Successful Principalship: Beyond Leadership Practice and Teacher Agency

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study of successful principalship in a Singapore school, conducted as part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) to examine the characteristics and practices of successful principals. The study followed the research protocol developed by the ISSPP, consisting of the collection of multi-perspectival qualitative data from the school leadership team, teachers, students and parents. Analysis was grounded and then categorised into key topics specified by the ISSPP. The study contributes to the literature on leadership by affirming the importance of the leaders’ values, beliefs and identities in shaping leadership practice, and the development of student agency as a pragmatic intermediate strategy that can be used to convince teachers to change their pedagogy, which takes a longer time to achieve. The study suggests a need to investigate in more detail the possible use of student agency as a catalytic leverage for teacher epistemic change. In addition, the study underscores the need for further research on the principal’s use of networking to achieve school goals. The findings are based on one specific case and transferability is therefore limited. In addition, the school studied is not a typical mainstream school in Singapore and the principal is also atypical in terms of his training and prior experiences. Nevertheless, many of the findings are congruent with existing studies on principalship in Singapore.

Keywords: Successful principalship, student agency, leader’s values, beliefs and identities

Introduction

The case study of Trinity School (a pseudonym) was conducted as part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) (www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp). The aims of the ISSPP, which started in 2001, include re-examining existing theoretical perspectives on school headship through insights from new empirical international research (Day 2005). The common research question is ‘What are the characteristics and practices of successful principals and what influences these?”
Although the ISSPP is an international project, apart from a study of two schools in Shanghai (Wong 2005), the rest of the inaugural studies were of schools in the Western world, though the countries present very different social, political and educational contexts and indicators of success (Day 2005; Moos & Johansson 2009). Subsequently, as part of the ISSPP, in 2008, a model of successful leadership was developed based on three case studies in Indonesia (Raithani 2008) while in 2010, Wang (also see Wang, Gurr & Drysdale 2016) examined how principals in four primary schools in Singapore led their schools to achieve educational excellence.

Trinity School is a publicly funded 6-year secondary school in Singapore with a history of over 150 years. It is recognised as a school that offers quality holistic and academic education. The school has won many of the Ministry of Education’s school awards such as the School Distinction Award and Character and Citizenship Education award. Catering to 1,700 students with a staff strength of 150 teachers, the school has autonomy over admissions, staff recruitment and curriculum matters. The principal studied is unique in that he did not go through the centralised leadership training which the majority of principals in Singapore attend. Despite this lack of formal training, the principal, Mr. Chan, was able to maintain the academic performance of the school and to further the school’s achievement by becoming one of a handful of Singapore schools approved by the Ministry to offer the dual track education, comprising the Integrated Programme Track (Grades 7 to 12) and the Cambridge O-levels (Grades 7 to 10) track. The Integrated Programme Track offers a more inquiry-oriented curriculum and approach to learning. Garnering the Integrated Programme status was paramount for the school, as it needs to compete with other similarly achieving schools for students. The story of how Mr. Chan was able to make an already reputable school even more successful affirms the importance of the principal’s personal characteristics, in particular his motivation, identity and values (Leithwood & Day 2007). Given that specific successful leadership practices, while possessing common elements, are nevertheless context-sensitive (Leithwood 2005; Wang, Gurr & Drysdale 2016), we propose that the case study of Trinity School is valuable in adding to the rich kaleidoscope of successful principalship crafted under ISSPP.

**Literature Review**

Since this study builds on the ISSPP’s work, this literature review focuses mainly on the ISSPP’s key findings, in support of the ISSPP’s effort to build on previous evidence. In his synthesis of seven countries’ ISSPP reports, Leithwood (2005) identified three main leadership practices that resonate with transformational leadership – setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organisation – as the basis of successful leadership. With respect to the setting of direction, Leithwood (2005) observed that students’ learning was central. In developing people, the successful principals provided intellectual stimulation and modelled important values and practices. Successful principals were further involved in redesigning the organisation through encouraging cultures of collaboration and distributing
leadership. Though the literature on Singapore principals is limited, there is support for the need for transformational leadership in Singapore, affirming the need for school leaders to set direction, develop people and design a positive school culture (Retna & Ng 2010).

With respect to factors that give rise to successful school leadership, Leithwood’s (2005) conclusion is that the dispositions, motivations and beliefs of successful principals were critical. Similarly, Day (2005) emphasised the inner values and philosophies of the successful principals, noting that they possess ‘a strong sense of agency, core sets of deeply held values and moral and ethical purpose, and immense amounts of emotional understandings of themselves and others’ (p. 536). The ISSPP conducted follow-up cases in six of the original seven countries, and in reviewing these findings, Moos and Johansson (2009) surfaced additional factors, including an increase in collaboration with parents and the external community, a greater distribution of leadership to middle leaders and teachers, and the design and management of schools as communities held together by a shared sense of identity.

