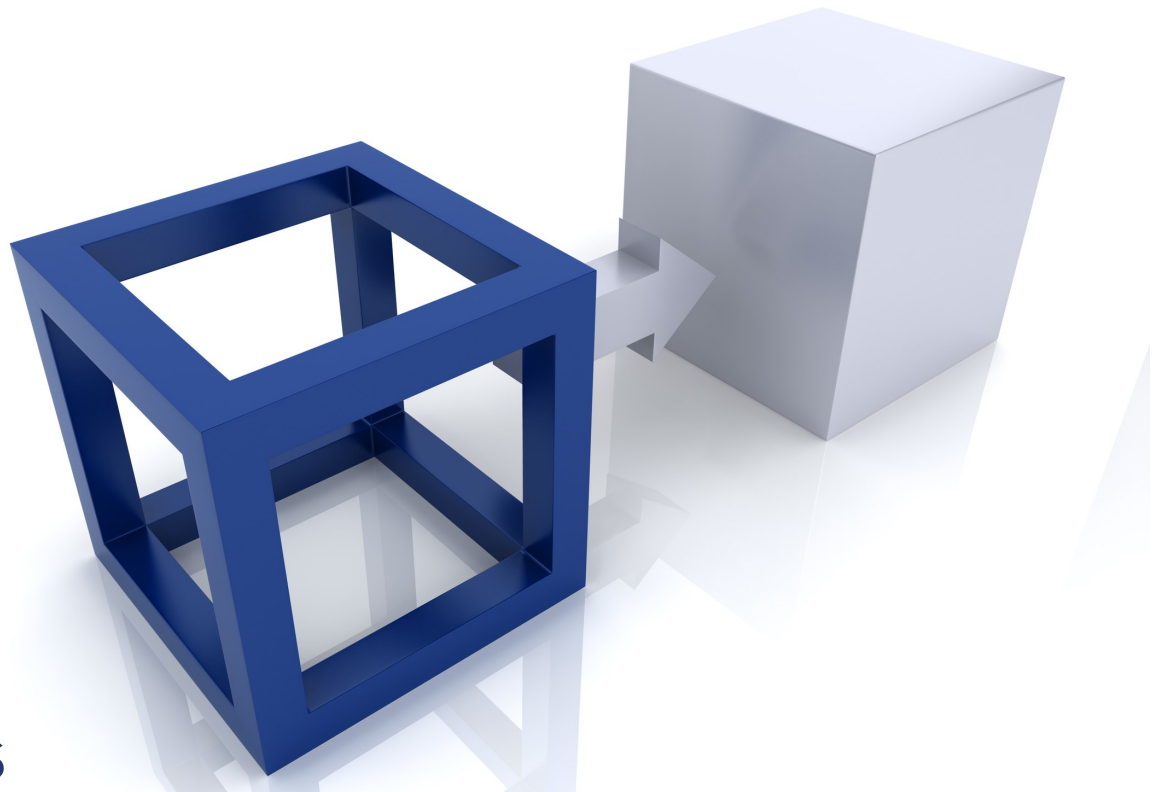
Stage 2:

The studies identified were individually coded for school leadership practices, student outcomes, effect sizes, school contexts, and methodological variables. The coding was done by independently by different members of the research team and then compared and discussed to achieve a high level of inter-rater reliability.

Stage 3:

Different sets of meta-analyses were performed. These included meta-analyses aimed at:

1. computing an overall school leadership effect size across all studies;
2. computing effect sizes for each school leadership practice;
3. computing effect sizes for different student outcomes; and
4. comparing effect sizes across school contexts



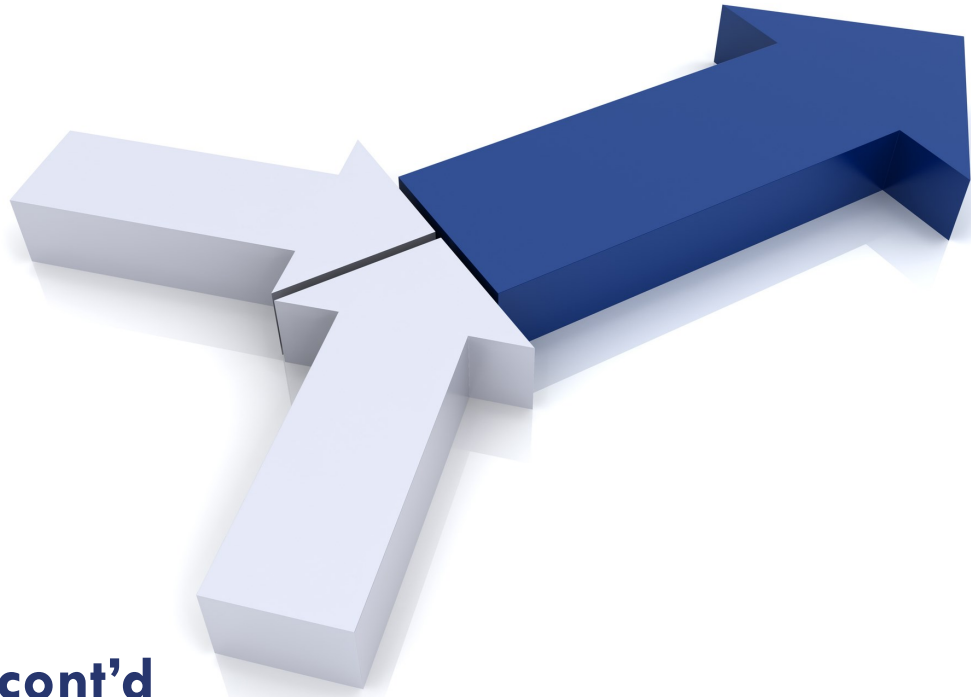
Results

There were 509 independent effect sizes extracted from the final pool of 108 studies. The mean effect size from these studies was $r = .13$, $p < .01$. Results showed that the mean effects were significant for seven school leadership practice variables at the .05 level (Figure 2). The effect sizes were all small to medium:

- managing external accountability and relationships ($r = .24$);
- empowering teachers ($r = .19$);
- engaging families and community ($r = .17$);
- building shared vision and values ($r = .14$);
- enhancing teaching and learning ($r = .12$);
- providing professional development ($r = .11$); and
- motivating teachers ($r = .11$).

