

Stakeholder Engagement

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Lana Y. L. Khong

Abstract

This chapter discusses the education policy of collaborating with school stakeholders to support student learning and development. It draws from three case studies to illustrate how Singapore school leaders might interpret, strategize and enact this policy for better stakeholder engagement at the ground level. The context and frame within which the ‘stakeholder engagement’ discourse occurs in Singapore has shaped the understanding of such engagement for two main purposes, namely, to support ‘weak’ or problematic students, and to enhance student competencies by providing them with short-term opportunities to exercise and further develop holistic learning and applied skills. The three cases illustrate the beliefs and perspectives of the respective school leaders, and the extent to which they believe in and actively drive stakeholder engagement to meet these objectives in their schools. When educational ‘gatekeepers’ such as school leaders are intentional in collaborating with stakeholders, their key personnel are enabled to ‘catch’ the same purposeful approach. When there is a ‘whole-school’ approach towards engaging the family and wider community in schooling, this becomes a powerful enabler of students’ holistic attainment of human potential and well-being.

L. Y. L. Khong (✉)

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: лана.khong@nie.edu.sg

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6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the policy initiative of collaborating with school stakeholders to support student learning and development and draws from three different case studies to illustrate some ways contemporary Singapore school leaders interpret, strategize and enact this policy call to engage stakeholders in their own community. The three leaders featured here clearly agree that the policy is a useful, even essential, one, and acknowledge that schools alone can no longer accomplish the complex tasks of strengthening student learning and enhancing academic achievement in twenty-first-century Singapore. As a key institution and vehicle for social mobility through educational achievement, the local school continues to fulfil necessary functions (notably content transmission, academic tracking, sorting and certification) but, in itself, is insufficient for developing the nation's young with all the necessary attributes, skills and competencies that will enable them to survive and thrive in the knowledge economy and the adult workplace. This general recognition dawned upon policymakers in the final years of the twentieth century when the well-known idiom '*It takes a village to raise a child*' was repeatedly mentioned in official speeches.

Putting this into practice at the ground level, however, has its own challenges. This is because Singapore's education system is highly competitive and places a strong emphasis on individual talent and the acquisition of educational merit through the 'rote and drill', content-heavy, approach to teaching and learning. Students are differentiated by their performance on high-stakes examinations which place a heavier weightage on Science- and Mathematics-related subjects. Education in mainstream schools is therefore characterized by tight deadlines and frenetic workloads for students and teaching staff leaving little room for deeply engaging 'the village' comprising other stakeholders. Despite the declaration that 'every school is a good school', stakeholders such as parents, the larger community and many educators themselves may remain largely unconvinced. Although official ranking of schools has been abolished, many stakeholders such as students, parents and industry players will have their own ideas about which of these 'good' schools is actually 'better' than the others. Their subsequent expectations of schools and attitudes towards educators may be shaped accordingly by these perceptions.

In Singapore, the trend of working with school stakeholders began about a decade ago when mainstream schools began to tentatively reach out beyond their physical and metaphorical walls to engage the family, community groups and business organizations for leveraging better learning for students. With the Ministry of Education (MOE)'s approval and clear encouragement, school leaders started to explore various ways to 'harness' stakeholders and their resources, and teachers in turn considered how to work with these parties to provide educational experiences that would prepare students with skills, knowledge and values for meeting new and anticipated challenges in the local and global landscape. Most schools are now familiar with the profile and practical possibilities of such value-added partnerships, not least for increasing their own competitive advantage as schools of choice that

offer special ‘niche’ skill areas. This is especially pertinent in a context where schools are increasingly viewed in marketing terms, with standard operational processes, instructional practices, appraisal and accountability structures in the organization deriving from the commercial and business world. Thus, the school community is framed (at least implicitly) as comprising the following components: students and their parents are clients/customers, teachers are service providers, and school leaders are chief executive officers, while the ‘bottom line’ remains largely exam-centric and grade-based.

The terms ‘stakeholder’ and ‘partnerships’ are themselves common currency in the corporate world, with various writers urging corporate leaders to be aware of and sensitive to their stakeholder environment as this is often essential to their success. Castells (2004), for example, has pointed out that strong networks of relationships are strategic assets that could and should be carefully managed and nurtured especially through the powerful information and communication tools available. Conversely, the failure to nurture and establish positive relationships with key (school) stakeholders could shut off the flow of additional material resources as well as knowledge and social capital. In terms of reputational capital, too, weak or negative relationships with parents, a key stakeholder group in all schools, could easily trigger angry complaints and damaging critique of that school on social media websites or by word of mouth, leading to dwindling participation in school programmes meant to increase parent engagement, as just one possible consequence. However, although the importance of having a supportive stakeholder network is equally relevant in the production, consumption and performance of education as it is in other commodity sectors of the economy, the network model may pose some difficulty for organizations where the vertical/hierarchical structure is prevalent, such as exists in most, if not all, local schools. The top-down, unilateral, ‘command and control’ model may sit somewhat uncomfortably with the more democratic flow of information, resources and power facilitated by the network model, and is a new challenge that school leaders today need strong social, emotional and relational skills to manage and leverage.

