Chapter 8

Inductive Leadership: Activating Community-Oriented Student Agency towards School Improvement

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In this chapter, we share a case study of a very successful Singapore secondary school’s efforts to implement a revised curriculum that is more student- and inquiry-oriented, i.e. to move towards purposeful learning for students. Through this case study, we have identified the notion of “agentic student leadership”, a term that we have devised, that could be leveraged to catalyse and spur school improvement through the activation of community-oriented student agency. We unpacked this notion of “agentic student leadership” into its constituent 3-stage process that had been enacted by the principal. We discuss how “agentic student leadership” constitutes 2nd order improvements in schools, as well as argue for the location of its potential contribution to the literature on school leadership and school improvement.

INTRODUCTION

As educators, we all know too well that quality school leadership matters for successful schools. We have either experienced or seen how quality school leadership, especially at the principal level, can have a positive impact on the lives of students and how they learn. Under a successful school leadership, students are more engaged and look forward to
coming to school to learn and to interact with their peers. Teachers feel energised and are empowered to give of their best to guide the learning of their students entrusted to their care. Quality school leadership gives both parents and students a sense of confidence that they can trust the school to do what is best regarding holistic development in both academic and personal growth.

Based on the research literature, we have indications of the range of leadership strategies and practices that are known to have a strong impact on the success of a school (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Day, Sammons, Leithwood, Hopkins, Gu, Brown & Ahtaridou, 2011; Leithwood and Riehl, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2008). They include, among others:

- Building vision and setting direction
- Understanding and developing people
- Designing the organisation
- Managing the teaching and learning programme

We have seen these effective leadership practices of principals who have worked via intermediaries such as managing the teaching and learning programmes and developing and managing school staff to develop the teaching and learning programmes. There is strong evidence of a complementary role of working at the organisational aspect of schools, which includes building a school vision and motivating school staff to work towards the school vision, as well as designing the organisation (e.g. resourcing of schools) in support of teachers working towards the school.

However, in our in-depth exploratory case study of a principal of a successful secondary school, we think that we have found an emerging category of leadership strategy or practice that contributes to successful school improvement. We called this practice as activating “community-oriented agentic student leadership”. It is an emerging category of successful leadership strategies and practices that contribute to school improvement via activating of student agency. None of the existing categories of successful principal leadership strategies and practices
highlighted above, as far we know, works via the entity of student, let alone through the activation of their agency.

A caveat is in order here. As this is an analytical piece, we focused on the unique role played by student agency in successful schools. Notwithstanding, teacher factor is key in the school for its improvement journey, consistent with the literature (e.g. Hattie, 2003) and that student agency is one of the improvement strategies used by the school. The activation of student agency for school improvement was used together with other strategies like teacher development, and it is not a standalone strategy.

Before elaborating the notion of community-oriented agentic student leadership, we will define what we mean by a successful principal or school and an effective principal or school. “Successful” principal or school, as a concept, is distinct from “effective” principals or schools. “Effectiveness” tends to connote the idea of attainment of quality, which Pashiardis & Johansson (2016) define as “a minimally acceptable achievement for all.” On the other hand, “successful” concerns itself with more than just academic achievements; it includes non-academic attainments such as values inculcation, personal, social and emotional development and the cultivation of skills and habits of life-long learning (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016). Another distinction relates to how we achieve the student outcomes. If the processes or procedures used to reach the outcomes are fair or equitable, leading to fair treatment of all students, it is more appropriate to term the school as a “successful school” (Pashiardis & Johansson, 2016). With this clarification, we prefer the use of the descriptor of a “successful school” where the pursuit of student outcomes is broad-based i.e. more than just a focus on academic achievements at examinations. In our Singapore context, we describe such an education that focuses on both academic and non-academic development and outcomes to be “holistic education”.

Having established the context of this study, we will describe the approach to data collection and analysis, and provide the context of the case school. Next, we present detailed examples to conceptualise the
notion of ‘community-oriented agentic student leadership’. Following which, we discuss this emerging notion in terms of the conception of second-order change in the school improvement literature and compare this notion relative to other conceptions of student leadership commonly used in Singapore schools. We will then end the chapter with a discussion of the potential contribution of this emerging notion of ‘community-oriented agentic student leadership’ to the school improvement literature.

