

Conceptual Framework on Digital Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, and Emotional Intelligence in Cambodian Schools

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the interplay between Digital Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, and Emotional Intelligence, with Cultural Sensitivity and Capacity Building as contextual enablers, in the context of Cambodian secondary schools undergoing digital transformation. Drawing on recent literature from 2018–2025, the paper proposes a framework where Digital Leadership and Emotional Intelligence independently foster Knowledge Sharing, while Emotional Intelligence also moderates the Digital Leadership–Knowledge Sharing relationship by enhancing trust, motivation, and openness. Cultural Sensitivity and Capacity Building are positioned as cross-cutting factors that strengthen these relationships by addressing cultural norms, infrastructural disparities, and professional development needs. The framework responds to Cambodia’s leadership gap in digital readiness by emphasizing both technology-oriented and human-centric leadership capabilities. The proposed model contributes to theory by integrating socio-emotional and contextual dimensions into digital leadership research and offers practical guidance for school leaders and policy-makers seeking to cultivate collaborative, innovative educational environments. This conceptualisation invites future empirical studies to validate the relationships and mechanisms proposed.

Keywords: Digital Leadership, Emotional Intelligence

Introduction

In the education sector, digital technologies have significantly reshaped the teaching and learning experience. These technologies enable inquiry-based learning and provide educators with access to vast repositories of open educational resources that can be modified, reused, and shared at virtually no cost (Harerimana & Mtshali, 2020). However, the successful adoption of such innovations in schools depends heavily on the presence of Digital leadership, a leadership approach that strategically integrates digital tools and fosters a culture of collaboration and innovation. Digital leadership promotes participatory and cooperative methods of management, aligning naturally with knowledge-sharing practices in educational environments. In this context, digital leadership is not only about managing infrastructure or digital platforms but also about shaping teacher behavior, supporting emotional intelligence, and cultivating an open culture of continuous learning and exchange. Despite the increasing significance of digital leadership in education, many institutional heads and school leaders continue to demonstrate reluctance in adopting digital tools or advancing their digital competencies, including the use of social media and collaborative platforms (Antonopoulou et al., 2024). Concurrently, teachers are expected to navigate complex technological environments while ensuring effective knowledge dissemination; however, many feel inadequately prepared or



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supported, particularly in developing countries where digital readiness and infrastructure are inconsistent.

In Cambodia digitalization is gaining traction—but there remains a notable gap in how digital leadership is practiced and how it influences teacher behaviors such as Knowledge Sharing and Emotional Intelligence. While some studies have explored digital leadership’s impact on institutional performance, few have focused on its role in promoting technology adoption through these softer, behavioral pathways. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how digital leadership affects knowledge sharing and emotional intelligence among teaching staff and how these factors, in turn, influence teaching performance and engagement with educational technologies. In the modern educational landscape, leadership is not solely defined by administrative competence but increasingly by the ability to lead within digital environments, build emotional rapport, and foster knowledge exchange. These interrelated concepts— Digital Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, and Knowledge Sharing - are pivotal in facilitating innovation, especially in the context of digital transformation in schools.

Knowledge Sharing and Educational Outcomes

Knowledge Sharing is the process by which individuals exchange information, skills, and expertise with others in the organization. In a school setting, knowledge sharing might include teachers discussing best practices, co-developing lesson plans, or mentoring each other – behaviors that enrich the school’s collective expertise. Literature in educational leadership emphasizes that a culture of collaboration and open communication is vital for continuous improvement (Stoll et al., 2006). Knowledge sharing among teachers has been linked to enhanced professional learning and innovation in pedagogy. It also supports the development of professional learning communities, where educators trust each other and work jointly towards school goals. A systematic review by Al-Kurdi et al. (2018) noted that in higher education, knowledge sharing improves organizational performance and innovation capacity. In secondary schools, knowledge sharing can translate to improved teaching quality and student outcomes by disseminating effective practices. Crucially, leadership plays a role in fostering knowledge sharing: learning-centered and transformational leaders build trust and create structures for teachers to collaborate. If principals encourage teamwork and provide time and platforms for teachers to interact, knowledge sharing behavior tends to increase. By contrast, in hierarchical or isolated cultures, teachers may be reluctant to share due to fear of judgment or competition. This is particularly relevant in Cambodia’s high power-distance culture, where teachers traditionally defer to authority and may hesitate to speak up. Therefore, establishing psychological safety and trust (discussed below) is key. Ultimately, knowledge sharing is both an intermediate outcome of effective leadership and a mechanism for school improvement – in this framework, it is positioned as a central outcome influenced by digital leadership and emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence in School Leadership

