Conclusion: Leading Schools in Complexity

13

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The collection of case studies in this book present a range of salient themes pertaining to school leadership in Singapore. These case studies highlight the demands placed on school leaders in contemporary times, and their responses to it. First and foremost, the need to lead schools that prepare students in the wide range of twenty-first-century competences and dispositions (e.g. critical thinking, creative thinking, self-directed, lifelong learner, teamwork and resilience)—in the midst of maintaining academic achievement is in itself rather challenging. Adding to this is the need to perform these tasks in the midst of a social environment that is becoming more volatile, disruptive, fluid and uncertain.

It is well known that context shapes how leadership is exercised, and once again the context of the current world situation brings along with it new challenges that bear upon leaders in every segment and layer of all societies in the world. Notwithstanding the cliché *'Change is the only constant'*, the world has now grown to become increasingly fluid, disruptive and uncertain—thanks to a large part to the growing accumulated applications of technological advancements and innovations such as automation, mechanization, robotics, smart devices, artificial intelligence and nanotech. However, among these, the *Internet of things* or 'internetization' has been the significant underlying contribution to many of the disruptions. Terror networks have made 'good' use of social media with much success to spread lone-wolf type of terrorism. Organizations are constantly on their toes to prevent cyber hackers from infiltrating their systems. Traditional businesses have to reckon with the *sharing economy* or *collaboration economy* such as Uber and Airbnb.

Internetization has also had a tremendous contributing role in the rise of individualism and groupism. While the Internet affords the expression of individual voices and identities, it has also been used to garner collective voices and identities —especially in social media spaces. The impact on leadership is huge. This is

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because the essence of leadership is influenced on individuals towards shared goals. The task of influencing the minds, emotions, values and attitudes of followers is much tougher when the sheer diversity and complexity of it bears on leaders. In schools, leaders increasingly have to manage diverse needs of a wide range of stakeholders who now have a wider range of tools to influence sentiments and decisions made in schools. Sometimes, or often, these needs are conflicting. Satisfying one group's needs may hurt some others'. Sometimes, or increasingly often, some of these needs change over time or across situations in conflicting ways. Brexit, Donald Trump and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong speak volumes on leading divided societies. The pace of the demands placed on leaders in schools makes the task of leading much more difficult and frustrating. The diversity and complexity that leaders have to face on a day-to-day basis add a degree of certainty to uncertainty in the task of leading.

The position of leadership is therefore becoming less attractive to many laypersons, and perhaps highly attractive for the small egotistical, idealist or foolhardy ones. *With great powers come with great responsibility*—indeed. But do the complexities of current times eclipse the power of leadership? Not at all. On the contrary, leadership is integral to societies' preservation and progress. While some sociologists and organizational theorists predict chaos due to the inevitable rise of complexities in societies, some would portend the inevitable rise of leadership to give structure, stability and sense-making to and in societies.

Notwithstanding all the challenges that bear upon school leaders, these case studies highlight the fact that school leadership matters. This is consistent with the claim made that leadership is only second to teaching when considering within-school factors impacting on school outcomes (Leithwood et al. 2008). Although school leaders—unlike teachers—rarely have direct involvement in classroom teaching, their extent of influence is pervasive and comprehensive in school. They have the strongest influence over the school vision, mission and values; school goals and strategies; school culture; staff appraisal; staff deployment; training and development priorities and approaches; physical structures and school funding policies. These case studies illuminate how school leaders in their unique contexts assimilate and accommodate the complex external forces that bear upon them.

In Chap 2, Ng brings to light the broadened set of learning outcomes that our education policymakers aspire students to acquire. These learning outcomes go beyond simply attaining academic achievements to include softer skills and dispositions such as values and aesthetics, albeit not weakening academic outcomes. The broadened set of learning outcomes require school curriculum that bounds to look different from the current status. Hence, the importance of instructional leadership, and the challenge of enacting instructional leadership is to respond to globalization forces in a localized manner, and doing so without emptying the personal beliefs, values and philosophies of the school leader. The balancing between globalization, localization and personalization can clearly become complex.