METHODOLOGY

For our case study, we used the research protocols developed by The International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) to conduct the investigation. Through the protocols used, we collected multi-perspectival data from sources who were close to the principal such as members of the school leadership team, teachers, students and parents (Gurr, 2015; Jacobson & Day, 2007). The collection of multi-sources of data mitigates against previous research limitations of relying on self-report and single lens accounts of principals (Gurr, 2015; Jacobson & Day, 2007). The ISSPP research design originated from an earlier study of English schools (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley & Beresford, 2000).

We collected primary data via interviews and Focus-Group Discussions (FGDs) from the following groups of school stakeholders. They included the Principal (2 times; interview); members of the school leadership team (5 persons; interview); Teachers (4 teachers; FGD); parents (4 parents; FGD); and students (9 students; FGD). We interviewed members of the school leadership team, teachers, parents and students who were nominated by the school. We also reviewed the principal’s email notes on school development matters (which included teachers’ professional learning) to staff, MOE press releases, speeches by political leaders, newspaper reports and school website.

We transcribed and coded the interview and FGD data using the ISSPP protocols. Based on the draft coding scheme arising from the transcript
of the principal’s interview, we met as an entire research team to discuss and confirm the coding scheme with some modifications that we deem were necessary. The confirmed coding scheme was then used to code the rest of the data collected. We also did a triangulation of the data as required by the ISSPP protocols.

**CONTEXT OF SCHOOL**

Our case study was carried out on a successful publicly funded 6-year secondary school that has been recognised as a school offering holistic education and achieving good academic results in both absolute and value-added traditional examination test scores. It is a single-sex school from Grades 7 to 10 and a co-educational school from Grades 11 to 12. The school has some autonomy over admissions and curriculum. Unlike the mainstream government secondary schools in Singapore where the Ministry of Education (MOE) decides on the posting of the teachers to the schools, the school in our case study recruited its teachers and staff. According to the principal, at the time of the case study, it had an enrollment of about 1,700 students with about 150 teachers. According to the school’s website, it has been awarded the highest MOE school award of “School Distinction Award” with best practice awards in all five possible areas recognised by MOE. The school offers a dual track education. One of the tracks is from Grades 7 to 10 which leads to a certification by an international examination board. The latter examination is also offered by other mainstream schools in Singapore. Another track from Grades 7 to 12 which leads to an award by another international examination board that offers a more inquiry-oriented approach to learning that prepare student well for university studies. According to the principal, the average score of the students taking the latter examination has been around 40 points (out of a maximum of 45 points) over the last three years of 2014 to 2016. It has a 5-year strategic plan, which was developed by the school leadership and staff in consultation with key stakeholders, to guide the implementation of school programmes to enhance student learning. And, the school conducts annual reviews of the strategic plan to take into consideration
data and feedback gathered during the year to make the necessary adjustments to the implementation of the strategic plan.

Based on the classification system of Stoll and Fink (1996) on school improvement cultures, the school would be described to have a “moving” school culture. Besides inquiry-oriented academic learning, the school emphasises holistic education, i.e. it emphasises both academic learning and personal student development. From the school website, qualities of its ideal graduate included being principled, people-centred, reflective learners and servant leaders (School website, 2017). For its efforts in nurturing these non-academic qualities in the students, the MOE had recognised the school with an award for character development (Principal’s Email, 2009) and subsequently, a MOE Best Practice Award for Character and Citizenship Education (School website, 2017). The principal also has a highly regarded reputation in the educational community in Singapore.

