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Abstract

The narratives of three principals were used to make sense of what is involved in curriculum leadership, particularly in the Singapore context where decisions such as selection of content, skills, values, and standards for evaluation are centrally made. The three principals were purposively selected based on the following contexts: an established school that has a long tradition of excellence in achievement at the national examinations; a new primary school; and a school that caters to academically low ability students. Their narratives show how each principal exercises curriculum leadership by defining their conception of curriculum, articulating their own curriculum mission and vision, and building the curriculum culture of the school.

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the narratives of three principals have been drawn upon to make sense of the driving force behind curriculum leadership. What is involved in curriculum leadership? It may seem that the curriculum is a ‘given’—‘something never to be questioned, just accepted, “covered”, and implemented’ (Shaw 2012, p. 5). This is especially so in an education system wherein curriculum decisions and policies tend to be centrally driven. Singapore’s education system has been characterised as centralised and standardised, with bureaucratic alignment (Sharpe and Gopinathan 2002). In Singapore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) publishes the syllabi for all the subjects taught in schools. These syllabi contain the desired

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outcomes, detailing content, skills and values for each subject. Recently, MOE also publishes a teaching guide in tandem with the syllabus for each subject. At the end of 6 years of primary school education, all students in Singapore take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). There are other national examinations that students have to take at the end of their secondary school education. The Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB) is a government statutory board that develops and conducts these national examinations in Singapore, and develops the examination syllabus for each subject. Since decisions such as selection and scope and sequence of content, skills, values and standards for evaluation are centrally made, how much autonomy does a principal have in exercising curriculum leadership?

This top-down approach in planning, disseminating and enforcing educational changes (Goh and Gopinathan 2008, p. 25) had served the nation well in the early years of nation-building and survival (Gopinathan and Mardiana 2013). Such a view of the curriculum in terms of content and transmission, however, would be detrimental for survival in the fast-changing globalised world of the twenty-first century (Ferrandino 2001; Priestley and Humes 2010). To survive and prosper in the future—particularly within increasingly globalised socio-economic conditions—the education system would need to foster dispositions of flexibility and innovation (Deng et al. 2013, p. 4). MOE has thus embarked upon extensive reform efforts in order to devolve decision-making power to local schools (Ng 2005), allowing for autonomy on the part of the practitioners in the field to interpret the goals and desired outcomes, and to innovatively plan and support pupils' rich learning experiences (Hargreaves et al. 2012). Moving from 'one size fits all decisions made by MOE for all schools in Singapore, schools are now much more active in decision making for themselves' (Tan 2008, p. 8). As noted by Tirozzi (2001), the principal of the twenty-first century—

establishes a climate for excellence, puts forth a vision for continuous improvement in student performance, promotes excellence in teaching, and commits to sustained, comprehensive professional development for all staff members. The principal ensures that curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment of student progress are coherent components in the teaching and learning process. In short, the principal engages herself or himself as an instructional leader (p. 435).

In view of this new policy trajectory that Tan and Ng (2007) have characterised as 'decentralised centralisation', Singaporean school leaders are more recently discovering, exploring, constructing and articulating their role in exercising curriculum leadership in their schools. As such, autonomy is still rather new to the Singaporean education culture, coupled with the onerous and demanding work of school leadership, it is not surprising that not much research has been done and written about how Singaporean principals view and carry out curriculum leadership. This is also compounded by the nebulous nature of curriculum leadership. As Hairon et al. (2017) pointed out:

There is still no official definition for curriculum leadership, and the attempt to understand the concept of curriculum leadership is likened to the story of ‘The Elephant and the Blind Men’ (Sorenson et al. 2011). *Each of the six blind men touches different parts of the elephant and defines curriculum leadership differently depending on the part of the animal that was touched* (p. 11).

To give us a frame of reference, it may be useful to consider curriculum leadership by referring to the literature on each of the words. Though there are diverse definitions of the word ‘curriculum’, there is general consensus (Eisner 2002; Marsh 2009; Posner 1998; Tyler 1949; Schwab 1969) that it can be conceived as

1. The intended or explicit curriculum, usually formally stated as national policies and in documents such as syllabuses;
2. The enacted curriculum or what is taught, usually guided and informed by departmental schemes of work and schedules and textbooks and instructional material and
3. The experienced curriculum, including the learning and assessment experiences, as well as the ‘hidden’ messages that are implicit in these experiences.

The definition of the term ‘leadership’ is just as diverse, ranging from types to styles of leadership. For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to look at the roles of leaders as explicated by Sergiovanni (2009):

1. The technical leader who ensures optimum effectiveness and proper management of the school;
2. The human leader who nurtures and supports the social and interpersonal potential of the school;
3. The educational leader who manifests well-informed professional knowledge of matters of pedagogy and education;
4. The symbolic leader who models and signals the values of the school and
5. The cultural leader who builds and nurtures the unique identity of the school.

The purpose of this chapter is to draw from the narratives of three principals to understand how they exercise their curriculum leadership within such ‘decentralised centralisation’. How do they negotiate a mandated curriculum, and yet exercise curriculum leadership in constructing curricula according to the unique context of each school?