These wider issues in the educational arena form the context and frame within which the ‘stakeholder engagement’ discourse occurs and has shaped the understanding of such engagement for these two main purposes: (a) to support ‘weak’ or problematic students, thereby mitigating the ascribed characteristics and inadequacies they bring to schooling, and (b) to enhance student competencies by providing them with short-term opportunities to exercise and develop their holistic learning and practical skills further, for example, in work attachments or social service volunteerism. The three cases below illustrate the professional beliefs and perspectives of the selected school leaders, as well as the extent to which they believe in and actively drive stakeholder engagement to meet these organizational objectives. When educational ‘gatekeepers’ such as school leaders are intentional in the way they set the tone for collaboration with other stakeholders, they can

effectively pass on this positive attitude to their key personnel and teachers. School structures and processes can then be designed, and policies for engagement purposefully carried out to support this intention. The literature shows that a 'whole-school' approach towards engaging the family and wider community in schooling becomes a powerful enabler of students' holistic attainment of human potential and well-being. However, it is also clear that authentic engagement of parents and teachers as well as members of the community within and around the school must be built on relational trust (Bryk and Schneider 2003; Tschannen-Moran 2014) in order to be successfully sustained over time.

Singapore schools, however, may need to move beyond the current school-centred, activity-based model of involvement to engage their stakeholders more meaningfully and authentically. At present, most schools still call the shots for collaborations that are mainly based on the school's goals and needs. Their perspective of stakeholder engagement may thus be limited to one of providing necessary supplementary resources to help the school meet *their* goals. However, parents today expect to have, and do call for, a greater say in school decisions and operations. Adjustment to this 'new normal' may require changes in established school norms and cultures to see and engage families and community groups as more equal rather than subordinate or junior partners. Sergiovanni's (1992) distinction between the *life-world* of schools—values, beliefs, relationships and interactions—and the *system-world*—based on policies and rules—would seem particularly pertinent in such a discussion. The following cases illustrate the extent to which school leaders, as key players, are able to balance these two dimensions of school to develop, enact and sustain genuine partnerships within their community.

Researchers on leadership on partnerships (Auerbach 2012) advocate for a change in the school leader's role from being 'buffers' to 'bridges' between their schools and the wider community. This would necessitate moving away from an instrumental view of engaging parent and community involvement merely to foster better student learning and raising school achievement (a driving force for most local schools), to one where partnerships developing from authentic relationships are recognized as being inherently valuable for everyone in the school community. This theme was somewhat highlighted in the Singapore Leaders Growth Model framework (MOE 2014) where *Engaging with Stakeholders* and *Strengthening the Fraternity* are listed as two key requirements for *The Network Leader*, one of six required domains in school leadership development. Specifically, school leaders in Singapore are now expected to develop 'sound knowledge and understanding of the contexts' of their community, and connect the school to the community in 'boundary-spanning, cross-cultural and socially responsible experiences' building collaborative partnerships and mobilizing stakeholders' 'expertise and practices' to benefit teaching and learning. Given the generalized scope of these new expectations, the specific ways individual experienced leaders interpret, embody and enact them within their schools, as depicted in the three case studies below, provide valuable food for thought.

6.2 Method

The three school leaders were purposively selected based on their reputation for successful stakeholder engagement in the current and/or previous schools they led, and were interviewed for their perspectives for an average of an hour and a half at their respective schools. They are leaders of mainstream ‘neighbourhood’ schools, one being a new primary school in an emerging neighbourhood while the other two are established secondary schools. As mentioned earlier, given that effective leaders can directly influence and shape the organization’s climate and culture, the one-to-one interviews centred on their understanding, interpretation and implementation of the stakeholder engagement policy, and were framed by eight open-ended questions, as follows:

1. What are your views of educational policy reform in the area of stakeholder engagement in schools?
2. How do you interpret and implement this policy in your school?
3. What role do you personally play in this?
4. What are the challenges you face in implementing or enacting this policy?
5. How do you provide support for stakeholder engagement in your school?
6. Who are the key people whom you work with to support this policy?
7. How does your school benefit from this policy?
8. What have you learned from your experience in the implementation or enactment of this policy in your school?

The interviews were conducted and audio-recorded, with participants’ consent, by the author who also transcribed and analysed the interviews. Overall themes were identified through initial in situ coding of the verbal responses to the above questions. The leaders and their schools were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms* have been used in the discussion. The three main themes that emerged from each leader’s story are based on the attribute deemed to be most distinctive of their leadership approach although they do share similarities in other characteristics and values.

6.3 Case Study One: The School Leader as a Connector

Mr. Chin is a fatherly figure, his daily presence highly visible to teachers and students alike ‘*walking the ground*’ on school premises, greeting students by name and engaging them in conversation where possible. His teachers admire the fact that he knows individual students by name and is not above giving even recalcitrant students second chances to turn around. He is also a familiar figure to parents as he stands at the school entrance lobby to welcome students at the start of the day, or seeing them off at the end of it. He is a mid-career educator and entered the field after several years of successful experience in another industry. He highlighted two

reasons why he thought the policy on stakeholder engagement is timely for his school. First, a noticeable and rising incidence of dysfunctional, or busy dual-income families, resulting in more child–parent disconnection in the home domain. Second, the recent funding of S\$2,500 set aside by the MOE for parent support group (PSG) programmes and school–family education activities in school to support the capacity of parents to manage, for example, cyber-wellness issues related to students’ accessibility and use of the Internet. He sees his physical visibility to students and parents as an essential part of his leadership role in educating the community for a new partnership model. The following excerpts provide the relevant corroborations:

I think visibility given to stakeholder engagement is very helpful for us operating on the ground, for a couple of reasons: when the MOE highlights the role of parents and importance of parents working with the school, it provides a balanced view for parents. For example, some parents might think that the onus is on the school to do everything for the child, but in actual fact there is a role to be played by the parents (too).