Besides the two articles that synthesised the key ISSPP’s findings, as this paper concerns a school in Singapore, we examined the other Singapore-based ISSPP study. Wang (2010) and Wang, Gurr and Drysdale (2016) found similar evidence of the principals’ personal qualities, beliefs and values guiding their practice. The four successful primary school principals also redesigned school structures, provided professional development, and established collaborative relationships both within and beyond the school community, including with parents and the school board. In addition, the principals set directions in which students’ learning and holistic development were central, and built upon the legacy of past principals. Wang’s research concluded with a 6E model of successful school leadership: educate, envision, energise, engage, enable and embrace. The model is consistent with earlier ISSPP findings about the importance of direction (envision), developing people (energise), the principal’s personal qualities, values and beliefs (enable), and developing quality relationships with various stakeholders (engage). A review of the leadership qualities and styles of school principals in Singapore (Ng, Nguyen, Wong & Choy 2015a) was consistent with Wang’s and colleagues’ finding (Wang, 2010; Wang, Gurr & Drysdale 2016) that effective Singapore principals demonstrated positive personality traits, such as being confident, open-minded, inspiring, empathetic and willing to trust others.

In the Singapore literature on school leadership, besides transformational leadership, the other key leadership practice identified is instructional leadership. A review of 27 papers from 1984 to 2014 on instructional leadership practices by Singapore principals indicated that the principals played an active role in defining the school vision, building pedagogical capacity, improving the school-wide curriculum and promoting a good learning climate (Ng, Nguyen, Wong & Choy 2015b). Another key finding was the influence of the Ministry of Education’s policies and initiatives on the principal’s framing of school vision and goals. Chua (2018) found that three principals adhered to the direction of the Ministry’s policies when translating and adapting them for implementation for their schools. In 2017, an
empirical study on instructional leadership in Singapore surfaced similar findings with regard to the influence of key national policies and initiatives and of principals keeping their predecessors’ vision when taking on principalship (Nguyen, Ng & Yap 2017). The latter finding is consistent with principals building on the legacy of past principals in the energise dimension of Wang’s 6E model (Wang 2010; Wang, Gurr & Drysdale 2016). An additional characteristic that Nguyen, Ng and Yap (2017) suggested reflected the local culture was the pragmatism of the principals in doing what was required to achieve annual goals while cognisant of the need for a long-term direction. This pragmatism was also mentioned in a separate study involving a survey of principals, vice-principals, key personnel and teachers in 224 schools and a series of focused group discussions (Goh et al. 2015).

**Methodology**

Trinity School meets the criteria developed by the ISSPP for the selection of a successful school:

a) In 2009, the school received the most prestigious award in the Ministry of Education’s Masterplan of Awards, the School of Excellence Award, as well as the Outstanding Character Development Award

b) The principal is highly regarded in the educational and academic communities in Singapore

The research protocols developed by the ISSPP were used to guide data collection and analysis. Besides the principal, multi-perspectival data were collected from the school leadership team, teachers, students and parents. This addresses a current gap in research on Singapore principals, which gathered perspectives on the principals mainly from the school leadership team and teachers (Ng et al. 2015b). Data from the principal and five members of the school leadership team (one vice-principal (VP) and four heads) were collected via interviews, with the principal interviewed twice, once at the beginning of the study and the other at the end. Teacher, parent and student data were collected through three focus group discussion sessions with 4 to 8 participants in each group. Data from documents such as the principal’s emails to teachers, newspaper reports and school website were also analysed.

The interview and FGD data were transcribed. Analysis consisted of two stages. The first stage was ground-up coding, with pertinent data extracted, put into individual cells in an Excel spreadsheet and assigned with a preliminary code, including in vivo coding, and a corresponding memo. The preliminary codes were then categorised into broader themes (Saldaña 2016). For example, the preliminary codes of giving students leeway, giving students trust and space, empowers the students, and giving students choice were re-categorised as developing student agency. The third stage of the coding was guided by ISSPP protocols, which consisted of key topics, main themes, and evidence from the various participants. The main topics included:

1. Major challenges of the school context
2. Strategies used to address these challenges
3. Perceived qualities and contributions of the principal
4. Beneficial effects on school culture and student behaviour.

**Setting the Stage – The School and the Community**

Trinity School is a school with an illustrious history. In Singapore, Trinity School is an example of an independent school that offers what is known as an Integrated Programme (IP). While most secondary schools in Singapore offer a 4-year programme (grades 7 to 10) culminating in the Cambridge O-Level examination at grade 10, IP schools offer a 6-year course (from grades 7 to 12) which leads to the GCE A-Level examination or the International Baccalaureate (IB) examination at grade 12. Trinity school offers both the O-level track and the IP track, with students in the latter track moving on to the Senior High School to sit for the IB examination. Table 1 provides a summary of the academic programmes.