**KEY FINDINGS**

We have already alluded earlier that a key finding of the project is the notion of “community-oriented agentic student leadership.” In our case study, we found that the case principal activated the students’ agentic leadership as one of the key ways to catalyse and spur school change and improvement. In the following sections, we will share what we mean by the notion of “community-oriented agentic student leadership” concerning the:

- Principal’s rationale for activating agency in community-oriented student leadership to aid in school improvement;
- Three elements that can be discerned to constitute this notion of community-oriented student leadership; and
- Pathways through which community-oriented agency in student leadership could be considered to have caused school improvement
Rationale for Utilising Community-Oriented Agency in Student Leadership for School Improvement

Based on our study, we found the following reasons for activating community-oriented student agency to facilitate school improvement. They include to (a) speed up the process of school improvement as a shift in teachers’ culture tends to be much slower to bring about, and (b) build student capacity to self-regulate themselves and support each other in their learning while waiting for pedagogies in the school to change. For instance, the principal said:

*I was very mindful when I was there, while waiting for the teachers to change, I can’t short change the students. In my early years I focused a lot on students, on changing students, and because students are coming in from primary school, they don’t have any baggage with them.*

Also, to further substantiate the reason to mitigate poor teaching, the principal said:

*...then in a way, I can mitigate [less effective teaching], because if the teachers are not so good, if their [i.e. students’] social-emotional environment is strong in terms of relationships built, then they will have the internal resources to actually do what is necessary. Even if you are not doing well, they can rely on their friends for help and support.*

In another occasion during the interview, the Principal reiterated the previous point:

*So if you can develop a sense of belonging and identity within the class, there is a support system even if teaching is not up to mark. Because the students themselves will have the agency to help each other, to do well.*
Teacher change is difficult and will take time. The evidence that lends support that teacher change is difficult and takes time came from Head 4, who said:

*I think so [that the school made effort to change teachers’ pedagogy], failed quite badly. I think there is a certain inertia and comfort level of teachers, even if you preach, and they are resistant to change, no matter how much I preach, things cannot happen...When I say inertia, the inertia is more on pedagogical styles in class, teachers being very didactic rather than using more inquiry investigative styles in class. And, that I think provided a lot of frustration for [the principal], he could not change.*

Based on the above remark by the Head, which is consistent with what literature has shown, we know that teacher change is difficult and slow. As a result, the principal leveraged community-oriented agentic student leadership to speed up the pace of improvement of the school.

### 3-Element Process

Our study showed that a 3-element process constitutes the notion of activation of community-oriented agentic student leadership:

- creating a sense of agency;
- inculcating self-regulation and
- putting in place facilitative structural constructs

We will describe the first element, with two examples, one from the non-academic domain and another from the academic domain. We want to demonstrate from the two examples given that community-oriented agentic student leadership is a school-wide phenomenon.
Creating a Sense of Agency

Non-Academic Domain: Student-led Carnival

After taking up the appointment as Principal at the school, he initiated an annual school carnival, which was organised and led entirely by the students. Teacher T4 shared on the carnival as follows: “Students practically take charge of our school carnival. With all this empowering, they realise that yes the school trusts me to be able to organise a huge activity like that.” A student in the FGD noted the opportunities for student-led events in the following manner: “Yes…There is quite a lot of student-led initiatives in the school, maybe more than the other schools; you are able to organise stuff and events for students. There is not too much teacher input; it’s more of student initiatives.”

However, according to the principal, some teachers had safety concerns about this type of activity:

*Obviously, like everything else teachers were very concerned. How can we let them organise carnivals, a lot of accidents a lot of things? But in the end nothing happened, they only underestimated the food for lunch.*

In addressing the concerns, the school put in place a safety net to create a safe-fail environment (see below) by having teachers available to serve as facilitators in student-led activities if required.

The principal’s objective for carrying out this kind of activity was to create a school environment “…where they can fail. It is not a fail-safe environment; it is a safe-fail environment. They can safely fail without any consequences.” In the process, the students learned:

*...a lot of things beyond academics...Leadership skills, how to work with people, all the other competencies that are required in the 21st century...that are not really emphasised in the formal academic curriculum.*
In support of the above point, a student remarked about the benefits of student-initiated activities:

Because through these things you learn more about planning and all that, so it will help you in your future. If we have more of these student initiatives, more people will step out of their comfort zone and expose themselves to all these. I feel that there should be more events, so that we can express ourselves more, rather than just stay at home and study. More events so that we can showcase our talents.

