

ASSESSING THE EFFECT OF SCHOOL CULTURE ON INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN MALDIVES

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Abstract

Organisational culture and leadership are linked to each other across various organisations including schools. This research attempts to examine the influence of school culture on instructional leadership of principals in schools of Maldives. A total of 145 teachers participated in the study. The data were statistically analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The result showed that all the dimensions of school culture are significantly associated with all the three dimensions of instructional leadership. The findings also revealed that three dimensions of school culture - 'professional development', 'unity of purpose' and 'teacher collaboration' - have a significant impact on instructional leadership. Based on the statistical results, implications of the findings were discussed in the context of school culture, and leadership. Consequently, suggestions for future research were also explored

Keywords: school culture, instructional leadership, schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

Instructional leadership is one of the oldest leadership models in the field of education that has remained as an utmost leadership model due to its impact on teaching and learning (Gumus, Bellibas, Esen, & Gumus, 2018). While instructional leadership remains popular, researchers have extended studies to understand how organisational contexts shape leadership practices (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Jawas, 2017; Walker & Dimmock, 2012), with specific attention to influence of school cultural on leadership practices (Lesinger, Dagli, Gazi, Yusoff, & Aksal, 2016; Shengnan & Hallinger, 2020). Previous research makes explicit that principal leadership behaviours and collaborative school culture are associated with each other

(Thlusiak-Deliowska, Dernowska, & Gruenert, 2017).

Leadership practices are very 'context-specific' and 'context-influenced' (Jawas, 2017), which makes school leadership more challenging. Today, school leaders are exposed to work with people from diverse cultural origins in their organisations. Organisational culture reflects the underlying belief and value structure of an organization (Sharma & Sharma, 2010). Culture refers to a set of structures, routines, rules, common values, norms, that guide or constrain behaviour of a person (Schein, 2004). The concept of culture is also defined as a product and a process (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Culture is a product once it has been produced by those previously worked in the organisation, while

culture becomes a process when it is being renewed and recreated as new members enter the culture and make the old ways their own. The cultural forces are powerful enough to operate outside awareness of leaders (Schein, 2010). Many organisational reforms failed because cultural forces in the organisation were ignored (Schein, 1990). Thus, school culture is important to shape the leadership of the principals.

Leadership and organisational culture are strongly intertwined and share a symbiotic relationship (Sharma & Sharma, 2010). While leaders shape organisational culture, cultural norms shape leadership behaviour of school leaders. Several empirical studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between school culture and leadership (Anahita & Sufean, 2019). Studies found a positive correlation existed between leadership practices and school culture in different cultural contexts (Quin, Deris, Bischoff, & Johnson, 2015; Turan & Bektas, 2013). Sufean (2014) found that two dimensions of culture, collaboration and school-wide planning were significantly related to instructional leadership. Culture affects leadership as much as leadership affects culture of an organisation (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Instructional leadership is required for managing and improving instructional process in schools. Instructional leadership has a significant impact on students' achievement (Hou, Cui, & Zhang, 2019). Sometimes, principals carry out instructional practices and are instructional leaders without encountering the term 'instructional leadership' (Khan, Asimiran, Kadir, & Basri, 2020). Strong instructional leadership can create structure and conditions for teachers to work in a way that it fosters student learning (Goddard, Goddard, Kim, & Miller, 2015). As principals' instructional leadership is linked with students' performance and schools' success, it is essential to explore cultural influence on instructional leadership behaviours of principals. However, importance of the culture and its influence on school leadership remains under-addressed in the literature and need to be unmasked. Hence, this study is aimed to examine the effect of school culture on instructional leadership in the context of Maldives. The

specific research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. How do teachers rate the level of school culture and instructional leadership in schools of Maldives?
2. Is there any relationship between school culture and instructional leadership in the context of Maldives?
3. Is there a significant impact of school culture on instructional leadership of school principals?