**Table 1: Summary of Academic Programmes in Trinity School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Academic Programme</th>
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| Grades 7 – 10   | - O Level Track – students move on to a Junior College or to a Polytechnic  
|                 | - The IP Track – prepares students for the Senior High School without needing to sit for the O level |
| Grades 11-12    | - The IB programme for students from the IP track       |
| (Senior High School) |                                                  |

Compared to mainstream government secondary schools in Singapore, independent schools have a greater degree of autonomy to design their curriculum and to recruit their teachers. Trinity School has about 1,700 students, 160 teaching staff and 40 support staff. It has a board of governors, which includes alumni and parent representatives. The Principal, Mr. Chan, led the school for seven years. He was an alumnus of Trinity School, and Trinity School was the first and only school he led. Mr. Chan had previous leadership experiences holding a senior position in different divisions in the Ministry of Education (MOE). Although Mr. Chan was not a direct MOE hire, being on secondment to MOE from the National Institute of Education, he was a qualified teacher who previously taught in school for three years.

Emphasised by nearly all the stakeholders interviewed, Trinity School has a very rich tradition, ‘a tradition of care for the larger community’ (VP), for the students and staff, for the ‘last, the lost and the least’ (VP, HOD 2, Parent E), with Mr. Chan taking care to continue and reinforce this tradition. In addition, teachers, students and parents all mentioned the school’s history of focusing on moral and character development, on the spiritual aspect, with the VP attributing the development of the students’ ‘souls’ to the caring environment.
There is a lot of focus on moral development, ... the teachers always emphasise ... do the right thing. (Student)

I think the soul part is developed because of the care ... care that the school leaders have for the teachers, the care that teachers have for the students, and care that students have for students. (VP)

Teachers and students affirmed that there is a nurturing and positive relationship between teachers and students, and amongst students. Students agreed that their teachers ‘support our studies, and they also put in effort to help us ... get our optimum results’. Parents who were in the FGD were generally satisfied with the education that Trinity School provided for their children, with comments like, ‘So they [the children] got into junior college, to me, [the school] has done its job’, sharing that their children would miss Trinity School when they graduate.

During Mr. Chan’s tenure as a principal, Trinity School was approved by the Ministry to offer the dual track education comprising the Integrated Programme track and the O-level track. Trinity School also started the IB Diploma programme. Considering how new the IB programme is in Trinity School, it has performed well, with the students scoring an average of 40-41, which are amongst top performing scores internationally.

The School Principal

Mr. Chan was invited by the Trinity School Board to become principal to help the school attain the Ministry’s permission to implement the Integrated Programme, which was initiated by the Ministry in 2004. The Board used its networks to identify suitable alumni who could be appointed to be the school’s principal. As a prominent alumnus with close links to the Ministry, Mr. Chan was identified as a viable candidate.

Mr Chan’s stint in the Ministry, during which he served in two divisions in a senior position, possibly explains the staff’s and parents’ perception of him as being ‘good at looking at the helicopter view’ (Teacher 3), and ‘able to see different perspectives’ (Parent E). Mr. Chan himself commented that his work in MOE helped him to ‘see things at a very high level, at a systemic level, so ... in terms of vision and understanding the trends, you have an advantage’.

Prior to his work in the Ministry, Mr. Chan was an academician with a local university, after serving as a teacher for three years. When Mr. Chan was invited to become the principal of Trinity School, he was about to return to the university. However, when the Trinity School Board comprising alumni spoke to him ‘about a need for Trinity School to move up to the next level’ as it was ‘lagging behind’, he felt he had a ‘responsibility’ as an alumnus to do something ‘to change the scenario’. Mr. Chan felt he could do ‘something ... meaningful changing the lives of young people that are entrusted to our care’.

Although he had never been a principal before, nor had he attended Singapore’s standardised training to be a principal, Mr. Chan had an astute understanding of the role of leadership,
possibly as he had held senior positions in the Ministry, and his own extensive reading, as an academic, on school improvement and leadership. When asked for his perception of the role of leadership, he was very clear about the distinction between leadership and management, but also the importance of both.

I think when I took on the job and even before, I was quite clear what leadership is. So, it’s a matter of understanding the starting point, and knowing where the end point is, and to figure out an iterative plan to get there.

A leader must also be a manager, but a manager is not a leader. The crux of the matter is that if you are a leader and you can’t manage, you can’t do anything.

As a leader, it’s about giving people clarity about where they should be going, and I think the more challenging part is to create the conditions to enable them to go where they want to go. So I think it’s about persuading them that they should be going there, to understand what are the fear factors on the part of the people, ... and to try to structure a gentle transition for people. (authors’ emphasis in bold)

Mr. Chan was ‘crystal clear’ about his end point and in sharing this end point with stakeholders. He articulated his ‘end point’ as to ‘improve learning for the students ultimately’ but noted that ‘in order for your students to learn, the teacher must model the learning’, thus implying the enhanced capacity of teachers is the other end point. His ‘ideal state’ is a school where students have the ‘agency to discover their potential’ and teachers ‘shift from a mode of just giving information, preparing them [the students] for just examination, to designing and facilitating learning conditions for the students’.