According to the principal, the “innocuous” event was “…student-led completely” and “now I think every year, the students are looking forward to it…”

Academic Domain: Tiered Curricular Structure

The principal implemented a three-tiered curriculum structure that promoted community-oriented agency in students in the academic domain. At Tier 1, the school delivered a traditional academic curriculum. At Tier 2, the school offered specially mounted subject-based study modules which included independent study module from which the students could choose. At Tier 3, students had opportunities to participate in open-ended project work through, for example, the implementation of Boston-based Cloud Foundation’s ArtScience Prize programme and Business Design Thinking programme. At Tier 2 and Tier 3 levels of the curriculum, the students could choose to learn topics related to their passion and areas of interest. The principal explained, “It is also a very powerful journey for the teachers because if they do the level two, they begin to discover the agency on the part of students.” To illustrate an example of the Tier 2 curriculum, the principal said:

[A student] was very curious about cloud seeding, so he decided to do it as his independent study module. He was creative enough to use his refrigerator as a way to test his idea, just use plastic containers and using the thing which he found out on the internet.
It is not a perfect model, but that journey for him is an important one.

The journey was an important one for the student, as the principal said:

First, he can answer his own question...the kid shows that he’s thinking, he is able to design the experiment, if it works, he has some hypotheses to explain why it works, that’s good enough. Once he goes in there, he knows I don’t need a teacher to answer my question. If I’m interested enough, I can go and look for questions that I can answer on my own, and I think that creates a different kind of skill.

The principal linked the design of Tier 2 curriculum to the development of a sense of agency in this manner:

So I think these are the cultural changes that are very important that you need to make and give that sense of agency to the students. Without a sense of agency, both the teachers and students, no change can take place.

The second element is the inculcation of a sense of self-regulation in the students.

Inculcation of Self-regulation

The principal defined self-regulation to be:

...relying on their intrinsic motivation to want to learn...” In addition, it also means that “self-regulation is not purely individual [underscore added] intrinsic motivation [but] comes from social interaction, from a sense of belonging to an institution, sense of belonging to an organisation, so you want to do your best not purely for yourself, but you also do your best for your organisation that you belong.
The school inculcates a sense of self-regulation in students by giving them the opportunities (1) to acquire and develop strategies and skills to learn on their own and (2) develop teamwork and community-orientation values. On the first means to develop a sense of self-regulation in the student, the principal remarked:

*I did an experiment in my second last year. I got a group of students before O-levels...teach them through things like growth mindset, and metacognitive skills in going through it [the content], again if we can introduce that earlier into the curriculum, it will be much more successful.*

On the second means of developing a sense of self-regulation, the principal confirmed:

*Yes [in response to the question of whether self-regulation would include the teaching of values]. The values were already there. When I came in, there was no issue with values, in general the kids have the orientation, but it is not systematic. What I did was I seized the opportunity to systematise it, that’s all.*

The third element of the notion of community-oriented agentic student leadership is wrapping structural constructs around isolated events involving the activation of community-oriented agency in student leadership to normalise the latter into the students’ mindsets.

*Facilitative Structural Constructs*

Structural constructs were put up to ensure that the idea of agency and self-regulation are routines in the context of a wider community, i.e. a sense of self-regulation that is anchored to social or community support to foster intrinsic motivation. In other words, self-regulation is not purely an individual outlook but stems from the motivation to do well for the sake of the organisation by developing a sense of belonging to an organisation.
While the research identified many examples of such structural constructs, four will be elaborated to provide a flavour of this finding. These structural constructs sought to address the question of “how the reward you put in encourages community, so how do you achieve competition without compromising collaboration,” said the principal.

**L1R5\(^a\) Class Targets**

Instead of individual targets, each class set class targets to create a common mutual goal. That is, every class decided on a target L1R5 score to work towards as a group. According to the principal, “What is important is that it is a class L1R5, so they can help each other to attain it.” For these class targets, the school focused on the value-added performance of the students. The principal explained:

*We try to encourage everybody to move. So we look at measures that look at value-added rather than absolute criteria so that the weaker classes are not disadvantaged. We look at delta as opposed to absolute, and if you want to choose a lower target, we have no issue with that. As long as we see improvement, the whole idea is to encourage movement forward.*

The principal’s orientation towards academic target setting is consistent with the school’s approach to the school-level academic target when Head 5 said:

*If we do not get band 1, it’s fine. It’s just a target that we should aim and look toward to, but if we don’t get it, he [the principal] says it’s fine and the board is all right with it, so long as we done our best.*

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\(^a\) L1R5 refers to the standard means to compute the academic performance of a secondary school student in Singapore, for use to apply for admission into Junior Colleges, a post-secondary institution (MOE, 2017).
And, Head 5 added:

...so long as all the processes are in place, the boys learn, they are able to move on, maximise their opportunities in the next level of higher education.