Different countries and schools operate within their unique cultural contexts. Maldives has a distinctive societal (national) and organisational (school level) culture with a population that is geographically scattered. The Maldives is an island archipelago of approximately 1,192 coral islands situated south-west of India. Additionally, values of the society are guided predominantly by the principles of Islam since the official religion of the country is Islam. Maldives also retains a unique cultural identity, a unique script and language. All in all, the Maldives has a unique culture identity in terms of its geography, scattered population, language, one religion, close-knit communities, and unique script. Additionally, the different cultures in disconnected islands make school culture incomparable. In the context of Maldives, there is a dearth of research on the effect of school culture on instructional leadership. Based on the gap in the literature, a research framework was developed to guide the current study, as shown in Figure 1. In Figure 1, the School Culture has six dimensions while Instructional Leadership has three dimensions. The conceptual framework of instructional leadership for this study was borrowed from Hallinger and Murphy (1985) as it is the most cited instructional leadership model in the literature

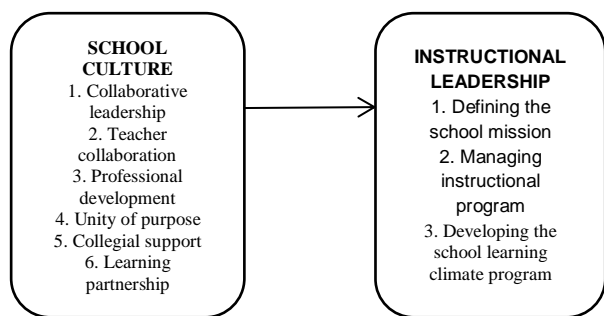


Figure 1: The research framework

II. METHOD

In this study, survey method was employed to investigate the relationship among organisational culture and instructional leadership in schools of Maldives. The study involved two variables; organisation culture and instructional leadership. The population of the study were teachers and leading teachers from the selected schools of Maldives. The samples for the study were selected conveniently.

Organisational culture was measured using school culture survey developed by Gruenert and Valentine (1998) which has six dimensions and obtained reliability as follows: collaborative leadership ($\alpha=.897$); teacher collaboration ($\alpha=.796$); professional development ($\alpha=.822$); unity of purpose ($\alpha=.875$); collegial support ($\alpha=.797$); and learning partnership ($\alpha=.675$). Instructional leadership was measured using Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale of Hallinger (1982/1990), which has three dimensions: defining the school mission; managing the instructional program; and promoting a positive school climate, which obtained reliability score of Cronbach alpha of .857, .934, .929, respectively. Thus, all the dimensions in both the variables obtained at least acceptable levels of internal consistency reliability (Pallant, 2007). The questionnaire items were rated on a five-point Likert scale where responses ranged from 1=*Strongly Disagree* to 5=*Strongly Agree*.

Printed questionnaires were sent to schools for collecting data after getting permission from head of the schools. A total of 145 completed surveys were returned by the school. Once questionnaires were received, Statistical Package for the Social

Science (SPSS 21.0) was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to find out the overall scores for each of the dimensions under the two variables which answer the first research question. Correlation and regression were employed as inferential statistics. Correlation analysis was suitable to answer the second research question while regression was deemed appropriated to answer the third research question. Prior to conducting these procedures, appropriate measures were taken to clean and prepare the data for the analyses.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. RESULT

The first research question seeks to examine the level of school culture and instructional leadership. The mean scores for the dimensions that made-up the two variables of culture and leadership are computed to obtain the average level of teachers' agreement to the statements under those variables. Accordingly, Table 1 shows the mean scores for the six dimensions of organisational culture. According to the results in the table, the mean scores vary from 3.56 to 4.16, indicating that teachers have a generally high perception, except for the dimension of 'teacher collaboration', regarding the elements of culture in their respective schools.

Table 1 Dimensions of School Culture

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Collaborative Leadership	3.78	0.681
Teacher Collaboration	3.56	0.707
Professional Development	4.00	0.678
Unity of Purpose	4.16	0.683
Collegial Support	3.86	0.765
Learning partnership	3.86	0.677

Similar mean scores were also obtained for the dimensions of instructional leadership variable which is shown in Table 2. According to the table, 3.67 and 4.08 are the lowest and highest mean scores respectively, depicting mean scores

of a little more than the average of the scale. Hence, teachers have a generally positive perception regarding the instructional leadership practices of their principals.

