

**LEADERSHIP IN SINGAPORE SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS: A MULTI-CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL  
PRINCIPALS' INFLUENCE ON THE PROCESS OF  
IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

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by

Ang Wek Cheng Vivien  
Department of Education  
University of Leicester

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# **Leadership in Singapore secondary schools: A multi-case study of school principals' influence on the process of improving student learning outcomes**

**By**

**Ang Wek Cheng Vivien**

## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the contribution and influence of Singapore secondary school principals to the process of improving student learning outcomes by examining the phenomena at three levels:

- perspectives of school principals on how they think they have influenced student learning outcomes in their respective schools ;
- what they actually have done, according to their own accounts, set up or implement measures in their schools in regard to improving student learning outcomes; and
- how the stakeholders in their respective schools perceive what they have done or not done in regard to improving student learning outcomes.

Using the interpretivist paradigm, multi-case study approach and modified analytic inductive analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 66 participants comprising principals, vice-principals, HODs, teachers and students.

The major outcome of the study is the model 'Leadership Influence to Improving Student Outcomes' (LIISO). LIISO provides insights on the complex practices involved when secondary school principals influence the process of improving student outcomes. There is no single influence that impacts the way case principals exercise their leadership practices; rather it is the cumulative effects of all the relevant influences that matter. Leadership practices both influence and are influenced by context (knowledge of context of the leaders and context of organization), perception of leaders on their influence, social relations between leaders and the stakeholders, personal dispositions of leaders and stakeholders 'view. The model shows that leadership does not directly impact student learning outcomes; rather, it is mediated by the ways in which leadership is practiced in each context. Crucially, the degree of success of principals' leadership practices is dependent on five dimensions - clarity, consistency, commitment, flexibility and scalability of the practices. In addition, the findings suggest that leadership practice is also influenced by the personal dispositions of the principals, and their perception of their leadership influence.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **The Context**

### **1.0 Introduction**

This thesis investigates the contribution and influence of secondary school principals in Singapore to the process of improving student learning outcomes. It aims to develop a deeper understanding and clarify the complex practices and processes through which school principals in successful (and less successful) schools lead and manage student learning outcome and reveal how they build and sustain successful schools, or turnaround less successful schools, in regard to their achievement of student learning outcomes. To gather a richness of data, qualitative research methods were employed, using an interpretivist paradigm. A multi-case study design has been adopted with three schools forming the main study.

This chapter justifies the need for the study. First, it provides a contextual overview of the issues related to school reforms in Singapore. Second, it examines the reasons for addressing this topic and hence the research aims and questions. The methodology is then outlined followed by a discussion of the significance and limitations of the study. Third, the research setting and the researcher's position in relation to this research is established. The chapter ends with an overview of the structure of the thesis.

## **1.1 Contextual Overview of Secondary Education Reforms in Singapore**

Throughout its short history of half a century as an independent republic, Singapore has always invested heavily in education for national development (Lee, S.K., 2008). To facilitate understanding of the recent reforms in Singapore schools, it is useful to link the analysis of the educational reforms with the prevailing philosophy of governance that has dominated policy making since its independence in 1965, and its wider public policy orientation.

### **Educational Landscape in Singapore**

The country's governance philosophy is to ensure maximum political stability and economic growth (Quah, 2001) and has tailored the education system to meet perceived economic needs and the impact of globalization (Dimmock and Goh, 2011; Kam & Gopinathan, 1999). This has given rise to the 'ability-driven' phase and the policy document, 'Thinking Schools Learning Nation' (TSLN) (MOE, 1997). The current system has evolved through three broad phases as it adapted to changing contexts and ideas since independence. These phases include the survival-driven phase (1959-1978), efficiency-driven phase (1979-1996) and ability-driven phase (1997 to the present day) (Gopinathan, 2001a). The government believes that TSLN is a formula for Singapore to compete and stay ahead of global competition. Several major educational initiatives ensued in the footsteps of TSLN. The government sees a need to emphasize diversity and innovation, while maintaining quality and high achievement standards. Many initiatives were undertaken in its attempt to encourage diversity and innovation in the education system (Tharman, 2003). This is a significant shift from a system that has previously been operating under tight central control in an efficiency-driven paradigm.

One such initiative was the emphasis on creativity and entrepreneurship aimed at encouraging thinking laterally and risk-taking. In 2004, the focus of TSLN

shifted to 'Innovation and Enterprise' (I & E), aiming to develop intellectual curiosity among the students and a spirit of collective initiative (Ng, 2005; Tharman, 2004). In 2005, 'Teach Less, Learn More' (TLLM) initiative was launched with the intent of transforming learning from quantity to quality (Tharman, 2005a) and it addresses the aspects of why we teach, what we teach and how we teach (Tharman, 2005b). Such transformation implies less dependence on rote learning and more opportunities for students to develop their attributes, mindsets, character and values. In short, TLLM advocates pedagogical advancement and innovation in the teaching and learning process. At the point of writing, more initiatives are ensuing to continue with the transformation from quantity to quality. Among these are the Primary Education Review Initiatives (PERI), Secondary Education Review Initiatives (SERI) and Junior College Education Review Initiatives (JERI).

Another significant initiative was to create diverse pathways for different sorts of students. These include setting up independent schools (IS) in 1988 followed by establishing autonomous schools (AS) (1994), the introduction of the Integrated Programme (IP) (2002) and setting up of privately funded schools in 2003. Principals of IS and AS schools have different degrees of autonomy in regard to staff recruitment and student admission and these schools serve as role models for innovation. IP is another example of customization for the top-end students and secondary schools in Singapore. The most distinguishing feature of the IP is that students in the programme can bypass the 'O' levels and use a 'through train' to the GCE A level examination. Since 2004, many specialized schools have been set up to offer even more choices to students of different talents and needs.

In an attempt to encourage diversity and innovation, greater autonomy has been given to principals in their management of schools. Additional grants have been offered to schools to support their developmental plans and special programmes (Gopinathan, 2001b). School Excellence Model (SEM), a tool for school planning and self-evaluation has been introduced. Schools are expected to self-evaluate at both micro and macro levels, based on nine criteria, of which five are enablers and the

remaining four focuses on results or outcomes. Progress and outstanding achievements are recognized annually through a system of school prizes called Masterplan of Awards. In short, SEM is introduced with the aim of driving schools to adopt the desired action plans and behaviours, while the Masterplan of Awards recognizes and rewards those changes in behaviour.

## **The Organization, Structure and Management of the Education System in Singapore**

The Singapore Education System is governed by Ministry of Education (MOE) and is traditionally known as a top-down 'command and control' system (Dimmock, 2012). It works closely with the senior management and is supported by directors in different divisions. The Schools Division has the responsibility for the running of schools and is divided into four zones geographically- each with a deputy director in charge. Within each zone, schools are grouped into clusters of 12-14 primary, secondary schools and junior colleges facilitated by Cluster Superintendents who guide and supervise the school leadership team to ensure that schools are effectively run. Principals of each of the schools in a cluster are accountable through their superintendent to the MOE

### **Inside the Secondary School**

Presently there are a total of 154 secondary schools of which 120 are government schools. Secondary school students undergo one of the three courses designed to match their abilities and interest. The Express Course, a four year course leading to the Singapore Cambridge GCE O level examination. If they do well, they can opt for either Junior College or Polytechnic for their post-secondary education. For those of middle ability, the Normal (Academic) Course is a four year course leading to the GCE N level examination. Students who do well at N level will qualify for an additional year to prepare for the GCE O level examination. The low ability group will pursue the

Normal Technical Course; a four year course leading to the GCE N level. Upon graduation, they can opt for Institute of Technical Education (ITE), a post- secondary education institution. The students' entry to one of the three courses at the secondary school is dependent on the outcome of the Primary Six Leaving Examination (PSLE) results, a placement examination conducted when the students are in primary six. For the post- secondary education, the posting depends on their GCE O level examination. Hence their academic achievement will determine if they are able to move on to the next level of their choice.

Similar to many schools in UK, the school principal is held accountable for the achievements in the school. Majority are either Honours or Degree holders (MOE Education Statistics, 2012). All aspiring principals undergo 6-month full time Leaders in Education Programme (LEP). They are guided by the prevailing educational philosophy of the MOE. Principals have the autonomy to manage their own school within strict policy guidelines laid down by the MOE (Leung, 2004). While they are encouraged to design an organizational structure that effectively supports the delivery of the school's strategic plan, they are also expected to use the SEM, a self-evaluation management tool to examine the extent leadership is able to drive strategic planning and manage staff and resources to bring about holistic and ability driven education. For many of them, their key challenge is how to continually ensure that there is improved student outcomes year on year so that their students are able to move on to the next level of education.

## **1.2 The research problem**

Educational reforms which trend towards school-based leadership initiatives in education (Angus, 2004; Green, 1999; Marginson, 1999; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2004) have increasingly put school leaders in the limelight as they are held accountable for the educational outcomes of their schools. Singapore is no exception.

With increasing scope for school-based initiatives in Singapore schools, principals are empowered to make changes in the schools to better serve their students. However, greater autonomy entails greater accountability. While principals are encouraged to think how they implement the central agenda, the MOE still maintains quality assurance through the School Excellence Model. Secondary schools, in particular, are accountable for their student learning and information of the student outcomes is made available to the public through the achievement table<sup>1</sup>. This table is intended to provide a more holistic view of the performance of schools with the focus on both academic and non-academic outcomes. Rewards and recognitions are accorded to better performing schools in the form of a Masterplan of Awards. Recipients of such awards are recognized as successful in the delivery of holistic education.

School leaders are held accountable for how well teachers teach, how much students learn and also for how they respond to the complex environments and how well they serve all students (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This demand for educational accountability has placed tremendous pressure on school leaders to find ways to improve student learning outcomes.

Extensive research related to school leadership effects on student achievements have been conducted in many western countries (Bell, Bolam & Cubillo, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004b, 2006b; Mulford, 2003a; Robinson, Lloyd, Hohepa, & Rowe, 2008; Witzier, B & Bosker & Kruger, 2003) and have provided complex and different answers in regard to the leadership effects, depending inter alia on sampling strategy. Most of the research findings suggest that the impact of the principal on student outcomes is indirect (e.g. Hallinger & Lee 2012). There are some exceptions however, where a moderately strong effect of school leadership on student outcomes is found (Marzano, Water & Mc Nulty, 2005; Robinson, 2007). In general, many of these studies concur that while the impact of good leadership may be difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> At the point of writing, MOE has ceased making the **achievement table** available to public. In line with the greater emphasis on Holistic Development of students and the idea of 'Every School a Good School', the Masterplan of Awards has been reviewed and School Achievement Table and banding for secondary school have been removed.

determine, the effects of poor leadership are easier to see (e.g. Leithwood, 2003; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2001).

While extensive research has confirmed that effective leadership makes a difference in improving learning in school, it is not clear in what ways leadership matters, how important those effects are in promoting student learning and what are the essential ingredients for successful leadership (e.g. Barker, ,2007; Dimmock, 2012; Leithwood & Levin,2005; Mulford, 2006;). In addition, little research has been done on exactly how leaders lead and manage the process of improving student outcomes. It is not clear how the day to day processes that school leaders engage in, actually influence student outcomes. There are still gaps in our knowledge on how school leaders balance their leadership and managerial responsibilities in ways that move their schools forward. Moreover, research on leadership and student learning has to date been restricted to studies in western countries and tends to focus more on elementary school principals (Hallinger & Murphy, 1987; Heck, 1992; Hopkins, Harris, Stoll & Mackay, 2010; Mulford, 2008,). Hardly any research has been conducted on Singapore secondary school principals which presents a distinctly unique cultural context (Dimmock, 2012; Walker & Dimmock, 2002). This study aims to fill some of these gaps by investigating and understanding better the contribution and influence of Singapore secondary school principals to the process of improving student outcomes.

## **1.3 Research Aims and Questions**

The research has two aims: first, to clarify the complex practices and processes through which school principals in successful<sup>2</sup> (and less successful) secondary schools manage student outcomes; and second, to identify leadership practices which appear to build and sustain successful schools, and turnaround less successful schools, in

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<sup>2</sup> See Section 1.4 for definition



regard to their achievement of student outcomes. It draws upon past research that suggests principals can exercise important influence over aspects of school governance and work structures (Heck et al., 1990; Leithwood, 1992; Teddlie, Kirby and Stringfield, 1989). More specifically, the study focuses on how principals perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influences in regard to student learning outcomes. The study considers three levels of the phenomenon:

- perspectives of school principals on how they think they have influenced student learning outcomes in their respective schools ;
- according to their own accounts, what they actually have done, set up or implement measures in their schools in regard to improving student learning outcomes; and
- how the stakeholders in their respective schools perceive what they have done or not done in regard to improving student learning outcomes.

Accordingly the main research question is framed as follows:

**How do school principals in Singapore secondary schools lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes?**

In order to answer the main research question, the following SRQs are posed. These questions serve as a guide during the information gathering process:

1. How do principals define student learning outcomes in their schools?
2. How do principals perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influences in regard to student outcomes?
3. According to the principals themselves, what leadership practices do they use to secure improved student outcomes?
4. How do other stakeholders (vice-principal, HODs, teachers and students) in the same school perceive the principal's leadership influence on student outcomes?

## 1.4 Definition of Terms

This study is built upon the key concepts of school leadership and management, leadership practices and their influence, and student learning outcomes. To facilitate a shared understanding of the terms used in this study, the following key terms are clarified and defined as follows:

### **Student Learning Outcomes**

Most early studies define ‘student learning outcomes’ in terms of academic test or exam scores (e.g. Crooks, 1988) as they are measurable and regarded as the most important for a student to achieve in regard to the progression of their formal education and career. However, researchers are increasingly beginning to extend the definition to include non-academic aspects (e.g. Mulford, 2003a).

In Singapore, while earlier definitions of ‘student learning outcomes’ placed greater focus on academic success in terms of test and exam scores, current definitions increasingly advocate a balance of academic and non-academic success. The core business of schools is to deliver a holistic education that gives students the chance to develop the skills, character and values of which cognitive development is just a part (Tharman, 2005a). **Student performance** is measured in terms of value-added-ness in academic and non-academic domain (Ng, 2008).

For this study, **student learning outcomes** are defined as the knowledge, skills and abilities that students should attain as a result of their involvement in secondary school educational experiences. This builds on the assumption that students who have demonstrated the ability to move on to the next level of education through their academic achievement at national examinations and the achievement in non-academic areas through their co-curricular activities is an indication of their achievement in acquiring a broader and more comprehensive range of knowledge,

skills and abilities. **Student performance** is measured in terms of value-added-ness in both the academic and non-academic domain as reflected in the achievement table<sup>3</sup>. In this study, the terms ‘student learning outcomes’ , ‘student achievements’ and ‘student outcomes’ all refer to academic and non-academic achievements, and will be used interchangeably.

## **Leadership**

Leadership according to Bush and Glover (2003) is a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) define leadership as “the work of mobilizing and influencing others to articulate and achieve the school’s shared vision and goals” (p14). They noted that successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values, articulate it at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share their vision. Dimmock (2012) noted that it is difficult to have a succinct definition of leadership as the concept itself is complex and closely linked to the organizational context it operates in. He suggested combining shorter, more succinct definitions of the concept and defines leadership as a “social influence process guided by moral purpose with the aim of building capacity by optimizing available resources towards the achievement of shared goals” (p7).

In this study, the term ‘**leadership**’ refers to school principals developing a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values and articulating this vision at every opportunity with the aims of influencing their staff and other stakeholders to share their vision. It entails actions of school leaders in envisioning mission, developing strategy, inspiring people and changing culture. The terms ‘learning-centred leadership’, ‘instructional leadership’ and ‘leadership for learning’ will be used interchangeably in this study.

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<sup>3</sup> See section 1.3 for details.

## **Management**

While the concept of leadership overlaps with management and shares some obvious similarities (ie. they both involve influencing people; authority and power are generally given with both position), there is a clear distinction between these terms. Kotter (1990) defines 'management' as a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly. The most important aspects of management include planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling and problem solving.

In this study, the term '**management**' refers to school principals putting in place a set of processes that keep the daily operations running smoothly. It entails looking into details so that schools can function smoothly and doing things right.

## **Leadership Influence**

Many concur that principals' leadership matters, although their leadership influence is more indirect than direct (Mulford, 2003a). Hallinger & Heck (1998) in their review of research between 1980 and 1995 exploring the relationship between school leadership and student achievement developed a three-fold classification of principal effects, namely **Direct-effects, Mediated-effects and Reciprocal-effects**<sup>4</sup>. A recently conducted series of studies by the same authors (Hallinger & Heck; 2011) offers further insights on the mediated and reciprocal effects.

**Direct-effects** refer to situations where the principal's actions influence the student outcomes without any mediation from others, while **Mediated-effects**, involve the principal's actions affecting outcomes indirectly through other variables. The effects of leadership are achieved through school-level conditions that impact directly on teaching and learning. **Reciprocal-effects** refer to situations where the

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<sup>4</sup> See section 2.3 for further discussions of these terms.

principal affects teachers and teachers in turn affect the principal and through these iterative processes, student outcomes are affected (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Both **reciprocal** and **mediated-effects** constitute the 'indirect influence' of school leadership.

In this study, the terms 'direct influence', 'indirect influence', are defined as follows:

- **Direct influence** refers to how the actions of the school principals impact student outcomes without mediation from other sources.
- **Indirect influence** refers to how school principals achieve their effects on student learning outcomes through other mediating or moderating variables. In this case, the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes is complex; it is rarely a straight algorithmic one and may involve mediated and reciprocal-effects (Hallinger & Heck, 2011).

### **Successful schools /Less successful schools/Turnaround**

Many scholars concur that **successful schools** are also **high performing schools** where strong instructional leadership, frequent monitoring of student progress, shared goals and professional community, strong parental involvement as well as positive and academically focused school climate - are all prevalent in the school (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Edmonds, 1979; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983). Perez et al, (2007) in their studies of successful California schools showed a number of factors appeared to be important contributors to school success of which principal leadership is one of the contributing factors.

**Successful schools** are not only effective but have a reputation for academic excellence, have good attendance, good student behaviour, parents who are satisfied with the schools, students who are satisfied with school life and have a reputation for excellence in the community (George & Oldaker, 1985). They are effective schools if students progress further than might be expected from consideration of their intake and add extra value to their student outcomes in comparison with other schools serving similar intakes (Sammons, 2007). **Effectiveness** concerns the achievement of educational goals using specific measures of cognitive progress, and social/affective outcomes (Sammons, 1999), and effective school performance measures both the academic and non-academic domain of learning.

In contrast, **less successful schools** are **low performing schools** that have difficulty making breakthroughs in student learning outcomes, both academic and non-academic, consistently showing poor performance in student outcomes over a period of time. Apart from lacking the key features of effective schools, studies have shown they share any or all of these characteristics - lack of vision; unfocussed leadership; dysfunctional staff relationships and ineffective classroom practices, and are likely to share features and problems that are linked to culture and staffing (Sammons, 2007). Reynolds (1995) noted that a negative culture is often found to contribute to the poor performance of these **less successful schools**. However, a substantial body of literature also indicates that some low performing schools can be successfully '**turned-around**' (**turnaround for short**) - a term referring to a low performing school that is turned into a high performing school over a period of time (e.g. Duke, 2006). Formerly beholden by issues linked to culture and staffing such as behaviour problems, low expectations and poor staff morale, these schools have implemented reforms that result in them making substantially sustained and improved breakthroughs in student outcomes. In short, **turnaround** implies successful interventions taking place in low performing schools that produces significant gains in student achievement over a sustained period of time and prepares the schools for a longer process of transformation into high performance organisation (Kutash et al., 2010).

## **Successful principals**

In successful schools, **success** is defined not only in terms of test and examination results, but also in terms of personal and social outcomes, students and staff motivation, engagement and wellbeing, the quality of teaching and learning and the school's contribution to community (Day et al., 2010). Leithwood et al., (2004b) noted that there is compelling evidence of a common set of leadership and management practices that the principal from these schools (commonly referred to as **successful principals**) call on, as needed. Dimmock (2012) posited that these **successful principals** are effective and tend to do different things than their less effective counterparts and even when both may do the same things, the successful principals do them differently, thus leading to positive student outcomes. While it is not necessary for all successful schools to depend on having **successful principals** (for example, some schools may perform above expectations in terms of student learning outcomes, by virtue of having highly motivated students and parents, combined with good teaching, while the quality of principal leadership remains mediocre), their presence is surely likely to help schools to do even better, as effective leadership puts in place strategies to sustain school effectiveness and improvement. In short, a successful school is usually led by a **successful principal**. Less successful schools (in the short term) but with **successful principals** are likely to be 'turnaround' schools after a certain time (maybe 3 years or more) as effective leadership by these principals begins to put in place comprehensive interventions that eventually transform these schools into high performance organizations – over time.

In this study, a **successful school** refers to a high performing school that has shown positive trends in student outcomes in the past three years and has risen in the achievement tables which reflects both academic and non-academic outcomes. It is an effective school where **success** is not only defined by the academic results but also in terms of personal and social outcomes, students and staff motivation, engagement and wellbeing, the quality of teaching and learning and the school's contribution to

community . Such a school is very likely to be led by a **successful principal** who has effectively overseen the enactment of a powerful set of leadership practices that eventually improve student outcomes.

In contrast, a **less successful school** is generally a low performing school that has difficulty in achieving breakthrough results in student outcomes or has consistently shown negative trends in student outcomes. The school has been featured low in the achievement table for at least three to five years. The principal in this school is deemed a **less successful principal** as he/she does things differently from his /her more successful counterpart and has been less effective. Even when he/she enacts the same set of leadership practices as his/her effective counterpart, these practices are played out differently leading to less impact on the student outcomes.

For the purpose of the study, the term **turnaround** refers simply to a low performing school that has difficulty making breakthrough in the student outcomes but has been showing positive trends in student outcomes in the past three years and inched up in the achievement table.

## 1.5 Outline of Methodology

As the core of this study centers around the perspective and experience of school principals and stakeholders in the case schools, an interpretivist paradigm has been adopted and a multi-case study design was used.

Interview and document study were used for data gathering. Semi-structured interviews served as the main data collection method and these were supplemented by documentary sources. Document study involved the analysis of key strategic documents of the case schools. This data gathering process was carried out over a



period of eighteen months and guided by four SRQs produced by fracturing the main research question into researchable questions. Reliance on more than one source of data collection was deemed necessary for triangulation and important to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

The study has been confined to three secondary schools in Singapore – carefully chosen from the School Achievement Table so that they could provide a range of contexts where the phenomenon of the study could be developed. They constitute three types of case schools; the high performing school, the low performing school and another school showing characteristic of a turnaround school. In view of the limited resources available at the point of research, the decision to narrow down to three case schools with different levels of student outcomes seemed appropriate. Purposive and snowball sampling were adopted in the selection of the participants in each school. The data were analyzed using a modified analytic induction approach.

## **1.6 Significance and outcomes of the study**

This research is conducted at a time when the key policy challenges for education, policy-makers and citizens alike in Singapore has shifted beyond describing and understanding what makes effective schools, to forging an understanding of what factors lead to an effective school system. In short, Hopkins et al., (2010) termed this phase of school and system improvement as towards systemic improvement of schools. As recommended by the McKinsey report (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010), the key area to create excellent school systems is to establish system-wide excellence in teaching; indisputably, school leadership plays a key part in achieving that.

The present study will add to the knowledge base of school leadership in several ways: First, it is directed at some of the knowledge gaps that exist in existing school

leadership research. While previous research on school leadership has confirmed that effective leadership makes a difference in improving student outcomes, the precise practices and ways in which leadership makes a difference are still ambivalent. Earlier studies were also largely based in western countries (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Dimmock & Walker, 1998, Walker & Dimmock, 2005) and tend to focus on elementary school principals and schools in low SES communities. Minimal research has been conducted on Singapore secondary school principals whose context is clearly distinguishable from Anglo-American cultures. Through this study, additional insights on how school principals perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influence and how this translates into daily practices in the school should add to the existing knowledge base on school leadership.

Secondly, while it is not the aim of this study to provide findings that can be generalized; the study may be of relevance to school systems and principals who work in similar contexts elsewhere. They may be able to gain a deeper insight into their own and others' situations (Silverman, 2006). Through a multi-case study design approach, local context narratives of principal's practices and processes of improving student outcomes of each case school provide in-depth accounts and analyses of school leadership and its influence on student learning in three differently performing schools in Singapore. This study should add to the knowledge base of school leadership in non-Western contexts and cultures.