However, Mr. Chan was acutely aware that pedagogical change for teachers is difficult and ‘takes a long time to happen’; he saw ‘change in a ten or fifteen-year time frame’ and thus viewed his seven years in Trinity School as time ‘to set a firm foundation’ for the succeeding principal to build on and to take the school to the next level.

**Major Challenges of Trinity School**

From the Board’s perspective, the major challenge that Mr. Chan was brought in to address was the need to move the school ‘to the next level’ (principal) so that Trinity school could remain a ‘school of choice’. As an Independent school, Trinity had to remain relevant, as there was strong competition amongst the top schools in Singapore for student talent. One strategy to achieve this was for Trinity School to ‘secure the Integrated Programme’. However, to Mr. Chan, this was ‘the least of the challenges’ because securing the Integrated Programme was mainly about ‘understanding the politics ... what the ministry wants in the form of Integrated Programme and having alumni who were able to help’. Within three years of becoming principal, Mr. Chan secured MOE’s approval for Trinity school to implement the Integrated Programme and the international baccalaureate (IB). As expressed by HOD 1, the IP is ‘one of the legacies that he [Mr. Chan] will leave behind’; HOD 1 perceived that Mr. Chan made the IP and IB possible as ‘he had the clout at that point to open doors’.
From Mr. Chan’s perspective, the main challenge in Trinity School was ‘the mindset, the skill set of teachers’ to design and implement the IP, to provide a more ‘diverse form of education’ (HOD 2), and to change teachers’ pedagogy from a more traditional lecture, drill and practice mode. The teachers interviewed agreed that there were teachers in the school, including themselves, who were still struggling with new pedagogies proposed by Mr. Chan, such as concept-based teaching. Another challenge that Mr. Chan identified was actually a strength of the school, the teachers’ ‘extreme’ care for their students, which resulted in the teachers doing all the planning ‘on behalf of the students’. Mr. Chan believed that, ‘If the students don’t take charge of their learning, they will never be able to fly.’

**Strategies to Address These Challenges**

Mr. Chan used multiple strategies to achieve ‘synergy’, ‘tweaking multiple variables at the same time’, and continually ‘getting feedback to know that you are tweaking in the right direction’. The vice-principal interviewed affirmed that the principal ‘takes an interest in having focus group discussions’ with both students and teachers.

**Empowering Teacher Agency and Leadership**

To address the main challenge of teachers’ mindsets and skills, and understanding teachers’ natural fear of change, Mr. Chan strategised a pragmatic approach to ‘allow curriculum change to take place in a safe way without … frightening them [the teachers] such that they resist the change’. This was through his suggestion to provide a 3-tier curriculum:

So tier 1 was your traditional, you [the teacher] can do what you want. I will urge you to make change but I won’t worry if you don’t make change … but we start playing around with tier 2 and tier 3. Tier 2 is your independent study modules, specially mounted modules by the teachers.

Mr. Chan shared that the tiered structure of the curriculum was deliberate, a change management ‘strategy to allow them [the teachers] to do something familiar, but also spend some time on something unfamiliar, and the success of the unfamiliar will creep into normal practice’. He shared a story of a mathematics teacher who, after teaching the ‘open end’ ArtScience programme in tier 3, ‘discovered’ that her normal approach to teaching ‘might not be the best way’. While the teacher might not have ‘changed completely’ her way of teaching, Mr. Chan observed that she was ‘more prepared to entertain questions from students, and to [consider] is there an alternative solution?’

Beyond providing direction for the change in curriculum, Mr. Chan promoted teacher ‘agency’ by encouraging and supporting teacher initiatives. He shared that if teachers came to him with ideas, he would ensure that these teachers had support to explore their ideas. Teacher and student agency to Mr. Chan were key to achieving ‘cultural change’. While the other stakeholders did not mention agency, they all noted the ‘trust in [teachers’] professionalism’ (VP) that Mr. Chan had for his teachers and his encouragement of teachers
to ‘initiate projects’ (VP) as well as the ‘freedom’ to manage their own time (Teacher 1). HOD 4 observed that Mr. Chan ‘releases energy in the senior school’ as the staff were empowered to develop the IB curriculum.

Mr. Chan believed that the professional learning of teachers is critical to them developing agency. Thus, he provided the teachers with many avenues to learn new ideas. For example, he arranged for learning journeys to various organisations, including a hospital and a prison. His rationale was that while teachers may have ‘preconceived notions’, when they visit a place, and start to ‘look at things, suddenly you ask yourself, actually what you have [to do] may not be impossible’. He also tried to connect teachers to the academic world of research through ‘monthly notes’ (HOD 3, four monthly notes), which provided summaries of pedagogies or theories that the teachers could explore. The teachers noted Mr. Chan’s belief in the importance of knowledge, and his asking the teachers to ‘make reflections on our teaching’. They also noted his effort to connect them to expertise from MOE and the National Institute of Education (HOD 2).