Table 2. Dimensions of Instructional Leadership

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Defining the school mission	4.08	0.595
Managing the instructional program	3.79	0.722
Promoting a positive school climate	3.68	0.682

The second research question sought to examine the relationship between the dimensions of school culture and instructional leadership. Pearson product momentum correlation was employed in order to examine these relationships, the results of which are given in Table 3. The first three dimensions in Table 3 correspond to instruction leadership and the remaining all relate to school culture. As can be seen from Table 3, all the dimensions of school culture have strong positive correlations with the three dimensions of instructional leadership. The strongest correlation is found between ‘unity of purpose’ and ‘defining the school mission’ ($r = .707, p < .01$) while the weakest correlation is found between ‘learning partnership’ and ‘defining the school mission’ ($r = .441, p < .01$).

Table 3. Relationship between school culture and instructional leadership

Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Defining the school mission	1							
2. Managing the instructional programme	.740*	1						
3. Developing the school learning climate	.656*	.763*	1					
4. Collaborative leadership	.660*	.647*	.671*	1				
5. Teacher Collaboration	.542*	.584*	.624*	.843*	1			
6. Professional development	.689*	.661*	.656*	.746*	.710*	1		
7. Unity of purpose	.707*	.636*	.657*	.788*	.636*	.793*	1	
8. Collegial support	.470*	.492*	.481*	.729*	.711*	.679*	.682*	1
9. Learning partnership	.441*	.480*	.525*	.707*	.687*	.673*	.660*	.651*

* $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

The third research question was set to investigate the impact of school culture on instructional leadership. A hierarchical multiple regression with backward elimination was employed in order to identify which of the dimensions of

school culture have significant impact on instructional leadership. A solution was arrived after 4 iterations. For brevity, only step 1 and step 4 are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *Impact of school culture on instructional leadership*

Predictors	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	sig
Step 1					
Constant	37.345	11.250		3.320	.001
Collaborative leadership	.825	.523	.200	1.577	.118
Teacher collaboration	1.477	.815	.202	1.812	.073
Professional development	2.931	.860	.338	3.409	.001*
Unity of purpose	2.440	.897	.282	2.721	.008*
Collegial Support	-1.377	.880	-.136	-1.565	.120
Learning partnership	-0.114	.925	-.010	-0.123	.902
Step 4					
Teacher collaboration	1.925	.579	.263	3.327	.001*
Professional development	2.813	.847	.324	3.322	.001*
Unity of purpose	2.670	.800	.309	3.337	.001*

* $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed); Initial model summary: $F(6,109) = 35.980$, R Square = .664; Final model summary: $F(3,115) = 69.341$, R Square = .650

According to the results in Table 4, in the initial model, two dimensions of school culture had significant impact on instructional leadership; these were ‘professional development’ and ‘unity of purpose’. In general, the initial model with the six dimensions of organisational culture explained 66.4% of variance in instructional leadership, $F(6, 109) = 35.980$, $p < .01$. In the final model, an additional dimension (teacher collaboration) of the school culture variable became significant. Hence, the results indicate that ‘professional development’, ‘unity of purpose’ and ‘teacher collaboration’ are cultural dimensions that have a significant impact on instructional leadership. With these three predictors, the final model explains 65.0% of variance in instructional leadership, $F(6, 115) = 69.341$, $p < .01$.

B. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study revealed that teachers have moderate to high perception on dimensions of organisational culture in their schools. Unity of purpose and professional development were the highest two levels among the six dimensions of school culture, respectively. The school culture factor, unity of purpose, scored highest with a mean score confirmed that the teachers in their schools worked towards a

common mission. The second highest mean score was obtained for professional development indicating that respondents also believed that the teachers in their schools continuously required personal development and valued school-wide improvements. Three other dimensions; collaborative leadership; collegial support; and learning partnership were highly perceived. However, teacher collaboration was perceived lowest at moderate level. The findings are in line with those of previous studies. Ngang (2011) found that school culture of primary schools in the capital city of Maldives was high. Similarly, high level of school culture was reported in North Cyprus schools (Lesinger et al., 2016). In accordance with present results, a previous study demonstrated that teacher collaboration was at a medium level (Tchong, 2014) and mean score of teacher collaboration dimension was lower than the other dimensions (Lesinger et al., 2016). The low level of teacher collaboration suggests that teachers are currently working in more isolated settings, which requires special attention.

