

# The Mediating Role of Self-Directed Learning in the Relationship between Leadership for Learning and Lifelong Learning among Primary School Teachers in Selangor

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## Abstract

This study explores the mediating role of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in the relationship between Leadership for Learning (LfL) and Lifelong Learning (LLL) among primary school teachers in Selangor, Malaysia. Utilizing a quantitative survey approach, data were gathered from 400 teachers across 662 schools, employing validated instruments to measure LfL, SDL, and LLL. The findings indicate that while LfL significantly enhances SDL, it does not directly influence LLL. However, SDL fully mediates the relationship between LfL and LLL, highlighting SDL's crucial role in promoting continuous professional development. The study emphasizes the need for school leaders to cultivate an environment conducive to SDL, which in turn supports teachers' engagement in lifelong learning. These insights suggest that educational policies should prioritize the development of SDL competencies in teachers to enhance their ability to pursue LLL effectively. The research contributes to the growing body of literature on educational leadership by demonstrating how leadership practices indirectly affect teacher development through SDL. It offers practical recommendations for school leaders and policymakers to better support teacher growth, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes. Further research is suggested to identify specific strategies that can enhance SDL and to assess their impact on LLL in diverse educational settings. This study provides a valuable foundation for future investigations into the interplay between leadership, SDL, and LLL in the context of primary education.

**Keywords:** Self-Directed Learning (SDL), Leadership for Learning (LfL), Lifelong Learning (LLL), Teacher Professional Development, Educational Leadership.

**Introduction**

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the demand for continuous professional development among teachers has become increasingly paramount. The rapid advancements in technology, the introduction of new pedagogical practices, and the dynamic nature of curricula require educators to constantly update their skills and knowledge (UNESCO, 2016). This need is particularly pressing in the context of primary education, where teachers lay the foundational skills that will shape students' future learning. In Malaysia, this emphasis on continuous learning and professional development is articulated in the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025, which highlights the critical role of lifelong learning (LLL) in achieving educational excellence and maintaining a world-class education system (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

The concept of lifelong learning is not new but has gained renewed importance as educational systems worldwide grapple with the challenges posed by the 21st-century knowledge economy. Lifelong learning involves the ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge, whether for personal or professional reasons (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007). For teachers, engaging in lifelong learning is essential not only for their professional growth but also for enhancing their effectiveness in the classroom. It enables them to stay current with new teaching methods, integrate innovative technologies into their lessons, and meet the diverse needs of their students.

However, the successful implementation of lifelong learning among teachers is heavily influenced by the leadership within educational institutions. Leadership for Learning (LfL) is a relatively new paradigm that focuses on creating supportive environments that foster continuous professional development (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). LfL integrates various leadership theories, such as instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership, all of which emphasize the leader's role in promoting a culture of learning within schools. In this context, school leaders are seen as pivotal figures who can inspire and motivate teachers to engage in lifelong learning by providing the necessary resources, encouragement, and opportunities for professional growth.

The process by which leadership influences teachers' engagement in lifelong learning often involves other mediating factors, one of which is Self-Directed Learning (SDL). SDL refers to the ability of individuals to take charge of their own learning process, including identifying learning needs, setting goals, finding resources, and evaluating outcomes (Garrison, 1997). In the educational setting, SDL empowers teachers to be proactive in their professional development, making them active participants in their learning journey rather than passive recipients of top-down directives.

The mediating role of SDL in the relationship between LfL and LLL is particularly significant in the Malaysian context, where primary school teachers face unique challenges and opportunities. Understanding how SDL functions as a bridge between leadership practices and lifelong learning can provide valuable insights for developing more effective professional development programs and leadership strategies. This is especially important in Selangor, a state with a diverse educational landscape, where teachers must navigate varying levels of resources, student needs, and administrative support.

The study of the influence of SDL on lifelong learning, mediated by leadership for learning, is therefore of critical importance for several reasons. First, it addresses a significant gap in the current literature, particularly in the Malaysian context, where empirical research on the interplay between these factors is limited. Second, it provides practical implications for school leaders, policymakers, and educators by offering evidence-based strategies to enhance teachers' professional development. Third, the findings of this study can contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership by highlighting the importance of fostering self-directed learning competencies among teachers as a means of promoting lifelong learning.

In terms of utility and effectiveness, this study holds significant potential for various stakeholders in the education sector. For school leaders, understanding the dynamics of SDL and its impact on lifelong learning can help in designing leadership practices that are more aligned with the needs of teachers. For policymakers, the insights gained from this research can inform the development of policies that support the cultivation of SDL skills, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education. For teachers, the study underscores the importance of taking ownership of their learning journey, which is essential for staying relevant and effective in a rapidly changing educational environment.

In conclusion, the exploration of the mediating role of self-directed learning in the relationship between leadership for learning and lifelong learning among primary school teachers in Selangor is not only timely but also crucial for advancing educational practices. By investigating these relationships, this study aims to contribute to the development of a more robust framework for teacher professional development, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and a stronger, more adaptive education system in Malaysia.

