Contextual Leadership for Model Kindergarten Schools through Human Capital Lens

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Abstract

While the success of model kindergarten schools mainly relies on the principal's effective leadership, there appear to be limited studies that provide a complete review of effective leadership for model kindergarten schools (MKS). This article aims to synthesize the variety of leadership styles successfully employed in kindergarten schools and analyze how these leadership styles contribute to the effective implementation of the Model Kindergarten School Standard(MKSS). This study adopted a literature review approach and employed document analysis as a research design by reviewing research articles from Google Scholar and different documents, including books and policy documents from the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS). The findings show that principals' particular global and democratic leadership aligned most consistently with the kindergarten goals, all stakeholders, the kindergarten setting, time allocation, resource-limited context, and diverse setting helps all kindergarten schools meet MKSS. Through the Human Capital perspective, MoEYS has to invest in conducting future studies and framing contextual leadership for Model Kindergarten School principals.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

In pursuit of the global agenda of *Education for All* (EFA), many countries, including Cambodia, have initiated reforms to expand access to education and improve its quality (Chansopheak, 2009). Cambodia's Vision 2050, articulated through the Pentagonal Strategy, emphasizes human capital development as its foremost priority for achieving sustainable growth, equity, and national prosperity (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2023). As part of this vision, MoEYS has implemented a series of strategic educational reforms—including the Education Strategic Plan (2014–2018), the introduction of School-Based Management (SBM), and the recent MKSS initiative—to enhance learning outcomes and institutional performance at all educational levels.

MKSS represents a cornerstone of these reforms. Introduced in 2023, MKSS focuses on five core dimensions: (1) student learning outcomes, (2) teaching and learning processes, (3) community engagement, (4) school operations and administration, and (5) accountability (MoEYS, 2023a). These standards reflect a commitment to both equity and quality in early childhood education (ECE), positioning it as a foundation for long-term human capital development aligned with Cambodia's goal of becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050. However, the main ECE challenges in Cambodia include low cooperation from state and community partnerships (MoEYS, 2024a). Leadership behaviors are the key to promoting involvement of stakeholders (Birasnav, Dahiya, & Bharti, 2025). Therefore, in the Cambodian educational context, the personal quality of principals contribute significance to trustful atmosphere of participation from different stakeholders (Seng, 2025). Teaching and learning processes are still a concern in the ECE Cambodian context. Om (2022) states that kindergarten schools lack of ECE qualified teachers and teacher

trainers in the field due to the unavailability of qualified and experienced managers with good leadership and management skills. Professional trainings are needed by preschool teachers (Karim et al. 2025). This demonstrates that teaching and learning in kindergarten schools in Cambodia demand much improvement of school principals' leadership, MoEYS, and the National Policy are the backbone of this positive change.

Efforts to operationalize these standards, however, face significant challenges. While policies and strategic frameworks have been clearly articulated, the human capacity—particularly in principal's leadership—remains underdeveloped. Principals' Leadership in ECE has unique characteristics that distinguish it from principals' leadership in primary and secondary education settings (Kivunja, 2015). Yet in Cambodia, school principals at the kindergarten level often lack formal training in educational leadership and management, and professional development opportunities remain limited (Jones & Nagel, 2022).