In the area of character development, for example, we can play a mutually reinforcing role. With the evolving family structures now, we cannot take it for granted that every parent is equipped with parenting skills. On the other hand, the parenting environment has also evolved, as our society evolves, and so modern parents need to adapt and understand as well as connect to their kids. This is where parenting tips on cyber-wellness, and the use of social media comes in handy.

With easy access to the ‘Internet of Things’, it is difficult to manage discerning right from wrong, the appropriateness of information, when parents are not at home... this is where parents can come in. The relationship between parents and the child is very important, (they must learn) how to build trust and connection and provide support so that the child is guided well.

Since the 4 years, he has headed the school, he says he has trained his staff, namely, the Form Teachers, Key Personnel, Discipline Team and School Counsellors in his school to be confident in handling problem situations and to keep him informed of these situations, so that he now intervenes only when they, or parents, directly ask him to. He prefers to ‘*orchestrate from behind the scenes*’ allowing his staff to handle the situations first before stepping in:

From the tell-tale signs and sometimes, the committing of offences within the school, what [my teachers] do is to bring parent and child together, and using the facts of the case, try to understand the prevailing situation in the parent-child relationship, and then seek intervention to maybe help them to reconnect with each other. Only when they can’t solve the problem, then I will step in.

He believes strongly in prioritizing support for the parent–child relationship and gave an example of a student who was under-achieving in his GCE ‘O’ Level year to illustrate how the school ‘connects’ parents with their children.

The teacher noticed he was sleeping in class, so naturally the results were not good. So I got the parents in and it became apparent that the child was spending a lot of time on the computer, so the parent and the child agreed to reduce it. As it turned out, he didn’t make it in his O-levels so when he appealed to repeat, I brought in the parents again, and this time round we got to the bottom of the facts, which was that the parents didn’t enforce what was

agreed. The parents said that they're working so really they have no control. We managed to get the uncle... to send the boy to the uncle, and we worked out a plan to help him. I think the moment he weaned off his computer, his grades started to go up and he graduated with a good set of O-levels scores, going to the Poly course of his choice. As you can see, if the parents don't cooperate fully, or don't exert their parenting responsibilities, then these half-measures won't work.

If parents are not in tune with the habits, the teenage environment today, we can help by illuminating to them what we already know. If they do not have enough knowledge about intervention strategies, this is where we can suggest ideas (and) provide the concrete support. Sometimes it has even got to do with the parenting. For example, some parents set expectations and have very little empathy for their kid. So they do not uncover the fears that the kid has, or they don't manage to explain some things to their kids, and so that makes the parent-child relationship negative. It's about knowing how that family works. But whether the family will provide a stable environment, sometimes there are factors that the family is grappling with for which we really have no control.

He also credits the MOE stakeholder engagement policy with enabling the development of more positive classroom dynamics between teachers and students, encouraging the development of more conducive teaching environments. The following comments reflect the outcome of this:

When we stand up front to engage the parents at the back end, the teaching environment becomes more conducive because it helps the teacher to understand where the child is coming from.

Mr. Chin clearly walks his talk, leading by example, influencing and motivating his teachers to make efforts to first understand the home and family contexts of their students, making home visits and enrolling the help of social workers at the Family Service Centre to work with the family, if necessary, rather than immediately escalating classroom misbehaviours into a discipline issue. Operationally, he has streamlined school management processes so that the first line of defense and responsibility to manage student challenges lies with the Form Teacher who is in direct contact with students. The Form Teacher coordinates any required intervention with other teachers and the school counsellors, failing which the Discipline Master and subsequently, the entire leadership team may be brought in. When the situation has been successfully managed, the full responsibility for the case is then returned to the Form Teacher. This systematic process not only ensures that *'somebody must be paying attention to and interacting with the child'*. It also gradually builds up the frontline teachers' professional capacities and gives them the leeway to take the initiative in connecting with stakeholders, while also providing them with adequate support to motivate them. For example, Mr. Chin recently employed an additional adjunct teacher from a previous school who is experienced in working with troubled youth to coordinate the supportive structures for the *'more chronic cases'* so as to relieve his school counsellors from the intensive efforts required to follow through on these. Although he was somewhat uncertain as to whether he has *'crossed the boundary'* by making this additional arrangement to provide help for unstable families, he justifies it in the following way:

I find that the social worker equally needs parents to be cooperative. If they for some reason are unable to cooperate, then the whole situation will just be left unattended. So I needed someone to make sure that whatever help is provided, there is a follow-through.