Thirdly, a deeper understanding of the complex practices and processes by which principals influence student outcomes will add to the knowledge base. Notwithstanding policy makers' preference for large system-wide studies, the findings from this study may have the potential to provide deeper insights for policy makers and practitioners on the key leadership practices which appear to build and sustain successful schools, and turnaround less successful schools. In particular, the choice of the three types of case schools, each with different levels of student outcomes, enable the findings to provide readers with deeper insights of the range of

different factors influencing how leadership practices are enacted in different school contexts.

Finally, the evidence gathered at the case schools has the potential to illuminate current models of leadership and to reveal alternative perspectives on leadership and change. The knowledge gathered from the study has the potential to be used to guide leadership practice, policy and research.

## **1.7 Limitations of the study**

This study uses a modified analytic induction approach to develop a deeper understanding of the processes and practices of school principals in leading and managing the process of improving student outcomes in their schools. Data collection includes one-to-one interviews and group interviews with the participants as well as communicating with them via email. The researcher notes the following constraints in this area:

First, sampling was a problem. The researcher faced issues such as principals declining to participate and movement of staff during the period of study. Chapter 3 captured how this difficulty was overcome.

Second, as with all qualitative research, time was an issue. While participants willingly followed the schedule given, they guarded their time carefully. To overcome this, the researcher resorted to communicating with the participants via emails through which the transcripts and interpretations of the data for each interview were validated by them.

Third, the quality of the data was dependent on the participants' ability and readiness to share their experiences and perceptions. The researcher is an 'insider'

(see following section), which may give her the advantage of drawing out pertinent contextual issues which seem relevant to the school situations in Singapore secondary schools. Possible drawbacks such as informant bias, interview reciprocity and research ethics have been taken into consideration (see section 3.8). Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that as in any data collection, there is always the risk of incongruence between a participant's interpretation of their sharing and that of the researcher. The findings of this study noted the potential limitations of this disparity and incorporate it as part of the discussion in Chapter 4, 5 and 6 relevant to each case school.

While the researcher has acknowledged some of the limitations posed by methodology, some of the strategies to overcome these limitations are discussed in Chapter 3. As such this study provides a possible methodology for replication and further considerations on how to surface up the leadership and management processes and practices which help to improve student outcome in different school contexts. Further research on a larger and more diverse set of schools is needed, however, to confirm and extend these findings.

## **1.8 Researcher's position**

This section serves to provide readers with a better understanding about the background of the researcher. This builds on the premise that with more details of the researcher's background readers will be better informed and hence able to better evaluate the work in a more informed way. This in turn may help them to detect any subjectivity as well as value laden assumptions underpinning the study (Bryman, 2004).

## **Researcher's background**

As an educator, I have always been fascinated by the way students learn and how they can best be helped to learn in school. As I have graduated through the promotion ranks to principal, I have grown more inquisitive about how leadership at different levels of the school system can influence the students learning experiences and outcomes. I have a genuine academic and intellectual desire to understand the complex practices and processes which help to improve student learning and hence student learning outcomes in schools. Frequent discussion during school leaders' meetings has created awareness that while different schools are bound by different contexts, there are different moderating and mediating factors that may influence student learning outcomes in a school. School leaders have also been frequently reminded that the outcomes of the students are in their hands. This has led me to the question: 'How do school principals in general lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes?' Do they really have full influence or control over this phenomenon? If not, what may impact onto their leadership and management influence on the process of improving student learning outcomes?

My position as a former vice-principal in a secondary school, and more recently, principal in a primary school, has also led me to experience what it is like to continually seek improvement in student outcomes in my school. Working alongside school principals, my personal experience shows that many principals feel the tremendous pressure to seek ways to move their schools forward, especially in securing improvements in student learning outcomes. Some succeed and even manage to consistently sustain the achievements, while others are constantly grappling with many school issues that hamper the school improvement. My interactions with principals of both successful and less successful schools inspired me to pursue the topic on school leadership in the context of Singapore secondary school principals for this PhD research.

## **1.9 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is organized into eight chapters. This introductory chapter gives the background of the research by providing a contextual overview of the school reforms in Singapore, identifying the problem, outlining the research aims and research questions and the methodology involved. It outlines the significance and limitations inherent in the methodology adopted, including the researcher positioning.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review of relevant research underpinning the study. Organized into six parts, it starts with the changing conception of school leadership followed by a review of the connections between school leadership, student achievement and school leadership effects. In particular, the literature review explores the changing role of school principals and the emerging contribution of principal leadership to student outcomes.

Chapter 3 describes and justifies the methodology used in the study. In particular, it examines the assumptions underpinning the interpretivist paradigm, justifies the choice of a multi-case study design approach and the use of qualitative methods. It explains the data collection and analysis method as well as the ethical and trustworthiness issues relevant to this research. Limitations of the research are also discussed in this section.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 report the findings from the three case studies. Each chapter starts with an overview of the school followed by a summary of the research findings of the study. The chapter ends by addressing the key inter-related propositions developed from the data in relation to the central research questions.

Chapter 7 presents a cross-case analysis of the findings starting with a discussion of the findings across the case schools by looking at the inter-related propositions that arose from the case studies. Concepts that emerged as a result of clustering of the propositions are carefully examined and relate to the overall phenomenon of how the principals lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes in their schools. The chapter also provides a theoretical discussion on the main findings of the study in relation to the relevant literature.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by providing an overview of the aims and purposes of the study, the methodology used and the model that emerged as a result of the investigation. It also examines the implications of the research findings for theory, practice and future research.

# **Chapter 2**

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter brings together several theoretical concepts from a selective literature review to undergird the main research question as well as the research aims and special research questions of this study. As there is a paucity of literature based on Singapore schools regarding the phenomenon outlined, the equivalent international literature is reviewed and where possible, comparisons are drawn for Singapore.

The review is organized into six parts starting with the changing conceptions of school leadership followed by a review of the connections between school leadership, student achievement and school leadership effects. In particular, the literature review explores the changing role of school principals and the emerging contribution their leadership makes to improving student learning outcomes. The review ends with a conceptual framework established from a synthesis of the literature for this study.



## **2.1 Conceptions of school leadership and its changing context in view of education restructuring for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Most agree that leadership matters and this subject has fascinated many for centuries. Leadership, as Burns (1978) asserts, is difficult to pin down and there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to leadership. For many decades, extensive studies have been undertaken on school leadership and latterly, its changing role in view of devolution/ decentralization befitting of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requirements. The role of school principal has been termed in many ways as the 'school leader', 'key decision maker', 'chief executive officer', and 'the agent of change' (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988; Edmonds, 1979; Gamage, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1991; Smith and Purkey, 1983; Thomson, 1993, Yukl, 1989). In an era of accountability, so much is expected of them that success in all areas of responsibility is increasingly more challenging for them. School leadership requires the principal to become expert at working through these competing commitments (O'Sullivan and Burnham, 2011).

Leading schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to pose a challenge for school principals, whether they learn to lead by collaboration, or continue to follow old traditions of bureaucratic administration (McCall and Lawlor, 2000). Researchers (Day et al, 2000; 2009) argue that for principals to do well, they need to engage themselves in 'people-centered leadership' by constantly creating, maintaining, reviewing and renewing the learning and achievement for all stakeholders. Hence, principals are required to perform as leaders and managers not only of the school but also of the entire school community. With greater autonomy, they have to confront many new challenges that they have not experienced under the bureaucratic model (Gamage, 1996, Zajda, 2005). They are expected to establish an effective network of communication with stakeholders and the community. The foremost challenge a principal faces is to understand this new situation and improve his/her interpersonal

and communication skills to meet the changing environment. It is important for principals to understand that they are in partnership with other stakeholders and are no longer in a position to issue instructions and expect them to be obeyed by the staff and students. Rather, this altered role requires them to articulate their views for a shared vision and decision making. The establishment of an effective network of communications with stakeholders and the community becomes an important task. With increasing parental choice, school principals are also required to market and brand their schools. All these changes have made the work of principals highly complex.

Commenting on the complexity inherent to this changed role, Caldwell (1998, 2006) noticed that principals were becoming less hands-on in school and more involved with external networks, relying more on delegation and the support of senior staff to cope with daily demands. Hallinger and Heck (1996) also noted that less emphasis had been given to the instructional leadership role and new forms of leadership such as transformational leadership emerged, in line with school restructuring.

However, the rise of the accountability movement at the turn of the 21st century gave rise to an increasing focus on student outcomes and instructional leadership once again (Gewertz, 2003; Stricherz, 2001a, 2001b). Hallinger (2009) in his review on leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century noted that ten years down the road, instructional leadership had evolved into a new term, which some referred to as leadership for learning, and others as learning-centred leadership (Dimmock, 2003). This has added another dimension to the role of principal.

There are many aspects of the work of principals that have changed as a result of education restructuring for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. School leaders played a daunting array of roles which required them to have the capacity to develop a strong instructional focus and possess a sophisticated understanding of organizations and organizational change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Their ability to make sound resource

allocation decisions that led to improved student outcomes was also a critical element of the reform plans. Commenting on the more stressful life of principals, Harold (1998) found that restructuring created a significant increase in workload and negative stress, part of which stemmed from the extent of conflict in schools and of the unknown due to change.

Leithwood, Edge & Jantzi (1999), concluded that almost no one uses the term manageable in reference to the work of principals in today's school context. Many school leaders interviewed felt that they were being pulled in many directions simultaneously in attempting to respond to their governments' demands for change. However, there was also considerable evidence (Fullan, 2001; Moos and Kofod, 2009; Southworth, 1998) that some principals were able to overcome these challenges by making sense of the reforms and emerging as winners. In responding to multiple waves of educational changes, they embraced practices that challenges them to think creatively about their practices, builds collaborative culture and develops structures to foster collaboration and involvement of parents in the education of their children. This is consistent with the claim made by Bass (1997) that some leadership practices are useful in almost all organizational circumstances and is supported by Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, (1999) and Day et al., (2009) who drew the same conclusion based on evidence from many schools varying in size, location and level.

The above review summarizes the changing role of principals in view of restructuring for the 21<sup>st</sup> century education. It highlights some of the research evidence about school leadership and provides a different conception of school leadership and its complexity in the light of educational changes. From the literature, the varied and expanded role of school principals confirmed Glatter's (2004) conception of school leadership; "embedded in relationships, context and task performance and operation in conditions of complexity and ambiguity" (p215). His conception of school leadership is further reinforced by Hartley and Hinksman (2003) who argued that "attributes that this conception implies, namely, the ability to live with uncertainty and learn from mistakes, agility, adaptability, preparedness to

distribute leadership, work across boundaries and build trusting relationships-are likely to become even more important in future” (p48).

The research literature above has clearly outlined the different competing roles of the principals. However, despite the expanded role, the accountability of the improving student outcomes still rests with the principals. While the literature noted that some principals were able to overcome these challenges by making sense of these competing roles, it did not shed light on how they manage the process of improving the student outcomes and under what conditions these principals were influential. In particular, how did they themselves perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influence? In cases where there were successes, what were their emphases where student outcomes were concerned? Did it entail both academic and non-academic outcomes, or were they confined to academic achievement only? These were not clear in the literature cited.

In Singapore, principals are facing the same challenges as their counterparts in other countries. With a trend towards greater school-based initiatives, school principals are empowered to make changes in their schools to meet the needs of the students. While they are expected to lead change to create greater diversity and innovation in their schools (Ng, 2008), they are also held accountable for student learning. This demand for educational accountability has placed tremendous pressure on them to find strategies to improve student outcomes. While some principals have problems coping with the expanded role and grappling the multiple school issues threatening school improvement, others seem to succeed in finding ways to continually improve student outcomes and means to sustain this improvement. This begs the question of how do these principals influence the process of improving student outcomes. How do they lead and manage? What works and what doesn't? Hence, the present study has framed the research questions as follows:

**How do school principals in Singapore secondary schools lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes?**

In order to gain a better understanding of leadership and management practices necessary to improve student learning outcomes, the next section looks at factors contributing to student outcomes and the extent schools and leadership matter to improving student outcomes.

## **2.2 Factors contributing to student learning outcomes: Research Evidence**

School effectiveness researchers have pointed to six major sources of variance, namely students, home, schools, principals, peer effects and teachers that impact student outcomes. These variances can be categorized as social class effects and school effects; the former comprising variances such as students/genetic, home-family-socialization, peer effect and the latter includes variances such as classroom/teacher, whole school factors and school leadership (Bosker , Kremers & Lugthart, 1990; Cheng, 1996; Coleman et al., 1966; Creemers, 1994; Jencks et al., 1972;Luyten, 1994; Scheerens, 1990).

### **Social Class factor**

Researchers have consistently acknowledged over the past 40 years that the influence of the school, compared to the social class factor, is relatively small (e.g. Scheerens and Creemers, 1989). This is further confirmed by a synthesis of 24 original studies, of various meta-analyses, which concluded that 12-15% of the variance of individual student achievement was due to schools (Teddlie, Reynold & Sammons, 2000). According to this study, the remaining variance was attributable to social context which constitute genetic, family SES and peer effects. Home accounted for about 5-10% of the variance on student achievements (Hattie, 2003) while 5-10% of the variance was attributable to peer effects (Wilkinson et al., 2000). These findings led to conclusions that student achievements were more associated with circumstances

beyond the control of school, and generated quite a pessimistic view on the influence of schools.

However, this view changed with more studies that focused on students' background characteristics (Stringfield et al., 1997). Some studies looked at performance of disadvantage students (Brookover et al., 1979; Rutter et al., 1979), while others examined the differential effectiveness exhibited by schools (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2001). For example, a study on differential school effects revealed while it was clear that social background of students influenced their progress at school, students' increasing time in school weakened the relationship between student achievements and their parental ethnic, educational and social class backgrounds (Reynolds et al., 2002). Similarly, findings from one of the large scale studies in the UK found that the direct instruction model explained between 50-75% of the classroom-level variance in performance. (Muijs, 2008). Latest research on school and social class factors (Tschannen-moran et al., 2013) confirmed that student academic optimism comprising teacher perceptions of trust in students, academic press, and collective efficacy, had a significant direct effect on student outcomes, over and above the effects of SES. While the study was only representative of 49 schools in USA, it is in line with a strong body of research on the school conditions that have a significant effect on achievement. This finding indicates the potential power of school to combat disadvantage. It confirms what many other effectiveness research studies have revealed (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2001; Muijs, 2008): schools clearly can and do make a difference – some more than others.

### **School Factors**

A further source of variance which accounts for about 15% to 20% of the variance comes from the schools (Scheerens, Bosker & Creemers, 2001). This includes whole school, classroom/teachers and school leadership effects. Teddlie, Reynolds & Sammons (2000) concluded that 12-15% of the variance in individual student

outcome was due to schools. This figure varies by country; for instance, the figure from USA is higher, 15-20% and lower in Europe, 8-12% (Reynolds et al., 1996).

Principals' leadership is considered part of the whole school variance mainly because of their influence on the climate and culture of the school. While leadership explains only five to seven percent of the difference in student learning and achievement across schools, this difference is actually about one-quarter of the total difference across schools (12-20%), after controlling for student intake or background factors (Creemers & Reezigt, 1996; Townsend, 1994). Principals who create a school with high student responsiveness, a climate of psychological safety to learn and a focus on discussion of student learning have this greater influence. The effect on learning is trickled through these attributes rather than acting directly on learning (Heck, Larson and Marcoulides, 1990). The findings supported the belief that a principal can have an indirect effect on school effectiveness through actions that shape the school's learning climate.

One of the key lessons from Creemers' research is the primacy of the classroom level over whole school factors in impacting student learning. What really matters is what happens in the classroom (Creemers, 1994) especially in the case of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Muijs et al., 2005). Many quantitative school effectiveness studies indicate that classroom factors explain more than one third of the total school variance in student outcomes (e.g. Creemers & Reezigt, 1996; Townsend, 1994). Classroom-level variance in student outcomes is twice that of school-level variance, with teaching and learning being the key factors (Muijs, 2008). Therefore interventions in teaching and learning have the potential to improve student outcomes (Muijs and Reynolds, 2000, 2002; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010).

Hattie (2003) suggests that we should focus on the greatest source of variance that can make the difference – the teacher. What teachers know, do, and care about is very powerful in this learning equation. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that this greatest influence is optimized to have powerful and sensationally positive effects on

the learner. Research has shown that teachers' accountability, empowerment and the way they developed student responsibility, student self-efficacy, student study skills and perceived support significantly impacted on academic student success (Young-Jones et al., 2013).

The above findings are further reinforced by Hattie's work - *Visible Learning* (2009) which was based on more than 800 meta-analyses of 50,000 research articles. In his study, Hattie argued that teachers' beliefs and commitments were the greatest influence on student achievement. He noted that the effect of high-effect teachers compared with low-effect teachers was about  $d=0.25$ . This means that students in a high-effect teacher's classroom have almost a year's advantage over their peers in a lower-effect teacher's classroom (Slater, Davies & Burgess, 2009).

This finding is consistent with claims made by Ingersoll (2003), who forces us to confront two realities. First, teaching quality matters and it is a decisive variable associated with improvement and student achievement. Second, while we know teacher quality matters, we tend to allocate the most effective teachers to economically advantaged students and deny these teachers exposure to impoverished or disadvantaged students.

The above review demonstrates the impact of social class and school factors on student outcomes. While school effectiveness researchers have long recognized the social class factor as a vital element in accounting for student outcomes, they also believe that schools can and do have an impact beyond that of social class. They are optimistic that while overall school effects only account for 15-20% of the variance in student achievement, this proportion can have powerful effects in the long term (Mortimore et al., 1988; Smith and Purkey, 1983; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). Recent studies (e.g. Hattie, 2009) prompt us to rethink how schools can create the conditions necessary to shape teachers' beliefs and commitments that are found to be strong predictors of student achievement. What is less clear from the above literature is how these conditions are created to foster and optimize the impact of class and teacher



factors to improve student achievement. In particular, how principals are involved in creating these conditions and influencing the classroom and teacher factors. The following section thus reviews the literature related to school leadership effects on student outcomes. This not only includes principal leadership but leadership at all levels.

## **2.3 School Leadership and Student Learning**

### **Outcomes: what literature reveals....**

#### **How much does leadership influence student outcomes?**

As the core conceptual axis of this study is between school leadership and student learning, this section will investigate salient research which has tracked pathways and established the nature of the relationship between leadership and student outcomes.

Scholars have paid much attention to school leadership and its impact on student outcomes over a long time period (Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Waters, Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). Generally, researchers concur that principals' leadership has potential to affect student outcomes, and that most of these effects are indirect (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). In contrast, a minority of researchers doubt whether school leadership effects exist and even if they do, whether they are important. Most of the Dutch studies in the 1990s failed to confirm a positive and significant relationship with student outcomes (Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Grift, 1990; Grift & Houtveen, 1999). Creemers (1994) and Leitner (1994) for example found no relationship at all. Closer examination of some of the earlier school effectiveness studies which did find relationships between school effectiveness outcomes and leadership suggest that most leadership variables were

only modestly to weakly related to outcomes (D' Agostino, 2000; Hallinger and Heck, 1998). This does not, however, mean that leadership is not an important variable. As suggested by the dynamic model of school effectiveness (Creemers and Kyriakides, 2008) one would expect effective leadership (as opposed to leadership per se) to be a factor that helps create conditions which in turn would result in improved student outcomes. Hence further studies on the leadership effect should look for what specific leadership practices affect student outcomes and also look for more subtle ways of measuring and evaluating the indirect impact of leadership.

Barker (2005) in his study reported that the student intake mix might influence results more than the organizational characteristics shaped by principals. His findings revealed that while principals had a pervasive influence on the climate, culture and organization of their schools and might play a formative or catalytic role in transforming internal conditions to meet new pressures and requirements in critical circumstances, there was little or no impact on student outcomes. He found that there was substantial evidence that a particular set of internal conditions might assist or constraint leaders to improve their organizations. The study surfaced two important issues in particular; one, the fact that SES matters far more than the principal's leadership effect and two, there is a limit to sustained improvement in student outcomes after the principal's initial impact. While Barker's case studies involved very few schools and principals thus making it impossible to draw generalized conclusions, the findings prompt one to raise serious questions about the effect of school leadership on student outcomes.

Searle and Tymms' (2007) study on the impact of principals on the performance and attitudes of pupils confirmed Barker's findings. Their study involving 1000 secondary and primary schools in the UK found that there were no differences in performance between schools that changed and did not change their principals. They concluded that there was no direct impact of principals on student outcomes and argued that the principals' influence was through the departments/teachers, and that their impact is, at best, indirect.

Evidence from the school improvement literature also highlights that effective leaders exercise an indirect influence on a school's capacity to improve student outcomes although this influence is not necessarily confined to principal leadership, but includes leadership at all levels (Harris, 2004). Barker (2007) termed this the 'paradox of leadership' as principals' leadership has consistently been found to have only a small impact on student outcomes and this in itself challenges conventional wisdom. He asserted that a different approach (e.g. sampling strategy) is necessary if the potential role of school leadership in bringing about improvement is to be fully understood and realized. Similarly, Leithwood and Levin (2005) argued that we should measure a more comprehensive set of leadership practices if we are to better understand the varieties of school leadership that contribute most effectively to student outcomes.

This idea was taken up by Robinson (2007) in her meta-analysis of 26 studies that examined the direct/indirect links between leadership and student outcomes. She pointed out that the contribution of leadership research should be to identify the leadership dimensions that have relatively more or less impact on students and explain how and why these practices work. Robinson identified five leadership dimensions on student outcomes with effect sizes ranging from small through moderately large, to large effects; the latter were associated with leadership dimensions of promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. This confirms that there can be a substantial leadership effect on student outcomes – when leaders focus on improving teacher professional development and ultimately teaching quality. Her findings re-affirmed what has been found by most researchers; namely, where student learning outcomes are concerned, school leadership has the potential to make a significant difference – however, it all depends on what leaders do and focus on in their schools.

The above literature confirms that successful school leadership matters in affecting student outcomes, and the effects are mostly indirect. Although the effect of

leadership for learning (also termed as learning-centred and instructional leadership) is only a subset of what schools do to influence student outcomes, the importance of leadership should not be underestimated. As the term 'leadership for learning' implies, causal linkages exist between intentions and actions of leaders and student outcomes. A remaining and related question is whether schools are still 'loosely coupled' organizations (Weick, 1976), or has the coupling tightened in schools with more pervasive practices, such as strategic development planning, appraisal, and shared leadership? How has this change impacted on the linkages between school leadership and student outcomes? Hallinger and Heck (2011) posited that there are three models of school leadership effects; **Direct-effects, Mediated-effects and Reciprocal-effects**. Although the terms have been defined in section 1.4, more will be discussed here.

The **Direct-effects model** has been viewed as the 'heroic leadership' model in that it seeks to explain student outcomes solely in terms of the principal's leadership. The Principal is seen as the driver for change in learning. Scholars found little support empirically and became increasingly critical of it as it failed to capture the complexities inherent in the organizational dynamics associated with school leadership and student learning. Some found that the effects of school leadership in the Direct-effects model were non-existent, weak, conflicting or suspect in terms of validity (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Increasingly, more scholars adopted models that conceptualized the relationships between leadership and learning as mediated by school level organizational structures and processes (e.g. Heck, Larson and Marcoulides, 1990; Marks and Printy, 2003).

Hallinger and Heck (2011) consequently proposed the **Mediated-effects** and **Reciprocal-effects** models which conceptualize the indirect influence of school leadership on student outcomes. Both models assume that changes in leadership impact on teacher classroom behaviour and eventually student learning (e.g. Mulford and Sillins, 2009). Leadership practices may thus contribute to the outcomes desired by schools, but the contribution is often mediated by other people, events and

organizational factors (Leithwood, 1994). Hallinger & Heck (1998) noted that studies employing the mediated model produced more consistent patterns of positive indirect effects of school leadership on student outcomes. Increasingly, scholars believe that school leadership effects on student learning are mediated by conditions that build school capacity for change and foster effective teaching and learning (e.g. Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Robinson et al, 2008). In particular, research indicates that school leadership impacts conditions creating positive learning environments for students, mediates academic expectations (e.g. Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood et al. 2006), supports ongoing staff learning which in turn facilitates effects of schools to implement and sustain change (e.g. Fullan, 2006; Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010) and employs strategies that are matched to the change state of the school over time (e.g. Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Mulford & Silins, 2009).