Mixed Ability Grouping

Previously, the school grouped students based on their scores from the previous national examination. When the principal came into the school, he “…changed that and it’s all mixed ability,” as mixed ability grouping could be leveraged to help in the promotion of the community identity of the students. Teacher T4 in an FGD explained how the school promoted community spirit via mixed ability grouping:

What I liked about what he did was the mixed ability classrooms. Some teachers may not agree. Immediately it removed this stigma that students have, that if I am in a certain class, I am so called tail end. I feel putting students of various abilities in a class, somehow they kind of motivate each other, and stigma is not attached to a particular class.

A member of the school leadership team Head 1 attested to the benefit of this form of grouping:

There is this one thing that [the principal] introduced, and that is the mixed class banding, where he believes that when you mix, in a class, you have the strong, weak and mediocre, you put them together, if you have the community spirit correct, they will all help each other.

Using Head 1’s word, it seems that the sense of community spirit in the school is indeed “correct”. A student in the FGD said, “I feel [the school] is one big community, where everyone looks out for each other, treat each other as brothers, and we will try to help each other as much as
possible” Another student said that the school culture of community spiritedness was prominent:

_I think it’s a very good community, and everyone is quite inclusive of each other, it’s quite easy to make friends. It goes beyond just helping in studies, outside of school. We get to know everyone in your class, in your CCA quite well, that’s what makes it more of a community” and “I think [the school] is special in the sense that, you can get friends really quickly, you can be accepted into the community really fast, and I think the reason for that, it has things like orientation camp, ace camp, that really focuses on bringing the community together. I think that is something really special for [the school]._

Thus, a number of the school stakeholders, besides the principal had attested to the promotion of the community spirit when the principal embarked on mixed-ability grouping. From another perspective, this evidence does positively indicates that the case school is “successful,” going by the definitions of “successful” schools in the literature (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Pashiardis & Johansson, 2016).

**Criteria Reference Testing Approach**

In the adoption of mixed ability grouping, the idea of top and bottom classes was done away with, as the principal said, “…we did away with the idea of top-class and bottom class.” In what the principal called “criteria reference testing approach,” students worked together as a class to attain a gold, silver or bronze rating based on points awarded for various class achievements. Elaborating, the principal said, “…we go for criteria reference testing approach, if you meet that number of points, you get gold, and if not you get silver, and everybody should aim at least for a bronze…” The principal further added, “And in order for them to get gold, they have to work as a class to achieve it. It’s not a question of an individual spike that can do it. It’s only as a class.” Again, the implementation of criteria reference testing attests to the principal’s desire to promote a spirit of community-ness in the school.
Head 1 confirmed the fostering of a class and community spirit via mutual help within mixed ability grouping of classes thus:

There is this one thing that [the principal] introduced, and that is the mixed class banding, where he believes that when you mix, in a class, you have the strong, weak and mediocre, you put them together, if you have the community spirit correct, they will all help each other.

Team-Based Recognition Structure (in Non-Academic Areas)

Besides the above examples, the principal implemented more instances of community-oriented recognition structures. For instance, the school awarded points to encourage collaborative competition. The goal of this approach was to strengthen camaraderie, build a sense of community and create an environment of mutual support, and yet spur some competition. An example of the awarding of points that encouraged collaborative competition was in the area of giving points for class attendance and class participation in school events e.g. cross country. The idea, said the principal, was to:

...set other parameters like attendance to build sense of belonging...[in] things like cross country, we award points for class participation, so a whole range of structure of recognition in such a way that there is competition, but yet there is collaboration within a smaller unit. We take the unit of a class as the basis for the competition, but within the class we encourage collaboration.