3.2 Method

The case study method provided thick descriptions on how each principal exercises curriculum leadership by:

1. Defining their conception of curriculum;
2. Articulating their own curriculum mission and vision and
3. Building the curriculum culture of the school.

The three principals were purposively selected based on their unique school contexts. Each context would have its own demands, expectations, dilemmas and tensions that call for each principal to negotiate and exercise curriculum leadership differently from others. The first case school is an established secondary school that has a long tradition of excellence in achievement at the national examinations. In such a context, the principal may feel pressured to maintain the status quo. The second case school is a new government primary school. In such a context, the principal would have to make a lot of decisions, starting from scratch, yet with a view to being distinctive among the other more established schools nearby. The third case school is a school that caters to academically low ability students. I was interested to explore how the principal would construct the curriculum to meet the challenges that are unique to this school. The three principals were invited to participate in the study, and they gave their informed consent. While it was possible to ensure anonymity for the first two cases as there are a number of schools within each of these contexts, it was impossible to do so for the third school. Pseudonyms have been used for the principals. Each principal was interviewed once, with the interviews lasting from 100 to 150 min. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then systematically coded to generate relevant themes. The draft of each principal's case was sent to them for member checking.

3.3 Case Study 1: Curriculum Leadership in an Established School

Mrs. Chen is a Principal in a secondary school that has a long history. The school is an autonomous school, which is indicative of its popularity as a school of choice. Through the years, its students have excelled academically at national examinations with value-added performance. The school has been conferred many national awards, including the School Excellence Award, which serves as a mark of distinction for schools that have achieved overall systematic excellence in both academic and non-academic outcomes.

3.3.1 Autonomy in Exercising Curriculum Leadership

As the school is part of the 'mainstream' education system, it would be guided by the subject and examination curricula set by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Would this constrain the extent to which Mrs. Chen is able to exercise curriculum leadership? Mrs. Chen feels that she has flexibility in designing the curriculum in the school, as she feels that a school curriculum is about preparing students for life. This is a big 'umbrella' that encompasses several aspects, both academic and non-academic. While conceding that the relevant departments in MOE would

design the syllabi for the various subjects and examinations, Mrs. Chen feels that the school decides on other aspects of the overall school curriculum.

The ‘O’ Levels¹ examinations is only one part. As a leader, I consciously perceive the definition of curriculum as more than just the syllabus, more than just the examinations, more than just the academic subjects. I believe in a holistic curriculum. To me, a holistic curriculum involves BOTH the academic rigor, as well as the character and citizenship education part. There are the 21st century competencies we want to develop in the students. So with reference to these different areas, I see quite a bit of autonomy as a school leader in how I want to see the curriculum enacted in my school.

Even with the non-academic aspects, Mrs. Chen sees the frameworks and plans that MOE provides (such as the Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) Framework² and the ICT Masterplan³) as broad directions and resources that provide support to the school. These are broad strokes for the general and long term. The details in the curriculum design, however, have to be customised according to the particular profile of the students in the school. Such decisions can only be made at the school level—‘On the ground, how I see it happen for the students of my school’s profile is a call that I make. It is a decision that we make as a school’. The curriculum that Mrs. Chen envisions for her school

will always reflect the confidence we have in our students’ ability, and our aim to prepare students for the challenges of the future. We continually blaze new trails for our students to discover new learning opportunities that will enable them to be wholesome individuals who believe in themselves and what the future can offer them.

She articulates this curriculum vision in her Foreword of the school’s website, which espouses a holistic curriculum that is student centric, and emphasises both curricular and co-curricular programmes. The intention is to develop students to be well-balanced scholars, responsible and gracious citizens, having strong character and potential for leadership, and be able to learn and work collaboratively, and endowed with twenty-first-century skills and dispositions.

The exercise of autonomy in curriculum leadership could also be constrained by school context and culture, especially with ‘established organizations’. As the school has a long history, with an excellent academic track record, did Mrs. Chen feel that she should not ‘rock the boat’ and just ‘maintain status quo’ when she took over the helm?

¹The ‘O’ Levels examinations refers to the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) Examination which is jointly administered by MOE, Singapore and University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE). It is a national examination taken by the majority of Singaporean secondary school students at the end of their secondary school education.

²The Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) Framework, incorporating National Education, Co-Curricular Activities and Civics and Moral Education, was launched by MOE in 2011.

³The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Masterplan in education is managed by the Educational Technology Division of MOE.

When I took over, I was conscious that I am not here to change everything. My predecessors have established very good foundations and it is on these foundations that I build. I see it as a continuum and each school leader builds on the good work that has been done in the previous term. That has to be. If not, I really pity the teachers. You ask me if I changed the school vision, mission and values. I left them as they were. You cannot keep changing the school vision every four, five years, so I left it. But how you interpret and unpack the vision has to be consistent with the prevailing context, so that was the approach that I took. And really, my predecessors have left an excellent school for me to lead so all the credit goes to them for laying the foundation.