Although he linked the teachers to external expertise, Mr. Chan shared that ultimately, he wanted teachers to ‘know that they have the agency, that they don’t have to rely on external help’. Thus, he restructured the timetable to create time for the teachers to ‘sit down and work with each other’, so that ‘they can find a solution, we don’t need the most ideal solution, we need a reasonable optimal solution’. HOD 1 observed that Mr. Chan ‘created’ a ‘whitespace’ in the staff’s timetable to enable the teachers to ‘articulate amongst ourselves, to converse about teaching conceptually’; similarly, HOD 3 noted that Mr. Chan ‘used money to free us [the teachers] up’ so that ‘everyone can sit down and communicate … [which] gave us a lot of scope to converse and improve’.

**Empowering Student Agency and Building Community Spirit**

Acutely aware that developing teacher agency and changing teacher mindsets would take time, Mr. Chan felt that he should not ‘short change’ the students while waiting for the teachers to change. His rationale for focusing on developing student agency was because students ‘don’t have any baggage with them’. He also focused on student agency as it served to help him to speed up the school transformation as a change in teachers’ pedagogies and culture takes a longer time to materialise. His strategy was to work with the students, particularly the first-year cohort, so that within four years, he would be able to ‘change student culture quite significantly’ by having ‘seniors to model’ for the younger students. A ‘daring’ (HOD 2) strategy that Mr. Chan implemented was the Thursday ‘white space’ (HOD 2) during which no teacher was present to monitor the students. It was totally the students’ time ‘to take charge’ (HOD 3), to decide whether they wanted to ‘play, study or rest’ (HOD 2). Students shared that ‘student initiatives get to blossom’ during this whitespace.
It is important to understand that Mr. Chan’s interpretation of student agency is not individual in nature. Student agency goes beyond individual motivation or self-regulation to student agency within a community, and arising from a sense of belonging. He also sees student agency as related to student learning and thus student academic achievement. Indeed, he believes that student agency is ‘the main driver of school improvement … If you get your agency right, good results become a by-product.’ The community of students serves as a ‘support system’ to ‘lift’ one another up when they encounter problems. The following quote provides insight into Mr. Chan’s thinking about student agency in terms of self-regulation:

I think self-regulation is not only about a single student, it is about students in relation to the community he belongs to. How do you harness that community to actually get things done … self-regulation is not purely individual, intrinsic motivation comes from social interaction, from a 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.

Based on the concept of student agency as agency within a community, Mr. Chan put in place structures to ensure that students ‘self-regulate’ as a group. One strategy was to involve students in setting targets by class – ‘in order for them to get gold, they have to work as a class’. Another strategy was to change the original class banding by students’ academic scores to a new structure of ‘mixed ability’ classes. This change was based on his belief that ‘when you mix [students] 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’ (VP).

Besides developing students’ self-regulation, Mr. Chan believed that schools must ‘create conditions where the students have agency to discover their potential’. Within the academic curriculum, Mr. Chan introduced tiers 2 and 3 to provide students with ‘the power of choice’ to ‘decide what they want to study’ (Student). Tier 3 is a ‘totally open-end project work’; at the same time, tier 3 involves group work, which supports Mr. Chan’s aim to develop bonding and a support system amongst students. HOD 1 noted that tiers 2 and 3 provide students ‘with an opportunity to investigate, and it is a lot more independent learning’, while HOD 4 views the IB programme as supporting ‘self-directed learning … to take control of their lives’.

Beyond the academic curriculum, Mr. Chan developed student agency by encouraging students to propose initiatives, and allowing them to trial the initiatives, because he views school as not simply a ‘fail-safe environment, it is a safe-fail environment’. While the rest of the stakeholders did not use the term student agency, they recognised Mr. Chan’s effort to support student initiatives and leadership:

He also gives a lot of leeway to students to try and initiate things. He believes in students initiating things, in leadership development, many opportunities for students to experiment. (VP)
He empowers the students. To take the initiative, come up with ideas, and if your ideas don’t work, fine. But you tried … Previously it was all very controlled, a teacher had to be in charge. Now it’s a lot of student-led activities. (Teacher 4)

I believe he gives … students opportunities. It is ok if it is not perfect, the key is to learn from them (Parent M)

Yes, I agree that there are quite a lot of student-led initiatives in the school ... you are able to organise stuff and events for students. There is not too much teacher input. (Student)

As with self-regulation, the strategies Mr. Chan introduced to develop student agency in terms of student initiatives and autonomy aimed simultaneously to build a community spirit. For example, one major strategy was to give the student council the responsibility to ‘take charge’ (Teacher 4) of the sports carnival on their own, without a teacher in-charge. As observed by the VP, in such a situation, ‘everyone has to work together…. That helps to bring that community spirit’. The VP shared that ‘building this community spirit’ was ‘very pertinent’ in Mr. Chan’s leadership. This is probably due to Mr. Chan’s belief that it is not sufficient to give individual students the tools to increase their self-worth – the ‘entire culture’, the ‘entire environment’ has to support the individual.

