

Learning Beyond School in Mentoring for Leadership development of middle managers in Singapore primary schools

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Middle managers play an important role in schools as their effectiveness in leadership will ensure schools achieve goals towards a common vision (Wise, 2001; Bush 2009; Koh, Gurr, Drysdale, & Ang, 2010). In the context of Singapore schools, the term ‘middle managers’ refers to heads of department, the subject or level heads of different departments in the school. School leaders have promoted them from the role of a teacher to a middle manager position based on their assessed potential and competencies in the leadership (Ministry of Education, 2016). A qualitative research study was conducted to study Singapore middle managers' perception on their leadership development through mentoring. This paper shared some of the findings derived from twenty one-to-one interview sessions with middle managers from different primary schools in Singapore in this study. In particular, middle managers' interpretation on how mentoring beyond the schools could have a positive impact on their leadership development. One of the significant findings was their interest to seek mentoring beyond their schools or even in organisations not from school context. There was a strong desire to learn from mentors from another school locally and beyond Singapore. In addition, middle managers also perceived mentoring experience from a different context could potentially develop their leadership in schools to meet their specific needs and overcome the challenges of their role in schools.

Keywords: mentoring, leadership development, middle managers

Introduction

Building the capacity of the middle managers is crucial to the success of schools in bringing positive change (Bush, 2009). Tucker, Young and Koschoreck (2012) have recognised school leadership as the key leverage to more effective schools and improved teaching and learning. Research in mentoring has shown mentoring can produce positive career outcomes and job satisfaction (Eby, 1997; Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Marchese, 2006; Waters, 2004).

The role of middle managers has become more complex with more responsibilities at school instead of departmental level (Rosenfeld, Ehrich, & Cranston, 2008). In Singapore, the learning curve for middle managers is steep and mentoring from an experienced leader can enhance the leadership of the middle managers in this learning process (Lim, 2005). The leadership role of middle managers will encompass the need to lead teachers teaching and to improve student learning outcomes (Burton and Brundrett, 2005) This research study explored mentoring for leadership development from the perspectives of middle managers. It seeks to gather insights to explore mentoring as an avenue in development of leadership competencies defined in the Leader Growth Model (LGM) – A toolkit for leadership development for leaders. The LGM is a guide designed for middle managers in Singapore schools to support personal growth plans in leadership development (LGM, 2014).

To define the role of middle manager and mentoring for leadership in this study, the following outlined the description of the role and process.

Middle managers in Singapore

Middle managers in Singapore school are teachers who are identified with good teaching skills and leadership competencies or potential to lead in a department. The leadership development of middle managers in Singapore schools is depicted in the framework of Leader Growth Model which states six dimensions for leadership development – (1) Ethical leader, (2) Educational leader, (3) Visionary leader, (4) Culture builder, (5) Change leader and (6) Network leader (LGM, 2014). In Singapore schools, the supervisors (school leaders) of middle managers are responsible to develop middle managers in the leadership role. They use the Leader Growth Model (LGM) toolkit as a guide to develop the middle managers. LGM was developed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2014 for development of educational leaders in Singapore schools to cope with the increasing demands in the leadership role placed in the increasing complex education landscape (LGM, 2014).

Mentoring for leadership development

In Singapore, middle managers (MMs) are mentored by the principal, vice-principals or senior middle managers. Using the Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS), a developmental tool for work performance, middle managers and their mentors meet at the beginning of the year, mid-year and end of the year to plan, review and evaluate the work done as well as discuss the developmental progress in the leadership role of middle manager. EPMS is a competency-based performance management system and it aims to develop the knowledge, skills and professional characteristics for three different career tracks (Teaching, Leadership and Senior Specialist) in all Singapore schools at all levels (MOE, 2006). Guided by the LGM, middle managers are mentored by their supervisors for their leadership development and the progress is documented in the EPMS.

Literature review

The following literature review explored literature that gave insights on the complexity of the role of middle managers and how mentoring can develop the leadership capacity and competency to overcome these complex challenges.