After LEP,⁴ I was assigned to the school as VP. During LEP, people always say, when you go to the school, you don't touch anything for one year. Watch things go by, make small changes here and there. But the reality on the ground is, when I came into the school in September, I knew I was taking over the helm in December, and that the school would be undergoing EV⁵ (external validation) two years later. That would mean I can't wait for one year to make any changes, because then it would be too late to actually do stuff. So it was a decision I needed to make whether or not to just let the school's previous strategic thrusts continue, or start an envisioning process with all the teachers by November of that year. It was a decision I had to make and at that point I recognized that it would be more useful to do it earlier than later.

It helped that in November my predecessor spoke to me and gave me the freedom and assurance to do what I thought fit. She gave me a tip: that the school was envisioned to death. Every time there is a new school leader you get the whole thing all over again. I felt for the teachers so instead of the usual envisioning exercise I adopted a futuring approach. I got the teachers to consider what the realities our students are going to face beyond the 'O' Levels, what are the underlying goals we serve as teachers, and eventually we made certain decisions with reference to how we would conceive of the curriculum moving forward. When we looked at the strategic thrusts that the school already had, we found that we could converge the seven thrusts into a single strategic thrust that merges CCE with the Instructional Programme.

As the school had established a very good reputation, with a student population in the 80th percentile of the Primary School Leaving Examinations, one would expect that the students and parents would exert pressures based on certain expectations. Would this serve as a constraint to the autonomy of curriculum decisions made by the Principal?

First of all, I feel the tension myself. I spent 9 years at a top junior college as a teacher. I felt it was my responsibility for them to get As for their 'A' Levels so they could move on to a university course of their choice. So I am very clear about what my core business is, with reference to the responsibility to ensure that our kids do well in the exams. I never once told the teachers that was not important. That is my own belief.

During the futuring exercise, I put forth an assumption. Then, some teachers were thinking we should offer IP (Integrated Programme⁶). At the back of my mind, I looked at the landscape and thought that it was too saturated with IP schools, and there is a place for a rock-solid school offering 'O' Levels. But I didn't tell the teachers what was on my mind.

⁴The Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) is a course jointly organised by MOE and the National Institute of Education (NIE) to prepare candidates for school principalship.

⁵The School Appraisal Branch of MOE conducts External Validation (EV) exercises as part of a system of school evaluation.

⁶The IP course would offer a 6-year programme instead of 4 years, with the end point being the 'A' Levels instead of 'O' Levels which is the end point of secondary school level.

Instead, I asked the teachers, “What if we were going IP?” I wanted them to think what they could do if ‘O’ Levels were removed, what would it look like, because if I don’t remove that, the teachers are constantly shackled. Every time they think of curriculum innovation, they would come back to “but this will get in the way of preparing for the ‘O’ Levels”; “no time - we need to finish the syllabus”. We get so shackled that we don’t think anything is possible. The “buts” keep coming, so to get on with the scenario planning exercise, I put forth the “if we were going IP, what will you envision” scenario, and collectively as a staff, we came collectively to what I call Vision 2025 – our vision for our school by 2025.

But at the back of my mind, I knew I did not want to go IP, and that the system does not need more IP schools. I knew it would make it easier if the ‘O’ Levels are not there, but looking systemically, the school did not need to go IP. I introduced the new idea of the ‘O’ Levels Enhanced programme, meaning to say the rigor of an ‘O’ Levels programme with the breadth and exposure that kids will get in an IP school. I recognised that there is a pecking order of school choice. I am very realistic. If your T-score⁷ is about 248 or 250, your first five choices are probably IP schools, which is fine. If I were a parent, I might do the same. If they cannot get into an IP school, they come to me. These are the students who have the capacity, the capability, but unfortunately they are not IP. But that does not mean I cannot give you a holistic education that you may also get in an IP school and I have the additional advantage of the rigor of the ‘O’ Levels.

This was how we eventually decided that we wanted to brand ourselves in that way to offer a holistic curriculum. It has taken some time. The teachers are very clear I am not saying “no ‘O’ Levels”. I am saying that even with the ‘O’ Levels exams at Sec 4, it should not stop us from providing a well-rounded, holistic, rigorous curriculum. The ‘O’ Levels are never out of view. I never once let my teachers think that I want them to swing to the other extreme because I know that is still my core business. That is the tension I feel. I tell them I feel the same tension. I think that assures them as well, because they know I’m being realistic.

This is also what I communicated to the parents. Ever since I came into the school, I always get asked the question “Are you going IP?” at every Sec 1 meet-the-parents session. I tell them point-blank – we are not but this is the ‘O’ Levels Enhanced curriculum that we offer. So when they first come in, in the first week of Sec 1, I ask how many are appealing and about 50% would appeal. I am fine with that and I wish them all the best because I also have a whole list of pupils appealing to come in. I am totally open-door. If no IP school is willing to take you, you are welcome to join us because I am very confident of the curriculum that I offer. I don’t clamour for students with high T-scores as they are not accurate predictors. I want students who want to be here and I am very confident that the holistic curriculum that we offer would develop them accordingly.

That really is the definition of “every school a good school”. It means we do “good stuff” with you, whoever who wants to come to me, at Sec One, whether you are an appeal-case or not, DSA⁸ or not. Once you come into Sec One, it is a level playing field. The holistic curriculum is yours to enjoy. If all your students come in with 260, if you don’t do good stuff with them or if they are not doing good stuff, there is something wrong with the school. We don’t judge people based on T-score.