In Chap 3, Lim-Ratnam provides another perspective to understanding the work of school leaders—that is, one of a curriculum leader. Drawing from the traditions of curriculum studies, a school leader must learn to appreciate that learning does not take place only in the classroom context, and that leadership is not only to support classroom teaching and learning. Rather, the role of leadership in schools is to support learning wherever it may take place. The curriculum is considered as any learning that a student experience in the school setting. Its pervasiveness perhaps explain why the curriculum can be understood as intended or explicit, enacted and experienced, and why leadership can be seen as technical, human, educational, symbolic and cultural. However, Lim-Ratnam raises potential challenges that school leaders may face in the context of the centralized–decentralized polarities, which pose a certain degree of complexity.

In Chap 4, Tay and Tan bring to the fore implementation challenges in the context of assessment policies especially on Assessment for Learning (AfL). Assessment has now become one of the three foci in regard to teaching competences—the other two being curriculum content and pedagogy. They further build on the challenges of school leadership in interpreting and implementing education policies sensitive to each individual school unique contexts. While they elucidate the complexities in implementing policies in assessment, a set of solutions is put on the table. First, is the notion of irreversible (fundamental) change on our perceptions and understanding on the objective of assessment. Second, the importance of attaining coherence and integration as opposed to being piecemeal in planning and implementing change in assessment. Third, the potential of assessment to bring about specific desired outcomes that are different to the status quo. Finally, being prepared to confront and address potentially troublesome discomforting issues.

In Chap 5, Choy and Chua bring attention to the benefits of professional development as a way of building capacity of teachers and schools, and in this way providing appropriate responses to the demands placed on schools resulting from globalization. They support the view that professional development is located at three levels: (1) teacher selection, (2) processes in training and development, (3) system support and structures. However, the priorities, investments and approaches on teacher professional development vary across schools. Although this can be interpreted as uneven and seemingly moving away from the ideal of 'leading nationally', it once again emphasizes the importance of context in shaping effective professional development provisions and practices so as to make it effective.

In Chap 6, Khong brings to attention the importance of multiple stakeholders in educating children and youths—as echoed in the often quoted idiom *'It takes a village to raise a child'*. The good news is that education policymakers are in full support of this spirit. There is indeed much worth in schools to engage with the different school stakeholders—namely, parents. Enacting these engagements to promote positive relations is, however, not without its challenges and issues. One potential challenge is the predominance of hierarchical social structure that may be contradictory to a stakeholder network model where more democratic flow of information, resources and power is required. Genuine, meaningful and fruitful partnerships with key school stakeholders can take place when school leaders are

able to balance the *system-world* and *life-worlds* of schools. The complexity lies in balancing both of these *worlds* within school differing contexts. In doing so, school leaders would contribute to trust building, and become 'bridges' between schools and the wider community.

In Chap 7, Hairon brings to surface the importance of building school capacity in response to the growing demands placed on schools to enact school-based curriculum development and innovation through professional learning community. The complexity lies in the fact that although the relevance of professional learning community is clear, implementing it in schools is not—due to multiple interconnected challenges. Leadership to support professional learning community in schools is therefore recommended. Since the initial introduction of the concept in 2000 in the name of Learning Circles, through the formal use of the term itself in 2009, the importance of leadership giving support to professional learning community has never waned. Instead, leadership to support professional learning communities have grown—specifically, support given through structures (e.g. time, space and culture. Also, leadership to support professional learning communities must go further to reside at the micro-level of interactions where teachers learn collaboratively.

In Chap 8, Wong and Wong propose that the growing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in all spheres of social life—including schools—require school leaders to embrace design thinking as both a mindset and strategy to be used. Design thinking would essentially help school leaders become more sensitive to the myriad human needs of its key stakeholders through the generation of innovative ideas and products. The application of design thinking can also pervade to the school curriculum where students themselves become familiar—even in practice— with design thinking. While the buy-in by school leaders is an important first step, integrating design thinking in the school curriculum would require appropriate instructional and curriculum leadership strategies to make it work successfully and sustainably.