However, there are still weaknesses in this Mediated-effect model in that it continues to assert implicitly the heroic role of leaders and fails to take into account the systemic forces and constraints under which they operate (e.g. Bridges, 1970). Moreover, the research designs adopted for studies using this model have been unable to empirically test the assumption of causality - something that is implied when using the term, leadership for learning. While the model helps to reveal to a certain extent how leadership operates, it does not portray adequately the potential interaction of key variables nor does it determine the direction of causality of the proposed relationship. Hallinger and Heck (2011) suggest that a more complex set of processes underlies the dynamics of school leadership and student learning. Accordingly, these processes extend beyond the effort of the individual principal seeking to effect change in school and take into account how the organization as a whole shapes behaviour. They propose that leadership for learning be framed as part of a systemic process that is aimed at impacting student learning (Fullan, 2006) – termed as Reciprocal-effects model.

The **Reciprocal-effects** model implies that the variables mutually influence each other over time. Scholars posited that unlike Direct-effects or Mediate-effects

models, the relationship between the principal and conditions in the schools are interactive. This model suggests that the strength of leadership and its impact on learning will be further moderated by the changing conditions of the school. Leadership is viewed as an adaptive process and the causal relationship between the variables may be multi-directional and change over time. This model offers an alternative means of unpacking the causal ordering of relationships and offers a better and more complex representation of what happens in reality (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Instead of conceptualizing principals as the drivers of change in leadership for learning, the mutual influence model proposes that relationships among variables are bi-and multi-directional.

While it is fair to conclude that the leadership effects on student outcomes are mostly indirect and scholars more recently tend to favour **Mediated-effects** and **Reciprocal models**, even these latter models fail to shed light on how exactly –in a micro-grained way - principals influence student outcomes in their schools and fail to clarify the paths and relationships between leadership, antecedent, mediating, and reciprocal influences and student outcomes. What are the effects of different configurations and types of leadership on student outcomes? Does the leadership impact on student outcomes in reality favour a particular leadership model or does it entail a combination of leadership practices? The next section appropriately focuses on the different types of leadership that have been found to have impact on student outcomes.

### **What types of leadership affect student outcomes?**

There is a large body of research on how particular leadership behaviours can impact on teaching and learning processes (Guskey, 2007; Harris 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mulford, 2006) has posited factors such as instructional leadership, transformational leadership and distributed leadership as key elements of organizational effectiveness (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). Researchers have been

examining the extent to which each leadership affects student outcomes (Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Robinson et al., 2008; Wiley, 2001; Spillane, 2009).

### ***Transformational Leadership (TL)***

Transformational leadership is usually described as leadership that changes individuals and organizations through an appeal to values and long-term goals (Huber & Muijs, 2010) and taps into the intrinsic motivation of the followers (Burns, 1979). Generally, there is little support in the literature for effects of TL on student outcomes. In his study, Griffith (2004) noted that staff satisfaction was a mediating factor between TL and student academic scores. A study conducted by Ross and Gray (2006) on how TL behaviours contribute to improved student outcomes revealed that TL influenced teachers' professional commitment to the school's vision, professional community, school norms of collegiality, collaboration and also commitment to community partnerships. Results showed teachers' beliefs in their capacity and their professional commitment mediated the impact of principals on student achievements. Thus these findings suggest that the principals who adopt a TL style have a positive impact on teachers' belief in collective capacity and commitment to organizational values.

While the above studies show TL has an effect on staff attitudes, other studies show no effects (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). In her study that examined the relative impact of different types of leadership on student outcomes, Robinson (2007) reported that the average effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was three to four times that of TL. Her findings indicated that the role of principals as instructional leaders needed to focus on promoting professional growth, emphasizing research evidence on effective practice in regard to improvement in teaching and learning environments, and supporting collaborations amongst educators, including action research to inform instructional decision-making. These findings beg the question whether instructional leadership alone is sufficient to influence student

outcomes to any significant extent. Will TL be useful in promoting and encouraging staff involvement in their professional practices that will eventually benefit student outcomes? Will the effect of a combination of transformational leadership and instructional leadership be more powerful than merely the practice of instructional leadership alone?

Hallinger (1992) argued that principals ought to be leaders of leaders who developed the instructional leadership in their teachers. In this view, TL is the vehicle for promoting and developing instructional leadership capabilities of classroom teachers and those leaders with direct responsibility for promoting learning. This view is consistent with the findings in a study on distributed leadership undertaken by Marks and Printy (2003). They concluded that strong TL by the principal is essential in supporting the commitment of teachers as teachers themselves can be barriers to the development of teacher leadership (Smylie & Denny, 1990).

### ***Distributed Leadership (DL)***

Before 1990s, studies on leadership for school improvement focused predominantly on principal as the source of leadership (Bridges, 1982; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). More recently, there is increased interest in studies on school leadership beyond the principal (Harris, 2004; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Spillane and Diamond 2007; Harris, 2009a). Interest in DL comes about as conceptions of school leadership change. With the changing context of school leadership in view of education restructuring for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more is expected of principals. Harris and Muijs (2005) noted that across many countries, economic, social and political forces had interacted to create a climate for educational reform and schools felt continued pressure to continually improve. Hartley (2007) noted that with increasing complexity of tasks faced by principals, there was a shift of interest in school leadership from heroic leadership to a system where tasks/activities were distributed.



Distributed leadership refers to shared leadership exercised by the principal and his staff in the school (Spillane, 2005). The focus on DL is grounded in the studies and concept of sustainable change. For leadership to create sustainable change in school, it is important that the change must be owned by teachers who are responsible for change implementation in the classrooms, and is best to involve them as leaders at their particular levels (Fullan, 2006; Hall & Hord, 2001). It is a form of leadership where individuals collaborate to extend and enhance leadership capacity within and across organisations (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010).

DL has been found to benefit improvement efforts in a range of studies (Gronn, 2000; Muijs & Harris, 2003). In his study, Spillane (2005) noted that while some principals reported that 'other school staff shared leadership responsibility for 31% of the activities in which they participated. DL does not negate the principal's role. Instead, the principal figured prominently in the empirical account of leading and managing although the degree of prominence differed across schools. Extended work on DL found positive relationship between DL and student outcomes (Harris, 2008) and it could become over time a sustaining driver for school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2009). Increasingly, scholars assert that sustainable school improvement, in particular that related to improving student outcomes is best supported by leadership that is shared among stakeholders (Barth, 2001; Day et al., 2006; Fullan, 2001, 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a).

Amidst rising appeal of DL, there are concerns too. For DL to succeed in schools, principals need to be comfortable with upholding different paradoxical positions (Rolph, 2010). For example, they must have high levels of self-efficacy and strength of character to be able to share leadership with others, yet retain the qualities of 'super-heads' (Dimmock, 2012). Because of the risks involved, principals must have the humility and courage to allow others to make decisions and show their individual talents. Some principals who are sceptical about the practice of DL express the concern about fostering this practice, as they remain accountable for what happens in their schools. Depending on the maturity of their staff, the risks involved

vary. Strong principals minimize these risks by ensuring that there is a shared vision and goals for the school and they grow DL in a timely manner depending on the readiness of their staff, while the practices of DL are modified to cater to the needs of the school (Harris, 2009a).

From the above literature, it is clear that school leadership is no longer exclusively the focus of principals; rather, sources of leadership emanate from all levels in the school. What is less clear is how the practice of DL varies at the discretion of principals. What should be distributed and how it should be distributed is left very much to the principal and the school. In enacting DL, the comfort level of the principals, their personality and individual characteristics play a part. All these are not explicit in the literature reviewed. Furthermore, as the studies reviewed are based on western countries, they do not show whether the practice of DL is appropriate for Asian contexts in view of school organisation and societal culture; after all, changes in DL practices influence the school culture and vice-versa. One wonders if the application of DL to schools in Singapore that have a more hierarchical, power centric Asian culture will be different compared to their western counterparts. What different conceptions of DL might schools in Singapore assume? Therein lies a further case for this present study.

### ***Instructional Leadership (IL)***

The importance of IL in creating student success and achievement has been consistently supported by many studies (Blasé and Blasé, 2000; Bryk et al, 2010; Hallinger, 2009; Quinn, 2002; Robinson et al, 2008; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2001; Walter, Marzano & McNulty, 2004). IL is seen as being concerned with the quality and impact of leaders and teachers in the school on student learning (Hattie, 2009), involvement with teaching and learning processes and with the principal acting as the leader in terms of pedagogy and instruction.

Research into IL began in earnest during 1980s (Hallinger, 2005) and since then, researchers have used different conceptual models and methodologies to investigate the concept. Two common agreements prevail across these studies. First, the positive impact of IL on school improvement; and second, IL is a multifaceted concept. Robinson et al (2011) highlighted the multifaceted nature of the concept by categorizing IL into two broad dimensions; direct and indirect IL. Research has reported how IL is applied to shape learning environments and teachers practices (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al, 2004b). In particular, secondary school principals are more likely to focus on indirect IL than those in primary schools, where middle managers and teachers tend to take on much of the direct IL (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2011). The direct impact has been found to be more obvious in elementary schools (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Louis et al, 2010). A recent OECD report indicated that greater IL contributed significantly to a wide range of teacher and school outcomes (OECD, 2009). A study on leadership corroborated the OECD findings and highlighted IL as a key characteristic of high performing principals in those countries (Barber et al, 2010).

In their studies on 42 secondary schools in Hong Kong, Lee, Walker and Chui (2012) found that IL practices enhanced student learning by boosting the positive effect of student's attachment to their schools on academic achievement. However, not all IL domains generate positive effects on student outcomes. For example, direct supervision of instruction undermined student learning by weakening the positive effect of student perceptions of school attachment on academic performance. They attributed the latter finding to issues around how teachers decode the intention embedded in the principals' direct supervision of instruction. This finding is consistent with that of Hattie's (2009) who posited that leaders in schools need to be fundamentally concerned with evaluation of the impact of all students in the school. In schools that regularly have evidence of high level of impact on students; the leadership is more indirect in supporting teachers in their work towards higher levels of impact. Conversely, schools with lower levels of impact need leaders who are directly involved in creating an orderly and safe environment and working with

teachers as well as explicitly providing resources that help teachers to realise their impact (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2011). Hattie (2009) argued that the important distinction from this finding is to move from the notion of IL which places too much emphasis on the instruction to learning leadership where it places greater emphasis on student and adult learning. Hallinger (2011) too advocated the need for a new paradigm to view IL and hence suggested how IL should be morphed into a new term of leadership for learning. A new model is needed which focuses on instructional leadership but also subsumes features of transformational leadership and shared leadership (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; MacBeath and Cheng, 2008). In their study on leadership and learning, MacBeath & Dampster (2009) noted that both are indispensable to one other. With leadership comes accountability and this calls for leader's ability to connect, extend and challenge - which form part of learning. They posited that in shared leadership, accountability is also shared and is open to discussion. This shared accountability strengthens a sense of ownership of staff, create a feeling of reciprocity and is in itself an important source of learning.

The above literature shows the impact of IL on student outcomes. There is substantial empirical evidence of the positive impact of IL on teacher practices and student outcomes. While evidence about the impact of IL showed that, all else being equal, students achieved more in schools with strong IL (Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2008), it was not evident that IL alone is sufficient to ensure student success (Hallinger, 2011). Little is said about the combined effect of instructional, transformational and shared leadership enacted together to drive student outcomes. Despite growing volumes of research evidence and knowledge about IL, there is still need for more research on what principals need to do in order to optimize learning in their schools. Apart from findings highlighted by Lee, Walker and Chui (2012), there is little evidence from other studies that show the same effects. While much of the findings from the studies on IL are confirmatory, some are not consistent. Many studies involved are either small scale or case-based which result in issue of transferability across different contexts (Dimmock, 2012). In particular, the concern for more research should focus on identifying the key leadership practices and

behaviours that impact quality of teaching and hence student's learning experiences. The next section will review the literature related to different leadership practices that have been found to improve student outcomes.

## **Which Leadership Practices work?**

Prevalent research indicates that principals contribute to improved student outcomes indirectly through actions they take to influence their school and classroom conditions (Bell et al, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004b, 2006b; Southworth, 2003). Leithwood et al. (2006b) noted that "almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices" (p3) but in a manner responsive to the particular context. This section focuses on the research evidence available on leadership actions that account for sustained school improvement.

According to Leithwood et al., (2006a), there are two basic assumptions underlying the above claim: first, the task for school leadership is to help improve teacher performance as the most direct means of improving student outcomes (but in so doing, it means the leadership influence is mediated through teachers and thus renders it indirect); and second such performance is a function of teachers' beliefs, values, motivations, skills and knowledge and the conditions in which they work. Based on the synthesis of evidence collected in both school and non-school contexts Leithwood et al. (2006) argued that four categories of leadership practices are part of the repertoire of successful leaders in most contexts. These core practices (see Table 2.1) are made up of 14 specific sets of behaviours. Table 2.1 summarizes the four categories of basic leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2006a):

Categories of leadership practices	Specific practice
Building vision and setting direction	Building a shared vision; fostering the acceptance of group goals and demonstrating high-performance expectations
Understanding and developing people	Providing individualized support and consideration; fostering intellectual stimulation; modeling appropriate values and behaviours as well as managerial practices such as supporting, developing, mentoring , recognizing and rewarding staff
Redesigning the organisation	Building collaborative culture; restructuring /reculturing the organization; building productive relations with parents and community; connecting the school to its wider environment
Managing the teaching and learning programme	Staffing the teaching programme; providing teaching support; monitoring school activity; buffering staff against distractions from their work

Table 2.1: Summary of Basic leadership practices (After Leithwood et al, 2006)

They hastened to point out that leaders do not do all the above leadership actions all of the time and the way they enact each set of practices varies in different contexts. Successful leaders apply a combination of basic leadership practices to suit the context. From the repertoire of leadership practices, one can see that the construct of leadership practice is viewed more as mere actions of the leader rather than through the interactions of leaders, followers and aspects of context (Spillane et al., 2009). The implication of this view of the leadership practice construct is that one assumes that the same set of leadership practices enacted lead to the same outcome. On the contrary, studies have shown that while the same set of leadership practices are enacted, they can yield different outcomes as these practices can be played out differently as a result of interactions between principals, followers and mediated by the situation in which they work. Heck and Hallinger (2009) argued on the need to take account of different school contexts and how these factors mediate the outcomes of the leadership practices that are enacted. This clearly reinforces the fact that while the same set of leadership practices are enacted, outcomes may differ depending on the school context and leaders' dispositions as antecedents.

The above review identifies the research evidence on the leadership practices that work. While the four broad categories of leadership practices have been identified, these practices are not isolated, but are interconnected and complement each other. It is clear that the successful leaders contributed to improve student outcomes through a combination of strategies (Day et al., 2010). While research shows that the leadership practices work for improvement of student outcomes, it fails to inform how the context and leaders' dispositions affect the same leadership practices when enacted and played out. Moreover, most of the empirical evidence about leadership practices that impact student outcomes are confined to western countries. While there are some studies that examine Asian education systems producing high levels of student outcomes (Barber et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2012), relatively little is known about principals' leadership practices in Asian schools. Major reviews done by Robinson et al (2008) and Hallinger (2011) respectively reveal relatively few Asian studies (Dimmock, 2012). The implication to this lack of Asian school leadership research is that little is known about the leadership practices of principals in Asian schools. Given the different cultural settings of Asian schools (e.g. Walker & Dimmock, 2005), would the leadership practices be enacted differently? Would the outcomes be different from their Western counterparts? Furthermore, there is hardly any mention about the stakeholders' views (e.g. students and staff) on the leadership practices of principals to improve student outcomes in the reviewed literature. In view that leadership practice is seen as more than the actions of principals alone and also the resultant of the interaction of principals and their followers (Spillane et al., 2009), there is a need to incorporate different voices.

### **Other conditions that influence leadership-student outcomes**

Researchers tracking the pathways of leadership-student outcomes are also exploring how context and individual characteristics of leaders influence as their findings on leadership-student outcomes increasingly point to the fact that while there is a basic

set of leadership practices, the outcomes differ when these practices are enacted in schools by principals. A literature review of these two factors is thus justified.

### *Context*

While only a few studies have looked at the interaction of context and school leadership, the findings from these studies has been somewhat mixed (Seashore et al., 2010). Some researchers have claimed that the local context overrides other factors, while others (especially those doing quantitative studies) treat contextual variables as factors to be controlled in their inquiry work on the 'leadership effect' – an approach that essentially dismisses context as a substantive problem. In particular, relatively few studies have been conducted specifically on how different contexts influence principal leadership, or how leadership practices and behaviours adapt to different contexts.

Some researchers (e.g. MacBeath & Dempster, 2008) noted that there are three fundamental elements - purpose, context and human agency that are at the centre of leadership for learning. Leaders should be driven by their clear moral purpose of improving students' lives through learning. Their focus should be to add value to students through learning, which ultimately will define the school performance. Research evidence about the significance of the context within which schools function and the effects it has on supporting learning or otherwise, has been confirmed over the past decades and is undeniable (e.g. OECD, 2008). Leadership is invariably influenced by its context, including the school environment namely the social-economic status of the community, the profile of the student populations and school culture. It also refers to the maturity and expertise of teachers, the resources and financial status of the school and its previous history and track records (Dimmock, 2012). Studies have shown that an important sets of skills a leader needs is the ability to 'read' and understand in the fullest sense, the context in which he/she is working and be able to judge how they can best harness capacity and support in the school and wider community.



While a set of characteristics for effective schools has been widely recognised, researchers suggest that caution should be exercised when evaluating school effectiveness and one should not assume that all schools are homogenous entities as every school is characterized by its context. Earlier studies on context by Lortie et al., (1983) and Hallinger and Murphy (1986) for example, found that principals in low SES schools were more focused on student discipline and difficult staff relationships, and these principals took a more direct role in curricular and instructional issues. Additionally, those in smaller schools were more directly involved in managing the curriculum than their counterparts in larger schools. Chapman (2004) suggested that a differential approach to improving student outcomes is necessary to offer more flexibility and choice, particularly for schools facing challenging circumstances. He noted that key strategies such as improving the school environment, generating positive relationships between schools, and a central focus on teaching and learning as important contributing factors to improving student learning in these schools. Studies on context have explored 'differential effectiveness', confirming that within most schools there are complex patterns of achievements with occasional fluctuations over time (Sammons et al., 1995). For example, Sammons and colleagues highlighted that the influence of social class became more pronounced when students move up through the system and differences among ethnic groups provided a more complex picture where achievement is concerned. Increasingly, scholars have discovered just how much context, ecology and individual experience matters to school improvement (MacBeath, 1998). Research into contextual effects reveal that while the internal community of the school forms the setting for the development of attitudes, expectations and sense of self of a person, it cannot be isolated from the wider community. The interaction between the school community and home shapes the pathway of the individual.

A key aspect of context relates to school culture. Prosser (1999) highlighted that scholars have taken two perspectives when viewing school culture. For some (e.g. Stoll, 1998), school culture is viewed as a holistic entity that pervades and influences everyone within a school. It is the way one does things in the school and is

identified as a value system for school to attain effectiveness (Wagner, 2006; Hargreaves, 1995). Others see culture as being the 'aggregate of significant, but fragmented, sub-cultures. In this perspective, school culture is the result of multiple interactions where individuals and groups who form sub-cultures are influential (Prosser, 1999). 'Culture' describes how things are in the school and serves as a lens through which the world is viewed. How leaders create and manage the school culture can inhibit or support school improvement (Stoll, 1998). People's beliefs, values and the norms will influence how they react to change as well as micro-political issues and the emotions they bring to their work. Marshall (1991) noted that the different subcultures could pull a school in several directions and could be powerful barriers to communications and collegiality and in turn inhibit school improvement. The existence of sub-cultures does not confine to the staff alone. Hargreaves (1967) found that deviant and conformist student sub-cultures develop as a result of student reaction and reinforcement to labelling- be it positive or negative labelling.

For school improvement to thrive, reculturing is a necessary process in the school where new values, beliefs and norms are developed (Morgan, 1997). Stoll (1998) noted that for successful improvement to take place, the process of reculturing needs to go beyond redefining teacher culture to include student and community culture as the latter can be resistant to change too. She highlighted that for real improvement to happen, it must come from within schools themselves, amidst a complex web of values, beliefs, norms, social and power relationships. Leaders as the change agents need to understand and respect the different meanings and interpretations 'people bring to change and work to develop shared meaning underpinned by norms that will promote sustainable school improvement' (Stoll, 1998,p14). Leaders redefine culture for their stakeholders (teachers, students and community) by first improving communications and collegiality and then initiating and building trusting relationship.

Trust is the most critical component in creating commitment toward a common goal and yet is one aspect of leadership that constantly baffles leaders (Peters, 1993). Gibb (1991) noted that building trusting relationship requires leaders to break the fear-distrust cycle that exists in an organization by addressing crucial areas such as the organization's vision, values, work environment and personnel decisions that directly impact the level of trust people have in their organization. A successful organization will develop values that guide behaviour and help achieve its vision. A trusting relationship in an organization is enhanced when the leaders role model the values and clearly communicate expectations so that fear, defensiveness and reactive behaviours that dominate the existing culture are replaced with proactive, responsive actions that improve quality of work. Inaction especially in regard to personnel decisions on the other hand, can erode people's trust in their leaders. Trust is enhanced when everyone knows that a leader will take necessary actions. Kouzes and Posner (1990) posited three characteristics of leaders who were most admired by their staff: integrity, competence and leadership. Both competence and leadership are marked by decisive actions and direction and both are critical components in building trust in leaders' actions.

In redefining teacher culture Hargreaves (1999) advocates that leaders create a climate that enables and encourages innovative playfulness and teachers' experimentation in their classroom in their search for more effective teaching and learning. Recent study related to leadership and student learning noted that improving social capital in school by building trust levels and improving the quality and frequency of collaboration is what most improves student outcomes in a school (Hargreaves, 2012).

### *Leaders' Characteristics*

Relatively little is known about how school principals' characteristics influence the leadership – student outcomes relationship, although there is rising interest in this area. For example, Mckenzie, Mulford and Anderson's study (2007) noted that

principals who were successful in improving student outcomes were ethical, authentic, consultative and demonstrated integrity, compassion and an ability to promote staff ownership. All these have to do with the characteristics of the leader. Hallinger and Heck (2011) denote leaders' characteristic as values, beliefs, expectations, knowledge and experience of leaders.

In their earlier study, Cave and Wilkinson (1992) claimed that leaders' professional knowledge, skills and higher-order capacities are vital determinants of the quality of leadership. They argued that it is the possession of these capabilities that determines the effectiveness of leadership and hence leadership behaviours and practices. These findings appear to be just as relevant in school leadership today (Dimmock, 2012).

Other studies that shed light on the influence of leaders' characteristic on the leadership effect include that of Barber et al., (2010) and Hallinger and Heck (2010a). Barber and colleagues (2010) highlighted that successful leaders possess key beliefs, attitudes and personal dispositions that enable them to focus on student achievements. Hallinger and Heck's study (2010a) concluded that the expectations of teachers influence how students behave and learn. While the finding relate to teacher leadership, it is reasonable to extend this to principals' expectations of teachers – so that how well they teach will influence the student outcomes. This further confirms how leaders' characteristics influence leadership practices and actions.

While there are beginning signs of studies on school context and leaders' characteristics, the existing knowledge base on the interactive effects of school context and leaders' characteristics on leaders' practices remains inadequate. As schools begin to diversify to meet the educational needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a need for school leaders themselves to identify more clearly the contexts in which they are leading. In addition, many existing studies are small and are confined to very specific conditions and are based in United States. There is a need for greater

contextualization as leader practices effective in one context or culture may not be so in another.

## **2.4 Gaps in literature reviewed**

Overall conclusions, based on the literature reviewed, denote five major implications of the influence of school leadership on improving student outcomes:

First, in the light of education restructuring for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of a school principal has become highly complex. With the varied and expanded role of school principals, there is a need for new conceptions of school leadership which entail looking at sources of school leadership beyond the principals and to include all levels of leadership in the school.

Second, while researchers has found that student background characteristics account for 80% of the variance in student achievement, these factors can be overcome at least partly by successful leadership (Bloom, 1985; Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003). The remaining 20% attributed to the school and teacher levels - while seemingly small by comparison to the home factor - can have immense effects on students. Hence it is important for leaders to work on influencing these aspects.