⁷The overall performance at PSLE of a student is reported in terms of an Aggregate Score. This aggregate score is derived from the T-scores (i.e. Transformed Scores) in all the subjects sat, which must include the three subjects—English Language, Mathematics and Science.

⁸The Direct School Admission (DSA) exercise is an admission exercise to allow participating secondary schools to select some Primary 6 students for admission to Secondary One. The selection is based on their achievements and talents before the PSLE results are released.

3.3.2 Leadership in the Curriculum Decision-Making Process

Taking on leadership over an established school has its challenges of engaging staff who may be rather wary towards any change. As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Chen's predecessor had warned her that the staff had gone through numerous envisioning exercises, and may be weary about the process. How did Mrs. Chen lead in the 'futuring' process? Did she have a plan in mind, or did she want the teachers to come up with the ideas themselves?

With reference to the direction of the school, of course, I did already have a broad direction that I wanted to bring the teachers and school to. I wanted to get them to recognize that as a school, we need to go in that broad direction – holistic education.

But I also wanted their ownership. I wanted the teachers to think, "What does holistic education look like?" So, for the 'futuring' exercise that we did in November, I asked them to work in groups to think about the possibilities in one of the following realms: of 21st CC⁹ learning, CCE, IP, and technology. So what happened then was a discourse that was entirely the teachers'. What I got at the end of that session was a whole diversity of different scenarios that the teachers had envisioned for the school, and then to draw them altogether into a certain direction that we wanted to head towards. The direction is quite apparent with reference to where we want to move our education system. It does not deviate very much because I think the core philosophy of education is there; we are all fairly aligned there.

Then we took what the teachers surfaced up at EXCO¹⁰ level. We fleshed it out a lot more and eventually converged on certain things, which were drawn from inputs from the teachers, but it was pretty much what I had envisioned. There was congruence. I then put it back to the teachers at the end of the year.

How much can you change at an 'established' school that offers the prescribed curriculum set by MOE? What value could such a 'futuring' exercise add to the existing curriculum?

Yes, the content of the subject curricula is discipline-based, and you can't change much there. For some of the subjects teachers had also developed some integrated curricula across secondary 1, 2 and 3 but it was still very academic.

So, for the 'O' Levels Enhanced curriculum that we offer, I wanted the teachers to understand that while we still offer a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for the 'O' Levels, we need to bring the students beyond the 'O' Levels, to equip them with a lot more skills than just being able to do well in the 'O' Levels. So, while you need a fair amount of direct-instruction and drill and practice for the students to do well in the 'O' levels, the question I put forth to them is how **effective** is your direct instruction? I needed the teachers to reconsider how they were doing the teaching and learning. While direct instruction has its place, were they mistaking quantity (through drill and practice) for quality (achieving deep learning)? How do we know that with all our telling (direct instruction), the students are truly learning and have understood? So these were issues that I put forth to the teachers under the guise of "what if we go IP?" so that they could dream beyond the 'O' Levels.

⁹In 2009, the MOE launched the 21st Century Competencies (21st CC) and Desired Student Outcomes.

¹⁰In many schools, the principal, vice-principals and heads of department form an executive committee commonly referred to as 'the EXCO'.

A one-off two-day ‘futuring’ or envisioning exercise is not enough. It is but the tip of the iceberg of a ‘slow but consistent shift’.

So during the first year, it was still “What if we were to go IP”. I established a small committee, what I called the think-tank, to spearhead some things with the intention that if we were to go IP, perhaps these are some of the things we should do. So that was how I gently got the teachers to shift a little bit. Along the way, things became clearer to me with reference to how the school was already doing 21st Century Competencies. What I really wanted to change was with reference to how the school was implementing the 21st CC curriculum. They were not implementing it but assessing it. This was what was happening. My burden was if you don’t teach it, how can you assess it?

So at that point I got into contact with some friends from (a certain research institute) and they had a particular People Development framework to guide teachers in designing lessons that develop 21st CC. We got them in, trained the teachers and eventually the 21st CC tightened and became another key curriculum innovation we wanted to propagate in the school.

So it took one whole year of going on the ground, talking to people more open to change, getting them to work with that, convincing teachers who did not want to change to make small incremental steps, working with what the school was already doing with curriculum innovations, sharpening that, building on strong foundations.

3.3.3 Leadership in Curriculum Implementation

Besides leading in the early planning stages, what other curriculum leadership roles does the principal play, for example, at the implementation stage? What is the role of the principal vis-a-vis the heads of department, who are the subject specialists? Mrs. Chen sees her role as guardian of the broad teaching and learning framework which provides the guiding considerations with reference to how things are done in the school. How does she play this role?

All my HODs report to me. I do work review with them. If you do not have a pulse on what is happening on the ground, how do you run the school? I want to be directly in touch with what is going on in all the departments. When I do the review and performance planning with all the HODs we talk about things that really matter, in terms of the academics, in terms of CCE, and in terms of the use of technology. I work through the action plans with them. Talking to the Heads helps me to establish a common understanding across all the departments in the school.