Problem Statement

Despite MoEYS's commitment to ensuring universal access to quality ECE (MoEYS, 2024a), systemic constraints persist. Key among these is a shortage of qualified, experienced, and well-supported school leaders (Chhinh & Dy, 2009). The leadership capacities of kindergarten principals are critical to achieving the intended outcomes of MKS, yet evidence on effective leadership practices and their relationship to educational quality in Cambodian kindergartens remains scarce. In fact, among 4, 725 public kindergarten schools across Cambodia (MoEYS, 2025a), there have been only 10 kindergarten schools awarded for model kindergarten schools champion for academic year 2022-2023 (MoEYS, 2024b), 6 kindergarten schools selected to meet the MKSS for academic year 2022-2023 (MoEYS, 2024c), 24 kindergarten schools awarded for model kindergarten school Champion in academic year 2023-2024 (MoEYS, 2025b), 10 kindergarten schools selected to meet the MKSS for academic year 2023-2024 (MoEYS 2025c), and 5 kindergarten schools selected to be the institutions offering best model public services (Ministry of Civil Service, 2025). Hence, 50 schools meeting the MKSS and being awarded MKS trophies are almost the resource pre-schools, certified and named by MoEYS. Hence, only 1% of kindergarten schools across Cambodia pass the MKSS for the last two academic years. As a result, to enhancing and solidifying in the quality of pre-school services requires strengthening of kindergarten school governance; however, it lacks of effective implementation of kindergarten school governance (MoEYS, 2025a). MoEYS (2025a) continues that by 2028, 360 schools are expected to be informed and trained about the MKSS. So there are only 3 years left to achieve this expectation, while 1% of pre-schools have passed the MKSS. This yield represents a limitation of good learning outcomes, teaching quality, community engagement, governance, and accountability.

In fact, principals' school leadership is the key to school success (Om, et al, 2019), teachers' job satisfaction (Yan-Li & Hassan, 2018), teaching quality (Ath, 2022 & Quinn, 2002), students' achievement (Quinn, 2002), stakeholder engagement (Nguon, 2011); and positive atmosphere (Bulach, Boothe, & Pickett, 2006). Studies from other contexts have established a clear link between school leadership and student achievement (González-Falcón et al., 2020; Myran & Masterson, 2020). Though Cambodia has invested in ECE integration to national education system, she has not accomplished her set goals because of leadership and management deficiencies (Om, 2022). Teacher Policy Action Plan (TPAP) 2024-2030 of MoEYS started to focus on only transformative leadership among other strategies to build innovative and inclusive educational leaders to upgrade teachers' quality as the backbone for high-quality education in Cambodia by 2030 (MoEYS, 2023b). However, contextualized research studies of principals' leadership styles, especially instructional and managerial dimensions, remain limited, and empirical research on contextual leadership in the Cambodian ECE setting is scare though "leadership styles should be selected and adapted to fit organization, situation, groups, and individual" (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015, p.9). Further, the country lacks a coherent framework for investing in leadership development within MKS. Without a clear understanding of which leadership competencies to develop—and how they contribute to human capital formation—the implementation of the MKSS may fall short of its intended impact.

Research Objectives

This study aims to discover the variety of leadership styles applied in kindergarten schools from the existing literature reviews and how the contextual leadership styles contribute to the effective implementation of the MKSS.

Research Questions

The study addresses two key research questions: 1) What leadership styles, commonly conducted to support kindergarten schools, are effective in supporting early childhood education? 2) How are the contextual leadership styles contributing to supporting the implementation of the MKSS?

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory provides the central analytical lens for this study. At its core, the theory posits that investment in education enhances individual productivity and contributes to broader economic growth (Almendarez, 2011). While early applications of the theory emphasized physical capital and labor efficiency, contemporary interpretations underscore the strategic value of formal education and skills development as foundational to national development.

In the context of early childhood education, Human Capital Theory highlights the importance of investing in high-quality learning experiences at the foundational stage. Research shows that early interventions have a disproportionately high return on investment by fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development, which in turn supports future academic and economic success (Heckman, 2006). This study applies Human Capital Theory to examine how effective school principals' leadership in Cambodian kindergartens can serve as a vehicle for developing human capital from the earliest stages of education and to support the effective implementation of the MKSS.

Human Capital Theory is necessarily used to improve human development through the investment in people's education, training, and health with high expected return (Almendarez, 2011); for example, doing a master's degree with high costs, including fees and long study duration, is expected to return lifetime earnings in a better job. For educational policy, the government uses Human Capital Theory to promote career development as well as income, lasting economic growth and social well-being, and innovation as well as economic competitiveness after investing with much funding.