Perceived Qualities of the Principal

Across various stakeholders, what came through clearly was the perception that Mr. Chan was ‘forward looking and visionary’ (Parent G), ‘paints the big picture’ (HOD 2) but without ‘micromanaging’ (VP). Instead, he left it to the VPs and heads to do the ‘day-to-day running’ (HOD2), ‘keeping tab on’ what was happening through focus group discussions. HOD 4 observed that while Mr. Chan would monitor what was happening and would step in when necessary, he was ‘not an intrusive leader’; instead, HOD 4 compared Mr. Chan to ‘a safety net’, in the sense that the latter was ‘always on-hand to offer advice, [and] help arbitrate any decisions’. While the teachers did not work with Mr. Chan directly, the teachers agreed that Mr. Chan trusted them enough to give them ‘space’ to do their work (which could lead to the development of agency) and that he would step in when necessary to provide support. The teachers also agreed Mr. Chan was ‘good at looking at the helicopter view’ which helped them ‘put things in perspective, and there was an assurance we will move on knowing where we are going’. They similarly noted that if they ‘digressed’ from the school’s plan, Mr. Chan would ‘somehow pull us back’. Parents observed that Mr. Chan was ‘not afraid to try’ (Parent G) and he was able to ‘see different perspectives’ because he had a ‘helicopter vision’ and was ‘not just pushing through the jungle’ (Parent E).

Mr. Chan’s helicopter view was partly attributed to his extensive knowledge, as an academic, of educational research, and his belief in ‘research-based evidence in whatever he advocates’ (VP). Various stakeholders acknowledged that Mr. Chan had ‘a thinking behind his programmes which … [was] sound in many ways’ (HOD 1); he ‘will cite, research says this,
and you can understand why he is advocating something’ (VP). Because Mr. Chan believed it was important to communicate and ‘explain rationale’ (VP), he initiated the monthly emails which he personally took the lead in writing. As HOD 3 observed, Mr. Chan ‘is good at writing and he knows how to put it across’.

Although he was good at writing, the perception was that he was ‘not wired’ as a people person (HOD 1) and he did not spend much time talking to teachers. There was an impression that because he was not a people person, he ‘wasn’t in touch with’ the ground (HOD 1). However, interviews with Mr. Chan suggest that he was aware of the natural human resistance to change, the need to pace and scaffold change, and that change would take at least 10-15 years. This was partly why Mr. Chan focused first on building student agency, although he initiated professional development and other strategies to simultaneously build teacher capacity and influence their mindsets.

Indeed, Mr. Chan’s understanding of ‘the messiness’ of leading school change seems aligned to his belief that leaders need to be ‘flexible’, and should not ‘overplan’ or ‘underplan’, setting a ‘broad’ end point that allows for ‘multiple routes’ to get there. While this paper focused on strategies which Mr. Chan put in place to develop student and teacher agency, his ‘multiple routes’ included creating connections with alumni and parents to open learning avenues for the students, and with the University to broaden the teachers’ learning. His understanding that change will take time probably also accounts for his patience and persistence. His VP observed that he will ‘persevere’ and ‘the same idea … [he would] put … in many different ways’. His patience includes not pointing fingers if things do not work. Consistent with his belief in student and teacher agency, and trusting them to explore what they believe in, Mr. Chan ‘believes that we are wiser if we make mistakes, we learn from the mistakes and grow’.

Impact of the Principal’s Leadership

During his tenure as principal of Trinity School, Mr. Chan secured the Ministry’s approval for the school to implement the Integrated Programme (IP), which also led to the Senior High school offering the International Baccalaureate Programme (IB), making Trinity School ‘a very attractive school’ (Teacher 4) which can ‘draw’ (Teacher 1) students to the school. This milestone achievement is aligned to the school’s vision to be ‘a school of choice’, with the IB also supporting another aspect of the school’s vision, which is to enable ‘learning driven by passion’. The second and third tiers of the curriculum, which Mr. Chan introduced, also supported students’ exploration of passion beyond what is in the traditional tier 1 curriculum. Despite IB being new to the school, Mr. Chan’s trust in and support of the Head of the Senior School and teachers resulted in the students performing very well in IB, amongst the top performing in the world. The Senior Head credited Mr. Chan’s trust in the teachers, and the autonomy he gave, releasing ‘energy’ in the senior school, and enabling a ‘collaborative approach in the leadership team and staff’.
Despite the school adopting a dual track for the Integrated Programme, which means that some of its better students did not sit for the Cambridge O Levels Examination, Trinity School managed to maintain its performance at the ‘O’ levels. Teachers, students and parents all agreed that Trinity School sustained its tradition of developing students holistically, and that Mr. Chan helped to reassure the teachers that it was not about ‘chasing after a numbers game’ (HOD 2). HOD 4 emphasised that though the school has performed well, it’s ‘not an exam factory’; instead, the school has ‘taught students to develop in a whole range of ways’. Students commented that they would not recommend their friends to join Trinity School ‘unless you are looking for an all rounded education’ and parents agreed that the ‘emphasis has always been on the holistic development of the child’ (Parent M).