Mrs. Chen believes that the key to implementing the curriculum is to work closely with the middle management. There are at least three points in the year where she talks to the HODs one on one, at length for at least an hour a session, talking through things. At such discussions, as well as the monthly EXCO meetings, she establishes certain guiding philosophies which form the foundation for her narrative.

I am also very deliberate about the tone of the school environment that I want to establish. I am a control freak about the narrative. The principal should control the narrative, which is what you say at morning assembly, at staff meeting, at EXCO meetings. It is a narrative that

has to be consistent. These are things I had time to think through at LEP. For example, Instead of just looking at the academic results, I look at the student. Instead of just focusing on whether you are getting your 6A1s or 7A1s,¹¹ I look at effort and character and holistic development. These are things that would be words in a policy statement but these are things I believe in. And therefore as a school leader, I want to make sure my narrative is consistent with what I believe in. For example, if I say it is a holistic curriculum and I am not chasing after results, I mean it. When I talk to students, I never once scold them about their common test results. I go to every Sec 4 class and talk to them. And constantly the narrative I put forth is not about the results. At the end I don't really care what results you actually emerge with but from now till then, part of character development means this is the goal, so let's find the resilience and go for it. So next year, when you come back with your results,¹² then we decide on what is next. That is the narrative I keep reinforcing, about character and about holistic development.

Even with my teachers, I say we are about holistic curriculum. If our 'O' levels results dip a little bit, the whole world watches what the principal says. So if my narrative has been about holistic curriculum, and if the moment the results drop I come in and say let's cancel everything else and just make sure our Sec 4s end CCA¹³ in February from the beginning of the year, then I undo the testimony and narrative that I am very deliberately establishing. So when we analyse the results, it is not about the one percent or two percent drop, but I articulate that as a school, we are committed to getting our students to a junior college of their choice. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves what have we done, and whether we could do better. If we can do better, let's do better. It is the tone and it is a conscious tone. So when the results drop, even the EXCO watch. I have to be very careful that it was not about the results. When I was upset about certain things, it was not because the results dropped but it's just the grief of whether we could have done better by our students. The analysis of results has to be framed from that perspective. Could we have done better? Could we have done more in terms of the care and motivation of the students? Please review the way you are working with the kids. Please review if you are teaching them the right way. I focus a lot on these things rather than the fact that results dropped.

How does Mrs. Chen remain consistent in this philosophy? Have there been times when there are slips in her narrative?

I truly believe it should not be about the results. So when the results dropped, I really believed that we really want to focus on the students and make sure we do justice by them. It is not something I felt I needed to say. It was who I am. Do I feel the pressure of accountability? Obviously, yes. I am responsible for everything that happens in school. So I must be absolutely convinced and sure about what I believe in, and stand by my convictions, so that I have an answer when called for.

I believe you lead the way you are because if not you will be really miserable. I am as transparent as what you see is what you get. I do not play games with the teachers. I am all the values that I walk. I am this. I am who I am. I do not put on a front in front of the teachers. I think you have to be transparent in front of the teachers for them to trust you.

¹¹The A1 grade is the top 75th percentile.

¹²As the students sit for the 'O' Level examinations at the end of the calendar year, they receive their results in the next year. As they would have left the school after the examinations, they have to return to the school the following year to get their results.

¹³Every secondary school student takes part in one Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) taken from the following options: clubs and societies, physical sports, uniformed groups, visual and performing arts.

3.4 Case Study 2: Curriculum Leadership in a New School

Mr. Yeo is a very experienced educator, who has held various positions in schools and MOE. He had been a principal of a primary school before he was asked to set up a new school. His staff was still growing as the school is serving only two levels (primary 1 and 2), so the culture of the school was still developing. Many changes were happening, as everything was new, affording him ample opportunity to exhibit curriculum leadership, unlike in an established school already flushed with resources, standard operating procedures and trained staff.

Where the academic curriculum of the school is concerned, Mr. Yeo emphasises that ‘we’re very clear that teaching learning is indeed the forefront of our business’. As there is a national examination at the end of 6 years of primary education, MOE has set very clear and detailed guidelines. The school makes these expectations clear to the parents and teachers at the start. ‘We put together a handbook that actually spells out all the different syllabus requirements by MOE’. So, while the academic curriculum tends to be prescribed by MOE, Mr. Yeo explains that he sees himself exercising curriculum leadership in three Cs—culture, climate and community.

3.4.1 Curriculum Leadership in Building Culture

By ‘culture’ Mr. Yeo means the philosophy or ‘whole ethos underpinning our belief of what teaching learning is’. This means ‘espousing beliefs in terms of what we think the learner is, because this affects how we view learning and teaching, and helps the teachers to frame their work around the philosophy’. Given the challenge of starting a brand new school in a neighbourhood that already had other popular primary schools, Mr. Yeo felt the most important step he had to take was to establish a culture that is unique to the school.

I wanted to be very clear why the school was started. With so many schools in the neighbourhood, why do we need to start a new school? How is this school different from the other schools? I also need to be convinced myself that I had something to offer to parents. Otherwise why would parents want to choose a new school? So we needed something as a rallying call, to champion the curriculum, to say we can offer a new brand of education.