Leadership in Early Childhood Education

Leadership is defined as the capacity to influence and guide others towards achieving shared objectives (Chey, 2019). In early childhood education, leadership is both organizational and instructional, requiring school principals to play diverse roles—ranging from managing operations to fostering pedagogical excellence. Leadership Style refers to a form of behaviour of leaders to endeavour to impact others and regulate in what way she or he makes decisions (Chey, 2019). Carvajal, Sanchez, & Amihan (2023) revealed seven characteristics of true leadership as "(1) visionary thinking, (2) emotional intelligence, (3) integrity and authenticity, (4) resilience and adaptability, (5) empowering and developing others, (6) cultivating growth and individuality, and (7) spreading positivity and promoting peach" p.907.

Given the complexity of ECE settings, a range of leadership styles has been identified in the literature, each with different implications for school performance and learning outcomes:

Instructional Leadership

Focuses on improving teaching practices and student engagement by setting clear instructional goals, supporting teacher development, and modelling effective pedagogical strategies (Blase & Blase, 2000; Quinn, 2002; Kalman & Arslan, 2016). Instructional leadership styles range from improving student engagement, teaching delivery, supporting teachers, to promoting professional development.

Transformational (Charismatic) Leadership

Characterized by charisma, individualized support, inspirational vision, and intellectual stimulation, this style encourages innovation and commitment among staff and promotes a shared

mission to move forward (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Adeoye & Akinnubi, 2023; Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015). This leadership emphasizes inspiring, motivating, and empowering followers to make the institution successful by helping followers complete their tasks and roles in curriculum, teaching, connection with students as well as community members, and monitoring and evaluation.

Situational Leadership

Adapts leadership behaviour to the competence and commitment levels of followers, using a flexible approach that shifts between directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating (Sari & Sowiyah, 2022). Motivation in work, teacher performance, and teacher commitment can be advanced by this situational leadership through activities: followers having roles (called Instruction), directions given by the leaders (called participation), leaders and followers sharing in making decisions (called consultation), and followers being allowed to make a decision (called delegation).

Transactional Leadership

Relies on structured rewards and punishments to achieve compliance and performance, with a focus on short-term goals and operational efficiency (Maloş, 2012). Leaders initiate ideas agreed by members when receiving a job (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015). Within this style, followers receive the tasks that they decide to follow because the return relies on the followers' performance, and punishment can be placed if their result doesn't match the expectation.

Bureaucratic Leadership

Rules are thoroughly complied by leaders to ensure all followers apply procedures accurately and this bureaucratic leadership is applied with severe safety danger such as working with dangerous machines or in dangerous situation (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015). Bureaucratic leadership is very useful for situations where risks are in place in terms of serious dangers and significant money risk, but it leads to vulnerabilities of modernization, flexibility, and creativity.

Authoritarian (Autocratic) and Democratic (Participative) Leadership

Authoritarian leaders make decisions unilaterally, often in highly centralized systems (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy, 2014; Van et al, 2004) and leaders has power over staff and make decision for staff to implement, and this style is effectively used in disasters situation (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015); whereas democratic leaders engage followers in participatory decision-making and foster collective ownership (Dowling, 2017). Autocratic Leadership is to handle whole power over subordinates who have little chance to suggest; however, decision is quickly made by leaders with immediate implementation. However, participative leadership allows all subordinates to participate in making decisions, finalized by leaders finally so all members are encouraged to be creative and engaged with high contentment. However, this style cannot be used during a risk situation because team members can delay the decision, and members' capacity can also lead to a disaster.

Laissez-faire Leadership

Grants high autonomy to staff with minimal intervention. While it may promote creativity, it can lead to reduced accountability and inconsistency in quality (Kamal & Kesuma, 2024). Laissez-faire leadership is a style in which leaders allow subordinates to work independently without decision from leaders, but with decisions from subordinates themselves. However, all necessary resources and advice are given by leaders to make all followers satisfy their jobs to heighten productivity.