School leadership team member Head 1 has this to say about the community spirit of the students fostered via team-based recognition structures:

From the students, I think the community spirit is very evident. Rallying the school together is very evident under principal’s leadership, because of his belief in giving opportunities to the students. For example, he believes in community, he brought about
things like the fraternity concept, and how to rally, rather than just go for...everything must be first, there are many different aspects, rather than just one final factor that determines the champion, it actually comprises many different aspects. For example, class attendance may be one aspect, participation in cross-country is another aspect. So all these aspects, everyone has to work together, and your success is not determined by one sole factor. That helps to bring that community spirit.

Again, the implementation of the team-based approach to recognising students attests to and triangulates to the principal’s desire to cultivate a sense of community among the students.

Two strands of pathways to successful school improvement, defined as gains in student achievement and other non-academic achievements, exist in the literature: The direct pathway and the indirect pathway. We will first present the findings related to the direct pathway and following that, those related to the indirect pathway.

**Direct Pathway to Improvement to Student Learning: Student Agency**

The principal believed that student agency in itself is the main driver of school improvement. With intrinsic motivation, students have a reason to succeed, and good academic scores are achieved as a by-product. For instance, he said, “I personally believe that [agency], that is the main driver of school improvement. Not academics. If you get your agency right, academics, good results become a by-product. Because they have a reason to do well, they have a reason to succeed. There is a reason when they encounter obstacles and issues, they have a support system to lift them up.”

The above quotation alludes to the fact that the activation of student agency is coupled with “a reason” i.e. the fostering of the students’ sense of identity and belonging to the school, a community. We will elaborate
the activation of community orientation while simultaneously activating the students’ agency next.

**Sense of Identity to a Caring Community**

When the principal activated the students’ sense of agency, he did so in conjunction with their sense of the community to which the students belong. The school created an environment of care and support such that students can help each other when they encounter difficulties. For example, he said:

*I think I earlier said, if I am in sec 1, I come in from a different school, I don’t have friends, I come into an environment where the environment is very welcoming, very warm, have seniors who care for me, I have a school where in class, I am encouraged to look out for each other, not to put down any individual in the class, if somebody get[s] put down, the teacher and the Head of Level attends to it, and makes sure that the kid learns, apologises to the class, then in that environment I get a sense that I am not a digit, I am not here for myself, I am here to realise the fullest of my talents in the community that cares for me. When that happens, when I encounter difficulty, I can’t get answers from the teachers, I got friends to get answers from. Eventually when I go to O-Level, I don’t want to let my class down, my school down, I will do my best.*

The principal’s theory was borne out by the following example as related by the principal:

*...the kind of camaraderie that they [the students] have [in canoeing CCA], the way they help each other [in their academics] is really tremendous. That gave me the inspiration to try to strengthen all this. Whether at the class level or CCA level, to strengthen the sense of community.*
This latter point is reiterated in another occasion during the interview when he said:

Like I said, I have people who score about 220 and got 6 points eventually, and the factor that made the change is actually not an academic factor. It’s the sense of belonging, he was in the right CCA, he got tremendous support from his own classmates, he did fine.

The logic to the principal’s theory is that with this sense of socialisation within a caring community, students then enjoy their experience in the school. The principal’s notion of the direct pathway of improvement is distinct from the perspectives of teachers. For instance, Teacher 1 said:

I think school life has become more interesting for them, and they really enjoy it. I can see that sometimes during the student led assembly, they have performances, and the students enjoy it, like what I mentioned earlier about flash mobs and students performing, it has become lively.

Teacher 4 said: “A happy student will help them with the overall education, and it will make the teachers happy also. I feel very proud when I tell people I teach in [the school].”

The principal and teachers adopted different perspectives with regards to how student agency leads to school improvement. For the principal, this improvement is achieved via a sense of belonging to the community, while for the teachers, it is through the creation of enjoyment and pride. With a sense of belonging to the community, the students are more likely to enjoy their learning and experience pride.

In sum, the pathway of improvement, according to the principal, is

...it is the basic sense that I belong to this community. My identity is with this community, what happens to this community matters, not only to me, but to the entire community. And as a consequence
of that sense of socialisation, I enjoy my experience there. It’s not creating enjoyment; it’s creating a sense of identity, a sense of belonging.