Third, leadership influences are mostly indirect and these effects include the mediated and reciprocal effect (Hallinger and Heck, 2011). Secondary school principals' influences are more indirect since much of the direct instructional leadership is carried out by other levels of leadership (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2012).

Fourth, leaders who focus on improving teaching and learning are more likely to exert greater influence on student outcomes. However, the instructional leadership effect on student outcomes may be enhanced when combined with distributed and transformational leadership although more research evidence is needed in this area to confirm it.

Fifth, while studies have established a basic set leadership practices that successful leaders use to influence student outcomes, studies have shown that these same set of practices may yield different outcomes in different school settings and enacted by different leaders.

While considerable progress has been made in examining the leadership-student outcomes connection, the literature reviewed has revealed many important gaps. For example, regarding the changing conceptions of school leadership, there is little mention of the conditions in which these principals are influential when striving to improve student outcomes. Of importance here, is how the principal's attributes and dispositions on the one hand, and the context of the situation on the other, affect their influence. In particular, how do these effective principals perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influence to improve student outcomes? In contrast, how is the perception and conceptualisation of their leadership and management influence different from their less effective counterparts? The present study is specifically focused on the principals' perception of their own leadership and management influence. Hardly any research on principals' perceptions of their leadership influence on student learning outcomes has been conducted. To date, most such perceptions focus on teacher and student perceptions.

While researchers have long recognized that schools can overcome at least part of the student-level factors which account for 80% of the variance for student outcomes, the literature is not so explicit on how principals can be involved in creating conditions to overcome this effect. It is not clear whether the effect is mediated or reciprocal, or both, and whether it varies in different situations. More

explicit findings of this nature will provide a clearer understanding of the complex practices and processes through which school principals improve their student outcomes.

Although the impact of transformational leadership, distributed leadership as well as instructional leadership have been discussed and findings have established their positive impact on student outcomes, more confirmatory research evidence is required to establish the integration of these three models of leadership to influence student outcomes. In short, in the light of the changing conception of school leadership, how much would the combined effect of transformational, distributed and instructional leadership enhance the influence of leadership on student outcomes?

To date, most of the research has been confined to western countries. Major reviews done by Robinson et al., (2008) and Hallinger (2011) respectively show that there are hardly any empirical Asian studies on school principals. At the time of the present study and with the exception of a study on transformational leadership of school principals in Singapore, little study has been conducted of Singapore secondary school principals' leadership. Singapore presents a very different cultural context from the Anglo-American systems for the study of school leadership (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). Given these different cultural settings (Walker & Dimmock, 2005), how would the processes and outcomes of Asian leadership be different compared to their western counterparts?

Moreover, there is hardly any mention about the stakeholders' views of the leadership practices of principals to improve student outcomes in the literature. If leadership practices are seen as more than the actions of principals alone, but include the interaction of principals and their followers (Spillane, 2009), there is a need to incorporate different voices; for instance from teachers, students and key personnel.

It is clear from the above deliberations that there is still much progress to be made before we can be clear of the complex practices and process through which

principals lead and manage the process of improving student outcomes. In particular, how do they perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management practices to improve student outcomes. This present study strives to meet some of these gaps in knowledge pertaining to Singapore school leadership.

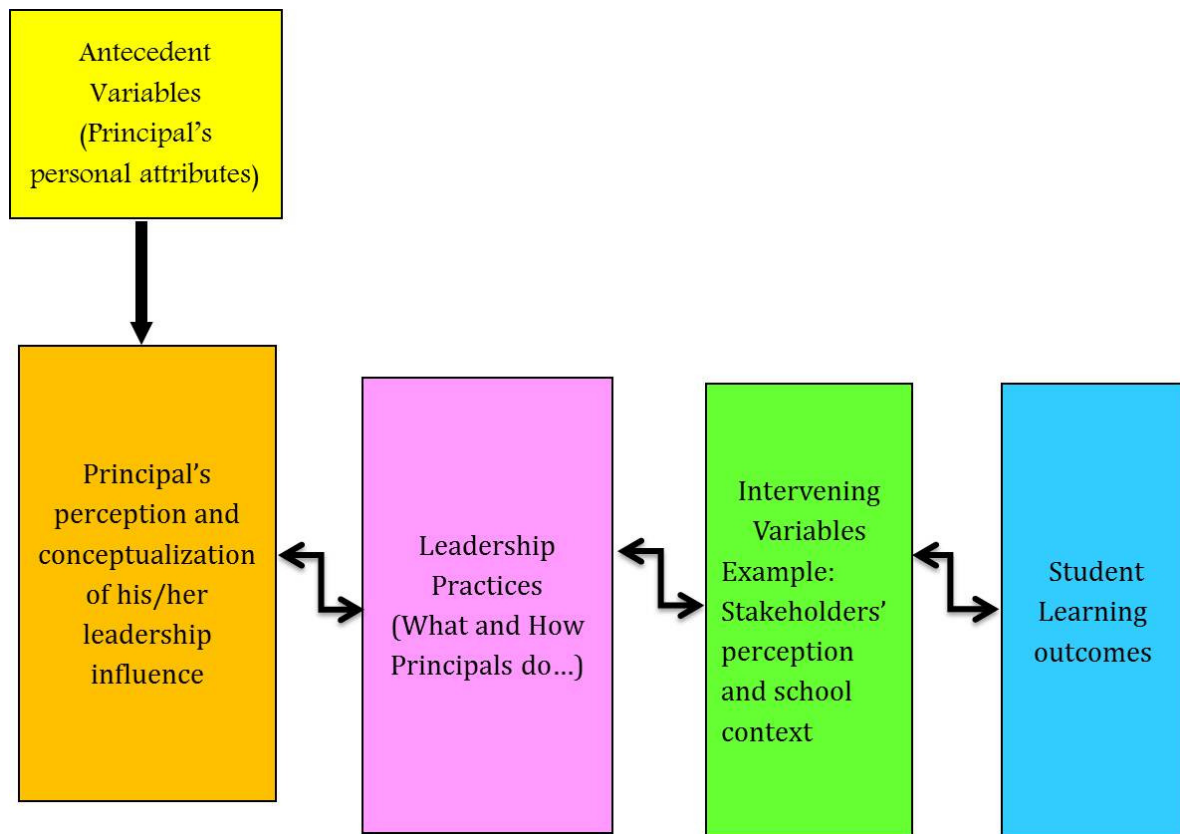
## **2.5 Conceptual Framework for this study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how school principals in Singapore secondary schools lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes.

The study draws upon past theory and research that suggests while principals can exercise control over aspects of school governance and work structures (Day et al., 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Heck et al, 1990; Leithwood, 1992;), their leadership practices - what they do and how these practices are enacted may be different depending on their school contexts and their personal characteristics. More specifically, the study is directed at clarifying complex practices and processes through which successful (and less successful) principals lead and manage student learning outcomes. A more thorough understanding of the complex practices and processes through which the case principals lead and manage student outcomes will add to the existing body of knowledge on educational leadership. It will also provide insights to practitioners on the key leadership practices which appear to build and sustain successful schools and turnaround less successful schools, in regard to their achievement of student outcomes. Drawing from this chapter's review of previous research and Hallinger's (2008) mediated effects with the antecedent model of educational leadership, the following conceptual framework is adopted. The relationship between each key concept has been conceptualized in a fashion whereby each set of mediating factors affects each other. Figure 2.1 shows the proposed



research model for analyzing the influence of school leadership practices on student outcomes in the case schools. The study aims to refine this existing model based on the analysis of the data collected from the case schools in Singapore. A comparison of the two models will be made in the final chapter and the outcome of the comparison will form my contribution to knowledge on educational leaders.



*Figure 2.1: Proposed research model for analysing the influence of school leadership practices on student learning outcomes*

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Educational reform has expanded the role of school leadership and changed the whole landscape of educational accountability. Singapore is no exception. This change has placed tremendous pressure on school leaders to find ways to improve student outcomes in their schools. Although extensive literature on school leadership effects has established that the impact of the school leader on student outcomes are mostly indirect, many of the studies concur that school leadership nonetheless, is important. While studies acknowledge that social class and student outcomes are closely linked, these researchers also believe that schools can finesse that link through various key leadership practices at the school and classroom levels. School leadership has the power to effect these changes which may well influence student outcomes. Thus research into how school principals lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes is justified.

Chapter 3 provides an examination and justification of the methodology for the study.

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

### 3.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a theoretical framework, research design and methods employed, for the study framed by the main research question and the research aims.

As the study focuses on principals' own accounts of how they perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influence, the study falls within the interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative multi-case design is used for three schools in Singapore chosen according to certain criteria. The analysis of the case studies was targeted to address the following SRQs as shown in table 3.0:

**Specific Research Questions (SRQs):**

1. How do the three case principals define student learning outcomes in their schools?
2. How do the principals perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influences in regard to student learning outcomes?
3. According to the principals themselves, what leadership practices do they use to secure improved student learning outcomes?
4. How do other stakeholders (VP, HODs, teachers and students) in the same school perceive the principal's leadership influence on student learning outcomes?

Table 3.0: Specific Research Questions

This chapter is organized into ten sections. First, the theoretical underpinnings of the research are described and justified. Second, an outline of the research

approach that was used to answer the research questions is provided. It also gives attention to the guiding questions used to explore the main research question. The third, fourth and fifth sections elaborate on the participants in the study, the methods that were used to collect the data and data analysis procedures, respectively. The sixth and seventh sections address issues related to quality criteria and ethical considerations related to the study. The ninth section explains the researcher's positioning, while the final section discusses the limitations of the chosen methodology.

### **3.1 Paradigm Rationale**

The research is designed to be an in-depth study of three selected schools involving school leaders, teachers and students in accounting for the ways in which principals influence the process of improving student outcomes in their schools. It aims to gain a better understanding about the complex practices and processes through which successful secondary principals lead and manage student outcomes. It also seeks to identify those leadership practices which are required to build and sustain successful schools and turnaround less successful schools. In order to address the SRQs, the study is undertaken from an interpretive perspective.

#### **Philosophical Assumptions in Social Research**

Researchers have long debated the definitions, approaches and philosophical assumptions of the different paradigms namely, positivist and interpretivist (Angen, 2000; Bryman, 2004; Cohen & Manion, 1994; Eisner, 1991; Guba & Lincoln 2005; Punch, 2003; Taylor & Edgar, 1996). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000b), a paradigm is the basic set of beliefs that guide action and can be viewed as comprising three main elements: ontology, epistemology and methodology - all of which are inter-related.

The interpretive paradigm is founded on an ontology in which realities are multiple, constructed and holistic and an epistemological standing that the inquirer and the object of inquiry interact to influence one another. It rests on an understanding of human behaviour, based on the view that reality is what is internally experienced and socially constructed through interaction. It assumes that reality is subjective and is a social product constructed and interpreted by humans as social actors according to their belief and value systems (Bryman, 2004). Such a naturalistic inquiry approach involves searching for patterns of meaning that people use to make sense of their world (Sarantakos, 1993). Under interpretivism, social research is concerned with understanding the meaning which people give to objects, social settings, events and the behaviours of others, and how these understandings in turn define the settings. Interpretivists subscribe to the characteristics of naturalistic inquiry proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). First, they study people in a natural setting. Second, they use methods of data collection that allow the meanings behind the actions of the people under study to be revealed. Commonly used methods in interpretivist studies are interview, observations, and documentary analysis (Gephart, 2004). The researcher shared this view and hence has chosen this paradigm for the study. The interpretivist paradigm is particularly suited to this study for the reasons set out below.

## **Paradigm choice and Justifications**

The core of this study is to examine the perspectives of principals and other stakeholders in the case schools on the principal's leadership influence using a multi-case study design.

According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), research methodology that attempts to investigate the perspective of participants must find a means to access their internal beliefs and knowledge in order to develop an understanding of the world from their viewpoint. As the study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the principals'

perceptions and practices by seeking their viewpoints, the research is necessarily value-laden; this is a characteristic of interpretivist research. As pointed out by Walsham (1995), the value of an explanation is judged by the extent to which it allows others to understand the phenomena, while also making sense to those being studied.

The purpose of the study is to seek information from the participants about their perspectives of how principals influence the process of improving student outcomes. This is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm where the underlying ontological assumption rests on the view that social reality is a result of interactions between the actors in real social context. The social world, according to interpretivism, cannot exist outside the independent minds of social actors (Burrell & Morgan, 1985).

The study seeks to gather information based on the perspectives of principals and the stakeholders of the school. This is again in alignment with the interpretivist paradigm which considers the knower and the known as interactive and inseparable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Any attempt to see knowledge as objective, separate and independent of the knower, as required in the positivist paradigm, would be counterproductive to the intent of the research.

In an attempt to study people's perspectives, it is necessary to understand their view of the world around them, which in turn are connected to their attitudes, beliefs and their personal experiences. Such a view is unlikely to lend itself to generalization. Rather, it provides insights which are thought to help in the development of propositions and in turn lead to an extension of the theory and further research.

In this study, it is anticipated that there would be anything but a linear relationship between principals' leadership and student outcomes. The methodology of such qualitative and naturalistic studies is based on a philosophy that tolerates ambiguity (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). This methodology will open up the possibility of

examining the complexities of human beliefs, understandings and actions in some organized fashion. In this study, the use of qualitative methods allows the researcher to probe particular and personal views on participants' perspectives of school principals' influence on student outcomes and lay a foundation for some valuable common understandings which form the propositions for this study.

## **3.2 Research Approach**

The focus of the study is to better understand the complex practices and processes through which principals improve student outcomes in their schools by examining the phenomena at three levels:

- perspectives of school principals on how they think they have influenced student learning outcomes in their respective schools;
- what principals think they have actually done, set up or implemented in their schools in regard to improving student learning outcomes; and
- how the stakeholders in their respective schools perceive what the principals have done or not done in regard to improving student learning outcomes.

Qualitative research has been adopted for this study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). It is an appropriate strategy to understand how the principals make sense of their world and the experiences they have in leading and managing the process of improving student outcomes. Qualitative research methods are used in this study in order to capture principals' and stakeholders' perspectives of the principals' leadership influence with regard to improving student outcomes and to understand how these vary across organizations, experiences and perceptions of the case participants. As pointed out by Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative research methods are particularly appropriate in researching organizational processes and experiences of people, in-depth. While some researchers (e.g. Creswell, 2007; Litchman, 2006) have presented the key characteristics of five methodologies for

more effective qualitative research, the researcher has decided to adopt a multi case study design approach based on three case school principals for this study for reasons elaborated in the section below.

### **Case Study Design**

The case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are evident” (Yin, 2003, p13). Since this methodology is conducted in a natural setting, it allows the researcher to grasp a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the researcher has selected a range of case schools and adopted a multi-case design with the principal and other stakeholders comprising a case school. This is a collective case study where the instrumental case study is extended to cover several cases, to better understand the phenomenon (Stake, 1994) under study. In such interpretive case studies, the researcher is directly involved in the process of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007, Morse, 1994). This is one of the advantages of adopting the methodology as it provides an opportunity for the researcher to get a first hand and thus deeper insight into the problem under study. In addition such an approach also makes it possible for the researcher to interact with the participants and to co-construct meanings with them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Neuman, 2007; Walsham, 1995).

The research is confined to government secondary schools. Three case schools at different levels of improvement were selected with the use of the school achievement table. These included a high performing school, a low performing school and another school showing characteristics of a turnaround school. To secure the feasibility of this study, this research deliberately omits schools such as independent and specialized schools as the profiles of their students are very different from mainstream government schools. The choice of confining the study to government schools in Singapore is to ensure that the participants are from similar Social



Economic Status (SES) groups, and have comparable Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) scores, an entry indicator of students into secondary schools. Generally, students from the independent or specialized schools are from higher SES groups and have higher PSLE scores compared to the government schools.

The decision to focus on three selected schools as case studies is justified for their potential to allow the researcher “to understand a case in depth, and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context” (Punch, 1998, p.150). The case schools in this study are what are described by Stake (1994) as an instrumental, intrinsic and collective case study. The case schools fit into the collective case study as the research investigates how the principals in the three selected schools experiencing different levels of performance influence the process of improving student learning outcomes.

Choosing a multi case study design for this study has several advantages. First, the analytic conclusions that emerged from the three cases are more powerful than those coming from a single case (Yin, 2003). The more cases are included, the greater the variation across the cases, the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and the more robust the study will be (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). Multi-case study design also allows for cross-case analysis and the investigation of a phenomenon in diverse settings (Darke et al, 1998; Yin, 2003). Second, the contexts of cases are different. These schools are selected as they offer differing and sometimes contrasting situations. With this design, if the findings of the cases once analyzed support the hypothesized differences, the results greatly strengthen the findings and they represent a strong start towards theoretical replication (Yin, 2003). Finally, a key strength of the case-study approach involves using multiple sources. There is no single source or method that has complete advantage over the others. Instead, each may be more appropriate for particular purposes, and they are often complementary. In this study, the researcher has used multiple sources in data gathering namely, semi-structured interviews, and documentary study of case school records.

All the above, explains the conditions that make a multi-case study design a suitable option for this study. It helps the researcher define the unit of analysis to be studied. Each case school is a “bounded system”, making it a suitable strategy for the researcher to cover contextual conditions. However, it alone does not provide sufficient guidelines for development of a theory or model, which is the overall intent of this research. Hence the researcher decides to adopt a modified analytic induction approach as a systematic process to theory/model building within the multi-case study design. How this is done is explained in the section on data analysis.

### **3.3 Sampling**

There are 120 government secondary schools in Singapore eligible for this study. How the case schools and participants have been carefully selected for this study will be discussed in this section.

#### **Case Schools**

For this study, purposive sampling was adopted. While reasonable predictions could be made prior to the commencement of a study about the likely type of case schools, changes in the sampling of the case schools could be decided and adjusted depending on previous rounds of data collection and analysis. Hence, decisions about sampling evolved during the research process (Creswell, 2007). The researcher used a maximum variation sampling strategy (Merriam, 2002) to selected cases and “illustrates the range of variation in the studied phenomenon to determine whether common themes, patterns and outcomes cut across this variation” (Gall et al, 1996:p.232-3).

Three types of case schools have been selected. These three case types provided a range of contexts where the phenomenon under study could be developed. The study involved 22 participants including principal, vice principal, heads of department (HODs), teachers and students. A total of 66 participants were interviewed in order to have sufficient in-depth perspectives of the principals and stakeholders on how principals in their respective schools influence the process of improving student outcomes. In view of the limited resources available to the researcher, the decision to narrow down to three case schools, each of different levels of performance in terms of student outcomes, and 22 participants for each case school, seemed appropriate for this study.

Of the three, one was a high performing school that has been performing consistently well for the past five years; another, a low performing school which has had difficulty in having breakthrough results and has featured low in the achievement table, and lastly, a “turnaround” where the school has made a breakthrough and has been showing positive trends in student learning outcomes in the past three years and has inched up the achievement table. The researcher’s decision to include the criteria of the performance for at least three years and not more than five years stems from the fact that secondary school principals in Singapore move schools after every five to six years of leadership in a particular school.

The three case schools were identified from the School Achievement Table which provided a broad picture of secondary schools’ performance for both academic and non-academic domains. In addition, it also displayed Honour rolls of schools that have done exceedingly well in the different areas under the Masterplan of Awards<sup>5</sup>, an award introduced to recognise the achievements of schools (SEM, MOE policy).

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<sup>5</sup> Masterplan of Award: In line with the greater emphasis of Holistic Development of students and the idea of Every School a Good School, the Award has been reviewed in 2012 and School Achievement Table and banding for secondary schools have been removed.

Purposive sampling was adopted when selecting the case schools in keeping with the aim of probing a variety of school contexts with different levels of student outcomes. The decision of the researcher to include a low performing school that has been experiencing difficulty in having breakthrough results stems from a desire to hear from the participants what could have been done and might have not been done leadership-wise, to improve the student outcomes in their school. Such data serves to further triangulate the data collected from the other case schools.

To ensure collection of meaningful data, the principles of selection of the respondents in each school is important for validity. As the principal is the key player in this study, and a key aim is to gauge the principal's influence on student outcomes, it is important to choose principals who have been in their schools for sufficient time to have an effect. It was decided that principals involved must have been in their schools at least three years to afford time for their leadership to bear influence. This is based on the premise that it takes time – in some cases many years - for principals to effect major changes in their schools. With the criteria above for the selection of the case schools, six schools were short-listed and details and profile of the schools are summarized in the Table 3.1

School	Characteristics
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High Performing school; a school that has been performing consistently well for the past five years;</li> <li>• Value-added in both academic and non- academic domain since 2004;</li> <li>• Recipient of high level Masterplan Award for the overall excellence in school processes and outcomes;</li> <li>• Principal has been in the school more than 6 years.</li> </ul>
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High Performing school; a school that has been performing consistently well for the past five years;</li> <li>• Value-added in both academic and non-academic domain for the past 9 years;</li> <li>• Principal has been in the school for 3-4 years.</li> </ul>
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shooting Star/turnaround school; school where it has recently shown positive trends in student learning outcomes;</li> <li>• Principal has been in the school for 5 years;</li> <li>• No value-added ness in academic domain until 2006. Achieved Sustained</li> </ul>

	Achievement Award in recent years.
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low Performing School; school experiencing difficulty in having breakthrough results;</li> <li>• Principal has been in the school for at least 4 years;</li> <li>• Value-added in Academic Domain for a year and then slip again.</li> </ul>
E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turnaround school; a school that has not been doing well for past three years and was at the bottom of the achievement table; recently has shown signs of recovery and showing positive trends;</li> <li>• Significant negative value-adding for academic domain in the earlier years;</li> <li>• Principal has been in the school for 4 years.</li> </ul>
F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low Performing School : a school that has not been doing well for past five years and has been at the bottom of the achievement table;</li> <li>• Principal has been in the school for more than 4 years;</li> <li>• Significant negative value-adding for the academic domain;</li> <li>• Ranking position in the achievement table, bottom 15%.</li> </ul>

Table 3.1: Profile of short-listed case schools

An introductory email was sent to invite principals of the short-listed schools to participate in the study. The content of the information sheet attached follows the guidelines given by the University's Ethics Committee. In the introductory email, the researcher introduced herself, stating the intent of the study and outlined the help and support required of the school principal involved in the data gathering process. In addition, she highlighted how the schools involved could benefit from the data collected from this study. Greater details of the purpose of the study, sampling which included selection procedure, assurance of confidentiality, value of the study as well as the suggested schedule of the interview - were all included in the information sheet attached to the email (see Appendix 3.1 and 3.2 for samples) .

The researcher was able to gain access to and acceptance by, the short-listed cases schools on the basis of her knowledge of the Singapore secondary school systems; her position as a school leader in a secondary school and her network with other school leaders in the secondary schools. All of the short-listed schools, except one which had expressed discomfort in taking part in the research study, were more than willing to support the researcher in her endeavour. One of the schools was

selected for pilot study, while three schools were selected for the main case studies. Each of these schools was conceptualized as a specific functioning, bounded system with clear boundaries, with all parts of the school community forming an integrated system (Stake, 1995). To preserve privacy and confidentiality of the participating schools, names of the schools are not disclosed in the thesis; rather, each school was assigned a pseudonym. These case schools were labeled as school A, B and C respectively for subsequent discussions in this thesis. Table 3.2 summarizes the characteristics of the case schools.