So, this culture is for the long term – it helped us, the pioneers of this school, to frame our mission, vision, values and motto. It’s our brand. It even helped us to design our school crest and school song – yes, even the lyrics of our school song, so that it becomes part and parcel of our daily life and routine – that’s the school climate. So it’s all interlinked – the school culture is reinforced by the daily school climate and the community.

How did Mr. Yeo lead in the design of the culture?

Actually, when I was Principal in the other school, I had heard of this particular curriculum for a positive education. So, I read up about it, and I even visited a school in Australia that started this five years ago, and went for some training on it. That was one year before I was appointed Principal of this school. So, I had an idea of the philosophy of the culture of this school.

So, as the Principal, I gave the idea the seed of the philosophy, the goals that I want, and the teachers fleshed it out. Because I want to honour the practitioner. They need to believe in it, not just carry out somebody else's programme. Positive education will only work if the teachers internalise it, accept it as their mindset, and then all their behaviour and teaching will come naturally as the manifestation of that mindset. So first of all, I had to believe in the philosophy, and then I sowed the seed – “this is what I stand for – this is what this school stands for” – then, the teachers flesh it out. We used the philosophy as a framework to guide our crafting of the school values, what we want our kids to have, and then what are the outcomes that we want to see after six years with us. We worked together to craft the mission, vision, values and motto. This is important because it sets the tone of the climate.

3.4.2 Curriculum Leadership in Building Climate

What is the difference between climate and culture? Mr. Yeo describes it as what happens daily in the school.

Like the weather – it sets the tone for every aspect of what we do every day. School culture is “the big thing” – the philosophy that endures, and should not change, and so, once we've decided on it, we don't quite need to keep talking about it. Climate, on the other hand, is about the now and present and the things we do daily. So it's about the small things that happen, day in, day out.

Once the teachers make sense of the culture, the philosophy, they need to internalize it. This internalization results in the school climate. It doesn't come about overnight. It needs a lot of conversations about their beliefs. This is where my leadership comes in. I have to keep having these conversations with my staff. Just this morning, we were talking about it again (even though it is during the school holidays) – how does our philosophy “play out” in terms of their teaching?

Language is very important in the climate. So, things like how we talk about accomplishments and success – we're so used to saying things like, “you must do your best, strive for excellence”, but according to this philosophy of positive education, even the language of praise takes on a different spin. I realized that I have to praise the effort and not the accomplishment. I need to encourage them to learn from their mistakes rather than focus on the product.

As the concept of school climate involves the translation of the philosophy into action, getting the consensus of the staff would be crucial. How did Mr. Yeo lead in helping every teacher internalise the culture such that their behaviour and speech promoted the desired school climate?

We got ourselves into six groups and in each group, we talked about how that aspect of the philosophy can be fleshed out. For example, in my group, we talked about mindfulness. How can we practise it every day? At the start of the day and then after recess we want them to come back together settle in just to give them the two minutes to settle down. Same thing before they take a test – two minutes to settle down first, before you start the test. So the teachers are the ones who suggested the practical ways in which we could play out the philosophy. Simple things, but so important to message the climate. Some good teachers are already doing these things – we tap into their craft – then the teachers make sense of it, and they can see that they are useful tips and practices. Now that we have discussed it, we have documented it, we even printed it out and everyone has a copy. We have a frame of reference to guide us. It’s about starting good habits for the children and for the staff.

3.4.3 Curriculum Leadership in Building a Community of Learners

Building a community of learners features strongly in Mr. Yeo’s vision for his school’s curriculum. In fact, the vision statement found in the school’s website states that the school ‘inspires our community to lead meaningful and engaged lives’. How does Mr. Yeo lead in building a community of learners?

When I recruit teachers, I want to bring in like-minded people. I always tell them, “This is our philosophy. It means we teach in this way. I’m very up front with them. This is what we stand for; this is how we do things. Do you agree with it? If not, perhaps this is not the school for you”. Some of them even tell us that they read our website, and I ask them for their interpretation of our philosophy. I like such people. We can co-create this whole journey together.

Nowadays, teachers don’t just do what they’re told to do. They want to find meaning in what they do. As a community we design and review our culture and climate and grow together. This is a community of learners. A teacher needs to be constantly learning. You can’t teach effectively unless you reflect on how you’re a learner yourself.

3.5 Case Study 3: Curriculum Leadership

In 2006, the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave an impassioned call for educational opportunities to give less academically inclined students hope for ‘every child who drops out is one too many’. Having experienced failure at the primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) can be very discouraging for a young person. How can we give these students a school experience that not only repairs their damaged self-esteem, but also set them on the path to a successful and purposeful life?

3.5.1 Curriculum Leadership in Advancing Social Justice

Mr. Lam feels strongly that curriculum design can help in advancing social justice. To him, social justice means providing greater support for the ‘low achievers’—ensuring that this group of children does not get left behind. Several of the students in his school come from socially challenging circumstances.

For want of a better way to say it, we say that our students are ‘less academically inclined’ but that is only the tip of the iceberg. Why did they fail at PSLE? If you trace back, you’ll find they have been failing practically every year in primary school. From the very start in life, they did not have a supportive socio-emotional environment that says, “I believe in you”. It is unimaginable what these kids have gone through or are going through now. Ever since I became Principal of this school, I’ve seen a part of Singapore that I’ve never seen before. And I wonder how these kids have managed to live through it.