This last principal’s quotation is reinforced by what he had said regarding the promotion of a community spirit when he embarked on mixed-ability grouping.

**Indirect Pathway to Improvement to Student Learning:**
**Improvements in Teacher Beliefs and Pedagogy**

Agentic student leadership strategies could lead to improvements in teacher beliefs and pedagogy. For instance, the principal cited the example of a teacher in this manner:

*One of the maths teachers was saying she has been very religious in an algorithmic way of teaching maths, but after going through the Art-Science program, where they suddenly see, ‘you let the students try out things, they are actually capable of coming up with very interesting things’ that now she has, in a way, review how she teach maths.*

We term this pathway as “indirect” as the effect on a student was achieved through mediating variables like how the teacher will teach in this case. We contrast this situation with the above “direct” pathway. In the “direct” pathway, the principal’s actions directly impacted on students, i.e. their agency.

**DISCUSSION**

**Second-order Change**

The educational leadership research community differentiates two types of changes — first-order and second-order changes. First-order improvements relate to incrementally adjusting current practice, without modifying the underlying beliefs (Cuban, 1988; Marzano, Waters, &
McNulty, 2003). Second-order improvements are those that seek to change teachers’ fundamental beliefs, leading to new ways of seeing and doing (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2003). While Hallinger (2003) also noted that second-order changes lead to the normative structure of the school, i.e. beliefs, the commitment of the staff, he added another perspective to second-order changes, i.e. that of capacity building (Hallinger, 2003). Elmore (2007) distinguished first-order from and second-order changes based on technical and cultural changes respectively.

It is a foregone conclusion that the indirect improvements to teacher beliefs and pedagogy constitute second second-order school changes. However, we are asking ourselves whether or not the activation of the agency of students for school improvement would qualify as a second-order change. While we know that second-order changes arise from modifications to the structures, beliefs of the teachers and culture of the school, our case study showed that activating student agency had led to school improvement and brought about much cultural change in the school. For example, Teacher 4 in an FGD said, “With all this empowering, they[the students] realise that ‘yes the school trusts me to be able to organise a huge activity like that.’ ” Then again, the principal says:

_These are the cultural changes that are very important that you need to make and give that sense of agency to the students. Without a sense of agency [in] both the teachers and students, no change can take place. That is the first necessary step for autonomy of learning for students. If the students don’t take charge of their learning, they will never be able to fly. If you have all along teachers telling you what to do and you just wait for instructions, you will never learn._

Thus, we could tentatively conclude that the activating of the agency of students is a second order change. This augurs well for the case school. Second-order improvements result in deep changes and hence, are thought to be irreversible. That is, it is not possible to revert to previous
actions and habits (Brownlee, 2000). Fullan & Miles (1992) explains the irreversibility of change as a deep change because of modifications to the structures, beliefs of the teachers and culture of the school. First-order changes are reversible and called “superficial” (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 745).

**Agentic Student Leadership versus General Student Leadership and “Student Voice”**

In our case study, we have described a concept of a community-oriented agentic student leadership that is distinguishable from the related concepts of student leadership as encountered in our Singapore education context. Student leadership is a commonly used concept of education in Singapore. For example, the former Minister of Education communicated that “As our country grows and matures, we need young people like you to realise that you have the potential to become a great leader who can effect positive change in our society. We need young leaders who will contribute to make society a better place for all” (Heng, 2013). The Prime Minister of Singapore calls the young leaders of Singapore to change the place and the world, for the better, as he says, “You are our future. You are idealistic, full of energy and passion. Go forth, change Singapore, change the world, for the better” (Lee, 2013). In the two quoted examples, student leadership refers to a calling of the students to take up leadership in the future. In our case study, agentic student leadership refers to the immediate application of student leadership by the student themselves for school improvement, and not when after they have left the school. We acknowledge that the agentic student leadership honed in these school improvement instantiations should also be beneficial to the development of the students taking up leadership in the future.

