


## Research Brief



# In Search of the Middle Influence: Case Studies of Heads of Teaching- research Groups in Leading Teacher Learning through Instructional Leadership in Chinese Primary Schools



Dr Tang Jianjing

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# INTRODUCTION

Middle-level instructional leaders within schools are increasingly recognized with a growing number of studies showing their potential influence on teacher learning. This study explores the impact of middle-level instructional leaders, specifically the TRG heads, on teacher learning in schools in the context of the Chinese system. Interviews, participant observation, and documents were collected and qualitatively analyzed to categorize the major leadership roles and practices (see Figure 1) and capture the multi-level influences on middle leadership (see Figure 2).



1. Collaborating with school leaders to lead teacher learning
2. Leading by example and modelling good teaching practice
3. Working with teachers to help teachers translate improvement needs into specific actions
4. Routinising teaching-research activities and encouraging and ensuring participation
5. Brokering and facilitating the apprenticeship model

Nurturing 'practice-embedded' professional learning

Optimising conditions for teacher engagement

Hub;  
Forerunner;  
Role model;  
Peer mentor;  
Knowledge broker

Leading teachers' research-informed practice

Drawing on external resources to develop teachers

1. Designing and managing research projects with teachers
2. Encouraging teachers to use research to improve teaching and learning
3. Leading deep conversations and cultivating a research atmosphere
4. Enhancing the teachers' research awareness and capacity
5. Offering guidance for teachers on research-based practice

1. Building good working relationships and fostering trust
2. Creating a caring and supportive learning culture
3. Promoting collective responsibilities and professional collaboration
4. Fostering knowledge sharing

1. Engaging in external resources and sharing with teachers to broaden the resource base for teachers
2. Seeking external professional learning opportunities for teachers
3. Facilitating teachers' participation in networked professional learning
4. Establishing the connections between teacher professional learning and external demands and resources

*Figure 1: A descriptive model of instructional leadership for teacher learning enacted by mid-level leaders in China*