It breaks my heart and that’s why I believe strongly that my school can make a difference for these kids - give them a second chance in life. They need it. Everything seems to be against them from the very start. People seem to have given up on them. That’s why the curriculum in my school must give them the message: you can be successful. You can lead a purposeful life. You can contribute positively to the community. You are not hopeless. There is hope. Someone cares for you. We are here to support you.

So the curriculum has to cater to the students. It must make them want to come to school. It must make them want to stay in school and not drop out. When the school was first conceptualised, the target was to reduce the dropout rate from 60 per cent to 25 per cent. Now, the attrition rate of the graduating cohorts is between 10 to 15 per cent. What does this mean? It means that the students feel a sense of belonging in this school. The hands-on pedagogy makes learning more interesting, and they look forward to coming to school.

We make our lessons authentic. There are opportunities for students to apply what they have learnt in class. We develop our own curriculum and teaching packages and have moved away from using textbooks. We want students to experience the joy of learning. Though many are not strong in Maths, they begin to experience the learning of it in a different and meaningful way. It is more than just teaching them Maths. Many of the students think they can’t “do Maths”. They’ve switched off because they have experienced failure in Maths for so long. So the teachers in my school need to go the extra mile for the students. They need to have the heart to help the students overcome their sense of failure and mental block. My teachers use great pedagogical strategies to engage the students. That’s what I believe in. If a teacher has the passion and the belief to help such students, the rest can be learnt.

3.5.2 Curriculum Leadership at the Institutional Level

Key to such a school environment would be the teachers. Mr. Lam feels that the groundwork had already been laid by the pioneering staff who strongly believed and articulated the school’s mission of giving the students a second chance in their education, giving hope to the students, and never giving up on them. On his part, as principal, he exercises curriculum leadership in this area by recruiting the right teachers who believe in the school’s mission, and building the capacity of new staff on how the school’s mission can be enacted.

Quite a large percentage of the work is outside the school. Because a lot of the students have a lot of problems outside school, in the homes, in their communities and as a result of that, they can't come to school and are not in school. Yes, 70-80% of the students come daily without issue. But the other 20-30% of the students are actually out there, having all kinds of issues. A lot of the teachers actually go out to visit the home and sit down and talk to the child and ask "why don't you come to school? What are your problems? I promise to help you in any way I can. Would you come back for the sake of your future?"

So the teachers have to make a lot of home visits, in between free periods or after school when they have time. Sometimes in the evening or weekends, when the child has run away from home, the parent calls the teacher "can you help me find him?" So the teachers have to go and do home visits. They have to work with other social agencies – MSF (Ministry of Social and Family Development) officers, and family service centres - take the child to hospital, accompany the child to court, help the parents apply for financial aid and so on.

It is a very important part of the work of a teacher in this school because if you don't bring them back, whatever curriculum initiative or innovation that you have is not going to reach them.

It goes back to how much the staff believes in this mission. The pioneering teachers did a fantastic job in setting the tone and commitment to this mission. But as you can see, this is emotionally sapping work, and many of the pioneering teachers have moved on – they need a break. So, the school is in transition with new teachers coming on board.

I think first of all at the recruitment stage, you really have to get the right people. You have to screen very carefully. Because these are matters of the heart. Passion. If you get someone in who doesn't have it, it's not likely to grow or develop in that person over one year or two years.

As their leader, I have to look into building the capacity of the staff - tapping on the more senior pioneers to show the way, ensuring that the new staff come on board successfully and are integrated, at the same time making sure the pioneering staff don't burn out – and then bring these two groups together as one family, striving towards achieving a greater goal, collaborating cohesively. I think that is a key piece of my work as curriculum leader.

Mr. Lam models the enactment of this care for the students by taking care of a few students himself. Halfway through our interview, a student came into the office to see him. It was so much a part and parcel of the routine of daily life that she was not hindered from approaching Mr. Lam's office even during an interview with a visitor. Her appointment with the principal was accorded the same importance as that of the visitor's. Every day, the student is required to get Mr. Lam's signature. The following conversation ensued:

Mr. Lam Share with me one new thing you learnt today.

Student I learnt how to play basketball during PE.

Mr. Lam Did you enjoy it?

Student Yes.

Mr. Lam OK, good. How come you didn't get anyone to sign at 7:45?

Student The teacher signed on the wrong side. See?

Mr. Lam Ah yes. So you came at 7:45. Were you at the morning assembly? Who was talking at the morning assembly?

Student Mr. Lam.

Mr. Lam What did I talk about?

Student You talked about the children in Cambodia

Mr. Lam explained,

It's not just about signing in and signing out. It's checking in and having a sense of how they're doing. So some days they come in looking very cheerful and some days, downcast. You ask them what happened, and they tell you 'this weekend I've got home leave and I don't really look forward to going home'. Then you'll give them a listening ear and share with them something positive and encourage them to look at it from the other side.