Student-wise, Mr. Chan felt that he ‘was able to change student culture quite significantly’, as students had ‘seniors to model’ the appropriate values and behaviour. He felt that the ‘general discipline tone and the [students’] sense of agency went up’. HOD 3 agreed that Mr. Chan had an impact on students’ self-regulation, describing the process metaphorically as ‘growing’ a seed, with students implementing ‘quite a lot of student-led initiatives’.

Different stakeholders observed the ‘very evident’ (VP) community spirit amongst the students, with ‘shared values across the senior school and the secondary school’ (HOD 4), and without unhealthy competition (Teacher 4, Parent C). The most convincing evidence comes from the students themselves, who agreed that ‘Trinity School is one big community … and we will try to help each other’ as ‘a family’. While Trinity School had a long tradition of values inculcation and care for the school community and beyond, the challenge was to continue this tradition and the sense of fraternity with the introduction of the senior school and thus the influx of new students who were not from the secondary school.

Teacher-wise, Mr. Chan was the first to admit that he had not managed to help the teachers achieve ‘pedagogical excellence’. Ever a realist who is willing to confront brutal reality, he shared that for one of the initiatives he introduced, once the ‘champion’ left, the innovation ‘petered off’. The teachers shared that while they knew they were ‘empowered’ to make changes, these changes were ‘not eventualised’ (Teacher 2); the teachers themselves felt they were ‘not ready yet’ and they struggled with the extent to which they should change the curriculum. HOD 1 shared feeling ‘very inadequate’ about how to teach conceptually as it was ‘not a teaching pedagogy that we ourselves were exposed to’.

However, Mr. Chan observed that teachers were ‘more ready to make changes’. The heads agreed that ‘teachers did move along’ (HOD 3) and ‘people are more open to accepting or trying new things’ (HOD 1). The teachers themselves felt there was ‘the beginnings’ of teachers’ understanding of how to design a more concept-based curriculum. For the Senior School, a lot of ‘time and energy’ was invested in developing teachers’ capacity to implement the IB, which was perceived to be a ‘success’ in itself (HOD 4). A few individuals shared that Mr. Chan influenced them to start reading – ‘I am thankful for [Mr. Chan] implanting these seeds in me. This love of learning’ (HOD 3). While there is still much work for the succeeding
principal to influence the teachers to change the way they teach, there were pockets of change amongst the teachers. As Mr. Chan shared, there was ‘delta’.

**Discussion**

**Beyond Leadership Practice: The Importance of the Leaders’ Values, Beliefs and Identities in Influencing Practice**

Crow and Møller (2017) note that there has been an emphasis in the literature on school leaders’ competencies and skills, which has resulted in the frequent exclusion of values, beliefs, motivations and professional identities. However, these are important in shaping leaders’ practices, affirmed by the ISSPP studies and by the 2015 review of studies on Singapore Principals (Ng et al. 2015a). In this case study, Mr. Chan was not a school principal before and was also not trained to be one with the desired competencies and skills. How does one explain his success as a principal? As many of his key personnel agreed, Mr. Chan was also not a people’s person. He was not considered charismatic or particularly approachable, and yet different stakeholders agreed that Mr Chan was a successful principal.

We suggest that part of the answer might be in the finding that successful principals’ strong moral purpose is a ‘critical antecedent and co-requisite of their capacity for effective practices’ (Crow, Day & Møller 2017: 265). Begley (2010) argues that leadership and management skills by themselves are not enough, schools need to possess a ‘clear set of educational purposes and … moral purpose’ (p. 52). Mr. Chan’s identity and experience as an alumnus of Trinity School shaped his identity as its principal, with a strong moral purpose to continue the school’s rich tradition of care for the ‘last, the lost and the least’ and the ‘responsibility’ to serve his alma mater and move the school to a higher level. From the interviews and FGD, what stood out was Mr. Chan’s motivation for taking on the principalship and how his values were shaped by his experience as an alumnus, illustrating the historical and cultural dimensions of the leader’s identity (Ng et al. 2015a). Decisions made by Mr. Chan clearly reinforced the school’s tradition of care for the larger community and for the student community, including putting in place structures to develop student agency within a community, with community support and to build a community spirit.

