



A distributed perspective on middle leadership in International Baccalaureate continuum schools in North-East Asia

Summary developed by IB Research, based on a report prepared by:

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Background

This study aims to enhance understanding of mid-level (“middle”) leadership in four International Baccalaureate (IB) continuum schools from a distributed leadership perspective. The theory of distributed leadership examines leadership as interactions among senior, middle and teacher leaders.

Middle leaders may include subject area coordinators, who lead the delivery of curriculum and instruction in a particular discipline; cross-school leaders, with responsibilities across the curriculum, such as coordinators of special educational needs; or grade-level leaders, who coordinate instruction and/or pastoral care at grade levels (Bryant, 2018). In IB World Schools, programme coordinators are pedagogical leaders with responsibility for implementing an IB programme or programmes. Programme coordinators form a pivot point, given their interactions with senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers across a range of subject areas and year levels.

The study considered middle leadership activities at the following three levels (Gurr 2015).

- Instruction and learning: leadership around pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and pastoral care.
- Organizational and capacity building: leadership in developing personal, professional, organizational and community capacity in schools.
- System and external: leadership at the systems level, addressing external influences and contexts (such as social, political and economic contexts).

Research methods

The investigation involved a multi-site qualitative case study approach (Yin 2003). Data were derived from interviews and focus groups ($N = 105$), documents, observations, and surveys ($N = 192$). In addition, a comparative case report considered how the case study schools compared to the study’s theoretical framework. The cases were located in North-East Asia, with one school in each of the following locations: Hong Kong, China, South Korea and Japan. All selected schools offered the Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Programme (MYP) and Diploma Programme (DP).

Findings

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers present six propositions about middle leadership in IB World Schools.

Proposition 1

Although their influence may be of less direct impact than that of senior leaders, middle leaders account for the largest proportion of leadership activity in schools. Senior leaders can influence the direction of middle leaders’ work and their capacity development through school-based aims, structures and initiatives.

- This study indicates that middle leaders collectively account for most school leadership activities. This finding suggests that a coherent structure and agenda that supports middle leadership development can facilitate effective programme implementation, pedagogical improvement and innovative practices. Schools can accomplish this through coaching, mentoring and appraisal systems that support development.
- Middle leaders engage in a range of leadership activities that collectively include each level of leadership. In most instances, their individual engagement was greatest in instructional leadership, followed by organizational and capacity-building leadership.
- Programme coordinators invest a substantial amount of time in leadership activities related to capacity building, liaising with the IB, and interpreting IB standards and practices within the school context.

Proposition 2

Designed organizational structures—such as the positioning of middle leaders in formal school hierarchies and on teams, or responsibilities for mentoring or appraisal—can provide scaffolds for leadership and opportunities to develop middle leadership capacity.

- In many instances, individual leaders have more than one area of leadership responsibility or multiple team memberships. This creates a highly complex web of leadership and a broad distribution of leadership activity across the school.
- Although not always mutually exclusive, programme coordinators tend to be positioned in schools either as senior leaders (such as vice-principals) or as middle leaders reporting to senior leaders. Allocating programme coordinators to senior leadership seemed

to ensure their influence with principals and a wide range of teachers and stakeholders. It also, at times, broadly diffused the focus of their work. When programme coordinators were positioned as middle leaders, this permitted a more discrete focus on the work of programme coordination, including building the capacity of teachers, and networking with other IB practitioners, schools and the IB organization.

Proposition 3

Participation in IB programmes enhances leadership opportunities for middle leaders by specifying areas of expertise, linking middle leaders to networks in other schools, and providing opportunities for leadership at policy, system and external levels.