### **Problem Statement**

In the evolving educational landscape, primary school teachers are increasingly required to engage in continuous professional development to meet the demands of modern curricula and pedagogical practices. However, despite the emphasis on Lifelong Learning (LLL) in national education policies like the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025, there is a gap in understanding how school leadership practices influence teachers' ability to engage in Self-Directed Learning (SDL), which is crucial for sustaining LLL. Specifically, the role of Leadership for Learning (LfL) in fostering SDL among teachers has not been sufficiently explored in the Malaysian context, particularly at the primary education level. This lack of understanding may hinder the effective implementation of LLL initiatives, potentially affecting the quality of education and teachers' professional growth. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the mediating effect of SDL in the relationship between LfL and LLL among primary school teachers in Selangor, with the aim of providing insights that can inform leadership practices and policy development to better support teachers in their lifelong learning journey.

### **Literature Review**

The concept of Lifelong Learning (LLL) has gained considerable attention globally, particularly in the context of professional development for educators. Lifelong Learning is defined as the continuous, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional reasons. This concept is increasingly important for teachers who must adapt to rapidly

changing educational environments and curricular demands. The Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025 emphasizes the need for teachers to engage in LLL to maintain and enhance their professional skills and competencies, aligning with the broader goals of the education system.

Leadership for Learning (LfL) is a relatively new paradigm in educational leadership, which integrates elements from various leadership theories, including instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership. LfL focuses on the role of school leaders in creating conditions that promote and sustain effective learning environments (Blasé & Blasé, 2000). According to Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter (2007), LfL involves behaviors and practices that directly influence teachers' instructional practices and, consequently, student outcomes. The concept is particularly relevant in the context of promoting LLL among teachers, as school leaders are in a pivotal position to encourage and support ongoing professional development.

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is another critical component in the context of LLL. SDL refers to a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, and evaluating learning outcomes (Brockett, & Donaghy, 2011). Garrison (1997), describes SDL as a foundational element of adult learning theory, emphasizing the importance of autonomy and self-regulation in the learning process. In the educational setting, SDL is essential for teachers who must continuously update their knowledge and skills in response to new pedagogical challenges and technological advancements. The ability to engage in SDL is increasingly viewed as a necessary competency for teachers in the 21st century.

Several studies have explored the relationships between LfL, SDL, and LLL, with findings suggesting that school leadership plays a significant role in facilitating SDL, which in turn enhances LLL. For instance, Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) and Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) highlight the importance of leadership practices that foster a culture of professional learning and encourage teachers to engage in SDL. They argue that leaders who prioritize LfL are more likely to create an environment where teachers feel supported and motivated to pursue LLL. Similarly, research by Blase and Blase (2000) indicates that teachers who perceive their leaders as supportive of their professional growth are more likely to engage in SDL and, by extension, LLL.

The relationship between LfL, SDL, and LLL is particularly pertinent in the Malaysian context, where the education system is undergoing significant reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. The emphasis on LLL in the Malaysian Education Development Plan underscores the need for effective leadership in schools to support teachers in their ongoing professional development. However, despite the recognized importance of LfL and SDL, there is limited empirical research in Malaysia that explores these constructs and their interrelationships in the context of primary education.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the mediating role of SDL in the relationship between LfL and LLL among primary school teachers in Selangor. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into how school leaders can effectively promote LLL through the facilitation of SDL. By examining these

relationships, the study seeks to inform policy and practice in Malaysian schools, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of improving the quality of education through enhanced teacher professional development.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a quantitative research design using a survey method to explore the mediating role of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in the relationship between Leadership for Learning (LfL) and Lifelong Learning (LLL) among primary school teachers in Selangor. The target population comprises 400 primary school teachers from 662 schools across Selangor.

Data collection was conducted using three validated questionnaires: the Leadership for Learning: A Research-Based Model and Taxonomy of Behaviors by Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter (2007), the Self-Rating Scale for Self-Directed Learning by Williamson (2007), and the Lifelong Learning Competence Scale by Uzunboylu and Hürsen (2011). These instruments were chosen for their reliability and relevance to the study's constructs.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, employing SPSS for preliminary analysis and AMOS-SEM for structural equation modeling (SEM). The SEM approach allowed for the examination of complex relationships between the variables and the testing of the mediation effect of SDL. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of how school leadership practices influence teachers' lifelong learning through self-directed learning initiatives.

### **Data Analysis**

To examine the mediating role of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in the relationship between Leadership for Learning (LfL) and Lifelong Learning (LLL) among primary school teachers in Selangor, a series of analytical steps were undertaken. These steps included confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), structural equation modeling (SEM), and a bootstrapping procedure to validate the mediation effect.

#### **Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)**

CFA was employed to ensure that the measurement models for LfL, SDL, and LLL were valid and reliable. The factor loadings for all items exceeded the threshold of 0.7, indicating a strong representation of the latent constructs by the observed variables. The goodness-of-fit indices (such as CFI, TLI, and RMSEA) were within acceptable ranges, confirming that the model fit the data well.