In contrast, two school leadership practice variables were nonsignificant at the .05 level:

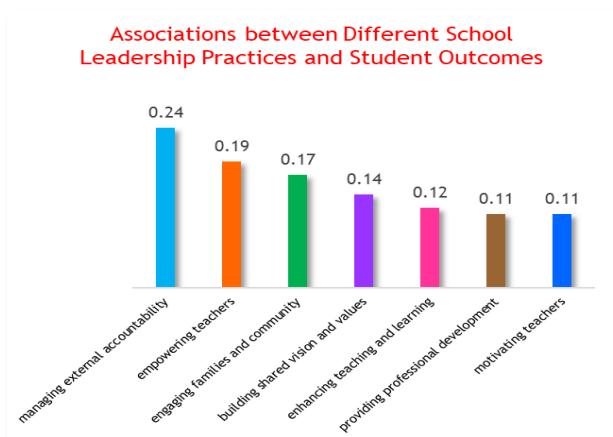
- managing resources and
- redesigning the school



Results cont'd

The school leadership effect sizes varied among different student outcomes examined (Figure 3). Specifically, effects were significant for four types of student outcomes ($p < .05$):

Figure 2: Influences of Different School Leadership Practices

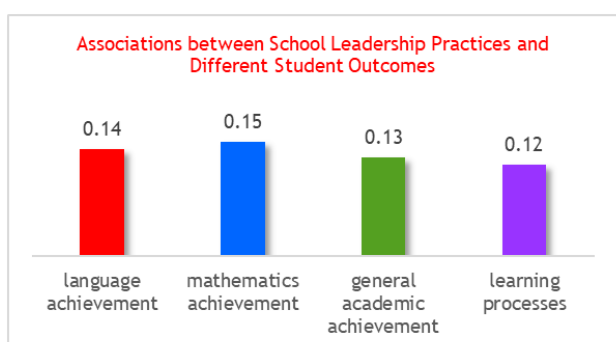


- language achievement ($r = .14$);
- mathematics achievement ($r = .15$);
- general academic achievement ($r = .13$);
- learning processes ($r = .12$).

In contrast, school leadership practices were not significantly related to students':

- science and social science achievement;
- attainment

Figure 3: School Leadership Influences on Different Student Outcomes



Results also showed that school leadership was equally significant for schools with different socioeconomic profiles and for different grade levels (e.g., primary and secondary schools).



Implications

It is insufficient for school leaders to just focus on teaching and learning; rather, they need to invest time and effort in different leadership tasks, in conjunction with promoting teaching and learning, to be effective.

For example, school leaders can be proactive in inviting staff to initiate new school-based projects, establishing communication channels linking school leaders, staff, and external stakeholders, and ensuring that staff contribute toward achieving the school vision and enhancing teaching effectiveness.

School leaders recognize the importance of building teacher capacity for school effectiveness (providing professional development, empowering and motivating teachers). However, which aspect of teacher capacity-building should they focus on? The study found that empowering teachers was the most important among the three practices; it being the second most impactful among the nine leadership practices examined.

For example, school leaders can support the sharing of new developments in learning and teaching and personal knowledge and experiences acquired by teachers from their professional development. They can also facilitate teachers' peer lesson observations and team collaboration on new curriculum initiatives. Local or overseas visits to educational and non-educational institutions can also be arranged to motivate teachers and broaden their perspectives.





Implications cont'd

School leaders cannot neglect external stakeholders such as parents and the community out of convenience; rather, they should actively engage these stakeholders to support their schools. In fact, the effect size for engaging families and community was 1.5 times larger than that for enhancing teaching and learning.

For example, they can build productive relationships with them, involve them in school decision-making processes, and elicit their involvement in developing school policies and monitoring student performance. This parent-school partnership essential to the success of school-based management.

There is no substitute for effective leadership practices, regardless of school levels (e.g., primary vs secondary) or student socioeconomic profiles; rather, the three implications discussed above are equally important regardless of school contexts.





Key Recommendations

- 1** School leaders need to focus on all aspects of leadership rather than just teaching and learning in order to promote student learning in its broadest sense.
- 2** School leaders should empower teachers above even professionally developing and motivating them in order to achieve school effectiveness.
- 3** In securing school effectiveness in its broadest sense, school leaders are advised to develop close relationships with external stakeholders, such as parents and community rather than narrowly focusing on teaching and learning.
- 4** School leaders are advised to follow the same leadership practices irrespective of the type of school, in order to achieve school effectiveness.



For more Information:

Research Team:

- Principal Investigator
Dr Cheng Yong Tan
Associate Professor of Social Contexts and Policies of Education
The University of Hong Kong
- Co-Investigator
Prof Clive Dimmock
Professor of Education Leadership and Policy
University of Glasgow
- Co-Investigator
Prof Allan Walker
Chair Professor of International Educational Leadership
Co-Director, Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change
The Education University of Hong Kong



To learn more about this GRF Project*, please visit:

For any inquiries, please contact Prof Allan Walker by adwalker@eduhk.hk.

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