Complexity in the role of middle managers

Middle managers play multiple roles in the school, these roles require them to be competent in accomplishing different tasks for different stakeholders and meet different expectations. Brown and Rutherford (1998), in their study on heads of department, concluded a middle manager was expected to be servant leader, organisational architect, moral educator, social architect and a leading professional. Furthermore, the leadership role of middle managers has become more complex with more responsibilities at school instead of departmental level (Rosenfeld, Ehrich, & Cranston, 2008). The study by Rosenfeld et al. (2008) found middle managers played the roles of instructional leader, curriculum strategist, learning architect and administrative leader. In addition, they were also expected to inspire a vision, build a culture and lead in collaborative learning. In Singapore, there were various studies also shared same challenges. For example, Seah-Tay (1996) documented how the role of middle manager in Singapore secondary schools demanded them to cope with many responsibilities in the multiple roles. In another study of middle managers in primary schools in Singapore, Alsagoff (2001) also found the role of middle managers was “overloaded” with administrative and supervisory responsibilities. She

had emphasized the development of leadership capacity of middle managers to cope in different roles as they are expected to multi-task as an administrator, a manager of a department, an organizational leader. They had to simultaneously plan, implement initiatives, develop staff and empower aspiring teachers to lead too.

Being middle managers, there are many expectations in their competencies to perform different duties. Esp (1993) identified competencies for the role middle managers in “Middle Management Competence Framework” and grouped them in four clusters: (1) *achieving* cluster (initiative, critical information seeking, result orientation), (2) *thinking* cluster (analytical thinking, conceptual thinking, forward thinking), (3) *self*-cluster (positive self-awareness, thoroughness, perseverance), (4) *working with others* cluster (concern with impact, interpersonal awareness, strategic influencing, assertiveness, independence, training and support needs of others). Congruent to Esp’s description of the expected competencies, the Leader Growth Model (LGM) also stated similar competencies in the six dimensions for leaders in Singapore schools (LGM, 2014). Hence, middle managers in Singapore schools are expected to be equipped with multiple skills in managing and leading.

Middle managers will need to develop their leadership competencies in different roles effectively to lead their teachers in schools. Mentoring is an avenue to develop leadership where more experienced leaders in schools guide the middle managers to be competent leaders to perform various complex roles (Lim, 2006).

Mentoring for leadership development

Research studies have indicated mentoring could contribute in positive career outcomes and job satisfaction (Eby, 1997; Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Marchese, 2006; Waters, 2004). Mentoring relationship supports mentee’s career development and it has positive effects on mentee’s learning through development of a successful relationship (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Mentoring will also reinforce the mentees’ confidence in learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Besides mentoring, coaching is also considered as a means to develop leadership, for example, in a study on executive coaching program, Moen and Federici (2012) indicated coaching has positive impact on participants. Both mentoring and coaching are approaches for development of leadership, some literature would make the distinction between them, for instance, Fielden (2005) defined mentoring as helping mentees in longer term for both career and personal development in preparation of the future roles and coaching would focus on development in specific area for achieving specific goal in a defined time frame. However, Clutterbuck (2012) has posited the functions of coaching and mentoring can be overlapped. The researcher in this study adopted the stance to regard coaching as part of mentoring in leadership development of middle managers. In the Singapore context, the supervisor of middle managers inherently play the role of a mentor as they share experiences and knowledge as a leader. Coaching is an integral process of mentoring for the leadership development of middle managers using the developmental tool of EPMS (LGM, 2014).

Mentoring can be an effective approach in developing leadership for middle managers (Lim, 2006) but it needs the exploration on how it can better cater to middle managers’ needs in the development of the complex leadership role in schools. This paper uncovered the perception of middle managers on desired changes in mentoring, in particular, the findings indicated the need to have mentoring beyond the school.

Research methodology

In this study, the research adopted the exploratory multiple case studies using the qualitative approach anchoring on the participants' perceptions as key source of data. The method was to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with middle managers from 20 different primary schools who were attending a leadership development course, Management and Leadership in Schools (MLS) at National Institute of Education, Singapore.