#### **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)**

SEM was conducted to test the hypothesized relationships between LfL, SDL, and LLL, with SDL posited as a mediator. The initial SEM analysis showed that:

- LfL had a significant positive effect on SDL ( $\beta = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).
- SDL had a significant positive effect on LLL ( $\beta = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).
- However, the direct effect of LfL on LLL was not significant ( $\beta = 0.065$ ,  $p = 0.254$ ), suggesting that LfL's influence on LLL may be fully mediated by SDL.

### Bootstrapping Procedure

To further validate the mediation effect, a bootstrapping procedure was applied. This method involved resampling the data 1000 times, with a 95% confidence interval, to assess the robustness of the mediation findings. The Maximum Likelihood Estimator (MLE) was used during this procedure, as recommended by Efron and Tibshirani (1993).

The results of the bootstrapping analysis provided additional support for the SEM findings:

- The indirect effect of LfL on LLL through SDL was significant ( $ab = 0.431$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), confirming that SDL mediates the relationship between LfL and LLL.
- The direct effect of LfL on LLL remained non-significant ( $c = 0.065$ ,  $p = 0.254$ ), indicating full mediation.

### Interpretation of Findings

The results confirmed that SDL fully mediates the relationship between LfL and LLL. This means that the positive influence of LfL on teachers' lifelong learning is realized primarily through its impact on enhancing SDL. In other words, leadership practices that foster a culture of SDL among teachers are crucial for promoting their engagement in lifelong learning.

This finding underscores the importance of SDL as a critical mechanism through which leadership influences teachers' professional development. It suggests that school leaders should focus on creating environments that support SDL to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared for continuous learning and professional growth.

Table 1

#### Summary of Results

Effect	Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	Significance (p-value)	Interpretation
LfL $\rightarrow$ SDL	0.62	0.000**	Significant positive effect
SDL $\rightarrow$ LLL	0.55	0.001**	Significant positive effect
LfL $\rightarrow$ LLL (Direct Effect)	0.065	0.254	Not significant
LfL $\rightarrow$ SDL $\rightarrow$ LLL (Indirect Effect)	0.431	0.002**	Full mediation

\*\*Notes\*\*: \*\* $p < 0.01$  indicating statistical significance.

These results highlight the pivotal role of SDL in bridging the gap between leadership practices and lifelong learning, emphasizing the need for school leaders to actively foster SDL to enhance teachers' professional development and engagement in lifelong learning activities. This analytical approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the mediating role of SDL, offering valuable insights for educational leadership and policy development aimed at supporting continuous professional growth among teachers.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role that Self-Directed Learning (SDL) plays in the professional development of teachers, particularly in the context of Lifelong Learning (LLL). The results demonstrate that while Leadership for Learning (LfL) significantly influences SDL among primary school teachers, its direct impact on LLL is not significant. This indicates



that LfL alone is insufficient to drive LLL; rather, it is through the mediation of SDL that teachers are empowered to engage in continuous learning.

SDL acts as a crucial link between leadership practices and teachers' commitment to lifelong learning. The positive relationship between SDL and LLL suggests that when teachers take ownership of their learning, they are more likely to pursue ongoing professional development. This finding aligns with Garrison's (1997) model of SDL, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy and self-regulation in adult learning.

Moreover, the study highlights the need for school leaders to focus on fostering a culture of SDL within their institutions. By creating environments that support and encourage SDL, leaders can indirectly enhance LLL among their teachers. This has important implications for educational leadership, suggesting that efforts to promote LLL should include strategies to develop teachers' SDL competencies.

In conclusion, the study contributes to the understanding of how LfL and SDL interact to support LLL in the Malaysian educational context. The insights gained from this research can inform leadership practices and policy development aimed at enhancing teacher professional development, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes.

### **Suggestions**

The study highlights the essential role of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) as a mediator in the relationship between Leadership for Learning (LfL) and Lifelong Learning (LLL) among primary school teachers in Selangor. The findings indicate that while LfL positively influences SDL, its direct impact on LLL is not significant, suggesting that the effectiveness of leadership practices on lifelong learning is largely mediated by the extent to which teachers engage in SDL. This underscores the importance of fostering SDL competencies in teachers to promote continuous professional development.

Given these findings, it is crucial for school leaders to create environments that encourage and support SDL. Leaders should implement strategies that empower teachers to take ownership of their learning, such as providing resources for independent study, offering opportunities for reflective practice, and encouraging collaboration among teachers. Additionally, professional development programs should incorporate elements that enhance teachers' SDL skills, ensuring they are equipped to pursue LLL autonomously.

For policymakers, the study suggests the need to emphasize SDL in the design of professional development initiatives. By recognizing the mediating role of SDL, educational policies can be more targeted in promoting LLL, leading to more effective teacher development and, ultimately, improved educational outcomes. Further research is recommended to explore the specific strategies that school leaders can adopt to cultivate SDL and to examine how these strategies impact teacher engagement in lifelong learning across different educational contexts.

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