Indigenous Leadership Concepts in Cambodian Context

Cambodian leadership traditions are strongly influenced by Buddhist philosophy. The *Four Immeasurable*—loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—are seen as essential qualities of effective leaders (Rasmussen, 2024). The leaders in this style have to promote well-being and happiness, relieve the suffering of others, share other people's joy and success, and foster a stable and neutral mind. Similarly, the *Tenfold Virtue of the Ruler* (*Dasavidha-rajadhamma*); including Charity (Dana) avoiding selfishness and motivating to donate, Morality (Sila) Alluring to possess strong moral

character, Altruism (Pariccaga) sacrificing the pleasure for the well-being of others, Honesty (Ajjava) being honest and encourage others to be honest, Gentleness (Maddava) restraining the unrest mind to be benevolent and gentle, Self-Controlling (Tapa) assisting to control five senses, Non-Anger (Akkodha) encouraging to control angriness, Non-Violence (Avihimsa) fascinating to be non-violent, Forbearance (Khanti) exercising endurance, and Uprightness (Avirodhana) honoring the opinion of the others and ensure and peace; provides a culturally grounded framework for ethical leadership, encompassing values such as generosity, morality, honesty, patience, and non-violence (Barua & Barua, 2019). These principles remain deeply embedded in the expectations of school leaders in Cambodia and complement Western leadership frameworks in unique ways.

Appropriate Contextual Leadership in Kindergarten

Factors of kindergarten principals' leadership for school effectiveness in Liaoning province in China include: improving the interior administration; protecting and educating; having curriculum instruction and improvement; matching the internal and external atmosphere; and providing a pleasant and equal employment atmosphere (Guanfu, Muangman, Tipanark, 2025). Also, Meng, & Julsuwan, (2025) identified six key components of leadership literacy of kindergarten principals in China: planning development, generating needed culture for kid development, prioritizing care and education, instructing and enabling teacher development, boosting interior management, and familiarizing with the exterior atmosphere. Significantly, a survey of kindergarten teachers' perception in Hong Kong shows that principals' leadership includes "empowerment and participation, reward and recognition, and role modelling and shared vision," which do not belong to transactional leadership or others (Chan, 2014). Also, the professional traits of school heads are "having a clear understanding of the vision, mission and goals of the program, maintaining one's integrity, treating others with respect and supports staff and their professional development" while contextual traits of school heads refer to "committed, dedicated, nurturing, kinds, trustworthy, honest, being a visionary" (Igoy–Escalona, 2018, p.1). What is more, the leadership of principals that teachers in China's bilingual kindergarten expect includes improving teaching and teaching support, generating a shared vision, building trust, and collaboration among teachers (Yang, 2022). Hence, principals of kindergarten schools have used their appropriate contextual leadership to achieve success.

School principals' leadership yields productive school outcomes (González-Falcón et al., 2020) and achievement of early child education (Myran & Masterson, 2020). There are many sorts of leadership styles which play vital roles in school management and success, and those leadership ranges from Instructional leadership, Charismatic/Transformational leadership, Situational leadership, Transactional leadership, Bureaucratic Leadership, Authoritarian leadership, Democratic/Participative Leadership, Delegative leadership, Buddhism leadership, to Cambodian indigenous and contextual Leadership.

These different leadership styles have key influences to the school success, including working power from leaders to followers, leaders' dignity and power of decision, rule application, decision made by both leaders and followers, shareholders' engagement, effective instruction, promoting cooperation as well as collaboration, work productivity, commitment, inspiration as well as motivation, job satisfaction, followers' autonomy, and the reward as well as punishment mechanisms. These various leadership styles partially impact the MKSS implementation. Thus, accomplishment of school requires appropriate leadership styles, needing appropriate investment to produce human capital with a high level of cognitive standard and good health (Almendarez, 2011). Linkage of Human Capital Theory, MKS principals' leadership, and school achievement exits in Cambodian ECE. Investment in education is closely connected to economic development and human capital (Becker, 1918), and human capital takes place because of success led by principal's leadership styles.