He also plans to strengthen his teachers' competencies in reaching out to parents by establishing peer mentoring by other more experienced teachers. But it is clear that the overall objective and key focus for this school leader is on student well-being. He strongly supports additional programmes initiated by his staff who provide help for the growing number of children from single-parent and dysfunctional families in his school. He is surprisingly open and possesses sufficient flexibility enough to accommodate individual students who have specific needs. Thus, he even agreed to allow a transfer student to not attend classes for a (non-core) subject he did not like! In return, however, teachers gained the student's (and parent's) agreement to put in his best effort for other subjects that he does well in. They therefore collaborated to '*accommodate and then try to re-integrate him back into the class*'. Although he acknowledges that some of his teachers are '*quite skeptical*' of the effectiveness of this practice, he justifies such customized and intensive efforts to turn challenging students around by making the following comment:

We have to look at how to save the child, even if we have to give in on some things. The point is that, as long as the child grows, we give in only to take back some of these things. For me, the most important thing is to care and yet, set the expectations. What helps me make my decision is really, anything I can do to help the child settle down in school. If it is within my means and the family is willing to give it a try, I will try to help them.

What ultimately drives him in his leadership approach to stakeholder engagement is an underlying personal belief in the intrinsic worth of every student, and his determination to provide a supportive network for each of them.

In a sense, even for me, it's a leap of faith. I assume that everybody is a star; it's just that we haven't found a way to polish the star. The idea is to find that path which excites (him) and I suppose the person will grow up and grow out of his bad habits. We definitely can help them directly and most of the time indirectly through our teachers and even through their fellow students and outreach to their parents.

He works tirelessly with his teachers to enable this belief to come to fruition, and directly engages the Parents Support Group (PSG) in his school who he appreciates as '*an important community and help create a presence of parents in the school*' especially for students who are resistant to parental influence in their own homes. He also works closely with the small group of PSG parents who provide an additional resource to coordinate School Matters talks and programmes and makes it a point to attend together with his vice-principal as many of their meetings as he can. He sees the PSG ExCo as '*a trusted voice*' and an effective channel for communicating school concerns to other parents. He makes it a point to connect directly with these active parents at their level, and in so doing, empowers them to connect to other parents.

I wanted the parents to feel that this was another platform for you to meet the principal, where you can raise anything you like. It worked to help them build a team...When parents come for talks, sometimes they question about the school; sometimes I don't even need to answer (these questions) because the PSG member will just chip in. To me, that's the best way, that would be a very good way to communicate. With your own people, you can build the trust.

Other internal stakeholders that he actively connects with include the relatively young School Alumni whose members are invited to come back to talk to and mentor their juniors, and help out with some of the co-curricular activities. He and his teachers are carefully developing these former students into a sustainable group with an eye to the future, when he feels they can more readily contribute back to the school. A few who are already working and have stable careers have in fact been invited to join the School Advisory Council (SAC) consisting of grassroots leaders, business people and members from higher education institutions such as the polytechnics, and now provide an important alumni voice for current students regarding valuable practical work attachment opportunities in the spirit of holistic education.

We have someone who's in OCBC (a local bank) so she opens the door for them and helps us in career fairs. In fact they gave us about twelve places, distributing the students into different departments and branches, and they assigned one manager to each student as a mentor for two weeks. This is a very good resource partnership that money cannot buy.

Such work-related opportunities form part of a future-oriented programme set up by a small group of teachers to especially motivate carefully selected, 'better-behaved' Secondary Three students to develop clearer ideas of what they may want to be and do in tertiary studies and future possible careers. These are school efforts to nudge the older students to '*figure out what kinds of career pathways they may want to gravitate towards*'. Where work attachments are concerned, he also finds that parents are '*more than keen*' to support their children to sign up. Mr. Chin uses such school structures and processes to open up new possibilities and opportunities for his generally lower SES students to have brighter futures than they would otherwise have, and hopes that this prospect will help to turn them around for the better. He shared a positive example of a girl who started out as a 'troublemaker' in her earlier years, but who, through her participation in the school's work attachment programme, became convinced that she wanted to be lawyer and became motivated to study hard for that goal. When she missed making the entry-grades in her O-levels examinations, she then took up forensic science in the Polytechnic to support lawyers involved in criminal cases. The principal declares that these little successes make the time-intensive efforts on the part of his school worthwhile and that he and his teachers need to focus on finding the right motivational triggers for the students.

6.4 Case Study Two: The School Leader as Advocate

Madam Han is an energetic, optimistic leader with a no-nonsense demeanour who is cognizant of and takes head-on the multiple challenges facing professional staff in her neighbourhood school, also attended by mostly lower SES students. She makes time to build relationships through one-to-one conversations not only with her teachers but also with students and parents, and is a familiar figure in the immediate community outside her school, encouraging her staff and students to support many events organized by different community groups. She makes it a point to personally participate in wider community events during which she uses her personal influence to create a deeper understanding among community members about her students. This is because of a rather problematic school history that has resulted in a negative perception in the community about students that she acknowledges has been '*hard to shake*'. Her approach and actions thus reflect her realization of the important role the community plays in supporting her students who, like Mr. Chin's, generally lack the educational, social and cultural advantages of those from more affluent families.

You have a school, you have the parents, but you also need the general community to come and contribute and play a major role because they (the students) are eventually going out to the community as well. So actually it was very heartening for me when greater engagement with stakeholders was put as one the strategic objectives of MOE.

Looking at where the school is situated and the profile of the students, there was a need to have greater engagement in order to expose them to opportunities as well as to provide them with the experience, that they may otherwise not get from the home. Our immediate neighbours, the religious institutions, the CDC (Community Development Council), this is our district. These are our major stakeholders and they play a critical role so we work with them should there be any support we require. Most of my students and parents are trying to make ends meet so when we look at solutions to the problem, we must make sure that it is not stretching them financially.