Another important finding was that mean score obtained for the three dimensions of the instructional leadership of principals were high. The highest perceived dimension was defining the school mission, whereas promoting a positive

school climate was the lowest and close to moderate level. This result can be explained by the fact that principals have a great focus on defining and communicating school goals with the teachers. Furthermore, principals need to give more emphasis on promoting a positive school climate in terms of protecting instructional time, providing incentives for teachers, providing incentives for learners, promoting professional development, and maintaining high visibility. The high level of instructional leadership of principal is found in previous literatures (Kwan, 2016; S. Liu & Hallinger, 2018). The higher level represents that teachers perceived enactment of instructional leadership by principals.

The second research question in this study sought to determine the relationship between school culture and instructional leadership. Results of this study indicated that all the six dimensions of school culture were significantly and positively correlated with three dimensions of instructional leadership. Although teacher collaboration was found at moderate level, it had a good relationship with three dimensions of instructional leadership. Instructional leadership is positively related to supportive school culture and teacher collaboration (Y. Liu, Bellibaş, & Gümüş, in press). Strong and positive association between unity of purpose and defining the school mission indicate that when everyone belonging to the school has the same purpose, it would be easy for principals to define and communicate the school vision with the teachers. Furthermore, collaboration and school-wide planning of school culture were significantly related to instructional leadership (Sufean, 2014). Hence, this study confirms that school culture is associated with instructional leadership of principals.

With respect to the final research question, the impact of school culture on instructional leadership, the results showed that the three dimensions of school culture; unity of purpose, professional development and teacher collaboration had a significant impact on instructional leadership practices of principals. However, the school culture factors such as collaborative leadership, collegial support and learning partnership did not influence significantly

to instructional leadership. This reflects that culture is not only around the leaders, but within the leaders as well (Schein, 2010).

The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that unity of purpose, professional development and teacher collaboration are three antecedents of instructional leadership practices. Thus, school culture with unity of purpose facilitates principals to frame school's instructional goals and communicate these goals with other staff members. When teachers recognise the importance of working towards achieving an organisation goal, they support and perform in accordance with school vision and mission to improve student learning. As a result, they value their own development and seek to gain knowledge from workshops and other professional sources to improve their instructional practices. Teachers can learn best through teacher collaboration such as peer observations, planning together, and through collegial dialogue of teaching practices (Tchong, 2014). This promotes positive school culture which carries high impact on instructional leadership practices of principals.

The school culture factors; collaborative leadership, collegial support and learning partnership that did not influence significantly to instructional leadership indicate that collaborative relationship of school leaders with staff, professional support among teachers, and the extent to which school community work together for common good must be improved. All these factors are linked to social relationship among teachers, between teachers and leaders, and finally with the broader community.

The findings of this study have important implications to develop a healthy school culture that can influence principals' instructional leadership. Although leadership arise in cultures, principals as practitioners and leaders in schools can reshape culture with their vision, values and beliefs (Sufean, 2014). In order to influence instructional leadership, a goal-oriented work with continuous professional development in a collaborative nature is essential. Every one of the school community and policy makers must work

towards a common purpose; that is, improving student learning.

V. RECOMMENDATION

This study confirmed that school culture and instructional leadership are positively related. The findings of the study also indicated that the three most prominent aspects of the school culture are unity of purpose, professional development, and teacher collaboration. They are fundamental dimensions that must be maintained to influence instructional practices of leaders. The findings imply that in order to foster instructional leadership within schools, school leaders have to pay due attention to critical cultural aspects of schools. Working collaboratively with a common vision, and providing relevant professional assistance along the way, is emphasised by the present findings.

This is a small scale study. Hence, a similar study may be done with a larger sample as the present study is limited in its ability to generalise the findings. Additionally, the influence of dimensions of school culture on specific dimensions of instructional leadership can be explored for detailed understanding of the relationships in future studies.

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