Besides Mr. Chan’s identity as an alumnus, his identity as an academic and his corresponding belief in research-based evidence is evident in his practice of referring to research to explain why he is advocating an initiative. Mr. Chan’s extensive ‘academic’ knowledge and understanding of people’s resistance to change, and the need to pace change, appeared to have influenced his decision to focus on building student agency while simultaneously providing professional development for teachers, understanding that it would take a much longer time to change the teachers’ practice. Mr Chan’s knowledge of change management, together with his belief that leaders need to be flexible in terms of strategies, also saw him
putting in place multiple routes to achieve his vision, including going beyond students and teachers to create connections with alumni and parents.

This case highlights the importance of school leaders having a clear understanding of the human side of leadership since bringing about education change is extremely complex and involves being sensitive to people’s fears about change (Stoll 2006). Crow and Møller (2017) refer to this as the ‘cognitive dimension’ of the school leader’s identity formation, in which leaders use their knowledge to reason about the judgements they make in complex contexts. In addition, this case supports findings that successful school leadership practice in Singapore is guided by the principals’ personal beliefs and values, while simultaneously seeking to preserve their predecessors’ vision (Nguyen et al. 2017; Wang et al. 2016)

**Beyond Influencing Teachers: Influencing Students and through Students**

Amongst the six leadership functions identified by Leithwood and Duke (1999) in their review, the functions either explicitly or implicitly were related to influencing teachers, in particular the leadership functions of instructional and transformational leadership. Distributed leadership, which has been increasingly advocated, is usually referred to in conjunction with distributing leadership to middle leaders or teachers (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond 2004).

In a more recent systematic review of studies on leadership models in educational research from 1980 to 2014, similar leadership functions were identified, including teacher leadership and curriculum leadership, with teachers included as potential leaders (Gumus, Bellibas, Esen & Gumus 2018). Students are usually positioned as the beneficiaries of leadership performed by adults, through impacting students’ achievement or other learning outcomes. In this sense, in the field of educational leadership, the students’ role appears to be mainly passive in nature.

A search using the keywords of student leader and student leadership shows that the bulk of related literature at K-12 level involves programmes to develop student leaders (e.g. Kouzes and Posner’s 2014), or to harness student leaders to achieve specific purpose such as to address the issue of school bullying (Shriberg et al. 2017). Using the search word, student agency, we managed to surface one study. However, this study was limited to a teacher’s promotion of student agency through the students’ involvement in developing once-off projects, as opposed to developing student agency at a culture level (Goodman & Eren 2013). The paucity of research pertaining to student agency and school improvement led one of the authors to suggest that the relationship between activating a sense of community-oriented student agency and school success is a plausible theoretical contribution to the school improvement literature (Chua, Toh, Tan, Hung & Koh 2017).

To further argue the point of activating community-oriented student agency, the attendant unleashing of agency could be framed as a form of leadership, albeit distributed to students. It can be considered a form of distributed leadership as the principal was intentionally
influencing the students towards the end of school improvement. This finding is supported by Moos and Johansson (2009) who observed cases of students being given more responsibilities, which arguably develops student agency and leadership.

In this case study, Mr. Chan further deliberately used student agency as a catalytic leverage for teacher epistemic change, rationalising that teachers needed ‘evidence’ that their students were sufficiently agentic for teachers to dare to explore a more constructivist style of teaching. Mr. Chan explicitly articulated his belief that student agency is the ‘main driver of school improvement’, particularly when student agency is supported by the entire student community.

Conclusion

This case study provides evidence of the principal performing the standard setting direction, developing people, initiating structures and redesigning the curriculum (Day 2005; Retna & Ng 2010). While the principal did show trust in the teachers’ professionalism and thus in this sense supported teacher capacity building and agency, his understanding of the teachers’ resistance to change resulted in him simultaneously developing student agency (Chua et al. 2017), community and leadership. This latter strategy, which was also a deliberate one to provide the motivation for teachers to change, appears to be less emphasised in the other ISSPP’s case studies.

In addition, this case contributes to local research on Singapore principals in that the strategic pragmatism observed in the literature (Goh et al. 2015; Nguyen et al. 2017) is seen in how the principal kept his long-term direction in focus, while implementing what he felt was more feasible in the short term. There is also evidence that his success, as perceived by the school, was due to his ability to navigate system-level politics to obtain the Ministry’s approval for the IP status, beyond the more routine Singapore principal’s role in implementing education policies (Ng et al. 2015a; Nguyen et al. 2017). The principal displayed entrepreneurial leadership in creatively utilising external networks and resources to support the school’s goals (Drysdale 2011). While the importance of networking is implied in the literature, there has been relatively little focus on this in studies of educational leadership.

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