She also perceives that her students generally have a 'small world' mentality and need planned exposure to the wider world in terms of understanding and respecting a diversity of practices, cultures and values and encourages her staff to work with her in broadening the students' general outlook.

The students need to understand that there is a world beyond their home and a world beyond school as well. So there is a greater need for us to create such an understanding and respect for one another among our students. That's why we expose them to the various religious institutions and teach them tolerance and respect through project work and our heritage trail. We hope to bring in the community to work with the students so that they will have a deeper understanding and appreciation of our rich heritage; this will also provide opportunities for the students to take on leadership roles. This is not just for the sake of National Education although it serves that purpose. They have to contribute meaningfully and understand that respecting other traditions doesn't mean your own beliefs and practices are at risk. For example, I had a group of 13-year old students who were uncomfortable about entering a temple, and that alerted us to the fact that this could be an issue. So the teachers pulled them aside and helped to explain that going there and listening does not put

your own religion at risk. They are all going to grow up into adults and if we leave it to somebody else to do this ‘unpacking’, what happens if nobody does it?

Beyond this intentional effort to strengthen social cohesion, community engagement also provides multiple benefits for her students, such as financial help through bursaries and sponsorships as well as other forms of voluntary support.

We provide them (community groups) with opportunities to interact with the young ones, and help them to understand the youth of today. I think that is critical as well. For example, last week we had some of the senior citizens, 70-year olds who enjoy working with the plants, here doing gardening so my Green Club members were there to help. It was very heartening to see our students walking them to the toilet, waiting for them outside, being patient. These are things that are going to be critical in an aging society. This is the generation that probably will make decisions about how I should be looked after when I’m old, eventually! So I help them to understand and empathise.

This kind of helps them to appreciate their own grand-parents a little bit more, and helps them to appreciate our community too, because in this estate, there are a lot of one- and two-room flats (built for low-income families). So when I speak to them, for example, I say ‘if you’re at the bus stop waiting for the bus and you’re sitting down and you see an elderly person, you get up and offer your seat.’ So our programmes are all aligned in this direction, they get the same message coming across in different ways.

Parent engagement is increasing in her school, despite the lower educational and socio-economic backgrounds of families, and she observes that parents’ voices ‘are louder now’ with parents wanting to have a say in children’s education. However, she has a very positive view about this change and counts herself fortunate that, unlike some of her fellow heads, she has ‘safely, say 95 percent positive experiences’ with the parents in her school.

I’ve noticed that at our Meet-the-Parent sessions, there are more of them turning up than there were in the past, and they want to know exactly what’s happening, what their child is being exposed to, their experiences in school, and everything. This is a wonderful thing because I think what we do in school must not be undone at home, so there must be this very close collaboration. In our conversations and communications, I say ‘You play a very, very critical role because when you place education and school as important, your child will also place it as important. When you show respect and demonstrate certain values in your actions, our child emulates that as well.’ So it is getting them to work with us to shape that individual child that both of us have a vested interest in, despite having my fair share of parents who have their own challenges. These are the ones who are trying to make ends meet, who will not answer our calls, who probably may not even know that the child has not been attending school.

She works with her teachers, counsellors and PSG parents to unilaterally provide a safe place for the students who could be neglected by their parents who are themselves struggling under various life pressures. She is pragmatic about her responsibility in this and understands that

I cannot control the parents, I cannot demand certain things but... let the school be so inviting that the child wants to come, you know? So there’s a place for the child to turn to. It’s not that we neglect the parents but we also understand that if they are facing all these challenges, the last thing they want is a phone call from a teacher to say that their son is not handing in homework. We will try to manage it on our own, and sometimes, the parents themselves turn to us. They call us and sometimes they demand that we do something. For

example, a student in a boy-girl relationship doesn't want to listen to the father so the father wants the school to step in and assist. Because my students are not listening to their parents, they (parents) think we can do something about it. We step into help although it's beyond our professional boundaries and we will guide them, put them through counselling and all that but (in the end) 'you are the parent and you will need to monitor them and set curfews and enforce certain rules in your own home.'

There's no (parent) to whom we say 'This is beyond us, we can't do anything'. We meet every one of them but we also explain to them that actually there's just this much I can do. We will channel them in the right direction, make that link and do the liaising for them. Under no circumstances have we told any parent that 'This is your family and your problem' because if they're turning to us, there is a real need and we try to assist as much as we can.

Her focus is on the holistic development of the child and she takes responsibility for 'all of us working together to support each other, and the family plays a part as well'. She readily advocates for needy students and, through her extensive network and strong relationships with her teachers, counsellors and active PSG members, is able to get assistance and support from the community for needy students. Her greatest challenge in this area, she feels,

(I)s probably in creating a deeper understanding among the community that these are students, they are learning, they will make mistakes, so 'please work with us'. Sometimes, they are very quick to complain, and when we check (on the situation), the students are just sitting there and talking, not actually doing anything wrong. Just seeing students gathering in a place seems to irk some of the members of the public. We will receive feedback from them and we always act on it immediately. So, we created a drop-in centre here in school so that they (the students) will always have a place to hang out.

At the same time, on a more positive note,

I tell our grassroots advisor that we have students on Financial Assistance and the support is fantastic, the stakeholders are fantastic! I can turn to anyone and they just write me a cheque and are so willing to support. We also work with other government agencies and self-help groups to surface (some) cases when we see that something is not right and then we follow-up on those cases ourselves, to see that certain things are resolved. We do our best, we don't see it as not our problem. Let's be preventive instead of waiting for something to happen and then we react!