Another instance where we would distinguish this notion of community-oriented agentic student leadership from is “student voice.” “Student voice” can mean two things: (a) soliciting pupils’ views on schooling matters (Arnot et al, 2004) and (b) offering pupils’ opportunities for involvement in decision-making in schools (Flutter, 2007a). Between the
two meanings, being the nebulous concept that it is (Flutter, 2007b), student voice as a concept means more to “...hearing what pupils have to say about teaching, learning and schooling...to look at things from the pupil perspective — and the world of school can look very different from this angle. Being prepared — and being able to see the familiar differently and to contemplate alternative approaches, roles and practices...” (Rudduck & Flutter, 2003, p. 141). Based on the above analysis of student voice, the description stops short of involving students in the act of improving schools, let alone activating their agency. In our case study, agentic student leadership seems to be more than student voice. While we argue that agentic student leadership would be different from student voice, we postulate that agentic student leadership might lead students to develop a more passionate student voice in the future.

Potential Contribution of Agentic Student Leadership to the School Improvement Literature

The key contribution and hence, the implication to the theory of this exploratory research is arguably the revelation of an emerging form of leadership practice when harnessed, can contribute to school improvement. The improvement would arise when the principal activates students’ agency with a simultaneous focus on community well-being. In fact, it is the latter that serves to provide the raison d’etre of the activation of the student. This community-oriented student agency can become a routine through facilitative structural constructs that enable its constant practice in the community. At the beginning, we highlight four categories of leadership practices and strategies for school improvement — (a) vision and directions setting, (b) people development, (c) organisational design and (d) educational programme management. Among the latter four categories, there is no explicit reference to the variable of student in school improvement, let alone the principals’ role in the activation of student leadership agency to contribute to school success.

Thus, it is not unreasonable for us to conclude tentatively, based on this exploratory case study, that the principal’s practice of activating agentic
student leadership is arguably a potential contribution to knowledge in the literature of the leadership practices and strategies of successful school principals that should be further studied. We propose that there should be a larger scale study of the phenomenon of utilising, by school principals, of agentic student leadership for school success. The outcomes of the large-scale study would address any shortcoming of the conclusion that we have drawn from our case study based on a single school, albeit an in-depth study.

While this case study documents specific examples from the case school, it is critical for one to be circumspect when applying agentic student leadership in one’s practice context. For example, to another practitioner, the specific example of basing criterion-referenced testing decisions on L1R5 score may not be suitable. The critical point is the principle of designing facilitative structural constructs that will enable student agency to become a routine for achieving both personal and community ends. The practitioner in question needs to find or design an approach of assessment or otherwise that matters to the school and yet could serve the purpose of nudging students’ agentic leadership towards community ends.

CONCLUSION

We would like to suggest a possible nomenclature to this notion of the principal activating agentic student leadership as “inductive leadership”. The latter term is an apt name to capture the actions of the principal in this case study. “Inductive” connotes the idea of bringing forth, causing the formation of, producing and in this case, the bringing forth of agentic student leadership. And, the latter consists of all the features of what the protagonist principal in the case study has believed in and done: activation of student agency without losing sight of the community end to which the activation of student agency is put towards.

Although this notion of inductive leadership to stir up the community-oriented agentic student leadership emerged from one in-depth case
study, our finding tallies with the anecdotal evidence from our colleagues, both practitioners and academic researchers, about how to energise a school for school improvement. It is about giving the students voice, space, support and direction to channel their energies towards both personal and community ends. Within the broader social context of the Singapore education system, we would shape and guide the youthful and passionate energies of our students towards something larger than themselves — their friends, families, communities and country.

As a final comment, we wish to note that as this is an analytical piece, we thought it was interesting to focus on the unique role played by student agency in successful schools. Notwithstanding, teacher factor is key in the school for its improvement journey and that student agency is but one of the improvement strategies used by the school. In fact, the principal fired all cylinders in its school improvement efforts, which meant that the activation of student agency for school improvement was used together with other strategies like teacher development and the like.

In the following last chapter, we will distil the key lessons learned from this chapter and the preceding chapters on how school leaders should bring about change successfully in education through enacting various innovations. In the nut shell, we should put our focus and resources on teachers in the system as they are the primary agents to bring about significant and sustainable improvements in learning that can move closer towards purposeful learning — Teachers at the Heart of System Change.

References


Inductive Leadership


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