Data	School A	School B	School C
Remarks about the school	High Performing	Shooting Star	Low Performing
Number of students	1400	1403	1300
Number of teachers	80	102	76
Profile of teaching staff	Good mix of experienced and young staff; 95% are graduates	High percentage between 20 and 30 years of age ; 97% are graduates	High percentage between 20 and 30 years of age; 93% are graduates
School Ranking	% of JC intake rises significantly and surpasses national average of 75%	% of JC intake rises significantly and has been trending upwards	% of JC intake remain very low
Accolades ( if any)	Achieved a series of higher level Masterplan Awards for its continual sustained achievements in all areas	Sustained Achievement Award in recent years	Achievement Award once but not able to sustain

Table 3.2: Characteristics of the 3 case schools

## Participants

In each case school, a total of 22 respondents were interviewed: - principal, vice-principal, five HODs, five teachers and ten students. In view of the limited resources available to the researcher, she kept the number of each group of participants

manageable to ensure that data gathered could adequately provide an in-depth perspective of how school principals influence the process of improve student outcomes. Except for the school principals and vice-principals, the researcher decided on a choice of five key HODs and five teachers so that the data gathered could be triangulated, thereby increasing the validity of the data gathered. In the case of students, the researcher decided on a choice of ten students for each group interview so that different perspectives could be teased out from the interview, and to reduce bias in the data. The researcher had deliberately specified certain criteria in the selection of the respondents to ensure that the data collected were meaningful and valid. The following criteria were imposed for each group of participants:

- Principal: at least three years in the case school ;
- Vice- Principal: at least 2 years in the case school ;
- HODs and Teachers: at least three years in the school ; and
- Students : Secondary 3 students of any mixed stream

The criteria above build on the premise that participants should have been in the school sufficiently long with the principals in order to experience and develop a better understanding of their influence (Kotter, 1995). The researcher faced some challenges at the initial stage. Some of the principals of the selected schools were informed by MOE at the year end, after having agreed to take part in the research, that they would be involved in the annual round of principals' rotation or promotion. Of the five short-listed schools, one of them was promoted to a higher position, and another was rotated to a different school. This truly reflected the "messiness" of the research process experienced by the researcher throughout the study, as pointed out by qualitative researchers (Punch, 1998; Silverman, 2006). To circumvent this problem, the researcher approached the existing principals to seek their support in continuing with the research despite the change of duty in the subsequent year. Not only did they agree to continue to be involved in the data gathering process, they also helped the researcher to seek permission from the new principals of the case schools

to enable her to carry on with the data gathering process in the school for the next 18 months.

Assistance was then sought from the principals to identify a HOD, a teacher who had been in the school for at least three years, and five Secondary Three students. The remaining participants were selected based on snowball sampling (Bryman, 2008) where the HODs, teacher and five students selected by the principals were asked to recommend four more HODs, four more teachers and five more students for the interview, respectively. This procedure is justified to circumvent possible bias that might have arisen if only principals of the respective case schools were to nominate all of the respondents alone. Data from the stakeholders served only as supplementary data for triangulating the principals' perspectives on how they influence the process of improving student outcomes.

Once the principal of each case school had identified the participants, an introductory email attached with information sheet containing a description of the study was sent to these participants (see Appendix 3.2). A consent form to be signed by the participants was also attached in the email (see Appendix 3.3). Before the scheduled date of the interview, the researcher emailed the interview guide to the participants to facilitate reflection and allay any unnecessary anxiety that might have arisen due to the interview (see Appendix 3.5-3.7). Details on the interview process and other aspects of data collection will be discussed in Section 3.4

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Following Punch's (1998) advice, the main research question was fractured into a number of SRQs to direct and enable empirical procedures such as data collection and analysis. The SRQs representing the interesting facet and focus of attention pertinent



to the research were viewed as productive pointers to generate the richness of data important to the main research question. The whole study was guided by the SRQs.

Data collection procedures involved two main sources: documentary analysis of each case school as supplementary method, and semi-structured interviews with the 22 participants of each case school as the main data collection method. The multiple sources of data collection were necessary for triangulation and to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. The data were gathered in an iterative process involving a continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis that facilitate the development of theory and model (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using interviews and documentary study over a period of eighteen months in each case schools, the research aimed to identify ways in which the principals lead and manage the process of improving student outcomes. The participants maintained a minimum prolonged engagement of 18 months. As case schools were scheduled for different 18 months period, the whole process took place from January 2010 to December 2011. The following section elaborates on the two data gathering processes and the challenges faced by the researcher in the process of data collection.

## **Interviews**

Semi-structured interview, either on a one-to one basis or in groups was chosen as the main method of data gathering in this study. As noted by Punch (1998), this form of data collection is an effective way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality. It is also one of the most powerful ways for understanding others. This form of interview provided the researcher an opportunity for dialogue with the participants (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Each of the SRQs formulated for this study was further broken down into a set of interview questions to facilitate conversation with the participants in the study.

This set of interview questions forms an aide memoire (Burgess, 1984) and interview guide during the pilot study. How the interview guide was further refined is discussed in the subsequent sections.

## **Pilot Study**

Interviews were conducted with participants of the pilot school with the aim of testing the validity, clarity and effectiveness of the SRQs generated from the main research questions. In this pilot school, the principal, vice principal and students were selected for interview so that the different categories of the interview guides could be tested and fine-tuned. The transcript of the first interview was sent via email to the participant to seek verification and to invite feedback before the second interview the following month. Based on the feedback received from both interviews, the interview questions were revised to ensure that the data collected answered the research questions.

The researcher decided to embark on the pilot interview so that she could get a feel of what to expect in the main study. She found this practice extremely useful for her to hone her interview skills and fine-tune the SRQs and interview questions to ensure optimal theoretical relevance to answer the research questions.

## **Interview Guide**

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was sent to each of these participants. It provided a general direction for the interview process and also served as a useful guide for the researcher on what to cover during the interview. The guide also ensured consistency of treatment across the interviews and provided a significant part of the research evidence. The researcher developed the interview guide in stages as she developed the interview questions and mapped out the SRQs based on the

literature review and conceptual framework (see section 2.5) for this thesis. Appendix 3.4 presents the revised interview guide after the pilot study.

To ensure these questions flowed naturally (Patton, 1990), they were sequenced with more general questions first, followed by more specific questions. However, during the interview, the researcher did not allow the order of the questions to dictate the structure of the conversation (Minichiello, 1990) but followed the conversation flow instead. This flexibility was deemed necessary in order to encourage information-rich responses. As pointed out by Burgess (1984), there should be no set preconceived, structured questions or a pre-set or fixed order of questions. Similar questions were asked at each case school and other questions focused on the uniqueness of each school context. In keeping with the iterative and non-linear nature of this research process, these initial sets of interview questions were reviewed and refined in response to the information emerging from the interviews as the research progressed. The researcher transcribed and analyzed each set of interview data before she undertook another. This allowed the interview questions to be changed or modified as concepts and categories emerged from the data. As a result of the pilot study, some of the interview questions in the initial interview were modified. Instead of only one interview guide for all, three separate sets of interview guides were developed to cater to the different groups of participants. Appendices 3.4-3.7 show the revised interview guide and the individual set of interview guides for principals and stakeholders.

### **Interview process**

The interview process involved three stages. Once the participants agreed to take part in this research journey, the researcher would email the interview guide comprising a list of the relevant research questions. This allowed the participants to reflect before meeting the researcher and allayed any unnecessary anxiety that might have arisen prior to the interview. This was one of the researcher's approaches to pre-empt interviewees' concerns.

The second stage involved a face-to-face interview. This form of data collection was carried out over a period of 18 months, with a total of three rounds of one-to-one or group interviews conducted for each group of participants. Prior to each interview, each participant read and signed a consent form, duly approved by the University's Research Ethic Committee (Appendix 3.3).

In order to elicit in-depth response from each participant, each interview, with the exception of the principal, took about an hour for individuals and one and half hours for groups. This was considered the minimum length of time for rapport to be established between interviewer and the participants (Appendix 3.2). Siedman (1998) suggested that "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p.3). Each interview with the principal took one and a half to two hours in order to elicit a more in-depth response of how they perceived and conceptualized their influence on improving student learning outcomes. A different interview schedule was given to each group of participants to provide general direction for the interview process (Appendix 3.2).

During the interview, notes were taken and conversations were also tape-recorded. All participants had given consent for their interviews to be recorded and permission for quotes to be used. Probes such as "tell me more about that...; what led you to...; what eventually happened...; looking back, what would you do differently now; ; compared this to what others have done..." were used by the researcher to enhance the understanding of the views put forward by the participants and to guide the direction of the conversation during the interview. Spradley (1979) noted that qualitative interviewing is more of a conversation with the researcher probing, prompting and actively guiding the direction of the conversation.

The third stage of the interview process involved participants checking of the data collected from the interview. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to provide the best database for analysis (Merriam, 1988; Rapley, 2004).

Prior to the analysis and reporting, the researcher sent each participant a copy of the interview transcript for validation (Bryman, 2004). Participants were invited to make any changes, if necessary, to the content of the transcript to ensure accuracy of the record. The researcher also consulted the participants on the interpretation, concepts and categories that emerged as a result of the analysis of the transcript. Further details on corroborating validity of the data will be discussed in Section 3.6.

## **Documentary Study**

The documents produced at both system and school level on the case schools forms the supporting source of data for the study. The documents analyzed included the Quality Student Experience (QSE) data, the School Climate Survey data administered at system level, key strategic documents related to leadership and management processes and practices, staff development, student-focused processes and other policy documents formulated within each case school. This strategy was deemed necessary in providing a more holistic and comprehensive approach to understand the complexity of the issues and justify the need for qualitative research to study the case in context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Macdonald & Tipton, 1996). As pointed out by Punch (1998), together with other data, documents can be important in triangulation, where an intersecting set of different methods and data types is used in a single project.

Data collected from the documentary study were also employed to guide construction of some interview questions relevant to the context. It also helped the researcher in the analysis of the interview data; especially in instances where concepts and categories emerged from the interview data were further reconfirmed by the product of the documentary analysis. Placier (1998) noted that this research method contributes to the triangulation of the research data, which in turn strengthens the validity of the research.

Prior to the interviews in each case school, the researcher analyzed their profile; in particular, those of the principals. This enabled the researcher to glean as much knowledge as possible about the participants to be interviewed. This additional step of documentary study helped the researcher to pre-empt an interviewee's concerns as well as taking steps to establish a common ground and building a trusting relationship during the interview (Bryman, 2008; Drever, 1995).

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

This study takes an inductive approach to data analysis where a substantive theory or model is the outcome of the research (Bryman, 2004). Since the research involves multiple case studies, there are two stages of analysis, namely within-case analysis where each case is treated as a comprehensive case in itself, and cross-case analysis where the analysis distills the processes and outcomes that occur across cases to develop more sophisticated descriptions and explanations (Yin, 1994).

#### **Modified Analytic Induction**

Modified analytic induction provides a method of collecting and analyzing data to develop a theoretical model describing all the cases of a particular phenomenon being studied. Generally, the following steps (as outlined in table 3.3) are involved in this method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Robinson, 1951).

Steps for Modified Analytic Induction:	
Step 1	Develop a rough definition/proposition(s) and explanation of the particular phenomenon early in the process.
Step 2	Compare the definition/proposition and explanation to the data as the data are collected
Step 3	Modify the definition and explanation as data are encountered that do not fit the existing definition(proposition) or explanation
Step 4	Actively seek data that may not fit into the existing formulation
Step 5	Redefine the phenomena and formulation until a universal relationship is achieved.

Table 3.3: Steps to Modified Analytic Induction

Similar to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987), the data analysis is conducted throughout the data collection process as open and axial coding procedures are used. However, they differ in that there are pre-selected hypotheses and concepts early on in analytic induction, while grounded theory researchers focus on seeking the gradual emergence of new concepts from the data.

In this study, a modified analytic induction approach was used to develop theoretical propositions from the data. The process involved a continuous interaction between data collection and data analysis involving asking questions about the data and making comparison for similarities and differences between each incident, event and other instances of phenomena. (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Tesch, 1990). Data gathering and analysis were conducted concurrently during the data collection phase over a period of 18 months for each case school. As proposed by Strauss (1987), the relationship between data, coding and memoing were interconnected and the researcher was moving back and forth between the data collection phase, coding and memoing phase with each phase of analysis guiding the subsequent data collection phase. The analysis of data in this study applied open and

axial coding to identify themes and patterns embedded in the data. The rest of this section outlines the transcription process and how the different coding procedures were carried out to develop the substantive theory/model for this study.

### **Transcription:**

Data analysis started with the interview process. During the interview, the researcher took down notes highlighting interesting details participants mentioned during the conversation and captured her reflection at the end of each interview. As noted by Silverman (2006), the practice of note-taking highlighting some part of the interviews could provide marvelous data to analyze how people actually went about constructing their social world at work during the interview.

After each interview, the researcher saved the data onto the computer and then transcribed it into a word document. Once completed, the notes taken during the interview were used to cross-check instances which deserved to be highlighted. The transcript was then emailed back to the participant for member checking and to check for accuracy of the content.

### **Open coding:**

In this study, open coding was applied to all the interview transcripts and relevant documents of each case school. In this form of analytic process, concepts were identified and their properties and dimensions were surfaced from the data (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Punch, 1998). For the initial interviews, the coding was done line-by-line and as concepts and categories emerged repeatedly, the subsequent interviews were coded by paragraphs in an attempt to identify the categories (Creswell & Brown, 1992; Glazer, 1978). The line-by-line microanalysis served to help the researcher avoid making biased analyses due to preconceived ideas about the data.



To facilitate the initial open coding process, the researcher constructed some pre-coding derived from the literature review related to the research questions. This is in line with the approach advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998) who argued that the pre-code from the literature review might enhance and enrich the design of research instruments and the analysis in particular in the coding process. These pre-codes were included in the coding notes where appropriate and mostly based on the language of participants in the transcript or documents. As mentioned by Charmaz (2006), it is very important to examine the hidden assumptions and meanings behind the participants' use of language in the open coding stage, as "specific use of language reflects views and values" (p46)

To begin the process of open-coding, a copy of the transcript that was duly checked by the interviewee was printed so that the relevant codes could be added. Once this was done, the coding was then transferred onto the word document. Figure 3.1 and 3.2 show examples of open-coded transcripts from an interview and policy document associated with one case school

	Document	Coding notes
C-P	The why me and <b>why always me</b> , you know that's exactly the generation operating in our system now, as teachers and even some are KPs. And that is <b>really a challenging task for school leaders</b> , at least for me I feel, because I find myself having to explain first the importance of doing things well and being with the teachers. And then because we are also finding tools to measure effectiveness in some of our areas of work. <b>They themselves are not familiar with such concepts. I myself as a baby boomer generation where I am also post war, I am also trying to discover some of this knowledge myself.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Why me generation/Generation Gap</li> <li>- Challenging task for P; the need to explain first</li> <li>-Generation who are not familiar with the concepts;</li> <li>-Perception of staff;</li> <li>-Context Sensing</li> <li>-Perceived lack of knowledge herself;</li> <li>P's leadership influence</li> </ul>

Figure 3.1: Example of Open Coded Interview Transcript

Document	Coding notes
1.1 School Leadership: 1. The Principal leads the school in the annual review and reaffirmation of the school's vision, mission and strategic thrust at the staff seminar and strategic planning seminar. Care is taken by school leaders to ensure that there is relevance, buy in and consensus 2. Short term goals are carefully considered. The school has met its term goals over the last few year. The school achieved the Thinking Culture Award and the School Distinction Award in 2007. For 2009, the school will focus on achieving the SAA for UGs, Physical Fitness Awards in preparation for its autonomous revalidation...	-Leadership practice/forward looking  -Duty of Care / Relational leadership  -Planning for the future /Visionary leadership /leading the future

Figure 3.2: Example of Open Coded notes on a policy document

Codes from the transcripts were compared with each other to see if there was commonality, and then similar codes were grouped together to form concepts, and concepts that were similar or had connectivity were grouped to form categories. This “constant comparative method” (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) was also done for different concepts that emerged. Code memos which capture the initial thoughts and themes were maintained throughout. These notes were useful as they have conceptual labeling and helped the researcher move from an empirical to conceptual level of analysis (Punch, 2005). They also helped in identifying issues that needed to be explored in greater details and what might be important to focus on in data analysis (Punch, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000). Despite the initial struggle, the researcher’s confidence in the process of coding grew with experience of the method.

## Axial Coding

This involves an abstracting process where categories developed from the open coding are interconnected with each other, producing a set of propositions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). There are different ways these categories can be connected (Glazer, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rosenberg, 1968; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). With the different categories that emerged from the open coding of the data collected, axial

coding was used to make connections among the categories and their sub-categories. This process increased the understanding between categories and sub-categories, thereby creating a dense texture of conceptualization (Strauss, 1987). Following the steps of axial coding suggested by Strauss & Corbin (1998), the researcher first examined the categories and sub-categories according to their properties to establish relationships. The actions, their causes and effects, factors that influence, and the conditions were explored and developed into core categories. Propositions were established with respect to these relationships and were tested against the existing and new data collected. As in open coding, codes notes and memos were created to explain the connections between categories and their sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Some of the codes identified from open coding became categories and others, sub-categories. An example of axial coding is shown in Figure 3.3.

Sub-category	Category	Core category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Re-position the school</li> <li>- Looking into the future for the school</li> <li>- Ability to anticipate the future</li> <li>- Forward looking in her planning</li> <li>- Anticipative approach</li> <li>- Forefront of new approaches</li> <li>- Setting direction</li> <li>- High expectations</li> <li>- Strategic vision</li> </ul>	Looking into the future	Leadership Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good relationship between colleagues</li> <li>- High trust relationship at every level</li> <li>- Putting reputation on the line</li> <li>- Trust others to deliver</li> <li>- Treating others</li> <li>- Persuasive in dealing with staff</li> <li>- Finding out what's truly important</li> <li>- Model hard work ; work ethics</li> <li>- Care and concern</li> <li>- Working together with staff</li> <li>- Consistent actions and communication</li> <li>- Acknowledge parts that others play</li> </ul>	Trust Building	

Figure 3.3: Example of Axial Coding

## **Theory and Model Development**

Once the analysis of a case school was completed, a narrative of the case school was generated using relevant themes that emerged and participants' quotes were cited. The flow of the narrative also worked towards addressing the SRQs of the study systematically. This format of reporting had its advantage as it allowed the researcher to examine data within each case school and to make cross-case comparisons more easily and systematically (Yin, 2003). Propositions relevant to the data analysis of each case school were established through the use of inductive analysis. In this regard, the researcher maintained the code notes and memos, following the model proposed by Strauss & Corbin (1990). The three sets of propositions that emerged from the three case schools were brought together for comparative analysis where the propositions were compared, consolidated and refined. The researcher continued with the cross-case analysis and used what Miles & Huberman (1994, p176) termed as "staking comparative cases" to compare and discuss the findings generated in the case schools based on the propositions that had been established. As a result of the comparative analysis, the three sets of propositions were consolidated into a final set of propositions. After interpretive tactic of proposition grouping, the final set of propositions was grouped into clusters. This clustering was conducted using a matrix containing the three sets of propositions derived from the three case schools thus enabling the researcher to identify themes and trends. Finally, a paradigm/model to represent and link up the various relationships was formed.

### **3.6 Quality Criteria**

In this study, the researcher considered it appropriate to use the criteria and design procedures for trustworthiness as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthiness is made up of four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability

and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The following section explains how the researcher ensured trustworthiness in this research.

### **Credibility:**

The researcher adopted the following strategies to ensure the credibility of data:

To begin with, multiple sources of data collection were used. Both interviews and close analysis of relevant documents resulted in a triangulated understanding of the phenomenon. Such triangulation was particularly appropriate for this study that sought to respond to the multiplicity of the perspectives present in a highly complex situation (Cohen and Manion, 1989). Moreover, interviewing different personnel in the school served to provide supplementary data which helped in further triangulation. While the researcher was fully aware of the limitations pointed out by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p184) that -"one should not adopt a naively optimistic view that the aggregation of data from different sources will add up to produce a more complete picture", data triangulation was carried out in this study for two purposes; the first of which was to add 'rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to this inquiry' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b, p5). The triangulation enabled the researcher to search for convergence among the multiple sources of information to form a theme or categories in this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The second purpose of triangulation was to enable the researcher to seek out divergent viewpoints and to reveal differences in the investigation outcomes. Inclusion of divergent viewpoints provided the researcher with a fuller picture of the events being investigated and also enhanced the quality of her findings.

Another practice used to promote credibility was the attempt to ensure prolonged engagement where the researcher took time to generate an understanding of the case schools. In this study, data collection from the case schools was extended over 18 months with at least three rounds of interview with the participants. Additional time was also spent on analyzing the documents relevant to the schools. Interviews, which were transcribed and subjected to coding and categorizing, served as another opportunity for prolonged

engagement with the data under study. The participants were also asked to review and appraise drafts of the emergent concepts, categories and propositions in between interviews.

To further enhance credibility, member checking was carried out. This involved the procedure of taking data and interpretations back to the participants and asking them if they were accurate (Merriam, 1988) after the transcription of data obtained from each interview. If a recognizable reality had been produced in the view of the research participants, the trustworthiness of the work would be enhanced. For this study, participants were consulted about the concepts as they emerged from the analysis of the data so that their validity could be corroborated. For example at the stage where transcripts were emailed back to participants for member checking, a few lines of the transcribed data were removed at the request of principal from school B as he deemed the information as sensitive and therefore not comfortable for them to be part of the data.

To address the issue of credibility with regards to interviewing, the researcher ensured that the interviews carried out satisfied the criterion of using low-inference descriptors<sup>6</sup> (Silverman, 2006). This was done by ensuring all face-to-face interviews were tape recorded, data of the interviews carefully transcribed verbatim.

### **Transferability:**

As the data of this study is particular to the context of the participants, the findings relate specifically to each case school. This makes transferability of findings difficult (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, by developing an in-depth and detailed exposition of the phenomenon and its context being studied, this can be overcome (Geertz, 1973).

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<sup>6</sup> Low-Inference Descriptors seeks to record observations “in terms that are as concrete as possible, including verbatim accounts of what people say, rather than researchers’ reconstructions of the general sense of what a person said.

For this study, the aim was to produce a narrative which would detail the phenomenon to be investigated. A detailed description of the context of each case school was developed and showcased in Chapter 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis. Furthermore, a systematic way of keeping the memo notes consciously ensured that the theoretical framework that emerged was grounded in the data gathered and that detailed analysis of the interview transcripts and documents studied could assist others to assess the transferability of the findings to different contexts.

As the sample consisted of the three government schools, each at different levels of school improvement but with similar SES, there is greater likelihood that findings from this study are more transferable than many other such studies. In addition, as this study is based in Singapore where government schools have a lot of homogeneity (Dimmock, 2012), the likelihood of transferability is increased. Furthermore, as the principals in Singapore go through the same training programme and selection process by MOE, this makes principals very similar in their focus. All of the above enhance the likelihood of transferability for the findings of this study.

### **Dependability:**

Dependability pertains to the rigour associated with the process of inquiry (Schwandt, 1997). In this study, the main technique used to enable the dependability of results is the “audit trail” (Appendix 3.9). This allowed the researcher to take the reader through the whole study so that the process by which conclusions are drawn is made apparent. In keeping with the audit requirements as suggested by Lincoln and Guba, (1985), information such as raw data from the interview, transcripts and documents provided by the case schools and data reduction and analysis products were collected and stored accordingly.

To increase the plausibility of this study, the researcher tape-recorded conversations so that they represent what was said with greater accuracy (Riesmann, 1993) and also kept a research diary capturing the researcher's decisions, reflections and interference throughout the research journey. This reflection depicts the researcher's awareness of how the research was done and the impact of the critical decisions made along the way (Silverman, 2006).

To avoid any possible bias that might arise during the data collection stage, the researcher chose to employ snowball sampling when selecting the remaining participants in each case school over random sampling. This ensured that there is no potential biasness that would arise if principals were to be asked to nominate all the respondents.

As an additional step to ensure rigour for this study, a pilot study was conducted. The researcher tested out the interview questions that were crafted based on the SRQs and fine-tuned them to better suit the context of the research (see Appendix 3.9).

### **Confirmability:**

In this study, confirmability was enhanced through maintaining complete records of the study in the audit trail. In addition, the researcher constantly kept in mind the following questions while analyzing the data: Are the findings grounded in data? Are the data-derived inferences, logical? Do the categories have explanatory power and do they fit the data? Do the findings have significance?

As part of the qualitative methodology, the researcher was mindful of constantly comparing the data collected as a means of enhancing the validity and confirmability of the data. This was done by beginning the analysis right at the start of the data collection process starting with a relatively small part of the data collected.



