

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)
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LEADING TO LEAD: PRINCIPALS' SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ITS INFLUENCE ON TEACHER LEADERSHIP

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 27.07.2025

Revised date: 18.08.2025

Accepted date: 10.09.2025

Published date: 20.10.2025

To cite this document:

Ja'afar, J., & Adnan, A. A. Z. (2025). Leading To Lead: Principals' Situational Leadership and Its Influence on Teacher Leadership. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 10 (60), 591-600.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1060042

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Abstract:

Leadership in educational institutions significantly shapes teacher performance, student achievement, and overall school effectiveness. This conceptual study explores the relationship between principals' situational leadership styles and secondary school teacher leadership in Malaysia. Guided by Hersey and Blanchard (1988) situational leadership model, comprising directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. The study examines how adapting leadership styles to teacher readiness can enhance motivation, professional commitment, and school climate. A systematic literature review was conducted using secondary sources such as indexed journal articles, academic books, educational reports, and Malaysian Ministry of Education policy documents. Data were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar using relevant keywords. Content analysis and thematic synthesis were applied to organise findings according to the four leadership dimensions, leading to a proposed conceptual framework. Results indicate that each style uniquely influences teacher leadership: the directing style benefits new teachers, guiding develops skills and confidence, supporting fosters innovation, and delegating strengthens experienced teachers' autonomy. Flexible adaptation of leadership styles was found to boost motivation, reduce work-related stress, and cultivate a positive school climate. This study contributes in three main ways: academically, it enriches the body of Malaysian educational leadership literature; for the education sector, it offers training guidelines for principals to tailor leadership styles to teacher maturity; and nationally, it supports the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) by enhancing teacher leadership and educational competitiveness.

Keywords:

Situational Leadership, Directing, Coaching, Supporting, Delegating

Introduction

Leadership in educational institutions plays a critical role in shaping teacher performance, student achievement, and overall school effectiveness. Effective educational leaders are able to adapt their leadership style to the context, build shared goals that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and promote teacher professional development (Pant, 2023; Yilmaz & Özgenel, 2023). Studies have shown that instructional and transformational leadership can raise pedagogical standards, create a culture of excellence, and foster a positive school climate, which in turn directly impacts teacher motivation and student learning outcomes (Sharafat et al., 2024; Liu, 2023). In this context, principals, senior assistants, and committee chairs play a role in a distributed leadership model that supports collaboration, innovation, and sharing of best practices in teaching (Hardianto et al., 2022).

In addition, leadership that is responsive to changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has proven its importance in maintaining the continuity of learning and teacher motivation (Pan & Cheng, 2023; Mizal et al., 2024). School leaders who emphasize accountability through effective assessment, strengthen collective effectiveness, and leverage technology in teaching can ensure that education remains relevant to the needs of the 21st century (Sibomana & Ndayambaje, 2024; Ullah et al., 2023; Komen et al., 2024). Studies also emphasize that ongoing leadership development is a prerequisite for strengthening the capacity of leaders to face complex educational challenges, ensuring teacher leadership, and building an inclusive and competitive school ecosystem (Cuzcano-Huarcaya et al., 2023; Larasati et al., 2022).

This study aims to i) identify the relationship between principals' situational leadership styles and teacher leadership in secondary schools and ii) analyze how leadership style adaptations (directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating) affect motivation, professional commitment, and school climate.

The Role of the Principal in Influencing Teacher Leadership

The principal plays a critical role in shaping the school culture, as it directly influences teachers' values, beliefs, and practices. Transformational leadership has been identified as an effective style for fostering a positive school culture. Principals who adopt transformational leadership can inspire and motivate teachers while promoting collaboration and innovation in teaching practices (Li, 2024; Rosas et al., 2023; Rahman, 2023). Muga (2022) study found that a conducive school culture not only enhances teachers' job satisfaction but also positively impacts student learning.

Beyond shaping culture, principals also influence teacher motivation through supportive leadership styles that focus on staff well-being. Studies have shown that when principals provide emotional support, recognize teachers' efforts, and offer opportunities for professional development, teacher motivation increases (Li, 2024; Rosas et al., 2023; Muga, 2022). Rahman (2023) emphasizes that a supportive work environment and alignment between school goals and teachers' aspirations lead to greater commitment and motivation among teachers. This in turn, contributes to improved job satisfaction and teaching effectiveness.