METHOD

This research article, is designed as a literature review article, relying on the secondary data as the foundation to respond to the research questions (Wee and Banister, 2016). They also add that the review is required because of the need to update the review and a new insight angle. Hence, what kinds of leadership styles and what to invest crucially require for MKS principals for success, as Webster and

Watson (2002) claim that further recommendation to the theory improvement, progress knowledge, and unfound field is needed if the field has little insight. Hence, this study aims to discover the leadership styles most conducted to achieving the goals of ECE under Kindergarten Schools and to identify priority areas for investment to ensure the success of the MKS in Cambodia by searching research journal articles in Google Scholar, ScienceDirect from accessing peer-reviewing research with the keywords—leadership styles, leadership styles in kindergarten, leadership styles in kindergarten in Cambodia, principals' leadership, kindergarten principals' leadership, effective leadership of kindergarten principals, principal's leadership styles in kindergarten, principal's contextual leadership in kindergarten and human capital theory, and different documents including Khmer news, books, and policy documents from MoEYS to offer insights into the topic. Examining the list of references of key selected articles is done through filtering only the relevant studies on the topic.

This review aims to collect the literature for a synthesis of relevant studies to inform the development of an inclusive framework of all leadership styles for ECE in kindergarten programs and contextual leadership in a particular kindergarten program. All selected studies include the following inclusive criteria: 1) The study in peer-reviewed journals and books; 2) The study of a doctoral dissertation only; 2) The study to be data-driven; and No short reports.

Based on the above procedures and careful examination of abstracts and full articles, 66 studies are included in this review, including 43 research articles from journals, 16 books, 6 doctoral dissertations, and one online news article. Significantly, only studies in the English version and one Khmer news article closely relevant to the topic were included in this review because of the authors' language expertise, without considering publication years, with the following findings and discussion. The upcoming review may well address these boundaries.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Leadership Styles and School Success
Leadership plays a pivotal role in determining the success of educational institutions. Research indicates that the leadership styles of the school principal can significantly influence school performance, particularly in the early childhood education context (Astuti, Aunnurahman, & Wahyudi, 2019). When leadership principles and strategies are applied effectively, school outcomes are enhanced (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015). Accordingly, school leaders are encouraged to identify and adopt leadership styles—or combinations thereof—that best fit their institutional contexts, stakeholders, and school visions.

In the Cambodian context, leadership is not merely a functional role but a cultural and moral responsibility. Effective leaders are expected to be tolerant, compassionate, collaborative, and trustworthy, qualities that foster inclusive decision-making and community engagement (Chey, 2019). These characteristics are particularly crucial in early childhood settings where relationships, empathy, and support underpin a child's early development.

Linking Leadership with Human Capital Theory
Human Capital Theory, rooted in the work of Becker (1918), conceptualizes education as an investment that enhances individuals' productivity and contributes to national economic growth. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and competencies that constitute an individual's productive capacity (Burgess, 2016; Lutz & Kc, 2011). Within this framework, early childhood education is a strategic domain for national investment. As such, the Cambodian government's introduction of the MKS represents a structural approach to building human capital for its Vision 2050.

Given that the principal is a central figure in shaping school culture, instructional quality, and teacher motivation, investment in their leadership development is essential to the success of the MKS initiative. A leader's ability to foster trust, guide instruction, and inspire a shared vision is aligned with the broader goals of human capital formation in Cambodia.

Comparative Review of Leadership Styles for MKSS Practices

Various leadership styles offer different pathways to achieving different educational goals. Regarding the review, in educational and organizational contexts globally—and in Cambodia specifically—the following leadership styles for MKSS practices are grouped as the table 1.