Having generated a set of categories and hence the emerging propositions from this small dataset, the researcher tested out the emerging propositions by expanding the database to other case schools. She has also made conscious effort to seek out deviant cases by choosing a low performing school experiencing difficulty in having breakthrough results as one of the case schools so as to hear from the participants what could have been done and may have not been done leadership-wise, to improve the student learning outcomes in their schools. This validated the data further. While the researcher acknowledged that co-construction of meaning and sense making is best where the researcher and researched together make sense of the data (Charmaz, 2000), where possible, she ensured that codes and categories were grounded in the participants' own words and meanings during the coding stage. This further enhanced the validity and confirmability of the data for this study. To preempt the possibility that the new findings may be shaped by the researcher's predispositions or biases and to put in place critical checks and balances to increase the credibility of the research findings, she made deliberate effort to engage "in a systematic search for alternative themes, divergent patterns and rival explanations" (Patton, 2002, p553). This was done by making her predispositions explicit, and acknowledging her orientation and the value of each perspective put forward when presenting the research findings of the case schools in Chapter 4 to 6. In addition, she conceptualized rival explanations by carefully considering potential arguments from other participants. Yin (1994) noted that the researcher's ability to be convincing increases when she incorporates rival explanations or alternative perspectives in her analysis.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Recognizing that ethics is an important process in research, the researcher has considered several potential ethical issues when designing this study. These include issues related to access and acceptance, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality,

misinterpretation and misrepresentation of data. This section outlines the steps taken to ensure that the research process in this study is ethically sound.

### **Access and Acceptance:**

The relevance of informed consent starts right at the beginning of the research journey. Access to the organization where the research is to be conducted and the acceptance of those whose permission is required before embarking on the research is critical (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992). Thus for this study, the first stage involved the gaining of official permission to undertake this research in the schools and to access the required information.

Prior to the start of the study, the researcher informed the MOE about the intended study and sought permission to peruse some key school documents. A letter stated details of the studies, purpose and methodology and an interview schedule was sent to the Data Collection Centre in the MOE to seek their permission to conduct this study in six schools. In addition, the researcher also followed the ethical guidelines laid down by BERA and the University of Leicester. A comprehensive application for ethics approval was sent to the University Ethic Committee for their approval prior to the stage of data collection. Ways to minimize these potential ethical concerns were also outlined in the application. The researcher short-listed six potential case schools based on the criteria mentioned in Section 3.3 and approached the principals to seek their participation in this research. Except for one school, all agreed to take part in this research study. One of the schools was selected for pilot study while three schools were selected for the main case studies.

### **Informed Consent:**

To begin, the researcher sent an introductory email to the principals of the short-listed principals. This invitation letter and the content in the information sheet attached followed the guidelines given by the University's Ethics Committee. Similarly

introductory emails were sent out to the other participants comprising the other stakeholders of the case schools once their email address were provided by the principals. The information sheet (see Appendix 3.2) included a description of the proposed study, details of the data collection methods, schedule for the interview, discussion of the worthwhile nature of the study and an assurance of confidentiality (Ryen, 2004). This informed consent included the understanding that participation was voluntary. The researcher emphasized this issue to the participants to avoid feelings of obligation or gratitude to the person(s) who have identified the participant (Holloway and Wheeler, 1996).

Prior to the date of interview, consent form (Appendix 3.3) and an interview schedule was emailed to the participants. All were given a full briefing on the purpose of the study and details of individual/group interviews. Participants were also given the assurance that they could withdraw from the study at any time and if they did, their records of interviews and personal information would be destroyed. This was to ensure that participation was voluntary and that they were not placed under any pressure to take part. Student participants (below the age of 21) were asked to seek parental consent to take part in this research by producing a consent form duly signed by their parents or guardians.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality:**

In ensuring privacy and confidentiality of the participating schools, names of the school and their participants were not mentioned in the thesis, but given pseudonyms instead (Seale, 1999). While participants had given consent to tape record the interview, the researcher was conscious of the need to protect the respondents' anonymity (Cooper and Schindler, 2003). In this study, the researcher ensured that the audiotape used during data collection was only accessible to the researcher. To ensure nobody besides the researcher and the participants got to hear the audio tapes, the researcher did the transcription of the interview by herself. In addition, the

researcher ensured that the dataset were anonymized before archiving (Hammersley, 2009).

### **Misinterpretation and Misrepresentation of data:**

In this study, the researcher took great pains to avoid and minimize any possible misinterpretation and mis-representation of the data (Howe & Moses, 1999). This was done by putting in place member checking procedures during the data collection and analysis stage. Interview data which had been transcribed, as well as the researcher's interpretations, were sent back to participants for their agreement on their accuracy and plausibility (Merriam, 1988). Participants were consulted about the concepts and categories as they emerged from the analysis of the data. This form of member checking is important to ensure minimal misinterpretation of the data and hence to reduce the gap between the 'narrative told and narrative reported' (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002).

## **3.8 Researcher Positioning**

As mentioned in Section 1.8, the researcher's background gave her the advantage of being an insider researcher in this study. This section elaborates further on the pros and cons of being an insider researcher in this study.

The researcher is aware of the pros and cons that might arise as a result of her role as an insider to the Singapore secondary school system, given that she has worked in similar environment to those of the case schools. One likely advantage as an insider to the system is that the case principals may be more willing to share as they know she will be more empathetic having experienced similar situations before. On the other hand, these principals may choose to hide certain matter as they know

the researcher is in the system. The researcher is aware of the potential biases and has taken steps to counteract these potential biases.

While being an insider might give researcher the advantage to draw out pertinent contextual issues which seem relevant to the school situations. she also deliberated on potential drawbacks such as informant bias, interview reciprocity and research ethics and took the necessary steps to reduce the effect. For example, regarding informant bias, data collection may be affected as a result of a perceived relationship between the researcher and the principals of case schools. To overcome this, the researcher made it clear to participants at the onset that the purpose of the investigation was an academic one, for the researcher's own personal qualifications, and not to pass judgment about the principal. Furthermore, they were assured that the interview content would be strictly confidential and only accessible to the participant and the researcher. Due to the assumed understanding of the topic under study, the researcher is mindful that she may have preconceived conceptions that may influence data collection and interpretation. Steps were taken by subjecting the research to standards of trustworthiness and by the researcher making a conscious effort to continually self-reflect her own values and perspectives to ensure the interpretation of data is grounded by the data collected rather than her own viewpoints. The researcher also took steps to ensure issues related to misrepresentation and misrepresentations of data were reduced. Section 3.7 explains how these were done.

### **3.9 Limitation of the study**

This study does not assume to represent the perspectives of all principals in Singapore schools on how the process of improving student outcomes is managed and led. There are 360 schools and principals in Singapore; this study samples three of them and does not aim to generalize across all schools and school leadership. Nor is it

the intention of the researcher to propose hypotheses or offer comprehensive sets of practices on leading and managing the process of improving student outcomes in the schools. Instead, it is a qualitative study of three selected schools in which principals (and a small number of their staff) as the key respondents are encouraged to share their perspectives on how they perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influence on improving student outcomes, and how they go about securing the process of improving student outcomes.

As with all qualitative research, this study has the inherent limitations with regards to generalizability and the transferability of the findings. The study is exploratory and concerned with generating a model of the relationships between leadership and improving student outcomes. The purpose of the study is to develop a model/theory that explains and captures the processes and practices of the phenomenon under study. While it has been acknowledged that there is difficulty in generalizing from such qualitative research, it is still possible that some of the findings from this study are transferable to other contexts of a similar nature. Readers may be able to draw parallels or identify similarities and differences between their situations and those of the participants. From this, they may be able to learn more about their own situations, and adopt some good practices they deem suitable.

This study is confined to cases drawn from government secondary schools which are the majority in Singapore. The findings may thus have more relevance for this type of school and its leadership in Singapore. While the researcher notes that there is greater homogeneity in schools and principals in Singapore than elsewhere (Dimmock, 2012), she also acknowledged the need to be cautious about generalizing findings (Payne and Williams, 2005) as there is bound to be slight variation in view of the different school context (Hallinger et al., 2011).

The findings of this study are limited to the views of five categories of respondents; the principals and the main stakeholders, namely the vice-principals, HODs, teachers and students. Although the stakeholder groups did not include

parents who are deemed critical partners in school education, the four groups of respondents of the case schools have been deliberately selected as they came into frequent, direct contact and communication with the principal on a day-to-day basis.

This study used qualitative methods to develop a deeper understanding of the processes and practices of principals in managing the process of improving student outcomes in their schools. Data collection included face to face interviews and communicating with participants via email. The researcher notes a few constraints in this area.

First, given the limited population (as explained in section 3.3) for the study, sampling was a problem. For some schools, the principals declined to participate. In other case schools, the movement of staff during the period of study, in particular the rotation of principals, and movement of vice principals and head of departments posed a problem. To overcome this problem, the researcher approached the participants to seek their support in continuing with the research despite the change of duty in the subsequent year. Many kindly agreed and some principals even went the extra mile to seek permission from the new principals of the case schools on behalf of the researcher so that data gathering process can be carried out despite the absence of the existing principals.

Second, time was an issue. Although most of the participants were willing to spend the time to share their perspectives following the stipulated schedule of the interview, they guarded their time carefully, especially in providing additional information and time. This restricted the number of subsequent interviews after the first in-depth interview. To overcome this, the researcher resorted to communicating with the participants via emails through which the transcript and interpretation of the data for each interview was validated by the participants. In some cases, the subsequent interviews and clarifications were done via telephone or emails.

Third, the quality of the data was dependent on the participants' ability and readiness to share their experiences and perceptions. On the onset, the researcher acknowledged the pros and cons of her role as an 'insider' which might affect the quality of the data. Drawbacks such as informant bias, interview reciprocity and research ethics have been considered and necessary steps, as outlined in section 3.7 and 3.8, have been taken to reduce the effect.

While the researcher has acknowledged some of the limitations posed by methodology, some of the strategies to overcome these limitations have also been suggested in this section. This study thus provides a possible methodology for replication and further considerations on how to surface the leadership and management processes and practices which helps to improve student outcome in different school contexts. Further research on a large and more diverse set of schools is however, needed to confirm and extend these findings.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter began with a discussion of the choice and justification for locating the study within the interpretivist paradigm. The arguments and justification for qualitative methods as well as the choice and description of the research design provided a clear methodology for preparing, collecting and analyzing data and reporting the findings for the research study. The study undertook a modified analytic induction approach where a model is the outcome of the research. Purposive sampling with a maximum variation sampling strategy was used for the identification of case schools as well as participants sampling. The semi-structured interview constituted the main source of data collection with documentary study serving as a supplementary source of data collection. Open coding and axial coding were instrumental in the eventual development of a model, elaborated in the analysis section. Chapter 4 gives an account of the research findings in case school A.



# **Chapter 4**

## **Case Study: School A**

***School Improvement: moving from success to sustainability  
through the principle of trust***

### **4.0 Introduction**

This chapter gives an account of the ways in which a secondary school principal in Singapore developed and sustained a successful school over a period of 6 years in a changing policy context. Throughout this thesis and chapter the school referred to is termed 'School A'. The school was selected on the basis of its sustained improvement in terms of student learning outcomes over at least three consecutive years. The first part of the chapter describes the overview of the school organization while the second part of the chapter presents the research findings of the study. The chapter ends with a discussion section that summarizes the main findings and addresses the inter-related propositions developed from this case study.

### **4.1 Organizational Overview**

#### **School Profile**

School A is a co-educational government secondary school that provides education for students aged from 13 to 17 years. It has an established history of at least 30 years and believes that every child can be an independent learner, accepting responsibility for their own learning outcomes. At the point of research, the school has an enrolment of 1400 students of whom 68.7% are Chinese, 22.4 % Malays and 5.9% Indians. Amongst the student population, 1.2 %, are international students. School A

has about 80 teaching staff and has a good mix of experienced and young staff. Amongst them, about 90% are graduates. Every year it has a relatively long waiting list, an indication of its popularity.

The school measures its academic success by the number of students who qualify for Junior College/Polytechnic and the value it adds to its students. Since 2003, the percentage of students eligible for higher education has risen significantly. The figure surpasses the national average . The school has achieved a Gold Value Added Award for the Express Stream for 3 successive years and a Sustained Achievement Award for a few years. Lately, the school was accorded the higher level School Master plan Awards<sup>7</sup>. Such success did not come immediately after Ann's appointment as principal. In fact, the turning point for the school was 2003 when it suffered a significant dip in academic results. The school has turned around and since then has continued to improve its student outcomes and sustained its high performing outcomes.

### **Principal Profile**

The principal, Ann has been a secondary school principal for more than 6 years. School A is her first principal-ship. However, she had extensive teaching experience as a classroom teacher, and then a specialist officer in HQ (MOE) prior to taking on the principal-ship. During her career, she completed her postgraduate studies and is always looking for the opportunity to learn. At the point of interview for this study, she is due for her next tour of duty.

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to Chapter 3 for further explanation on Master Plan Awards

## 4.2 Research Findings

This section briefly outlines how Ann, the principal of school A perceives and manages her leadership and management influence to improve student outcomes. The findings will be structured based on key themes that arise in response to the SRQs that are posed and also through developing arguments and findings based on quotations from participants. How and why these participants were chosen is elaborated in the methodology chapter. Participants' quotations are coded as follows:

Participants code	Participants' Roles	Gender	Years in school
A1(Ann)	Principal	Female	9
A2	Vice Principal	Male	3
A3	HOD	Female	16
A4	HOD	Female	5
A5	HOD	Female	3
A6	HOD	Male	10
A7	HOD	Male	13
A8	Teacher	Female	20
A9	Teacher	Female	15
A10	Teacher	Female	3
A11	Teacher	Male	7
A12	Teacher	Female	8
AG13	Students Group 1	5 Sec 3 students from mixed streams	3
AG14	Students Group 2	5 Sec3 students from mixed streams	3

Table 4.1 Profile of participants in case school A (accurate as of 2010)

#### **4.2.1 Perception and Worldview of Principal on Leadership and Management influence**

To have a better understanding of how Ann perceives her leadership and management influence, four interview questions were posed. First, how does she define student learning outcomes? Second, what is her perception of a successful school? Third, is school A, in her opinion, a successful school? , and lastly, what is her view on the influence of principals in improving student outcomes?

Ann perceives that the principal's influence is critical in moving a school forward. She feels that principals play an important role in establishing a school culture which centers on a strong vision for future success.

*To me work should be seen in the context of the larger meaning of life. Hence school culture should be one that centers on a strong vision that comes about as a result of collective meaning-making that eventually gives rise to shared vision for the school to move forward. [A1]*

Where Ann is concerned, a successful school is one that strives for excellence and people are happy in that organization. She explains:

*In my view, a successful school will be one that not only produces good results and strives for excellence but everybody within the organization is happy. There is a sense of fulfillment and people enjoy what they are doing and no shortcuts are taken to achieve results at the expense of doing things which are not right, helping kids to succeed.*

While she stresses the importance of good results for all students to move on to the next level, she hastens to add that character development of a child is important too. She clarifies:

*I think academic results are important because all kids need good results to move on to the next level. As everybody knows, the character of the child is also very critical... No point excelling without the ability to communicate well. Make choices later in life.*

The above view shapes how she defines student learning outcomes in her school. While she holds the view that both academic and non-academic are important, she works on academic excellence to develop mindset and skills which drive excellence in other areas. She holds the view that holistic education must lead to success and help the students to move on. In her own words:

*I think all areas are important. Okay, but parents and the community look at the student academic performance as being quite critical. It's an area that we really have to look into. But some students' talent and ability do lie in different areas and we also want to develop them. I think every school has to achieve a balance.*

Ann perceives that her leadership influence to improve student outcomes can be effected through working on her relationship with her stakeholders, in particular her staff.

*To me, teachers hold the key to student achievements and their well-being and their capacities are important. Indeed, one of the top reasons people quit their job doesn't relate to dissatisfaction with their own work. Rather, it relates to not getting the support they feel they need from their boss or others within the team.*

She strongly believes that creating high-trust relationships throughout the school is the answer to improving and sustaining student outcomes. She has this to add:

*If we put effort into creating high-trust relationships at every level, the chances are we will get on with others more effectively, enjoy our work more, and be*

*willing to put our reputation on the line, knowing we can trust others to deliver in ways that everyone agreed to, and are happy with. This in turn will definitely benefit our students....*

She holds strong views of what can be done to build high-trust relationships -

*To me, being truthful, respectful, understanding, serving and thankful when dealing with each other in the organization is important. It will go a long way towards building and maintaining high trust relationship in the organization. A leader must kick start this whole culture and role model it...*

In particular, Ann strongly believes in the power of respect. She holds the view that when a leader relies primarily on authority to lead the school, more effort is required to monitor and follow-up with her staff to ensure that results are achieved. She subscribes to the idea that persuading all parties to have commitment to achievement of the goals is better than exercising a top-down, authoritative stance. Ann has this to say:

*I think an authoritarian style of leadership requires you to constantly exert pressure with your presence or your commanding drive. I prefer to use another way- influence people in the right way and build respect for each other.*

*As a leader, it is not the authority but the respect you earn that makes you an influential leader. People buy you first, before they buy your ideas and proposition. Once the respect and relationship is built, people will be more receptive to the system and structures you put in place to move the school forward.*

She holds a strong belief in her students' and staff abilities to exercise responsibility with accountability. She is convinced that her presence, availability and

approachability will go a long way to inspiring others to commitment of shared purpose. She puts it this way:

*As long as the leader shows that she is sincere and willing to work with the team, is not afraid of hard work and is there when there is a need in a certain area; she needs to actually take the lead. I think the staff will appreciate it and they know they have a leader who understands them, works with them and tries to achieve the best possible outcomes. I think people tend to look at the leader; a lot of teachers tell me actually shared that they work so hard is because I work hard as well. [A1]*

Her strong conviction that every child matters guides her leadership decision making in school A.. She elaborates:

*For me, part of my job is about having the moral courage to do what it takes to help students to learn. This includes having the courage of my own convictions even if it goes against convention.... Very often, this has to be done for me to continually move the school forward. [A1]*

Sharing her perceptions of her leadership and management influence to move school A to the next level, Ann declares:

*I believe for an organization to progress, it has to sharpen its competitive edge through innovation. The way to move this school forward is to foster a culture of change where staff and students are adaptable to change and empowered to be change agents.*

Ann's belief and her values orientation drives how she defines and drives change in the school. It also shapes her approach to conducting day to day business in the school which entails allocating her time focusing on people first, then structures and system. She sums up her perception of her leadership and management influence as follows:

*My key role as a leader is to break down obstacles that lower performance and motivation so that staff who are helping the kids to achieve are free to be fully engaged in whatever they are doing....*

Through the data analysis of values<sup>8</sup> held by Ann in school A, it has been found that there is a list of dominant values to which she subscribes. This includes values of relationship, trust, care, change, risk taking, hard work, empowerment, resourcefulness, flexibility and sense of mission. Table 4.2 shows the values orientation of Ann.

Values held based on analysis of data	Dominant value to which Principal subscribe
Relationship ( Team )/Trust ( Belief in the good of people) Success/Change Care (everyone must be happy)/Fight for a cause Hard work /Independence Empowerment	+ Relationship + Trust + Care + Change + Risk Taking + Hard work + Empowerment + Resourcefulness + Flexibility + Sense of Mission

Table 4.2 Values Orientation of the principal in school A

Findings from analysis of her interview data indicate that she has a strong values orientation towards relationship and connection as evident in her thinking that her leadership influence can be actualised through working on her relationship with her stakeholders and the importance she places on putting events in their context and taking time to understand her stakeholders. Data analysis of her leadership practices noted that her leadership activities are predicated on connecting with her stakeholders. Her strong values orientation towards relationship and connection also shapes the way she leads, communicates, uses power and interprets information. One

<sup>8</sup> In this study, the term ‘value’ has been used liberally to include elements of dispositions and personal qualities. Refer to Chapter 7 for details.



wonders if this could be the reason for her to subscribe to a different view of having power over others as affirmed by one of the teacher participants. “Unlike other principals who tend to exert their power as a principal, she uses her power very differently. She would build respect for each other and inspire you to want to do things for her.”[A8]

The analysis of Ann’s interview data also reveals her values orientation to ethics of care which is evident in the way she takes context and her care for others into consideration when working through ethical dilemmas. She takes time to reflect on the emotional content of the message and feelings of individuals in her school. A12 reports:

*She is very willing to spend time hearing us out. She would listen to what’s being said. Very often, she is spot-on on what’s being unsaid and hence surface our needs and wants....*

Many participants (A2, A4, A5, A8, A11, A12, AG13 and AG14) agree that Ann’s values orientation towards change may have explained why she is so flexible and resourceful in her day to day approaches. One participant noted her resourcefulness and her distinctive personal characteristic:

*She will always think of ways to do things better; not one who is contented with status quo. I am amazed at the way she remains positive when we bring a problem to her. She is always so optimistic and there is always a more creative solution at hand.*  
[A11]

Ann is certainly not one to be contented with status quo. Her optimistic mind set enables her to see barriers as challenges rather than obstacles.

Data clearly shows that Ann has a strong personal drive and sense of mission. She is an excellent communicator with strong interpersonal skills. While she is single

minded in her pursuit of excellence and promoting change, she takes time to establish relationships with her stakeholders. A2 provided an interesting observation:

*It is interesting to note that although she sees change as important, she always does in the context of relationship; always finding common ground for people to be involved in the change process rather than driving from the top. You can see the way she promotes change by empowering us to be change agents..*

From the above data analysis of Ann's role as principal of school A, the following propositions are formed:

Proposition A: Ann's values orientation, personal characteristics and beliefs shape how she perceives her leadership and management influence to improve student learning outcomes. Her strong values orientation towards relationship and connection shapes the ways she leads and uses power. What give rise to how Ann perceives her leadership and management influence is summarized in Table 4.3.

Values Orientation	Personal Characteristics	Beliefs
1.Strong values orientation towards relationship and connection 2. Values orientation towards ethic of care 3. Values orientation towards change	al drive and strong sense of municator with excellent and communication skills sed on integrity, care and gh her role modelling	1.Creating high-trust relationships can improve and sustain student outcomes 2. Everyone has the ability to exercise responsibility with accountability 3. Principal's presence and availability and approachability inspire others to commitment and shared purpose 4. Innovation is the key to sharpen the school's competitive edge
Perception of Ann of her leadership influence to improving student outcomes		
1. Influence through working towards a school where people are happy 2. Focus on academic excellence is important to develop mind set and skills that can drive		

excellence in other areas

3. Influence can be effected through working on her relationship with stakeholders

Table 4.3: Summary of values orientation, personal characteristics beliefs and perceptions of principal of school A

Proposition B: Ann's beliefs and optimism about human nature shape the way she conceptualizes her leadership practices and how she allocates time and effort to exercise her leadership practices. Her strong belief system based on innate goodness as demonstrated through her honesty, empathy and commitment as well people centeredness where all students and staff have the ability to exercise responsibility with accountability enables her to conceptualize leadership practices that empower her stakeholders to be involved in the school improvement.

#### **4.2.2 Core Leadership Practices to improve student learning outcomes**

Common themes of leadership practices that Ann has adopted to improve student outcomes in school A emerged from the interview and document analysis and are grouped as follows:- Looking to the Future, Culture of Change, Trust Building, Connecting with Others , Distributed Leadership and Capacity Building. Each of these themes will be discussed in the sections below.

##### ***Looking to the Future***

As a new principal to school A, Ann reckons that she had a heavy responsibility to bring the school to new heights. She shares the conversation that ensued with her superior when she first joined the school:

*When I first came in, the Supt. came to see me talking about what next and how can we re-position to bring the school to next level. She said everybody is very concerned about the successor for the school. Well, I felt I have to fill quite big shoes..... I know I have a heavy responsibility here and I definitely need to think of ways to bring the school to the next level.... I know I have to give stakeholders a compelling reason to join me in this adventure....*

Her forward looking strategies have paid off as is evident in the school achievements during her stewardships. In outlining reasons for the school's success in raising student outcomes, most of the stakeholders interviewed attributed the success to the principal's strategic vision which ensures that the school either keeps pace with, or pre-empts external policy change in education, thereby keeping the school moving forward.

*Ann's strength is her ability to anticipate the future and she is always forward looking in her planning. A lot of things we have done often times we are the first. Because of her anticipative approach, we are often considered to be the forerunner of a lot of new approaches.... [A6]*

When asked if the principal contributes to improving student outcomes, all stakeholders interviewed felt that school leadership directly influences school culture, exemplified by Ann setting direction and expectations for the school to scale new heights. The VP elaborates:

*Ann puts the school culture in place. We have a very open culture where people could just come up with new ideas and the principal is very motivating to the staff. She really encourages them to think of new ways of teaching, new ways of doing things and to value add to the students. The staffs know they have Ann's support when they do this and the middle managers know that also.*

Findings from this case study also show that because Ann's strategic vision is both clearly communicated and responsive to different aspects of school contexts, staff are more likely to put trust in the principal and participate positively in the direction of school change.