Professional development is another crucial aspect of teacher success influenced by the role of the principal. Research by Lee et al. (2023) and Amzat et al. (2022) highlights that principals who encourage ongoing professional learning such as through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) help strengthen teaching practices and empower teachers as leaders.

Furthermore, principals who model lifelong learning have a positive influence on teachers' attitudes toward personal and professional growth (Eadens & Ceballos, 2022). In a positive school climate characterized by trust and open communication, teachers are more willing to engage in innovation and professional development (Rosas et al., 2023; Hammad, 2024).

Situational Leadership Theory

The Situational Leadership Theory by Hersey and Blanchard (1988) emphasizes that no single leadership style is suitable for all situations. Instead, effective leadership depends on the readiness and competence levels of followers, requiring leaders to be flexible in adapting their leadership style. The model outlines four primary styles: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating each applied according to the followers' abilities and confidence. In the educational context, leaders must adjust their approach depending on whether they are working with novice teachers, inexperienced students, or capable and independent staff.

Each style in this model carries its own implications within the educational environment. The directing style is appropriate for situations that require clear instructions for inexperienced followers; the coaching style is suitable for those who need motivation and additional encouragement. The supporting style is used when followers are capable but need moral support, while the delegating style is most effective when followers are highly competent and confident in working independently. In a school context, these styles can improve teacher job satisfaction, empower students, and foster a positive and collaborative learning environment.

The application of this theory has become increasingly relevant in modern education, especially when facing major challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that leaders who adopt situational leadership are better able to maintain the motivation and performance of both teachers and students in changing circumstances. The ability to adjust leadership styles to current needs proves the model's effectiveness in building the resilience of educational institutions. Thus, Situational Leadership not only offers a strong theoretical foundation but also a practical strategy to enhance leadership effectiveness and overall educational outcomes.

Principal's Situational Leadership Style

Figure 1 illustrates Hersey and Blanchard (1988) Situational Leadership Model, which highlights the importance of adapting leadership styles based on the readiness levels of individuals being led. The model comprises four leadership styles that is Directing (S1), Coaching (S2), Supporting (S3), and Delegating (S4) matched with four levels of follower readiness, from D1 to D4. For instance, the directing style is suited for individuals at D1, who lack experience and require clear guidance, while delegating is appropriate for those at D4, who are competent and capable of working independently.

In the school setting, principals must be adept at assessing the readiness levels of teachers and adjusting their leadership approaches flexibly to optimise teacher motivation and performance. Situational leadership, therefore, serves as a dynamic and effective approach to cultivating an adaptive and progressive educational ecosystem.

Overall, the model underscores the importance of flexibility in leadership principals must continuously evaluate the competence and commitment of teachers to select the most appropriate leadership approach. This, in turn, helps create a positive working environment that supports teachers' professional growth and overall school improvement.



Figure 1: Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Model

Source: Bruin (2020)

Directing Leadership Style

The directing leadership style is characterized by clear instructions and close supervision by the principal, making it suitable for teachers who lack experience or confidence. It is effective in improving the performance of novice teachers, as the principal provides strong structure and guidance (Hardiyanti & Usman, 2023). Mujahidin (2023) study also indicates that this style enhances teachers' pedagogical competence; however, when overused, it may undermine the motivation of experienced teachers and hinder creativity (Samad et al., 2023; Sari, 2022).

Coaching Leadership Style

The coaching leadership style combines moderate direction with high support, making it appropriate for teachers who possess basic competence but still require encouragement. Principals who adopt this style actively provide feedback and offer professional development opportunities, which help improve teachers' well-being and job satisfaction (Adarne, 2023). This style fosters collaborative relationships and is relevant in addressing the pressures and challenges of today's education landscape.

Supporting Leadership Style

The supporting leadership style emphasizes emotional support and interpersonal relationships, while providing minimal directive input. This approach is suitable for competent teachers who need encouragement to experiment with new innovations. Teachers feel appreciated and trusted, which enhances motivation and job satisfaction (Hardiyanti & Usman, 2023). Nevertheless, principals must maintain a balance between emotional support and professional accountability to ensure teaching goals are achieved.