Table 1. Leadership Styles for MKSS Practices

No.	Leadership	Description	Authors	Five Core Dimensions of MKSS
1	Instructional Leadership	Teaching practices, student engagement to professional development	Blase & Blase, 2000; Quinn, 2002	Student Learning Outcomes
2	Situational Leadership	Directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating followers—teachers' competence and commitment is advanced	Sari & Sowiyah, 2022	Teaching and Learning Processes
3	Transformational (Charismatic) Leadership	Encouragement of innovation and commitment of staff with shared mission—inspiring, motivating, empowering followers by helping and connecting with teachers, students, and community members High autonomy given to followers with minimal intervention Encourages collaboration, shared decision-making, and inclusivity	Ponting, 2023; Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999	Community Engagement
	Laissez-faire (Delegative) Leadership		Kamal & Kesuma, 2024	
	Democratic (Participative) Leadership		Dowling, 2017; Jaelani, 2024	
4	Indigenous Leadership	The Four Immeasurable and the Tenfold Virtue of the Ruler: Loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity to promote well-being and happiness; and encompassing values: generosity, morality, honesty, patience, and non-violence.	Barua & Barua, 2019; Rasmussen, 2024	School Operations and Administration
	Cambodian King Jayavarman VII Leadership	Strategic thinking, integrity, and vision—qualities: 1) Beware of the Yoke of Justice in which leaders have to be fair, 2) Keep the Eagle Eye in which leaders have to critically think with long-term vision, 3) Live the Lion Heart in which leaders have to be powerful to be respected, 4) Walk the Talk in which leaders' words are followed by followers, 5) Listen actively in which leaders have to take care of followers, 6) Dream Big in which leaders have to have big dreams for the team to accomplish, 7) Develop Knowledge in which leaders have to be smart to peacefully solve followers' problems, and 8) Build Team Spirit	Van, 2021	

5	Bureaucratic Leadership	Rules complied by leaders to ensure the procedures well done for safety	Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015	Accountability
		Relies on reward and punishment mechanisms to ensure compliance and efficiency		
	Transactional Leadership		Maloş, 2012	

Notably, in private-sector contexts in Cambodia, transformational and transactional leadership styles have been positively associated with employee satisfaction, while laissez-faire leadership tends to yield negative outcomes (Khath & Tan, 2024). These patterns are echoed in the education sector, where studies suggest that transformational and democratic leadership are most effective in motivating and retaining preschool teachers, while authoritarian styles correlate with job dissatisfaction and turnover (Nthuni, 2012; Sayadi, 2016).

The comparative literature suggests that no single leadership style is universally applicable. Instead, leadership must be contextually grounded. For example, while transformational leadership promotes creativity and shared vision, situational leadership is more effective in contexts where teachers require differentiated support (Kusumawati, 2023; Ridwan et al., 2022). Significantly, democratic leadership compared to autocratic and laissez-faire leadership intensely influences kindergarten teachers' discipline of the performance (Astuti, Aunnurahman, & Wahyudi, 2019), and organizational commitment impacting work productivity (Jaelani, 2024). Authoritarian leadership, though still prevalent in some public institutions, has been shown to undermine collaboration and increase occupational stress (Lindskog & Carelli, 2024). Each leadership style has its partial impact on kindergarten success, depending on how principals use it for their leading purposes within the actual context.

Indigenous and Contextual Leadership in Cambodia

In addition to Western leadership theories, Cambodian leadership is shaped by indigenous frameworks rooted in Buddhist philosophy. The *Four Immeasurables* (loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity) and the *Tenfold Virtues of the Ruler* (Dana, Sila, Ajjava, Maddava, etc.) provide ethical and relational foundations for leadership (Barua & Barua, 2019; Rasmussen, 2024). These principles resonate with the Cambodian cultural emphasis on harmony, respect, and moral integrity in leadership.

Furthermore, the leadership traits attributed to historical figures such as Cambodian King Jayavarman VII emphasize strategic thinking, integrity, and vision—qualities: 1) Beware of the Yoke of Justice in which leaders have to be fair, 2) Keep the Eagle Eye in which leaders have to critically think with long-term vision, 3) Live the Lion Heart in which leaders have to be powerful to be respected, 4) Walk the Talk in which leaders' words are followed by followers, 5) Listen actively in which leaders have to take care of followers, 6) Dream Big in which leaders have to have big dreams for the team to accomplish, 7) Develop Knowledge in which leaders have to be smart to peacefully solve followers' problems, and 8) Build Team Spirit in which leaders have to help followers work together and kingdom prosperous (Van, 2021), that continue to influence expectations of educational leadership in Cambodia. So the global leadership styles are suggested to integrate with Cambodian leadership styles for MSK principals to practice regarding their goals, people, setting, and time to succeed in the kindergarten program in Cambodia. In fact, a study by Anderson (2017) suggests that education leader training and development programs with leadership style application integrated with traditional school leadership are an appropriate key to the educational era of change. As the above table, the share of the relationship between world leadership and Khmer indigenous leadership styles for the kindergarten principals to effectively implement MKSS to produce the kindergarten school achievement, so specific training of particular and necessary leadership styles to kindergarten principals is the key for ECE success.