*The first thing that struck me when I first joined the school is that Ann is a very different leader - the way she communicates with the teachers and the students. There is always a heavy emphasis on the welfare of students. She cares for the students a lot and I think teachers like myself, we feel it very strongly. This influences the way we do things. Whatever we do we also think in terms of the students. [A10]*

*Ann is very hands-on. She has a part to play in especially the EL dept in the school. She will teach alongside the teachers where English is concerned and she contributes directly to the teaching and learning of the students. She is very well supported by her strong MM team and that helps a lot. Ann is one who if something cannot be done, she will do it herself. She will find ways to do it. She will exhaust all avenues and .... I think MM and teachers could see what she is doing, so they take her as an example of what could be done.... [A2]*

There is general agreement among the participants interviewed that Ann and her style have a great deal to do with the success of the school. They perceive her as a leader who is flexible and is always open to new ideas, opportunities and approaches. Many (A2, A3, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, A12) see her as an optimistic person who is not afraid of hard work and as someone who will take risks for the sake of the school. In fact, they attribute the school's achievements to her optimistic approach. Many feel strongly about Ann's leadership and use her as a role model. A middle manager remarks:

*Ann is a risk taker. She is very open to innovation. So when teachers go to her and ask, "Can we try this out?" I am quite sure 90% of the time she will say "yes, go ahead". In fact, often times, the dampener on the whole change project are the middle managers. We are more averse to risk; she is a risk taker, so we complement. That's why it works well. [A7]*

What makes Ann stand out is her ability to negotiate her way to success. As a new leader in school A, she was aware that while she had the support of the previous principal who eased her into the role nicely, she needed to extend deeper foundations for cultural change in order to support sustained improvements in the school's performance. She saw a need to lay the foundation for long-term improvements that focus on diagnosing cultural problems and take early actions that began to change perceptions. She remarks:

*When I first came in, there were key personnel who were moving on to cluster schools as Subject Head and Head of Departments. We saw quite a few transfers. It was quite challenging because there were a few middle managers who were not quite up to the mark. I could sense some unhappiness within some of the members in the department. I had to be very careful as it was a very close knit community. I had to spend some time to understand the whole system and try to effect changes as and when I could. [A1]*

Despite the challenges, she is always mindful of taking care of staff feelings. For example, she modeled the importance of building personal and academic relationships and established appropriate collaborative structures in which roles, responsibilities and accountabilities were progressively distributed. Through these, she has embedded a particular organizational set of values-based practices in the school- at the heart of which is the ethic of care with achievement. A3 comments:

*Ann has impacted on the work culture. We have very hardworking teachers because she herself is very hard-working. Many teachers are not particular about doing extra or more. Few teachers here complain that others are not doing more and things like that. She has set the standard where if you do more, you don't complain; you just focus on what you are doing rather than what others are not doing. If you can contribute more, it is good. But don't compare with others who are not doing as much because of different circumstances....*

Ann began changing the culture by getting people to think differently and consider new ways of operating. She initiated the cultural change by encouraging teachers to be involved in pilot projects, changing the way performance is measured by constantly sharing with staff what better performing schools are doing and how they measure their performance. She also helped them to develop new perspectives on students, parents and competitors.

*I think it has to do with my personality. I love to talk to people, go around and get to know everyone. I think that helps as I don't believe in hierarchical structure and everyone is free to talk to me, email or even message me including all students. By getting to know everybody well we form a kind of relationship that is collegial. They know I am not there to find fault but to help people to achieve the best outcomes for themselves. At first, teachers felt a bit threatened when students and parents approached me directly. But after a while they all got used to this system and they became quite open and collegial as well....*

Ann describes her approach to leadership as being founded upon systems management, educational ideals and relationships. A leader who demonstrates a high degree of emotional intelligence in her leadership role, she creates an environment of positive morale and higher productivity that results in sustainable staff engagement. She leveraged on quality relationships and took time to build credibility with staff, students and parents and this in turn resulted in these stakeholders agreeing on the same goals and commitment to achieving the goals.

It is Ann's strong, caring and involved presence at every level which is so remarkable and important within the school:

*You will see her everywhere.... She will go to the staff room, be at the lobby..... Talking to students, staff or parents.... She is never too busy to deal with any student who's causing problems. She leads by example. Faced with a difficult parent, she would be very firm about where the school stands. She would diffuse the situation and look into their needs, yet firmly put the parent in his/her place [A9]*

A senior middle manager involved in building up the school agrees:

*Ann is a very hands-on person. She knows what is happening in the school, in fact more than I do. She keeps in touch with everybody-all the way down to students, parents and teachers. She knows everything about them; she touches base very often. Because of that personal touch, she knows what is happening.... [A3]*

Such approachability, availability and presence are key aspects of her leadership. However, this level of involvement is at the expense of her personal life. Ann has to make sacrifices in terms of her work-life balance. Often, stakeholders see her clocking in exceptionally early every day and she has a reputation for keeping long hours. Some of the staff interviewed shared that sometimes they feel the pressure created by



her level of commitment, although she does not expect the same of her staff. A teacher makes this comment:

*She is the first to be in school and the last to leave. Even the neighbourhood is aware of this as they will see her car parking in the school compound on Saturdays and Sundays. Some of us wonder if she goes home.... [A11]*

Ann sees these sacrifices as a necessity on her part. She hastens to add that despite the sacrifices, she finds joy in what she is doing. She elaborates:

*I am well aware that change is difficult- successful change requires commitment, persistence and a certain measure of faith. Important changes don't happen easily and they don't occur overnight. I only know that positive change happens only when we genuinely want things to be different. To do that, we must be willing to make personal sacrifices ..... [A1]*

Another factor which is fundamental to Ann's leadership of the school is her strong student-centered values stance. There is always strong emphasis on the welfare of students. Ann describes her observations when she first joined the school and how she leveraged on quality relationships to influence the perception of staff on student management, as follows:

*When I first came in, I was quite perturbed by the amount of at-risk cases. The way some teachers felt was if the kid is giving problems, we must try to get rid of them as fast as possible because they are not fair to the others.... That is also in line with the policy direction at that time. We tried to change to understand each situation and get all the necessary help rather than just judge the child. I think discipline is one where a lot of people disagreed with me. I could see a lot of unhappiness at the beginning. Teachers questioned why they should tolerate rudeness... I had to convince the staff that times are changing and students are*

*not going to behave the way they did long ago. Parents are not going to accept an approach where we come down hard on the students for everything ....*

On how Ann seizes every opportunity to make use of teachable moments to inculcate values, the following comments of a teacher capture the views of other staff and students:

*We talked about the incident of a student knocking down a senior citizen. Although I did not witness it, the story and how it is being used to teach character has left an impact on me. It really makes me think that being an educator is certainly more than teaching them content knowledge. We are actually playing the role of parent teaching them how they can become better people to serve the nation and to serve the family in the future- all these are things that really touched me... [A12]*

Ann clearly focuses on teaching and learning by nurturing relationships between expectations, work ethics and efficacy alongside care, engagement and achievement. This is clearly evident in the way she was involved when the school's GCE O level results took a dip in 2003. A middle manager outlines the approach:

*I heard how Ann took the lead in turning around the school when the results took a plunge in 2003; for example, introducing night study. When I joined the school later, I saw a different approach to night study compared to my previous school, very structured, teachers are rostered to help out for each subject; non-graduating class teachers also pitch in to help. It was a way to build the team spirit and sharing of resources. I was impressed..... New teachers would get to see how experienced ones went about coaching the students, looking at the readiness of the students and catering to their needs rather than one size fits all... [A5]*

A4 sums up the culture of the school in the following way -

*It is a 'happening' school. There are many challenges and the culture is such that we all want to live up to expectations; meeting the needs of students. There is this culture of sharing, so we don't just work in silos and we don't work on our own trying to meet all these challenges. I feel that the culture is such that we have a very strong team spirit to support one another....*

Ann is a very hands-on leader. She takes time to talk to people to assess how things are going. Ann herself states:

*We talk about a lot of things including personal things, how work is progressing and what we need to change when there are obstacles along the way. The staff and students seem to appreciate the chance to talk.... This gives me a chance to evaluate the daily operations and explore ways to support the work in progress before it escalates to more serious situation.*

As a result of Ann's hands-on approach, there is clarity and a clear communication of a responsive vision for the school. Where the stakeholders are concerned, this is important as it helps in fostering a culture where staff feel empowered as a change agent in moving the school forward.

### ***Culture of Change***

Participants from school A commented that building a school which embraces change and innovation is essential to the school's success. They view that the role of the principal is crucial as she sets the tone for how staff in the school respond to constant change in external policy and the community environment. In particular, the way the school principal responds constructively to local and national policy initiatives helps to foster a climate in which staff view participation in change more positively. A6 comments on the proactive way Ann evaluates and implements external policy: "She

is constantly embracing what is available, without losing sight of our core business. We are trying to keep what we value and what works well and streamline it for effectiveness...”

A8 states:

*Despite new initiatives that come on board, there is always a very heavy emphasis on students being able to do very well- not just academic but also the non- academic areas. Look at the way Ann emphasizes journal writing where there is always a theme.... There is always this inculcation of values. She struck me as a Principal who places a lot of emphasis on character development.*

These comments show that Ann does not consider policy changes as impositions, but opportunities for the school to reflect and improve its current practices. The way Ann encourages a climate in which change is viewed as a necessary and positive dimension of school culture is shared by many participants. For example, a teacher remarks:

*In our school, promoting a thinking culture is one of our Strategic Thrusts. It's a culture where staff, students and parents are encouraged to make suggestions. People are encouraged to think of ways to take the school forward and they are valued for their suggestion through tokens that are given to short-listed and implemented suggestions. We knew that we have the support of the principal.*  
[A9]

The vice-principal adds:

*The other thing that Ann does is to try to get buy-in from the staff and students. Look at all the surveys and all the studies she has done. She may already know the right approach but she wants it to come from them so that she can get greater support ....*

Stakeholders (A2, A4, A5, A9, A12) interviewed comment that encouraging staff to innovate and providing them a voice in how change can be implemented is important because change and innovation should not come from the principal alone; instead it should emerge from different levels of leadership in the school. Encouraging staff to play an active role in fostering innovation is considered to be essential as many perceive it as a means of empowering people from different levels to view themselves as change agents.

In summary, the principal's role of communicating clear strategic intent that is responsive to the internal and external school context and involving wide participation by a range of staff is critical to improving student learning outcomes. The strategic vision and planning leads to the feeling amongst the school leadership team that the school is at the cutting edge, constantly moving forward and improving – a feeling that is a foundation for the development of a school culture where change and innovation are welcomed.

### ***Trust Building***

The data from this case study show that one of key factors in sustaining success in school A is the way the school principal exercises trust. This stems from her strong belief about the responsibility of the school leader to promote trust among all members of the school community. As Ann puts it:

*Good relationships between colleagues are a matter of trust. If we put effort into creating high trust relationships at every level internally, chances are we will get on with others more effectively, enjoy our work more and be willing to put our reputation on the line, knowing we can trust others to deliver in ways that everyone's agreed to and are happy with.*

She exercises trust in such a way that it was broadened, deepened and embedded over time. *She* believes in being open and honest about things, as indicated by the

following quotes, “Being truthful or transparent is both honourable – it helps us to sleep well at night - and helpful to the person we are dealing with as it enables them to make informed decisions.” [A1]

However, Ann adds, “As I have always shared with people, it is not what we say that counts; very often it is how we say those things....”

She goes on:

*Oftentimes, the way a person wishes to be treated is quite different to someone else. One size doesn't fit all. I avoid making assumptions. Instead I prefer to find out how someone wants to be treated by taking time to understand the person. You know we always say we adapt to people and there are so many different personality types in the school. What is important is we have got to respect that people are different. Instead of jumping to conclusions about what I think people need or want, I choose to listen and hear what's being said. Where appropriate, I also try to identify what's not being said ....*

Ann is highly persuasive in her approach to dealing with staff. As A12 puts it, “She actually uncovers our biggest “hot button”; that is finding out and not guessing what is truly important to us.”

When asked about this aspect of trust building, Ann shares her belief that it pays to take time to uncover what the other person values most in the first place, before concentrating on addressing the issues. Ann elaborates, “From there, I can build up my point of view around their “hot button” and relate and resonate my idea in line with what is considered to be truly important to them.”

All the evidence from her and colleagues confirmed that there has been no dimming of her commitment, passion and energy over the years and this builds greater trust among the members in the school community. A teacher states:

*Ann models the hard work, the ethical aspect; working hard for the school. It is important as it gives the school the whole culture and staff work ethics. She shows a lot of concern for staff and students. She would willingly top up money for them. Another of her work ethics - her openness to get feedback and provide information; she does not hide information from you. Her qualities such as care, openness, transparency as well as her work ethics and role modeling for the staff have been good for the school progress.... [A11]*

Some of the participants (A3, A4, A6, A9) interviewed concur that one unique trademark about Ann is that she always acknowledges the part that others play and there is always affirmation and gratitude on work done. Such a disposition makes the staff, students and parents she is dealing with feel valued. This always makes them want to go the extra mile for her and the school.

When asked for her view on the comments made by the participants on how she has this disposition to make people feel valued and how she models hard work, Ann has this to say:

*For myself, I think I am more of a down to earth kind of person who actually likes to get involved with everything, look into things to see how I can improve in all areas. So I spent quite a bit of my time with the school, working together with the teachers and planning things together. I guess this has to do with my values orientation and my mental model...*

Her frequent and consistent actions and communication on what is important reinforces trust between the leader and members of the school community. A teacher corroborates this:

*Ann keeps on talking about innovation and always getting staff to think about how to improve the ways that we are doing things and if you keep on talking*

*about it, staff can see the principal is trying to improve the way things are done and spurred us to follow. [A9]*

Some stakeholders (A6, A7, A8, A9, A12) interviewed share that they appreciate her wisdom in making timely decisions which are always in the interests of the students, the school and its staff. One teacher comments:

*Because of her frequent emphasis on the welfare of students, we can be assured that whatever decisions she makes, it will be in the interest of the students, school and the staff. The extent to which Ann cares for the personal as well as the academic self of others makes us feel we can whole heartedly entrust her to guide us forward... [A9]*

Another middle manager adds that they are particularly heartened by Ann's ability to nurture, realize and renew hope and optimism.

*We particularly like the way she is so optimistic and hopeful about everything. This is truly important for us during moments we feel demoralized or stressed out by the voluminous work we have to manage. Somehow her presence and her words make things more manageable.... [A7]*

The vice-principal sums up how Ann goes about building trust and inspiring confidence and enthusiasm in her people and in the process how this increases the probability of a performance breakthrough and success:

*To the stakeholders, Ann is a leader worth following into the uncertainties of change. People choose to follow a leader because they can identify with the leader's values. Leaders earn the trust and respect of their followers to the extent that they are able to demonstrate their allegiance to a set of universally accepted values as they carry out their daily responsibilities in a leadership role. This is exactly how Ann has built trust here ....*



### ***Distributed Leadership and Capacity Building***

Both the principal and stakeholders interviewed feel that leadership in the school is distributed amongst staff. Many concur that the practice of distributed leadership is important to the success of the school in terms of sustaining improved student learning outcomes. They perceive this strategy to be important as it works to cultivate the ownership of staff and in so doing, develops the shared vision with the team. In the words of the principal:

*In this school, everyone is a leader of something. If you give people the ownership then they will want to do a good job. My role is monitoring and evaluating what is going on in whatever way it is done, and if something isn't working then that would be the time to find out why it wasn't. This is good as it works on leveraging the strengths of the individual.*

Ann shares that the practice of distributed leadership requires a school leader to balance between wielding power and sharing power. During the change process, principals are required to lead the school improvement but at the same time disarm themselves from positional power in order for a collaborative and participative culture to flourish. She shares:

*For me, the practice of distributed leadership comes naturally in view of the school context. I don't believe in hierarchical structure and 'letting go' of the idea of positional power is easy for me... To me, enhancing the school's capacities is important and the practice of distributed leadership creates opportunities to build teachers' and leaders' capacities among middle managers.*

Within the school, there is a well-established system of distributed leadership and management that enable staff to contribute effectively in setting priorities and targets and tracking these targets. The middle managers interviewed provide their view of this practice and how such strategy has helped to improve their management skills as

they are involved in the process of building up the school. One middle manager shares:

*As a KP, one of my challenges is to get the teachers to see the overall picture. Once they see the big picture and understand the rationale why the school is doing certain things, they are more agreeable to go all out .... You develop this skill as you are involved in delegating and attempting to create buy in .... [A7]*

Another middle manager adds:

*At least at the middle management level there is still a lot of cooperation and give and take. This is so because many of the middle managers went through the process of building up the school. It builds a spirit, a sense of ownership. I also think it is partly the culture of the school. When there are clashes, we sit down to find a solution. There's a clear indication that people are willing to give and take. [A6]*

A3 continues: "There is room for conversation to sort things out. But all the indications that the middle management has actually grown with the school and understood the philosophy and how far we have arrived is what makes it so successful...".

Ann's key emphasis in enhancing the school's capacities is to get the right people to form the leadership team and task groups. She believes in getting the best staff members and finding ways to motivate and retain them. She knows she cannot directly impact the students in all areas so she makes sure that the teachers who are there are the best teachers available and if they are not the best, she makes them either the best or after several attempts still unsuccessful, remove them. A3 provides a peek of how Ann goes about this:

*I remember how she stepped down one of the HOD who was not able to move the department despite her attempt to coach him. She does the same to teachers too. I think she is fair. She tries to level them up but if they are not willing to do anything about themselves, something must be done....*

Ann also works on retaining the good teachers by giving them as much support as she can and to be flexible when teachers have certain needs. She is always working on capitalizing on the strengths of the staff. She elaborates:

*Initially, we had weak heads in some critical departments. Staff felt that the heads at that time did not listen to them (the teachers) and whatever ideas they came up with they were given the thumbs down. I realized that if I did not address it fast, a lot of people would leave. Fortunately we were able to persuade the middle manager to step down....We were able to recruit a new middle manager who was quite different and quite visionary...*

It is clear that Ann places particular emphasis on building both the teaching and leadership capacities of the staff team. She views the development of leadership capacities through the practice of distributed leadership as imperative to sustained improvement of student outcomes and to help individual staff members develop their leadership skills. Through such sharing of leadership, she builds a sense of efficacy and commitment to the school and its goals.

### ***Connecting with Others***

A further key factor leading to sustained success in school A is the importance Ann places on stakeholders - namely, parents, students and staff engagement. Students and staff interviewed observe that she allows parents to have a genuine say in things that concern them. A8 asserts:

*She likes to get parents involved in the school. She spends time with them when they are here. She goes round talking with people and she is not one to stand back and let them come to her. She makes them feel important. I think it is her approachable personality that makes people very comfortable with her.*

Ann has earned a reputation not only for raising standards of student achievements but also for integrity of purpose and conduct which extends beyond her relationship with teachers and students into the community. The stakeholder community spoke about her focus, dedication and care and approachability. Two students express the care and concern she shows:

*I think the students can also see what kind of teacher Ann is. She is genuinely concerned about the students' results. She gives one to one coaching to students taking literature, and these students did well. She is very hands-on in a lot of things. [AG13]*

*As a school leader, she is not only concerned about academic achievement. She is equally concerned about the non- academic, such as co- curricular activities. She is directly involved in raising funds for the needy and we can see that she cares about the needy students. Look at the way she came down to our student level to perform on stage during the Care and Share day.... [AG13]*

On Ann's leadership style that stands out from other school leaders, a teacher and a middle manager both comment:

*Her commitment- goes to the extreme end of commitment.... Many principals are committed but I think in her case, she spends a lot of time, which is beyond many people's expectations. This makes her very unique... It is amazing, to want to do that much for her school. A lot of us treasure our jobs, and we give a lot of effort, but to achieve that extreme is very rare.... Even the people in the neighbourhood talk about her dedication. [A10]*

*Another thing about Ann is her sincerity. I think if you get to know her better, especially through incidents, she has her unique way of showing her sincerity. I remember how I was surprised by the way she remembers every KP's birthday and bothers to go all out to buy the cake and celebrate with us... I know nowadays a lot of schools have a practice where the principal will write a thank you message for the teachers on teachers' day but if you read her card, it is not cut and paste, it is really personal. That means she really remembers what you have done for the school. [A5]*

Ann builds strong professional identities by advocating working hard with a moral purpose. She has established a reputation among parents and students as a principal who will go all out for the students to help them to move on to the next level.

However, not all staff subscribe and admire her form of commitment. Some feel that she goes to the extreme, which in their view is unnecessary. One teacher who feels this way elaborates:

*For instance, we know she cares for the needy but there is no need to come down to the level of students to impersonate and dress like western pop icons... I think she should safeguard her image as a principal.... [A10]*

It is clearly evident that Ann's leadership style and her persona have a great deal to do with the success of the school. Her approachable personality coupled with her strong belief that everyone must be happy in what they do help her to connect to people easily. She is highly persuasive in her approach and advocates persuasion and commitment rather than a command- control approach with staff, students and parents. A6 describes how she goes out of her way to persuade and model care in her relationship with her stakeholders:

*What is interesting about Ann is her ability to detect the unarticulated messages hidden beneath the surface of spoken interaction, complaints, behaviour and*

*actions. When she wants something to be done, she will put forward the suggestion with clear rationale and why it is for the person. She will never hesitate to explain how the proposal can help him/her to achieve what the person wants. She will also surface out potential objections people might have and mention additional support for the idea... This way, she reduces the objections. She doesn't stop there. Often times, she will help us to take the desired action by being specific about the next step we need to take if we are not sure... So, each time we embark on something new, we know we are not alone....*

Students and staff interviewed share how Ann's personable nature has helped her to connect with people to move the school forward. According to a teacher:

*Because of her open nature, people tell her things - whether she hears it from parents, from students, from other staff members or other stakeholders. She hears a lot of things. This helps in the area of staff deployment and understanding the strength of the staff. She develops and leverages on the individual staff strength based on the information and understanding of the individual strength of the staff. Being more hands-on, she is directly involved and she understands the staff well and deploys them appropriately. [A12]*

A3 comments on her people engagement skills, "Little things like making her email and telephone number accessible to everybody, this is more powerful than the other things she has done! It changed the whole culture!"

Ann motivates staff by seeing how she can support their passion through providing the necessary resources. A11 asserts:

*Ann is always ready to give us the support. In terms of resources, manpower, finance. Whatever it is, she provides. Her impact is also in the open culture in more ways than one. Journal writing is open culture already. Whatever the feedback from the students, it gets back to her. Like it or not, once you open that*

*up, we are all very careful about what we do... I think this made a lot of difference because everything became transparent. Transparency is not a bad thing....*

In the words of A9, "I think she has a good understanding of what drives human behavior and she makes full use of it. In fact, in school A, she is very much the linchpin that motivates others."

Data analysis of the different leadership practices enacted by Ann indicates that she tends to devote most of her time and attention to conceptualising and enacting her practices. For example, in guiding her stakeholders to look into the future of the school, Ann goes beyond articulation of the direction. She works on securing the commitment by articulating a compelling reason for her stakeholders to share the responsibility of moving the school forward. Her stakeholders appreciate her clearly communicated and responsive strategic vision as they create greater trust in the staff to buy-into the vision.

Ann does not merely focus on enacting instructional leadership alone to drive student outcomes. Instead, she embeds the instructional, transformational and distributed leadership practices and enacts them as a combination of leadership strategies. For example, to support sustained improvements in student outcomes, Ann enacts the leadership practice of promoting a culture of change, an aspect of transformational leadership practice. This includes laying the foundation for long term improvements that focus on diagnosing cultural problems and taking early actions to change perceptions. She also models the importance of building personal and academic relationships and establishes appropriate collaborative structures in which roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are progressively distributed. Such scaffoldings provide further support for her staff and students working towards the goals. While she sets high expectations for staff, she also works on nurturing relationships between expectations, work ethics and efficacy alongside care, engagement and achievement. Her leadership practices played out in her day-to-day

activities consistently reinforce her focus on the vision and expectations she has articulated. Her structured and hands-on approach creates clarity and clear communication of a responsive vision for the school.