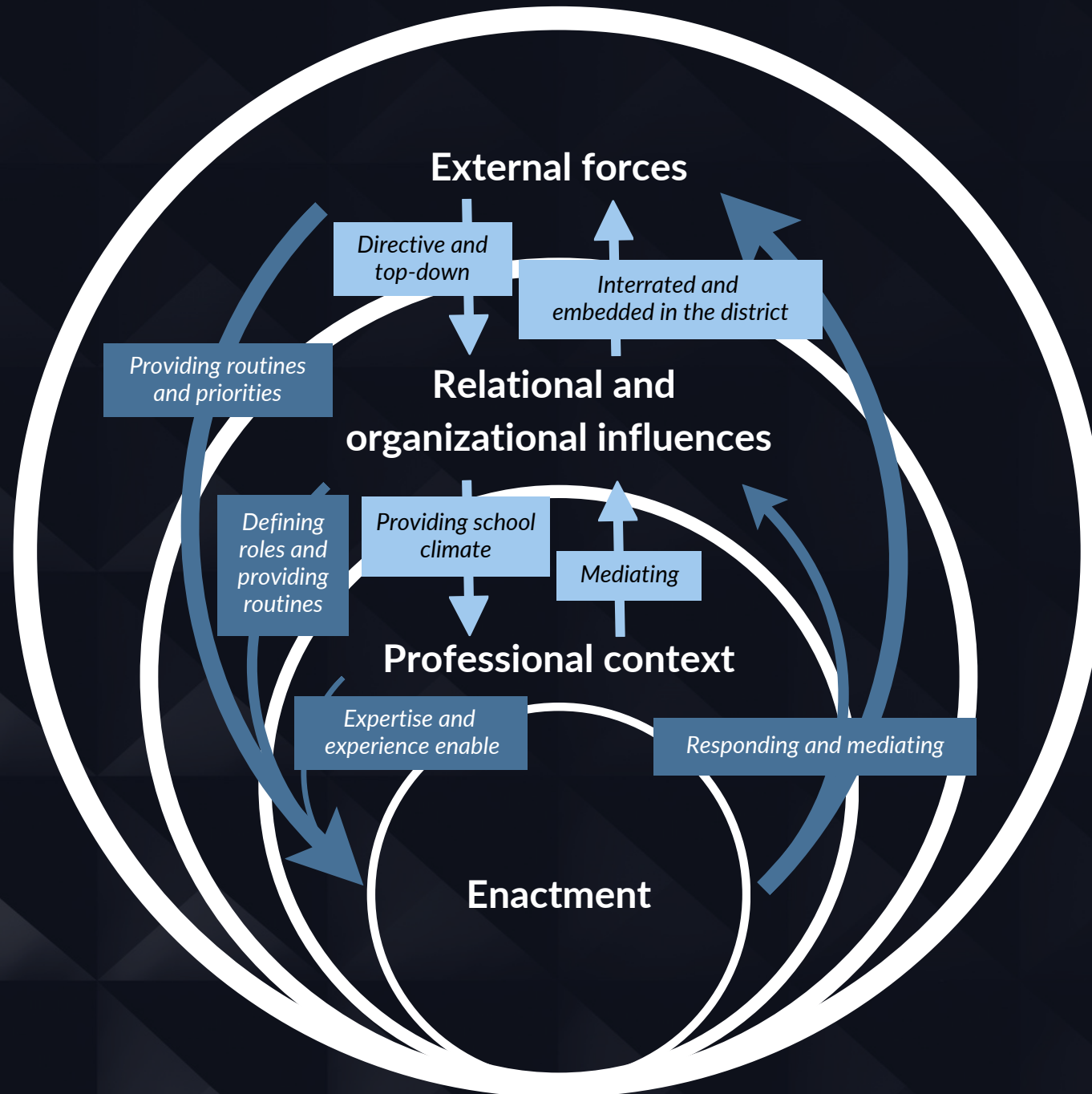


Figure 2: Multi-level and interrelated influences

# KEY ISSUES & SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

The findings revealed four areas where middle leaders can impact teacher learning:

- (a) nurturing 'practice-embedded' professional learning;
- (b) optimizing conditions for teacher engagement;
- (c) leading teachers' research-informed practice; and
- (d) drawing on external resources to develop teachers.



The five core roles (i.e., hub, forerunner, role model, peer mentor, and knowledge broker) and the four core areas with 18 specific practices comprise a model of conceptualization of the teacher development dimension of middle-level instructional leadership. It is argued that co-learning, participation and brokering are integral to middle leadership, and middle leaders engage in multiple spheres to lead teacher learning. Paternalistic attitudes towards teachers and the use of benevolence and servant leadership are viewed as appropriate middle leadership. Successful middle leadership can be seen in challenging school contexts, and layered instructional leadership advances teacher learning.

# MAIN STAKEHOLDERS & Engagement with Them

I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with a sample of TRG heads and principals and carried out focus group interviews among teachers. I used participant observations after the interviews with TRG heads, principals, and teachers, which involved observing TRG meetings, classroom demonstrations by TRG heads, meetings about curriculum design and timetable scheduling, and other instructional developmental activities. I visited and spoke with the TRG heads and their teachers about their TRGs and the ways in which the TRG heads led teachers. I observed TRG heads as they work in their schools, which enabled me to ask them what they were thinking with regard to the specific leadership practices I witnessed when they led learning of peers.





## RECOMMENDATION & IMPLICATION

The conceptual model and the research propositions emerging from the study call for large-scale quantitative studies across different societies to examine and develop the proposed model and capture more potential variables. More “in-situ” research is recommended to examine the role of middle-level instructional leaders to provide cross-societal discourse.

I recommend reorienting middle-level roles towards instructional leadership. The concept of instructional leadership has moved beyond a simple description of a principal’s role to understanding it as multi-level, multidimensional, and highly interactive practices that may need to expand to include the practices of other sources of school leadership (Hallinger et al., 2018; Harris, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Nguyen et al., 2020). Middle leaders are regarded as an under-utilised source of instructional leadership (Leithwood, 2016). This study findings reveal that there is a need to define the concept of instructional leadership more broadly to include the middle-level leadership position.



# FOR MORE INFORMATION



## Link for the thesis

[In search of the Middle Influence:  
Case Studies of Heads of Teaching-research  
Groups in Leading Teacher Learning through  
Instructional Leadership in Chinese Primary Schools](#)

For enquiries, please contact Dr Tang Jianjing.

 [jtang@eduhk.hk](mailto:jtang@eduhk.hk)



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see the video interview