She works closely with her team, having regular conversations especially with her Heads of Department, Key Personnel and Counsellors, to find out more about her students and to discuss together how to handle the difficult challenges so that in the end, the students can benefit. Similar to the other two school leaders featured here, students' emotional and personal development, and viable futures for them, is the driving force for the intensive efforts she makes with them and on their behalf.

It's a personal belief and a deeper understanding of where my students come from and the challenges they face. In my one-to-one conversations and interactions with some of them, especially the ones who are graduating and the problem ones, I find out what their aspirations are, and then help them to set goals for themselves. I have told some of them (and this won't sound very principal-y) 'just concentrate on these three subjects, it will get you into ITE' (Institute of Technical Education). Then I told my teachers, 'I will understand that your (subject) results are not there, don't worry. But I need this child to go on to the next level.'

Mdm. Han is a skilled networker, receiving multiple invitations to attend various community events even on public holidays, and arranges not only to attend these events but also engages her colleagues to go with her, building up their networks, and even to stand in for her at times. Because she recognizes that her physical presence in school is just as important, she has to strategically focus on prioritizing her own participation in these community events where—

I'm not just making up the numbers, where I have a voice and I have something to contribute. Or, if I can approach them to provide opportunities for the students or if my students are participating or performing, then I will make it point to go.

As mentioned earlier, her relationships with staff seem genuinely warm and reciprocal. Staff appreciate the fact that she takes a personal interest in them and spends time chatting with them. She frequently engages her key personnel in conversation and maintains an open flow of information within the leadership team. This personal approach to relationships is also appreciated by the students with whom she takes time to have conversations, and has discernibly helped to improve the quality of the overall school experience and school culture.

I just schedule the students, the most problematic ones first, to speak directly to them. I show them their profile on my computer so they know that I have some information on them, like 'you've not been in school for this number of days without valid reasons' and I ask why this happened. Then they confess, yes they've been lazy, not been studying, and they share certain things, and I learn that some of them are working part-time, some of them despite their family circumstances, don't want Financial Assistance, so they need to work to support the family. So I got a deeper understanding of where they are coming from and I try to help them understand that it's not shameful to get financial help. So their voices are heard and they come up with a way to rectify the problem. We help them to reflect and think through, and what we have discovered is, most of the students know what is the right thing to do.

Because they know we are listening, there will be several occasions where people (students) come forward to say when they've done something wrong. The heartening thing about it is, there have been situations where damage is done, and they come and tell us they did it, either by their own mischief or accidentally. So we recognise and acknowledge that. I tell them, 'I respect you for your moral courage. You will still face the consequences, doesn't mean you own up to it and you get away scot-free, but you earn my respect as a result.' This has helped to change the tone of the school and the relationships between teachers and students.

This commitment on her part to her students inspired her to put in structures in the school enabling her teachers to do the same and to strengthen teacher–student relationships. For example,

During the silent reading period (twice a week) when the whole school is reading, the form teachers will bring these students down to the canteen, then they sit down and have a one-to-one chat with them. So it's not eating into curriculum time. (teachers can) cover the whole class and the students who are in real urgent need, they will surface to the counsellors. In the initial stages I had students who can be very rude to teachers, they can answer back and all that, but now I think both are prepared to listen.

As part of her leadership approach to partnerships, she values feedback and makes sure she and her team ‘close the loop’ quickly to pre-empt any issues from escalating, often within twenty-four hours. This has the positive effect of stakeholders knowing that their feedback is taken seriously by the school, thus further building confidence and trust. She has also carefully selected and delegated one key person to be in charge of each important stakeholder group such as the Parent Support Group, the School Advisory Council as well as community partners. This is partly to help her staff develop their leadership capacities, and also partly to ensure continuity for the school’s efforts in stakeholder and community engagement.

In the past I used to do it myself, but I suddenly realized that this is my knowledge, and what I was doing was not right because I was not developing the others. I recognise their strengths, it doesn’t rest on my shoulders all the time, so I shared with them that ‘you need to own it, it cannot come just from me’. What I’m trying to do is to ensure that sustainability, and I think it will be sustainable because they see the benefits. So I don’t have any worries. When I’m away (from school), I don’t receive phone calls, I see my colleagues and friends answering, because the people know what to do. I’ve got a very good team, they know what to do, so in terms of management, we will never be ‘person-dependent’. If in your absence things collapse, then you’ve not been a good leader.

A clear indication of her success as an advocate for her school and network leader is that she receives strong affirmation from her stakeholders, some of whom readily defend the school and her students from complaints within the community. Her good relationship with the grassroots leader in her neighbourhood, for example, who has spoken up for the school in the face of criticism, helps renew her drive to keep on doing what she does. Her parting advice to aspiring or new school leaders in working with stakeholders is—

Be open. The most important thing is to be open for opportunities that present themselves. You’ll be amazed at how many external stakeholders and organisations want to work with schools, and how much benefits they can bring to the school. They need not have any fears that it is something they cannot manage, but learn how to integrate it into the current programmes and don’t see it as an ‘add-on’. Learn to be good at networking, respond to people in good time and never forget to recognise your partners - build that relationship. The journey we have taken so far and the success we’ve had as a school is a result of our relationship with all our partners.