Emotional Intelligence (EI) describes the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one’s own emotions and those of others (Goleman, 1998). In leadership contexts, EI is often manifested in skills like empathy, self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, and adept social communication. High emotional intelligence in a school leader enables them to build strong relationships with staff, handle

stress and conflict calmly, and motivate and inspire teachers. Recent empirical research underscores the critical role of emotional intelligence in enhancing educational leaders' effectiveness and shaping a positive school climate (Chaudhary et al., 2024). Leaders with heightened emotional intelligence foster trust, psychological safety, and open communication, thereby increasing colleagues' willingness to participate actively in collaborative knowledge sharing (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022). For instance, a 2024 study by Munawar et al. found that leaders high in emotional intelligence can cultivate a psychologically safe environment where team members are comfortable taking risks and sharing ideas.

In the context of knowledge exchange, emotional intelligence is crucial. It facilitates open communication and helps resolve the interpersonal barriers that often hinder knowledge sharing. Malik et al. (2021) observe that individuals with higher EI are better at managing emotions and empathizing with colleagues, which builds trust and a collaborative environment for knowledge sharing. Moreover, emotional intelligence may play a mediating role in leadership dynamics. Studies have shown that EI can mediate the relationship between leadership support and employees' knowledge sharing – essentially, leaders who are supportive only translate that support into actual knowledge-sharing behavior if they also exhibit emotional intelligence (Shariq et al., 2019). In schools, this suggests that even if a principal encourages teachers to use digital tools or share practices, those efforts will be far more effective if the principal is emotionally attuned to teachers' needs and emotions. In sum, emotional intelligence complements digital leadership by adding the human-centric skills needed to motivate staff and sustain a positive, trusting culture.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model linking digital leadership, knowledge sharing, and emotional intelligence, with cultural sensitivity and capacity building as contextual enablers. Digital leadership is posited to have a direct positive effect on knowledge sharing. Leaders who effectively champion digital initiatives and model collaborative, tech-enabled practices are likely to stimulate more knowledge sharing among teachers. This link is supported by empirical evidence: Pu et al. (2025) found that academic leaders who exhibited strong digital leadership saw greater knowledge-sharing behavior in their institutions, which in turn led to positive organizational change. In secondary schools, a digitally savvy principal might, for example, implement an online platform for teachers to exchange lesson resources, thereby actively facilitating knowledge exchange. Emotional intelligence is also expected to positively influence knowledge sharing. As discussed, leaders (or even teachers) with high emotional intelligence build trust and open communication channels, making colleagues feel safe to share knowledge.

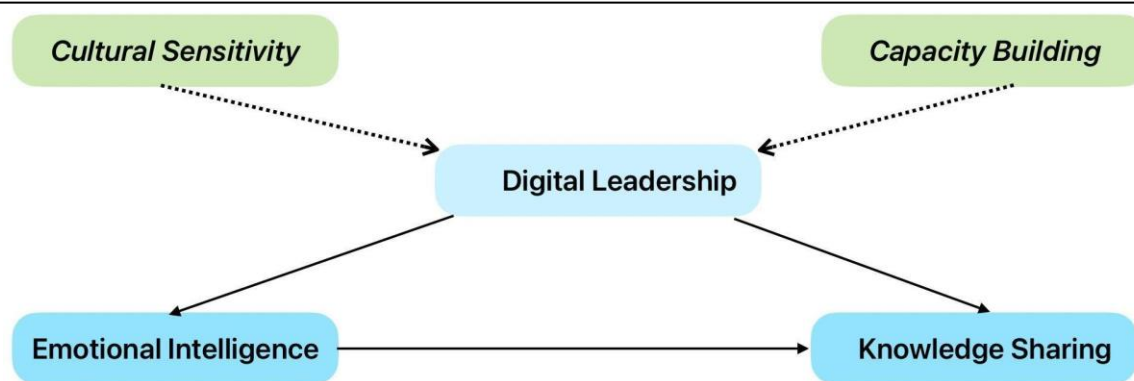


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model linking Digital Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, and Emotional Intelligence, with Cultural Sensitivity and Capacity Building as contextual enablers.