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) described a semi-structured interview as “generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee” (p. 315). This is adopted in this study, hence, there were open-ended questions used in the interview guide for the interview sessions. During the interview sessions in the research, the interviewer also used probes to derive more information and clarify points or expand on an idea. Creswell (2014) suggests that such probes should be used to clarify purposes, or to elicit more details from the interviewee. In this paper, the sharing focused on the responses for one of the research questions: *What are the desired changes in mentoring?*

Data analysis

After the interviews, transcripts were read word for word where key information was highlighted to derive codes for key thoughts and concepts. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) posit that in a conventional analysis of data, labels of codes emerged from the data are sorted into categories after interpreting the codes that are related or linked before they are organised into meaningful cluster. It is a process of data reduction. In the same light, Miles and Huberman (1994) described it as the “process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming the data that appear in written up field notes or transcriptions” (p. 10). Data then became “organized, compressed assembly of knowledge that permit conclusion drawing and action” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). Adopting this approach, the final process in data analysis of this research was to derive themes when data were clustered by making comparisons, verifications and conclusions.

Findings

Participants had provided interesting insights and perspectives on leadership development of middle managers on mentoring. Among them, three out of eight categories of codes in the clustered responses, were related to the desire to explore mentoring experiences beyond school as seen in Table 1.

Table 1
Perception of middle managers on desired changes in mentoring

<u>Desired Changes</u>	<u>No. of Participants</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Provide mentoring beyond schools with different mentors	8	40
Need to find a good mentor outside school	7	35
Differentiate mentoring	7	35

Replicate the model of mentoring for teachers	6	30
Recognize role and effort in mentoring	4	20
Evaluate mentoring	4	20
Allow choice in mentoring	3	15
Ensure mentorship continuity	3	15

As seen in table 1, in response to the desired changes in mentoring for leadership development of middle managers, participants suggested several changes in the mentoring process and structure. Most of the participants suggested provision of mentoring experience for middle managers beyond school contexts and with different mentors (40%). Congruent to this desired change, there were other responses that were related to mentoring beyond schools - the need to find a good mentor outside school (35%) and to be allowed to have choice as mentoring were also interpreted from the participants' perception. The findings indicated the desire for a mentor beyond school to learn specific skills or good practices and learning experiences in a different and diverse environment. These interpretations were evident in the corresponding quotations from the responses shared in the following.

Desire for a mentor beyond school

The participants had indicated implicitly and explicitly that they needed a mentor beyond school to learn from the good practices that could value-add their leadership development.

Need to find a good mentor

The participants in the study emphasized the need to find the "right person" to guide them in the "right way". The mentor can be someone who is remote but accessible whenever the need arises.

"...personally I find mentoring is having the right person there to help guide another person in the right way and you don't need to be there 24/7, when the person needs it, you are there...A bit like the apprenticeship in the past, you learn the skills already, then you go, but every time you need the shifu's (mentor's) help, then you go and look for the shifu (mentor) so that's the whole idea."

Choice in mentoring and interest in "external mentor"

Participants of the study also suggested that mentee should have a choice on the mentor.

"the mentee needs to have a choice over who is the mentor...Mentee should have a choice and decide."

In expressing the need to choose their mentors, participants also suggested instead having the supervisor as mentor, middle managers want to have an "external" mentor from "another organization".

"Although supervisor is a possible mentor, but we should have a mentor who doesn't have to be your boss...I suppose...but you can have a mentor from another organization...an external mentor and having a once a week meeting with him or her. You move away from school and to talk to someone outside school about your leadership..."

Interest in strengths of leaders and best practices beyond their own schools

Participants also recommended middle managers to learn good practices or strengths of leaders from another school. Middle managers could learn "from another school's perspective" with someone who could be good in the leadership competency of a specific area.

"So maybe that VP (vice-principal) in another school is very strong in student leadership area, so it's good to learn from another school's perspective, I thought it

would be nice to be mentored by him or her instead of just confined within your school scope.”

Desire for mentoring experience beyond school

In this study, participants expressed their strong desire to learn through mentoring in a different context or relationship beyond school. They believed such diverse experiences would provide better insights and inspiration for their leadership development.

Refreshing and energy booster from external mentors

Middle managers should have a mentoring experience in a different context. This was also a common suggestion gathered from the interviews. It would be “very refreshing” and would give middle manager the “energy booster” from mentoring in other organization too.

“Attach the MM to HODs in another school, so you see another culture, you see another set of approaches. This will allow the officer see a bigger perspective and not just within your own school context....what about attaching to those managers, not relating to teaching. Then you will have different set of thinking which I think...can be very valuable. Like in MLS course, we went for an industrial visits that were not in school context and we saw how other organisations were run, the way they approach leadership is very different. It gives us the energy booster. In a school context, all of you will do the same thing. But if we really pull ourselves outside the comfort zone, really learn from another organization, what do they have to say about how they develop their own management, it will be very refreshing.”