In Chap 9, Chua and Chai argue for the perfusion of the use of TPACK in the education system of Singapore. TPACK is the short form of technological pedagogical content knowledge. It is the merging of technological knowledge with Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). The success of the pervasiveness in TPACK lies in its application in cultural knowledge, national policies, education technologies, school structures and lesson designs. However, while TPACK is given importance at the macro policy level, the challenge lies at the meso local school level. This implies the importance of school leaders in translating and implementing TPACK in schools. The case for positive attitude in leaders towards TPACK has, however, been identified to be key in matters of translation work. The case of distributed leadership to support the translation of TPACK in the classrooms has also been found to be critical—that is, the dispersion of leadership support from school senior leaders to middle leaders, and eventually to teacher leaders. They also found that support from key stakeholders is also crucial to the successful implementation of TPACK—echoing Khong's call for greater democratization to strengthen stakeholder network.

In Chap 10, Teng and Zhang argue that culture is an important asset to the school's identity, and as such involves the identification of the core value system which reflects the unique cultural traditions of the school and exhibits the expectations of the personal qualities possessed by all its members. The role of school leaders as culture builders therefore cannot be taken-for-granted, even though culture usually denotes a large degree of taken-for-granted or implicit meaning. The positive case studies proffered by the authors speak volumes to the benefits of investing in building school culture. One lesson that can be derived from the case studies is the intentionality in taking advantage of existing cultural capital of the school. School leaders articulate, define and strengthen the cultural strengths of the school. They also integrate the core values of the school through various key processes such as in quality control, problem-solving, resource allocation, professional development and learning, appraisal, and recruitment. Finally, these school leaders continue to build and strengthen the core value of the school culture even in the midst of external forces resulting from globalization.

In Chap 11, Boon and Wong bring citizenship and character education to centre stage in school leaders' role as instructional and curriculum leaders. Once again, school leaders in the context of the Singapore education are given the task and responsibility to customize the macro-education agenda on citizenship and character education with the intention of making its translation and implementation sensitive to the unique contextual school needs. The priority given to this agenda is apparently clear. The global forces of change have the potential to increase varying interpretations and identities on what it means to be an individual citizen—thus, potentially undermining the national identity and social cohesion of the nation. Several salient lessons can be learned from the case studies presented: communicating clarity in the rationale of the policy; finding innovative ways in making the policy successful; role modelling and support by middle and teacher leaders.

In Chap 12, Goh, Chua and Hairon apply the concept of marketing to give a greater depth to the understanding on what it means by education policymakers' mantra 'Every school a good school'. Although schools are located in the domain of the public sector, they no longer serve parents' and students' needs and demands for educational experiences that are homogenous. With education policymakers encouraging schools to find their niches so as to provide diverse educational peaks of excellence, and the growing range of diverse needs from parents and students, school leaders' challenge in this matter heightens. Their success depends on how they are able to establish sound marketing strategies, which involve matching the quality of school programmes and services with that of educational or learning needs of their students.

In summary, it is evident from the case studies that a growing degree of complexity is being felt by school leaders. The complexity is the result of change that is becoming fast pace, and that crosses boundaries in a permeable and fluid manner. One event in one part of the world can have relatively immediate impact on one or several parts of the world. One event in one part of the system can have relatively immediate impact on one or several parts of the system. The immediacy and multiplicity of one event impacting on others can bring about disruptions and

uncertainty. Leadership is thus necessary to provide the needed stability through appropriate engagements with key school stakeholders both within (e.g. students, teachers) and outside (e.g. parents, policymakers) school. The case studies support the importance of engaging key school stakeholders—either directly or indirectly. The third theme that surfaces from the case studies is the importance of capacity building in three areas: (1) teacher development, (2) leadership development and (3) culture development. What is apparent from the case studies is the need to develop teacher competences to meet school curriculum that is set up to meet a broadened and diverse set of learning experiences and outcomes. Equally essential is the development of leaders throughout the organization—from senior to middle leaders, from middle leaders to teacher leaders and from formal teacher leaders to informal teacher leaders—to cope with the new demands. School leaders have to be mindful and intentional in their efforts at providing opportunities to develop leadership competences in a more broad-based and dispersed manner. Finally, school leaders have to invest in the development of school culture, which essentially puts the human spirit back to the heart of schooling and education—our collective beliefs, values and philosophies that constitute what we all consider to be good.

Reference

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership and Management, 28*(1), 27–42.