Empirical studies in organizational settings mirror this expectation – emotional intelligence correlates with higher knowledge-sharing behaviors. Emotional intelligence is included in the model as a parallel predictor of knowledge sharing, acknowledging that a leader’s emotional capabilities can independently foster a culture where teachers collaborate and share (even apart from any digital tools being used). Furthermore, we can theorize that emotional intelligence may interact with digital leadership. A digital leader who lacks emotional intelligence might face obstacles in mobilizing a team’s active involvement or might create an atmosphere of compliance rather than genuine collaboration. Conversely, an emotionally intelligent leader could amplify the impact of digital leadership initiatives by tending to teachers’ motivations and fears. Thus, emotional intelligence is expected to moderate the effect of digital leadership on knowledge sharing – when a leader is high in emotional intelligence, their digital leadership efforts, like introducing new communication platforms or data-sharing practices, should result in greater teacher knowledge sharing than if that leader had low emotional intelligence. This moderating effect aligns with Lyu’s (2024) finding that the influence of digital leadership on team knowledge sharing was stronger in teams with a positive emotional climate. In our context, a positive emotional climate is likely cultivated by an emotionally intelligent leader. Finally, knowledge sharing itself can be seen as a driver of downstream outcomes like improved teaching quality, innovation in pedagogy, and student performance.

While our framework centers on knowledge sharing as the key outcome, we note that prior studies link knowledge sharing to organizational learning and innovation (Al-Husseini et al., 2021; Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). In Cambodian schools, increased teacher knowledge sharing – facilitated by digital leadership and emotional intelligence – could help address instructional gaps and improve adaptation to new curricula or technologies, ultimately benefiting students. The framework thus positions knowledge sharing as a critical intermediate outcome on the path to educational improvements and digital transformation.

Mediating and moderating effects.

The literature suggests several mediators and moderators that clarify how and when digital leadership leads to knowledge sharing. One important mediator is trust/psychological safety. Digital

leadership practices, like transparent communication or supportive coaching in technology use, can build trust, and trust in turn encourages teachers to share knowledge freely. Emotional intelligence, as noted, can facilitate this trust – it partially mediates the effect of leadership support on knowledge sharing by enabling positive interactions. This understanding is incorporated by emphasizing the role of EI-driven trust in the narrative, though in the figure we do not explicitly show “trust” as a separate mediator to keep the model parsimonious. Instead, emotional intelligence subsumes the trust-building function. On the moderating side, contextual enablers are crucial – particularly in a developing country context. We highlight two in our model: Cultural Sensitivity and Capacity Building. These factors do not directly cause knowledge sharing but influence the strength or success of the primary relationships. Cultural sensitivity refers to leaders’ attunement to local cultural norms and values in implementing changes. In Cambodia, where hierarchical (high power-distance) and collectivist norms are strong, cultural sensitivity is theoretically relevant because it conditions how digital leadership is received. Leaders must understand and respect traditions of difference and face-saving, working within those cultural parameters to encourage openness. For example, teachers in Cambodia may be uncomfortable openly sharing ideas in front of leaders due to cultural respect for hierarchy. A culturally sensitive principal might address this by creating informal sharing sessions or by explicitly empowering junior teachers to speak, thereby mitigating cultural barriers. Research on digital leadership in multicultural settings shows that developing cultural intelligence in leaders is essential for fostering collaboration and creativity in diverse teams. Aldighrir (2024) argues that digital leaders who manage cultural diversity well establish more collaborative and innovative cultures. We expect similarly that in Cambodian schools, a leader’s cultural sensitivity will enhance the effectiveness of digital leadership on knowledge sharing. Without cultural sensitivity, well-intended initiatives (say, introducing a collaborative online forum) might fail if they inadvertently clash with local norms or are not communicated in a culturally appropriate way. With cultural sensitivity, leaders can frame and tailor knowledge-sharing initiatives so they resonate with teachers’ values (for instance, invoking the collectivist value of helping the “school community” to encourage knowledge exchange).