Delegating Leadership Style

The delegating leadership style grants full autonomy to highly experienced and motivated teachers. Principals place trust in teachers to make decisions and manage their own professional development, which fosters innovation and greater engagement (Hardiyanti & Usman, 2023). However, this style is not suitable for all teachers, particularly those who are less confident or

inexperienced, and requires continuous communication to ensure that even independent teachers feel supported.

Principals' Situational Leadership and Teacher Leadership in Malaysia

The relationship between principals' leadership styles and the development of teacher leadership is increasingly emphasized in the Malaysian education context. Local studies show that leadership styles such as instructional, transformational, and authentic leadership have a direct impact on teacher leadership and their commitment to the profession. For instance, Thien et al. (2023) demonstrated that principals' instructional leadership improves collective teacher efficacy and commitment. Similarly, Khun-Inkeeree et al. (2022) found that authentic leadership strengthens teacher confidence and effectiveness, leading to greater engagement in school leadership.

However, weaknesses in instructional leadership as highlighted by Tin (2022) show that without strong skills in this area, the development of teacher leadership may be hindered. Other studies stress the importance of sustainable leadership and support for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in empowering teachers. For example, Nagurar (2023) and Nelikan (2023) both emphasize that principals who support sustainable leadership practices and PLCs can enhance teachers' initiative and effectiveness in the teaching and learning process.

Additionally, middle leaders also play a vital role as intermediaries between the principal and teachers. Thien et al. (2022) found that learning-centered leadership among middle leaders helps strengthen professional culture and promotes the achievement of teacher goals. In the context of inclusive education, Faizy (2023) emphasizes that principals' support for teacher leadership fosters a collaborative culture and enhances educational impact among diverse teaching staff.

In conclusion, the principal's adaptive, supportive, and collaborative situational leadership has been shown to play a key role in advancing teacher leadership. Studies such as Lau and Singh (2022) assert that inspiring and motivational situational leadership not only nurtures teachers as leaders but also positively impacts student achievement. Therefore, principals' leadership competency is a fundamental pillar in shaping an effective and competitive school ecosystem.

The Importance of Situational Leadership in School Leadership

Leadership in educational institutions is not merely about managing daily operations; it is a key driver of school culture, teacher professional development, and student achievement. In an increasingly challenging environment such as Malaysia's education system facing resource constraints, policy shifts, and rapid technological advancements responsive and flexible leadership styles are becoming ever more critical. One approach that has gained recognition for its effectiveness is situational leadership, which emphasizes adapting leadership approaches to suit individual needs and specific contexts (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988).

The Situational Leadership Model outlines four main styles: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating each applied based on teachers' levels of competence and commitment. Mujahidin (2023) found that the directing style suits novice teachers who need a clear structure, while the coaching style is effective for teachers who are skilled but require additional motivation (Adarne, 2023). The supporting style allows confident and competent teachers to

experiment and innovate (Hardiyanti & Usman, 2023), while the delegating style gives full autonomy to experienced teachers, enhancing their sense of trust and responsibility.

In the context of secondary education in Malaysia, principals' ability to adapt these leadership styles has been shown to significantly influence teacher motivation, work commitment, and school culture. Studies by Sari (2022); Dewi and Syahril (2022) and Adarne (2023) consistently show that flexible leadership approaches help create a positive and supportive school climate. This not only reduces work-related stress but also enhances teacher resilience, especially in the post-COVID-19 era.

Furthermore, situational leadership supports the development of teacher leadership in schools. Local studies by Thien et al. (2023) and Khun-Inkeeree et al. (2022) show that principals who practise transformational and authentic leadership help build teachers' self-confidence, which encourages them to take on leadership roles. In addition, this approach fosters professional cultures such as PLCs, which have been proven to enhance reflective and collaborative practices among teachers (Nagurar, 2023; Nelikan, 2023).

Middle leaders, such as heads of departments and senior assistants, also play a key role in implementing this approach. Instructional-centered leadership by middle leaders can bridge the gap between school policies and teachers' needs, thereby strengthening effective teaching practices (Thien et al., 2022).

Overall, situational leadership not only improves teacher performance and job satisfaction, but also creates a more adaptive, collaborative, and student-centered school environment. In an era of continuous change and educational innovation, the ability of principals to understand and respond to the diverse needs of teachers and school communities is a critical determinant of institutional success (Lau & Singh, 2022).