3.5.3 Curriculum Leadership at the Programmatic Level

At the programmatic level, Mr. Lam explained that he was able to exercise curriculum leadership in advancing social justice by proposing an extension in the duration of the curriculum offered by the school from 4 years to 6 years. Looking at the context of the student profile and demographics, and studying the data of what graduating students do when they leave the school and how they have fared in the workplace, Mr. Lam and his team realised that more has to be done.

50% of them actually have to join the workforce after they leave the school. And out of these 50%, many of them are struggling with work, because they're still young and they still lack the resilience. So we are designing and developing a new curriculum which is an extension of the four year programme we have now, to a six-year programme. The aim is to better prepare them for their employability. The two years are like an apprenticeship, where the students actually spend some time with a company and then some time back in school to strengthen their literacy and numeracy. And the final goal is that after the two years of apprenticeship, companies will absorb them as permanent staff.

The other students in secondary schools go on to two or three more years of post-secondary education, like JC or polytechnic. So, why not our kids? They also need the runway of time for maturity to take place, to be steadier, more ready.

How did Mr. Lam come up with this idea?

It's always communications with the various stakeholders. To begin with, we spoke to some parents. Then we spoke to some students and I also spoke with my predecessor. And we looked at the data of students who have graduated, what they're doing. Because this goes back to the mission of the school. Just because they have graduated from the school, we can't just turn away and say, "our job is done, you're on your own now", when we know that a percentage of them are struggling with work, not quite ready, and don't have a chance to continue their education.

With a very strong mission to help these students prepare for a better future, And also seeing that some of the students were struggling, it was something that we felt strongly we had to do. And one of the things we did when we started to ideate was to go to the staff. And we had several sessions communicating with the staff and hearing their views. And so we had strong support from the staff. The teachers are very focused on helping the students. So if you sell them something that is always about the students, they will buy it,

wholeheartedly. If they can see that it's really about helping the students they will buy it wholeheartedly even if it means stretching themselves further.

Being intimately familiar with the context of the school enables Mr. Lam to make decisions that make the school experience engaging for the students. Interestingly, seemingly 'small things' such as timing of certain programmes could make an impact on the students' school experience.

Take the Co-curricular Activities (CCA) programme as an example. I see great value in CCAs as they help to build character. But when it is held in the afternoon – 3:30 pm – after school, in the hot sun – the students are just too tired. The teachers are also tired. So CCA was not doing well. So I thought long and hard and I again went to the staff and I shared my observations and I said, "let's think about this and what we can do". One of the teachers told me, "if you really want to make CCA successful, bring it into the curriculum time, so that it's not an after-school afterthought. Bring it into the curriculum."

So we worked it out and we asked what are the benefits of bringing two hours of CCA into curriculum time? When you do it first thing in the morning, everybody is fresh, and you have sports, games, art, music, cooking classes. It's a good way to start the day, for both teachers and students. But how to find the curriculum time? Which subject would want to be pushed to the afternoon?

At that time we used to start school at 7:45, and we used to have 15 min of pep talks to encourage students. We didn't think this was very effective, so we got rid of it. So we managed to save quite a bit of time from there – 15 min over four, five days add up to an hour. So we basically extended curriculum time by half an hour on two days. So, instead of ending at 2:30 we now end at 3. But it sure beats staying back till 5:30 for CCA. So last year we tried it. Student attendance at CCA shot up.

3.6 Discussion and Conclusion

To all three principals, curriculum is more than just the syllabus or content to be taught. They conceive of curriculum as the experience afforded to the students who enter the portals of their respective schools. The outcomes of such experiences go beyond achievement in the national examinations. They impact the students' sense of self-esteem, and their values and attitudes towards leading a purposeful and fulfilling life. This corroborates with the definition of curriculum extending beyond the explicit and intended curriculum, to encompass the implicit and experienced curriculum (Eisner 2002; Marsh 2009; Posner 1998).

Seen in this light, there is much that the principal, as curriculum leader, has to do. Principals 'cannot merely be accepting of ever-expanding curriculum but need to bring a critical and moral edge to the judgment of how and in what ways the curriculum will support the purposes of the school and the learning of the individual' (Shaw 2012, p. 56). Clearly, all three principals drew upon the various roles in Sergiovanni's (2009) list: the technical leader, the human leader, the educational leader, the symbolic leader and the cultural leader.

At the very start, the principals needed to be very clear of their own curriculum beliefs. How do they view the purpose of education? How do they view the learner and learning? Their answers to these questions would impact their conceptions of how teaching and assessment of learning are done. What came out strongly in the narratives of the three principals was their strong conviction in their personal curriculum beliefs. This is especially important in their communications with the staff, students, parents and other stakeholders, including the public. They not only articulated these beliefs, but they also ensured that they walked the talk.

The principal, however, does not walk alone on the curriculum journey. All three principals shared about how they had to build the curriculum culture of the school. The main work of curriculum leadership is in engaging colleagues in dialogue to own the desired curriculum for the school. This is a necessary condition to ensure that the planned curriculum is enacted in such a manner that the student experience what is intended for them.

3.7 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How and to what extent do you believe the curriculum to be malleable? or what reasons?
2. How did the beliefs of each of the principals affect their curriculum decisions and actions?
3. What curriculum dilemmas and challenges were implicit in the stories of the three principals?
4. What future research needs to be done to explicate curriculum leadership by school principals?

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