Capacity building is the second enabler in our framework, encompassing professional development and training for both leaders and teachers. It is rooted in the idea that people need sufficient skills and confidence to engage in the expected behaviors (in this case, digital leadership actions by principals and knowledge-sharing actions by teachers). Capacity building can include formal ICT training, leadership development programs, or ongoing mentorship and support. The theoretical relevance of capacity building comes from both technology acceptance and leadership literature: individuals are more likely to adopt new technologies or practices if they feel competent in using them. Thannimalai and Raman (2018) provide empirical support: in Malaysia, they found that the positive impact of principals’ technology leadership on teachers’ technology integration was significantly stronger when principals had undergone robust professional development in ICT. In other words, training amplified the effects of digital leadership. We integrate this finding by proposing that capacity building will moderate the Digital leadership - Knowledge sharing relationship in Cambodian schools. For example, a principal who has received extensive training in digital leadership (e.g. how to use online collaboration tools and how to lead change) is better equipped to

implement strategies that get teachers sharing knowledge. Likewise, teachers who receive training on collaborative skills or digital literacy will be more receptive and able to share knowledge via digital platforms. Unfortunately, many Cambodian schools historically have under-invested in professional development; as noted, “tailored leadership development programs” and more training opportunities are needed. By strengthening capacity building (e.g. through workshops on digital pedagogy or peer learning groups), schools create an enabling environment where digital leadership can translate into actual knowledge-sharing practice. Thus, capacity building is an indispensable support pillar for our conceptual model.

The model hypothesizes that digital leadership and emotional intelligence independently promote knowledge sharing among teachers. Emotional intelligence is also expected to augment the impact of digital leadership on knowledge sharing by fostering a supportive climate. Cultural sensitivity and capacity building act as overarching contextual factors that enable or strengthen the positive relationships. In the Cambodian private secondary school context, these enablers address unique cultural and skill-based challenges, thereby improving the overall effectiveness of digital leadership on knowledge-sharing outcomes.

Contextualizing to Cambodian Secondary Schools

This conceptual framework is particularly salient for Cambodian secondary schools undergoing digital transition. Cambodia is striving toward a “Digital Education Strategy” by 2023–2025 (MoEYS, 2023), yet schools face notable digital transformation challenges. Infrastructure and connectivity gaps persist, and many teachers are not fully confident with technology integration. Moreover, leadership in many schools has traditionally been administrative rather than visionary, resulting in a lack of clear direction for digital change (“leadership gap”). Our model addresses these issues by focusing on what leaders can do (exhibit digital leadership and emotional intelligence) and what conditions are needed (cultural sensitivity, capacity building) to foster a collaborative knowledge-sharing culture. The role of professional development (capacity building) cannot be overstated – it is the vehicle through which leadership gaps can be closed. By training current and future school leaders in digital competencies and change management, schools empower leaders to act as digital champions. Similarly, training teachers in both technical and soft skills (e.g. how to use learning management systems, how to engage in peer coaching) will enable the knowledge sharing that digital leadership tries to spark. References to professional development’s impact appear in both global and local studies. Thannimalai and Raman’s findings from Malaysia likely generalize to Cambodia: principals need ongoing learning opportunities to keep pace with digital innovations and to learn effective leadership techniques. Indeed, a recent ASEAN education ministers’ statement (2022) emphasized developing school leaders’ capacities in digital innovation. In the Cambodian school sector, some initiatives (e.g. “New Generation Schools”) have begun providing specialized training to principals on technology and 21st-century skills (Bo, 2021). Our model reinforces that such capacity-building initiatives are theoretically sound – they will enhance digital leadership and, through it, encourage the collaborative knowledge sharing essential for sustainable digital transformation in schools.

Conclusion

This conceptual framework integrates digital leadership, knowledge sharing, and emotional intelligence into a cohesive model tailored to the Cambodian secondary education context. Digital leadership and emotional intelligence are proposed as key drivers of a knowledge-sharing culture, while cultural sensitivity and capacity building serve as critical enablers that ensure these drivers are effective given the local context. The framework is grounded in recent literature and addresses the dual needs of technological and human-centric leadership in education. By applying this framework, researchers and practitioners can better understand how to cultivate school environments where teachers continually share knowledge and collectively adapt to the demands of the digital age, ultimately leading to improved teaching and learning outcomes.

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