6.5 Case Study Three: The School Leader as Equal Partner

As the leader of a relatively new primary school, Mr. Quek has wasted no time establishing his school’s visibility in the neighbourhood. Together with his newly formed staff, they ‘learned on the job’, running a couple of weekend roadshows,

sending out flyers and publicity brochures, meeting and engaging local grassroots leaders for their support, and marketing the school through social media such as Facebook, to ‘sell the school’ in the neighbourhood. He firmly believes that the person of the school leader is crucial to today’s generation of well-educated and informed parents, and together with his staff, both welcomes and works closely with pupils’ parents, many of whom are typical dual-income earners. For example, he warmly invited them to suggest ideas for creating the school’s values in the form of attractive colourful animal icons that would appeal to the young children. The vision that drives him is to build a *family*, not just a school, and asserts his belief that the children are not just the parents’ responsibility but also the school’s. He feels that modern young parents want to be equal partners with the school unlike the previous generation which unquestioningly trusted the school to do what they thought was necessary, resulting in less direct parent involvement in schooling. With fewer children being born in the current climate of dropping birth rates, the educational stakes have risen and parental trust now, he feels, has to be earned, not automatically assumed.

Parents now want the best for their children as the result of which, they want to make sure that the school they select for their children is something they really have in mind and it would help them to prepare the children for the future they want the children to have. We have lots of conversations with parents, even parents-to-be - actually, as early as three years before the child gets into school, they already start thinking about it. And the interesting thing about parents’ decision for schools is who the school leader is, not so much the programme. They are very informed today so schools will really have to communicate (well) to the parents.

His vision is to see his school nurturing two cultural strands in tandem, a culture of care *and* a culture of learning, both of which he thinks are equally important to parents. He prides himself on being a personal example of promoting these cultures, setting himself to ‘lead by example’. Although he deems himself an introvert, he has cultivated an evidently approachable and nurturing persona, putting a strong emphasis on developing quality relationships through personal interaction with individuals and small groups, and ‘constructive dialogue’ both with his staff as well as with others beyond the school. He has a good working relationship with his vice-principal whom he has put in charge of both the PSG and Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) and who has complementary strengths to his own, and in whom he wants to develop further leadership competencies. He is very aware that building teacher mindsets and a school culture based on quality relationships of trust requires his taking the leadership initiative, time (even up to 5 years) and consistency, but nonetheless sees this as well worth the effort. Once he sees some evidence of this, he plans to leverage on it to pre-empt difficult challenges and what he terms ‘fire-fighting’ issues, in future. He cited Fullan’s (2004) leadership principles for leading a culture of change through moral purpose, understanding change, rela-

tionship building, knowledge creation, sharing and coherence-making as well as Sergiovanni's (1992) balance between 'system-world' and 'life-world'. Regarding the former, he commented—

I am very shaped by the School Excellence Model (SEM); it is a guiding tool for me to see how I lay down the different process and management system. SEM is a tool that school leaders should tap on for running the school.

He has also translated his understanding of Sergiovanni's concept of 'life-world' into the four relational principles of *L-O-V-E*, namely *Leading by example, Observing and listening actively, Verbalising care and concern, and Enthusing others*. His staff are seen as his key stakeholders since they have a stake in building the school and so he meets them individually or in small groups on a daily basis so that he can get to know them better as individuals. He takes all opportunities to express his appreciation personally as well as understand and address the different needs they may have.

If you say (school is) 'family' then you need to treat each person like a family member. They are not a 'digit' or a pawn in your toolbox to produce results. They are individuals who have their own likings, their own dispositions, strengths and weaknesses, so you tap on the strengths.

Apart from the parents, he also actively engaged staff in contributing ideas for the formulation of the school's values, vision and mission in the early days of the school. These were then disseminated to all parents at the start of the school term so that they could support and reinforce them on the home front. He discussed his 'framework for parental involvement' consisting of six roles that he hopes parents can play, namely parenting, communication, teaching at home, volunteering, decision-making and community support. As an example of how the school utilizes this framework, available MOE funding is drawn on to conduct parenting talks and workshops to help parents build up their skills for positive parenting and being equipped to teach their children at home. The school also employs a variety of communication channels to keep parents up-to-date on what's going on in school. These include a parent-teacher handbook, maintaining a school website, and he personally sending out regular emails, stories and a bi-monthly newsletter. Parents are also invited to (and do) email the school leader directly if they need clarification on any matters that they are unsure about. A few involved parents, both mothers and fathers, have also begun volunteering to help in lunchtime and recess duties as well as working with struggling readers. To further support the vision, he has put in place clear systemic structures and processes to provide a unique 'ecosystem' for pupils with an on-site preschool and an after-school centre for latchkey students who lack home supervision. Counsellors run holiday programmes to strengthen the social-emotional skills of pupils who would otherwise be left alone at home, thus preparing them better for school once the term re-starts. He has also used this parenting framework to align his connections with neighbouring religious and community organizations whom he willingly grants permission to regularly use his school's facilities for their activities such as charity drive events and inter-racial

engagement. His current School Advisory Council, unsurprisingly, comprises not just parents but also a few grassroots leaders from the community around the school. He explained his school's 'values-in-action' and corporate social responsibility thrust based on what he termed an 'A-B-C concept', namely, Assisting the needy, Building community and Contributing to an environmentally friendly school.