- The IB provides a strong and supportive framework for middle leadership to function in schools. This includes programme coordinators and other staff working in formalized middle leadership positions within the schools.
- Participation in the IB focuses discussion on the IB's standards and practices. This influences the nature of coordinators' work in preparation for authorization, and also engages coordinators and other middle leaders in activities to address recommendations from IB visiting teams. Coordinators in particular serve as policy advisors to senior leaders, providing feedback on the extent to which school-based initiatives fit with IB standards and practices.
- The distinctive features of IB programmes are leveraged to develop middle leaders and enhance their influence. This was evident when schools identified and supported the development of individuals with specific expertise in areas such as approaches to learning (ATL), the extended essay, the personal project, or creativity, activity, service (CAS).
- Membership in a consortium of schools tends to enhance the impact of middle leaders beyond their own school. IB regional networks and workshops can provide outlets for this influence.

Proposition 4

Programme coordinators, subject-area coordinators and grade-level leaders draw on a range of strategies to do their work. Where effective, this tends to emphasize developing team and individual capacity.

- Middle leaders play an important role in the processes of identifying and effectively utilizing teacher leaders within schools. Teacher leaders are teachers without formal leadership titles but who are recognized for their particular expertise or professional insight. Teacher leaders provide professional knowledge and resources for completing instructional planning tasks or capacity building. Engaging teacher leaders' specialized capacity to meet a team goal was typically employed at the invitation of a formal middle leader.
- Some subject area coordinators reported that they delegated work by identifying colleagues with particular expertise or interest, or by drawing on the principle of sharing work equitably. Approaches that related more directly to distributing leadership mostly involved co-leadership of specific tasks, team work and consensus building.

Proposition 5

Middle leaders pragmatically but strategically employ a range of borrowed, adapted, and school- or self-designed tools to meet their responsibilities for implementing programmes and developing individual and team capacity. They use formal and informal processes that include scheduled meetings and spontaneous opportunities to provide feedback and mentoring. Much of this can be supported through formal school structures.

- Tools and routines for enacting leadership primarily constituted a series of fixed meetings, observations, and feedback sessions designed for different purposes, for example, meetings related to curriculum planning or pastoral care.
- Senior leaders, middle leaders and coordinators may also be involved in conducting observations, providing feedback and mentoring more junior leaders or teachers with whom they work. This may involve formally structured and regularly scheduled sessions that connect to the development of portfolios, professional development and appraisal structures. Alternatively, this may involve less formal sessions at the request of the mentee or teacher.
- Borrowed and adapted tools were those developed by the IB or other providers and adjusted by leaders to enable and structure the completion of tasks. These included school-based adaptations of ATL standards and common planners as resources to guide and document instructional planning. Often,

these were combined with other resources, such as computer-assisted curriculum-mapping programmes or Google documents, as mechanisms to store, share and analyse instruction and assessment plans.

Proposition 6

Formal school organizational structures, mission, organizational cultures, stages of development and maturity of experience with the IB can influence the work of middle leaders and can be utilized to hone leadership capacities.

- School missions and programme emphases serve to prioritize certain middle leadership positions by developing organizational structures, procedures and formal positions to meet aims. In this study, priorities related to language education, experiential learning and pastoral care had a significant impact on instructional and organizational leadership.
- The schools' stage of development and maturity with IB programmes seemed to impact how broadly leadership is distributed among middle and teacher leaders. Younger schools with less exposure to the IB tended to be more firmly directed by a few senior leaders. By contrast, more established schools, with greater experience in IB programmes, broadened the scope of responsibility to middle leaders and created additional formal positions for them.

Summary

The findings in this study indicated that middle leaders collectively account for the largest proportion of leadership activities within schools. Given their potential roles in programme implementation, pedagogical improvement and innovation, it is important for schools to develop middle leaders through coaching, professional development, mentoring and appraisal systems. Researchers found that membership in a consortium or network of schools tended to enhance the impact of middle leaders beyond their own school. Lastly, unique aspects of IB programmes can broaden the scope of opportunities for middle leadership.

References

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This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at: ibo.org/en/research/. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

To cite the full report, please use the following:

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