Policy Implications for Model Kindergarten Schools

Evidence from both domestic and international studies highlights the need for formal leadership training and contextualized professional development for kindergarten principals in Cambodia (Yang,

2022; Sam et al., 2025). Jones (2020) identified five essential leadership competencies for Cambodian principals: personal excellence, strategic thinking, managerial leadership, instructional leadership, and community engagement. These competencies are closely aligned with both global leadership standards and Cambodia's national education policies.

Despite the significance of leadership, many Cambodian kindergarten principals have limited teaching experience and lack formal training in leadership and school management (ADB, 2018, as cited in Jones, 2020). As Cambodia moves toward its Vision 2050, it is imperative that MoEYS invest strategically in the development of effective, context-sensitive leadership programs for the MKS principals because principals' effective leadership styles are determined by various factors: size of a school, degree of interaction or communication, members' personality, goal congruency, and decision-making level (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015). The needed investments are required to conduct studies in Cambodian ECE for exploring contextual leadership for principals leading to complete particular tasks by focusing on student learning outcomes, teaching and learning processes, community engagement, school operations and administration, and accountability. Significantly, the above table is a gateway for MoEYS to produce actionable routes to build kindergarten school principals' leadership capacity through competency-based training modules, a structured mentoring program, and performance appraisal. Such investments through leadership development programs, career incentives, and systematic supports for kindergarten school principals in MoEYS action plans are likely to yield long-term unexpected outcomes in terms of student outcomes, teacher professionalism, and system-wide educational quality. Then all kindergarten schools can meet MKSS when all principals master leadership competence and use them accordingly. In fact, the leadership of school principals is key to the school success (Astuti, Aunnurahman, & Wahyudi, 2019)

CONCLUSION

Leadership styles must be contextually appropriate, responsive to institutional needs, and aligned with Cambodia's cultural and policy environment. Besides Transformational Leadership introduced by MoEYS in Teacher Policy Action Plan (TPAP) 2024-2030, Leadership styles for succeeding in implementing MKSS are instructional leadership for student learning outcomes; situational leadership for teaching and learning processes; transformational (Charismatic), Laissez-faire (Delegative), and Democratic (Participative) Leadership for community engagement; indigenous and Cambodian King Jayavarman VII leadership for school operations and administration; and Bureaucratic and Transactional Leadership for accountability. Thus, each leadership appears particularly well-suited to specific goals, people, and settings as appropriate leadership styles promote inclusion, collaboration, and innovation. However, the utility of global leadership, along with Cambodian indigenous and contextual leadership, should also not be overlooked, especially in resource-constrained and diverse settings. So, these MKS principals' leadership styles should be framed through investing in the concept of Human Capital Theory by MoEYS. While it is difficult to prescribe a single "best" leadership style applicable to all educational contexts (Val, & Kemp, 2012), it is clear that effective school contextual leadership is essential to achieving the goals of Cambodia's MKS initiative. Drawing from Human Capital Theory, this study underscores the importance of investing in the continuous leadership development and capacity of kindergarten principals as a strategic lever for national development. For Cambodia to achieve its Vision 2050, the principals' leadership of MKS must be a national priority. Policymakers, education leaders, and stakeholders must collaborate to design and implement principals' leadership development initiatives that reflect both global best practices and indigenous values, including the principals' leadership literacy framework and training. In doing so, Cambodia can lay a robust foundation for human capital development—one that begins with the leaders at the very start of a child's educational journey.

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