We felt it is important to get in touch with the neighbourhood, to be a good neighbour, not antagonize them by disturbing them, and don't be a nuisance. We also need to fall back on the community's assistance for families that need help. For example, when it comes to counselling, we counsel the child but we (also) involve the Family Service Centre, we work very closely with them to provide services, financial assistance and support for families.

The key challenge he feels he faces as a leader in implementing the MOE stakeholder engagement policy is the time required in creating trust through quality relationships whether these are with parents or teachers.

It is about relationships - that is the core theory of success - when you have a positive relationship, then everything will be okay. I tell parents, 'if you're not happy with certain things, come to me'. If parents know where we are coming from, they're not so difficult because they know it will be resolved. So it helps, you see? We will address it and see what we can do. Let us resolve within our family, for the sake of the children. What helps me to cultivate that trust is probably because of my presence. I try my best to start school with the children in the morning unless I really have to go to HQ or something. It's when your presence is felt and people know how to catch you, that you don't have a bigger problem eventually because fire-fighting is more painful than being proactive.

But it takes time, it's very tiring, because you've got to talk, to meet and have that conversation. Changing the culture doesn't take place overnight, it takes long processes and you need to be consistent, to practice what you advocate. The people I have identified for leadership, they also have to come and see me because I need to change the way they think and talk. The 'big ideas' and the language has to be very different. You also have to show the person who is understudying (you) what it looks like, so (he) doesn't need to second-guess me. When you have someone who doesn't know you, there's no trust, so... they (now) know my habits. I lead by example so they can learn and model the way I want it to be but I also listen to them and synthesize and choose the best ideas. As a leader, you need to do more than your teachers, then they'll respect you. The important thing is, whatever decision you make, if you can as far as possible, don't destroy the trust and don't destroy the relationship.

Mr. Quek thus sees himself not just as a school leader but also, as part of his dominant metaphor of school, as the 'head of the family' and takes full responsibility for what his teachers do.

If anything goes wrong, I have to cover for them. I tell them 'you are guilty unless proven innocent' and I will help you to discover and admit your mistakes, but it's not right for the teacher to have to admit these mistakes and the principal is not involved. The stake is that we are building a family here. I should not have policies that stop people from doing the wrong things; I should have policies that encourage them to do more of the right things.

6.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The three principals featured here embody well the Ministry of Education's attributes of the 'network leader' in their proactive and effective creation of connections with stakeholders, building bridges between their schools and the wider community, and advocating strongly for their less-advantaged students in order to optimize opportunities for these students' success. Their leadership in stakeholder engagement comes across clearly in the three descriptive attributes highlighted in the discussion. Regardless of level of schooling, family background and student population, and indeed perhaps due to the particular profiles of the families and neighbourhood communities that they work with, they have tailored their school systems and processes to meet the needs and demands of their own particular constituency. Fundamental to the structures and processes they have put in place, effective and frequent communication with stakeholders is clearly key to their success, the contents of which are often focused on sharing the responsibilities and challenges of student learning. They believe that learning is not limited to the classroom or within school walls but has to be expanded more holistically outside into the real world, particularly for older children. They boldly and intentionally leverage on their networks and personal positions to gain richer learning opportunities for students. In turn, they open up opportunities for the community, including parents, to participate in and contribute to school events and activities. The person of the school leader, being the official 'face' of the school organization, is especially important in conveying to both internal and external stakeholders how approachable they are, and how accessible opportunities for participation may be. Beyond the formal structures, or 'system-world', they understand that there lies the perhaps messier, but nonetheless, richer informal 'life-world' of the school, which can undergird beneficial stakeholder engagement for students. This 'life-world' in turn depends on the level of trust they are able to forge with all stakeholders in the community within which they lead. This they effectively succeed in doing through leading by example, building good teams and forging authentic trustful relationships around them through daily personal conversations and interactions with internal and external stakeholders.

In successful stakeholder engagement practices, the importance of personal modelling by a school leader (and teachers) must therefore not be underestimated. The leader, in particular, sets the tone in building a supportive whole-school partnership culture that pervades the staff room and school community. Effective school leaders can do much to transform even an existing negative culture, if they set their minds and hearts, and prioritize time, to building good relationships. Through daily social exchanges within school, social trust among school leaders, teachers and parents can in turn effectively improve much of the routines of school that can help motivate students to learn better. A skill in building trust is thus not to be viewed as a 'soft' skill but rather, one that can actually drive school reform. When a school leader demonstrates this in his or her personal demeanour and actions, teacher capacity in the area of social-emotional, and relational, capital can

be strengthened, certainly to the overall benefit of their students. This would truly strengthen the partnership aspect of being a school leader (Auerbach 2012)—by transforming the school leader’s role from being defensive ‘buffers’ to indefatigable ‘bridge-builders’ between their schools and the wider community.

6.7 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you think were some significant attributes and beliefs of each of the principals featured in the chapter that shaped and influenced their views towards the stakeholder engagement policy?
2. What were some of the key leadership challenges you think they would have faced, and if you were in their position, how would you handle these?
3. How and to what extent do you think you would approach the design and practice of authentic stakeholder engagement policy in your own school? What are your reasons for this?
4. If you were to undertake your own research in the area of stakeholder engagement, how would you frame an exploration of peer and/or teacher–student relationships?

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