Study Methodology

This study uses a conceptual article approach based on a systematic literature review to build understanding and propose a conceptual framework on the relationship between principals' situational leadership style and teacher leadership. Data sources consist of secondary materials such as indexed journal articles, academic books, educational reports, and policy documents of the Ministry of Education of Malaysia. The literature search process was conducted through academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar with keywords such as situational leadership, principal leadership, teacher leadership, and school climate. The analysis was conducted using content analysis and thematic synthesis, where Hersey and Blanchard's theory was used as the basic framework to categorize leadership styles into four dimensions, namely directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. Each dimension was analyzed based on the findings of previous studies to identify its impact on teacher motivation, professional commitment, and school climate. The results of this analysis were formulated in the form of a conceptual framework that suggests the relationship between situational leadership style and teacher leadership, as well as its role in building a school ecosystem that is inclusive, adaptive, and centered on lifelong learning.

Study Findings

The results from the findings of previous studies can be summarized that situational leadership among principals has a positive relationship with teacher leadership in secondary schools.

Adapting leadership styles such as directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating has been shown to significantly influence motivation, professional commitment, and school climate.

The following is a conceptual framework that can be formulated from past findings and also the Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Model (Bruin, 2020) for the purpose of further research.

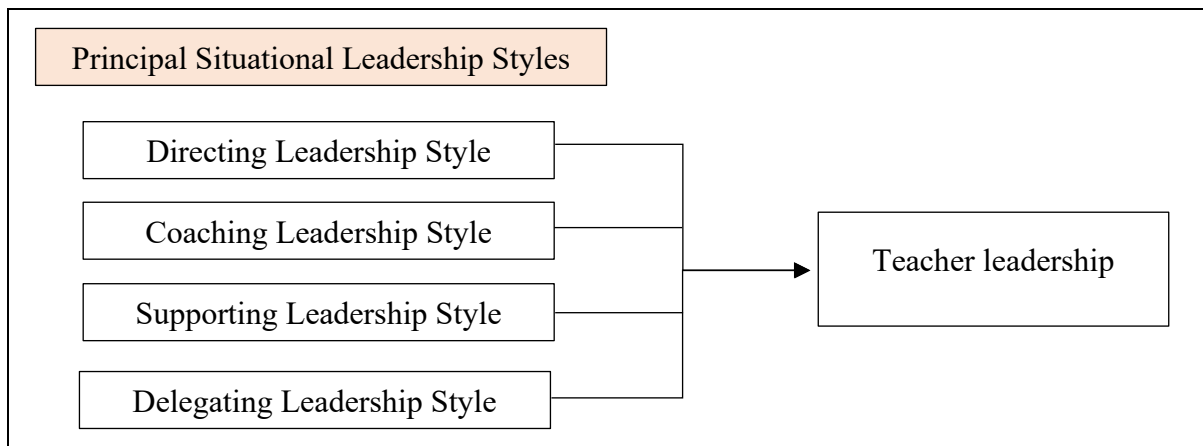


Figure 2: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Conclusion

In conclusion, both research objectives were achieved. The relationship between principals' situational leadership styles and teacher leadership in secondary schools can be identified through an analysis of four main styles, namely directing, coaching, supporting and delegating. The study shows that each style has a different impact on teacher leadership, pedagogical competence, and effectiveness. Adaptation of leadership style also affects motivation, professional commitment, and school climate; for example, coaching and supporting styles increase teacher motivation and well-being, while the directing style is suitable for new teachers but can weaken motivation if used excessively. The delegating style, on the other hand, provides autonomy that encourages innovation, but requires ongoing communication and support. Overall, this analysis proves that situational leadership styles not only influence teacher achievement, but also play an important role in creating a positive and adaptable school climate.

This study contributes to academia by enriching local educational leadership literature, to the education industry by providing principal training guidelines to adapt leadership styles according to teachers' maturity levels, and to the nation by supporting the achievement of PPPM through increasing teacher leadership and educational competitiveness.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Ahmad Amri bin Zainal Adnan, my research supervisor, for his invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous encouragement throughout the development of this conceptual paper. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and peers for their insightful discussions, as well as to the Faculty of Management and Economics, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, for providing the resources and academic environment that made this work possible. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to my family

for their unwavering support, patience, and encouragement, which have been a constant source of motivation throughout this academic journey.

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