Explore different culture and system overseas

Some participants in the study believed when middle managers attached to a strong school leader overseas for mentoring, they would be able to learn how to lead better from different culture and context.

“So I felt it would be good if I have the chance to attach to this school overseas and be attached to the school leader...I did once had the opportunity to go China and attached to a school principal there...I learned how she worked, how she conducted meetings and managed so many teachers. Weekly, she would conduct a meeting for 5 campuses so all the teachers would meet in one place...I felt we can learn so much especially on how she observed teachers’ lessons...how she managed and led with so many responsibilities at the same time, so this is something I hope I have a chance to learn again...from in a different culture, different context, it will be a good learning experience...”

Learn from another sector

A few participants suggested having leadership development mentoring experience in the private sector for middle managers. They could learn to be “inspirational” and become more effective in “managing people”.

The mentors may be some directors from the private sectors. Because recently, we just visited the Boncafe, the manager shared about management with us, you can see that he’s really passionate, we can understand how the vision, mission really materialized under his leadership...I was amazed by these people in the private sector, ...You learn to be inspirational especially in managing people, I think they are quite strong in this area and their vision. Their vision and mission are not only words on the wall...”

Discussions and Implications

The study indicated that most of the participants in this research aspired to learn to lead through mentoring beyond their own schools. They were interested in specific skills or areas of leadership development which they aspired to learn from the identified leaders through mentoring beyond school. In particular, they mentioned that they would benefit the learning in people management, management practices and realization of vision.

Participants in this research suggested mentoring for middle managers in another organization or school would be beneficial for their leadership development. They expressed the desire to have mentors from another school or organization in a different industry. They opined that mentoring beyond their own schools with these different mentors would provide opportunities for them to learn different best practices. Their preference to learn from good leadership practices in a different context stemmed from the belief they can be more competent in leadership when they learn from a mentor for specific strengths. Instead of “one-mentor-fits-all”, having no choice on the mentor or limiting their learning from mentor in the same school, they preferred mentoring beyond school experience that can cater to their needs in leadership development. They believed this would benefit them especially when they identified specific competency or strength for their own leadership development and believed the identified mentors who could guide them effectively. This research indicated their keen interest in the “cross pollination” of learning experiences through mentoring for leadership in different and diverse contexts outside school – being mentored by leaders in other schools locally or overseas. Through this mentoring beyond schools, the participants believed they would gain greater insights, fresh perspectives and learn from the best practices at the targeted areas.

After this study, it would be useful to have further exploration in the possibilities in mentoring beyond schools especially based on strengths of different mentors in other schools or organisations for leadership development of middle managers. As technology advances, we could also study how to overcome time and space constraints in mentoring beyond schools by exploring online or remote mentoring to develop middle managers in leadership.

Limitations and future research

Extend to a quantitative study

The study has focused on perceptions from middle managers in 20 primary schools. A quantitative study can further research in this area by translating the findings in this research into survey questions on desired changes in mentoring for middle managers. The survey findings can then confirm if the suggested recommendation of mentoring middle managers beyond school for leadership development is a common desired change among most middle managers.

Include perception of mentors in the study

Future research can also explore mentors’ perception on mentoring beyond school for middle managers’ leadership development. This will provide a more holistic perspective. Comparing perceptions of mentors and mentees can further contribute to the understanding of mentoring in leadership development of middle managers. In particular, the perception on mentoring

middle managers from different schools or organization would reflect if the idea of mentoring beyond school is supported from a mentors' point of view.

Conclusion

Middle managers are the nexus between vision and practice in schools as they lead and empower teachers to teach and inspire our students. Their leadership developmental needs are complex. This study revealed middle managers' desire in learning to lead through mentoring beyond their school context. The participants indicated they need to find the right mentor who can help them to grow and they wanted to have the autonomy in deciding who will be their mentors beyond the school, especially for a specific area of interest or strength. It was also evident in this study, participants believed that through mentoring for leadership development beyond schools, they will be able to bring fresh perspectives and creative ideas in executing their leadership role.

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