Apart from communicating strategic intent that focuses on learning and improving student outcomes, Ann builds professional communities that value learning through practicing distributed leadership in the school. Participants (A2, A3, A6, A7, A8, A9) feel that this leadership practice cultivates the ownership and agency of staff in teaching and learning. This clearly shows how Ann cleverly embeds and enacts her instructional, transformational with distributed leadership activities. In enacting her leadership practices, she works on creating coherence by connecting students, professionals and system learning with one another and with learning goals. This results in a more holistic picture for staff which contributes to the scalability of her practice.

Findings also show that Ann works on developing her staff by first building trust and then connecting with them. Her stakeholders noted that her frequent and consistent actions and communication on what is important reinforce trust in the school and motivate others to be more receptive to her coaching and development. She works on getting the best staff members on board , providing them with as much support as she can and exercising flexibility to serve their needs. This demonstrates how Ann exercises flexibility in her leadership practice.

Two further propositions thus emerge from the analysis of the Ann's leadership and management practices:

Proposition C: The success and sustainability of student learning outcomes in school A hinges on the type and focus of leadership practices exercised by the principal, Ann. What stands apart is how the principal influences through promoting a culture of change, building trust, and capacity building through the practice of distributed leadership, connecting to others and exercising her



ability to look into the future. Her ability to strategically combine and deploy these leadership practices based on her understanding of the needs of the organisation defines her success.

Proposition D: The degree of success of these leadership practices depends on the clarity, consistency, commitment, flexibility and scalability of the practices. What distinguishes Ann's leadership practices is her ability to maintain clarity, consistency and to communicate her commitment while at the same time exercising flexibility and scalability in her leadership and management practices.

#### **4.2.3 Stakeholders' views of the Principal's leadership influence on the process of improving student learning outcomes**

In order to understand the stakeholders' views of Ann's influence on improving student learning outcomes, two interview questions were asked. The first has to do with how the stakeholders (Vice-principal, teachers, key personnel and students) in the school perceive the principal's leadership influence on student learning outcomes, while the second centers on how they perceive what the principal has done or not done in regard to improving student learning outcomes in the school.

The interviews with participants of school A clearly show that Ann certainly has a significant influence on the process of improving student outcomes. Like Ann, all the stakeholders interviewed perceive her influence as critical in moving the school forward. Without a doubt, they attribute the success and the sustainable improvement of the school to the strategic leadership and management practices put in place by Ann. This is clearly articulated in Section 4.2.2 when the different leadership practices enacted by Ann to directly or indirectly improve student outcomes are discussed.

Through the interview data, it is also evident that perceptions of stakeholders about Ann's influence over improving student outcomes builds up as a result of her direct involvement in turning the academic results around when the school suffered a drastic dip in the GCE O level results in 2003. Students and parents suffered a deep shock at that point in time. Ann shares the sentiments of parents and students during the moment of truth:

*I could still remember the expressions of some kids who could not move on to the next level because of their English results. Parents were very upset and at that point in time, I wondered if I could have avoided it.*

When Ann first joined the school, she faced challenges in terms of staff acceptance of her leadership approach. She elaborates –

*When I first started I realized some departments were not really functioning and people were unhappy with the leader. Some teachers actually came to me to express strongly negative opinions against these leaders and they expected me to do something. I also saw at that time the way some teachers felt about the kids who had problems. They felt strongly that we should get rid of them. I could see a lot of unhappiness at the beginning... Some threatened to leave...*

At this early stage, stakeholders' views about Ann's influence on student outcomes were adapting and appraising. With negative perceptions, staff may not have bought-in to what she wanted to do. Many who were wallowing in their unhappiness may have exercised selective hearing, some doing things their own way, while those who were not fully convinced adopted the 'wait and see' attitude or just got on doing what needed to be done. This was a cause for concern. It could have hampered student outcomes, as the implementation of reformed teaching and learning practices may not have improved to the extent they want. This might have contributed to the drastic fall of academic results in 2003. However, Ann's swift action to analyze the cause of the dip and put in place structures to correct the slide caused stakeholders to rally around during this crisis. One middle manager comments:

*Remember 2003, she just didn't look at the trend. She actually jumped in and did something when she saw the problem area. For that I really admire her. She role models a lot of what she says. Up to today.... [A3]*

The outcome of the GCE 'O' level results the following year affirmed all the stakeholders' views of Ann and built further confidence in her leadership guidance. Such a reaction further inspired Ann to do more. Since then, she has set about working on changing the mindset of stakeholders through her strategic vision for the school as well as initiating culture change by helping staff to develop new

perspectives on students, parents and competitors. At the same time, she works on influencing the student outcomes by creating high-trust relationships throughout the school. Her efforts have paid off. With the continual and sustained improvement in student learning every year, the perception of the stakeholders on her leadership and management influence has evolved into further re-affirmation and acceptance. This is evident in the way they recognize her contributions to the success of the school. Her commitment and sincerity to engage stakeholders warms the hearts of many and inspires confidence and enthusiasm in them. Two teachers' views capture the essence of the general sentiments of stakeholders interviewed about Ann's leadership influence:

*To me, a good leader is one who has an open mind, compassionate hearing and a willingness to listen.. (Ann) has all those qualities and much more! When asking opinions or thoughts from parents, students and staff, her consideration is sincere - never undermining of one's position. She has the ability to make us feel important and valued as people. So, we are all ready to move with her... [A11]*

*She is a beacon of encouragement with whom I am honoured and blessed to work. [A8]*

Data analysis shows that there is a high degree of shared perceptions between different groups of stakeholders in school A. For example, all concur that although Ann's influence is indirect; she has been a significant influence on improving student outcomes and has attributed the school success to her leadership influence. Like the staff, students perceive that her approachable personality and her care for people inspire them to want to do things for her. Stakeholders' perception of what and how Ann has done to exercise her leadership influence is also similar. However, the staff and students differ in the way they perceive as important for Ann's leadership influence to have an impact on them, and eventually on student outcomes. The students, for example, view the opportunity to interact with the principal and the support she has given to enhance their school experiences, as important. Her visible

presence and direct involvement in daily school learning activities, her willingness to listen and the positive relationship she has established with them are some examples they cite as important leadership influence. On the other hand, staff perceive Ann's personal characteristics and her provision of appropriate and timely support as important leadership influence. For example, they perceive Ann's knowledge of human behaviour, curriculum and strategic deploying of resources, and ability to create high-trust relationships throughout the school – all of which led to change in staff perception and school climate change, her decisive action to implement change, her direct involvement and her leadership in turning the school around when the school suffered a dip in the O level results, as important leadership influence to improve student outcomes.

Data analysis on the manner in which Ann enacts her leadership practices points to the fact that she enjoys strong productive social relations and exercises good interpersonal skills. Her belief and optimism about human nature and her understanding about human behaviour and needs enable her to explore ways to produce, sustain and transform relationships that build on high-trust throughout the school. She demonstrates a high degree of emotional intelligence in her leadership role and is able to create an environment of positive morale and high productivity that lead to sustainable staff engagement. Her efforts to take time to build credibility with staff and stakeholders spur them to commit their time and effort to achieving the school goals. It is evident that her social relations stance and good interpersonal skills impact the way her stakeholders respond to her leadership influence. Findings in relation to Ann's interaction with her stakeholders show that Ann has high self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills. Her ability to find common ground and build rapport with her stakeholders helps her to build and exercise trust in the school.

Two further propositions emerge as a result of this analysis of stakeholders' perceptions in school A:

Proposition E: The degree of success of the principal's leadership practices is dependent on the principal's social relations. Interpersonal relationships between Ann and her stakeholders make all the difference. How stakeholders perceive her influence - be it positive or negative - depends very much on the social relations and interpersonal skills of the principal in relating to them. Ann's commitment to build high-trust relationships throughout the school helps to improve and sustain student learning outcomes.

Proposition F: There is a direct link between how stakeholders' perceive Ann's leadership influence on improving student learning outcomes and the actuality of what she does and how she in fact exercises her leadership practices. In school A, stakeholders are accepting and affirming about Ann's leadership influence. As such, this encourages her to do more and commit more time to engaging her stakeholders. It becomes a virtuous circle.

## 4.3 Conclusion

Six inter-related propositions relevant to how Ann, as principal of School A, leads and manages the process of improving student learning outcomes, emerge from the analysis of the case study data for school A. Table 4.4 summarises the propositions that emerge from the analysis.

Proposition A	Ann's values orientation, personal characteristics and beliefs shape how she perceives her leadership and management influence to improve student learning outcomes. Her strong values orientation towards relationship and connection shapes how she leads and uses power.
Proposition B	Ann's beliefs and optimism about human nature shape the way she conceptualizes her leadership practices and how she allocates time and effort to exercise her leadership practices. Her strong belief

	system based on innate goodness of humans as demonstrated through her honesty, empathy and commitment as well people-centeredness - where all students and staff have the ability to exercise responsibility with accountability - enables her to conceptualize leadership practices that empower her stakeholders to be involved in school improvement.
Proposition C	The success and sustainability of student learning outcomes in school A hinge on the type and focus of leadership practices exercised by the principal, Ann. What stands apart is how the principal influences through promoting a culture of change, building trust, and capacity building through the practice of distributed leadership, connecting to others, while communicating her vision for the future.
Proposition D	The degree of success of Ann's leadership practices depends on their clarity, consistency, commitment, flexibility and scalability. What distinguishes Ann's leadership practices is her ability to maintain clarity, consistency and to communicate her commitment while at the same time exercising flexibility and scalability.
Proposition E	The degree of success of the principal's leadership practices is dependent on the principal's social relations. Interpersonal relationships between Ann and her stakeholders make all the difference. How stakeholders perceive her influence, be it positive or negative, depends very much on the social relations and interpersonal skills of the principal in relating to them. Ann's commitment to and success in building high-trust relationships throughout the school helps to improve and sustain student learning outcomes.
Proposition F	There is a direct link between how stakeholders' perceive Ann's leadership influence on improving student learning outcomes and the actuality of what she does and how she exercises her leadership practices. In school A, stakeholders are accepting and affirming about Ann's leadership influence. As such, this encourages her to do more and commit more time to engaging the stakeholders. It becomes a virtuous circle.

Table 4.4: Summary of propositions for school A

The next two case schools, case school B and C, will be analyzed in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively. This emergent set of propositions from the data analysis of case school A together with the remaining two sets of proposition from Chapters 5 and 6 will be carried over to Chapter 7 for comparative analysis. Chapter 5 gives an account of the research findings of the principal in case school B.



# **Chapter 5**

## **Case Study: School B**

### ***School improvement: The command and control approach to improving student learning outcomes***

#### **5.0 Introduction**

This chapter gives an account of how the Principal in School B brought about improvement in student outcomes through strategic leadership and leveraging on a command-control approach. The chapter starts with a description of school context followed by a presentation of the findings based on a number of key themes that emerged from interviews and documentary study of the case school, closely guided by the key research questions. The chapter ends with a discussion section that summarizes the main findings of the case and addresses the inter-related propositions on leadership for school improvement developed from this case study.

#### **5.1 Organizational Overview**

##### **School Profile**

School B is a co-educational government secondary school catering for students aged 13 to 17. It started with only 318 students and 15 staff and today the enrolment stands at 1403 with 36 classes and a staff of 102. Teaching staff in School B are relatively young with a high percentage between 20 and 40 years of age and a high percentage of staff are graduates. Like School A, it has a racial mix of Chinese, Malay and Indian. The school believes that every student deserves an education that promotes personal excellence and success in all areas.

The school measures its academic success by the percentage of students who qualify for Junior College (JC). Since 2005, the percentage of JC intake has risen significantly. It is a school that is known for its academic rigour. In recognition of its achievements in both the academic and non- academic fields, it has been accorded the Sustained Achievement Award (SAA) for both the academic and non- academic areas in recent years.

### **Principal Profile**

The principal, Bob, has been a secondary school principal for at least 10 years and was previously a founding principal of a new school. He was principal at school B until 2010. Bob's personal desire to learn and grow saw him taking on the challenge of completing his postgraduate studies during his principal-ship. He was instrumental in 'turning around' his second school and producing marked improvement for school B. These two schools were awarded the Sustained Achievement Award (SAA) for Academic Value-added as well as non- academic areas such as Aesthetics and Uniformed Group.

## **5.2 Research Findings**

This section outlines how the principal of school B, Bob, exercises his leadership and management influence to improve student outcomes. The findings will be structured based on key themes that arise in response to the SRQs that are posed and also through developing arguments and findings based on quotations from other participants. Participants' quotations are coded as follows:

Participants' code	Participants' Roles	Gender	Years in school
B1(Bob)	Principal	Male	16
B2	Vice Principal	Male	3
B3	HOD	Female	8
B4	HOD	Male	8
B5	HOD	Male	6
B6	HOD	Female	3
B7	HOD	Male	5
B8	Teacher	Female	9
B9	Teacher	Female	10
B10	Teacher	Male	8
B11	Teacher	Female	10
B12	Teacher	Female	4
BG13	Students Group 1	5 Sec 3 students from mixed streams	3
BG14	Students Group 2	5 Sec3 students from mixed streams	3

Table 5.1 Profile of participants in case school B (accurate as of 2010)

### **5.2.1 Perception and Worldview of Principal on Leadership and Management influence**

Four interview questions were posed to Bob to understand his perception and world view on his leadership and management influence. First, how he defines student learning outcomes; second, his view on what he perceives as characteristics of a successful school; third, whether School B, in his opinion, is a successful school and lastly, his view on the influence of principals in improving student outcomes.

Interview data show that Bob's perception and worldview of his leadership and management influence is very much impacted by his tacit knowledge as a result of many years of leadership experience as a principal in different school contexts, his values orientation, and also his personal beliefs and characteristics. Like Ann, he believes that the principal plays a critical role in moving a school forward. He states that to improve the student outcomes in a school, it is important for the principal to initiate–

*Researchers said that the Principal's impact on student outcomes is indirect. Perhaps true to a certain extent. But it's so crucial that the Principals are the ones who initiate, you are the one who put in the structures, you are the one who puts in the policies and these policies ultimately affect the teachers and the students in the classroom. [B1]*

In his view, a successful school is one where all students can move on to the next level of learning. He explains:

*Ultimately, the school has the responsibility to ensure that the child who comes through the school is able to learn enough to proceed to the next level - be it in the JC or other educational pathways- it doesn't matter, but able to go to the next level of learning. I think if the school can help the child to do that – then I would consider the school is successful.*

To Bob, academic press is an important element in a successful school and regardless of the achievements in other areas, if a school fails to help a child to move to the next level, then the school is deemed not to have achieved its purpose. He elaborates:

*Back to basics.... The school core business is to enable the kids to learn and move on to the next level of learning. So, if a school has too many failures and is below national average; that means you are not doing well. Students are not passing means they are not learning. Then I don't think the school is successful even though the school may be doing very well in CCA<sup>9</sup>.*

However, he is quick to qualify that academic success is not the only thing. He adds:

*Academic is one very crucial aspect - you can say that's the core business but you should not forget the holistic development of the children – the CCA part, the values part , character part and so on. That's where it all comes into the picture.*  
[B1]

While he perceives that academic success is important and based on his experience, “it boosts the confidence of staff and students in a school”, he feels strongly that improving students’ outcome should entail focusing on academic and non- academic aspects at the same time. He recalls his conversation with a teacher:

*A teacher asked: can I concentrate on one aspect first instead of doing everything? I say no ...We do all areas together. Everything goes in life together. You can say you wait until you get discipline first then you do academic. That point will never come. So, everything goes together. Discipline, academic, CCA; altogether ....*

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<sup>9</sup> CCA refers to co-curricular activities

This belief drives how he defines student outcomes and allocates his time to drive changes in school B. He holds strong views that the principal and the staff of the school have the responsibility to provide the best for the students. He adds, “My belief has always been this: give my kids the best. Whatever independent schools can give them I will also want to give them. In other words, I don’t want to deprive them.”

Bob is driven by what he believes passionately about and this belief is reinforced by his earlier experience in another school. He perceives that meeting the needs of the students, motivating them and giving them the learning experience and exposure is critical. This comes through strongly as he shares experiences of his previous school:

*It was a laissez-faire school. Teachers were very happy and not achieving, the kids were deprived. You just imagine- when I organized the first camp, the upper sec. said they also want to have. Imagine, they don’t have this since the school started. They keep asking for more... So, I said, “send them out for competition- not winning”. It’s the experience and the exposure that counts.*

He perceives that showing students the possibilities and building self-belief in them is important in the journey of improving student outcomes: “Showing them the possibilities and their self-belief are important. Making them believes that everything is possible .....” He has strong conviction and values orientation that every child is capable, if given the opportunity. Such optimism and his earlier successes shape his leadership style when he implements changes in school B. When asked about his leadership style, B1 has this to share:

*My style can be very directive at times. ....Sometimes I will give consensus if it is not a crucial problem to me. But if it is crucial, I will veto. You know the Principal has the veto power. But if it is not important, you all can decide. But when it comes to certain things, there are no two ways about it.*

Stakeholders (B4, B5, B7, B8) who were interviewed confirm this leadership approach that he frequently adopts:

*Once he believes in something, he will bulldoze his way through. He always tells us the rationale of the change and reminds us that whatever we do for our students should be what we desire for our own children. After the explanation, he will ask if anyone is against the policy. Often, none of us dare to go against it as we know he is doing for the students .... [B8]*

While Bob shares similar opinions as the other principals that a successful school is highly dependent on teachers who directly shape the learning of the students, he has a different view about staff capacity. When asked his view about the importance of staff capacity to the success of improving learning outcomes, he has this to share:

*Staff capacity is for the school leaders to shape it. For me, I see the need to put in place proper structures so that your result is not so dependent on a particular teacher. Otherwise, when the teacher leaves, you are in big trouble.*

Unlike the principals of school A and C, he perceives that the staff attitude and commitment is more important than staff capacity. He is optimistic that if a teacher is committed and willing to learn, he/she can be developed. B1 explains:

*Talk about capacity - I hesitate to say yes - capacity matters. To me I view high capacity as experienced teachers who have the expertise. To me, as long as the teacher is committed to help the students, who are willing to work – you give me any teacher, no problem. It doesn't have to be a very experienced teacher. What's important is how we coach them....*

*Between one who has high capacity and poor commitment and another with low capacity but high commitment - I will take the one with the high commitment. I would rather not have this capable staff; calculative and not committed – you*

*can go. I would rather have this young teacher, brand new but committed and dedicated, willing to spend the time. It's the time with the kids that counts ..... With proper guidance, I am confident this young teacher can do better than the other experienced teacher.*

Bob strongly believes that structure drives behaviour and such perception is further reinforced by his experiences in previous schools. When sharing how the principal should influence the process of improving student outcomes, he states, "I think it is the structure that you have to put in place to support the teachers. I am sure they can do it.....".

He is of the opinion that implementing structures and processes based on research is important. This belief shapes his approach to managing his young staff profile. He adds: "Put in the structures and lay down expectations for them to follow."

He holds the view that adopting a school wide approach by putting in place tested structures and expectations is an important process to ensure sustainability in the outcomes.

Like Ann, Bob shares the belief on the importance of providing a sound education for all students. His belief system centres on the innate goodness of people, equity and people-centeredness; that everyone matters and is capable if he/she wants to be. This belief is evident in his perception and values orientation that every child is capable, if given the opportunity. Such optimism strongly influences how he conceptualizes his leadership practices. His stakeholders also share the same belief system. B11 comments: "His strong conviction that every child can do if given opportunity resonates with many of us. We just want to do our best for them."

Interview data show that Bob is recognised for his distinctive characteristics of being highly motivated and passionate about giving the best for his students. He demonstrates strong personal drive and sense of mission. He is single-minded and is



determined to do what it takes to help students to achieve academic success. Stakeholders perceive him as one who will remove all obstacles to ensure the set goal is achieved. According to participants, Bob is one who will continually ‘raise the bar’ for himself and for the school community. B6 remarks:

*He is always challenging us to do our best. Once we have achieved the target, he will raise the bar again. He does the same thing for the students too. Though it is stressful, the students follow him. They understand it is for their own good. Somehow, he has a way of ‘persuading’ us to take up the challenge. Sometimes we are surprised at what we were capable of achieving. His optimism about what is possible often amazes us.*

Data analysis of values held by Bob reveals that there is a list of values<sup>10</sup> that he subscribes to. This includes the values of justice/fairness, fight for a cause, hard work, sense of mission, pragmatism, passion and optimism. Table 5.2 summarises his values orientation.

Values held based on analysis of data	Dominant value to which Principal subscribe
Relationship(Teamwork); Care Success; Independence ; Change *Fight for a cause; *Hard work; *Religious Beliefs; Risk Taking ; delegation/empowerment; *Enforcing( power); *Justice/fairness; ; Integrity *Passion;* Pragmatic ; *Optimism; Commitment	+ Fight for a cause + Hard work + Justice/fairness + Religious belief + Enforcing/Control + Delegation + Passion + Pragmatic + Optimism + Sense of mission + Commitment

Table 5.2 Values Orientation of the principal in school B

<sup>10</sup> In this study, the term ‘value’ has been used very liberally to include elements of dispositions and qualities. See Chapter 7 for details.

Data from Bob's interview reveal that he has a strong values orientation stance for the ethic of care through justice. He sees moral decisions through an ethic of justice and uses a different set of criteria from the other case principals to define fairness. As a result, he makes decisions based on principles and rules with a view to ensuring fair and equitable treatment for all people. This is consistent with his perception and conceptualization of his leadership influence. He perceives that his leadership to improve student outcomes can be effected by adopting a school wide approach which entails putting in place structures and expectations for his stakeholders. His preference for a command and control strategy is evidence of his dominant values orientation for an ethic of justice. For example, his values orientation to power which he uses to exert control over decision, actions and people under his charge differs from Ann, principal of school A. This is evident in the approach he uses to reward, coerce or gain assent and compliance from his stakeholders. Together with his values orientation stance towards pragmatism, sense of duty, commitment and hard work, ethic of justice has influenced how he perceives and conceptualises his leadership influence.

The following propositions where School B and Bob are concerned emanate from the data:

Proposition G: Bob's perception about his leadership and management influence to improve student outcomes is shaped by his values orientation, beliefs and personal characteristics. His strong values orientation stance for an ethic of justice has dominated his other values orientation. Together with his belief and personal characteristics, they shape how he perceives and conceptualises his leadership and management influence. Table 5.3 provides a summary of Bob's values orientation, beliefs and personal characteristics which together result in how he perceives his leadership and management influence.

Values Orientation	Personal Characteristics	Beliefs
1. Strong values orientation toward ethic of care through justice. 2. See moral decisions through an ethic of justice. 3.Values orientation to fight for a cause 4.Values orientation to power 5.Values stance towards pragmatism	1. Strong personal drive and strong sense of mission 2. Single minded in their pursuit for academic excellence; persistent and determined 3. Challenge status quo 4. See obstacles as challenge rather than impediment; will not hesitate to remove all obstacle to achieve set goal 5. Assertive	1. Importance of principal initiating in the area of improving student outcomes 2. Believe that staff and P have the responsibility to provide the best for the students. 3. Believe that every child is capable if given opportunity .
<b>Bob's perception of his leadership and management influence</b>		
1. Lead the school to focus on academic success which will in turn boost confidence of stakeholders 2. Show students the possibilities and build their self- belief - important in the journey of improving student outcomes 3. Influence by putting in place tested structures and setting high expectations		

Table 5.3 Summary of values orientation, personal characteristic, beliefs and perception of principal from school B

Proposition H: Bob's strong conviction about what students deserve and his optimism about what they can do if given opportunity shape his leadership practices to improve student outcomes in school B.

### **5.2.2 Core Leadership Practices to improve student learning outcomes**

Common themes of leadership practices that Bob has adopted to improve student outcomes in school B emerged from the interview and document analysis and are grouped into the following themes: Sense making and creating a shared sense of purpose; Leader's Presence; Culture building and structure, and lastly, Command and control strategy.

#### **Sense making and creating a shared sense of purpose**

What stands out is Bob's ability to sense the context and know what approaches work for each context. As an experienced principal, Bob is sure footed and knows what needed to be done when he joined school B. He quickly got down to making sense of the strengths, and areas for improvement, in the school and created a shared sense of purpose for his staff. As B10 put it, "He provided certainty for his people during a time of uncertainty."

Clarification from the interview data found that he does that through focusing, conditioning and creating the desire and courage in his staff. Each of these is further elaborated below.

#### **Focus and Conditioning**

Bob noted that while the school had done well in CCA, more could be done for the academic area. He sums up the state of school B when he first joined the school as follows:

*It was a happy school. Staff had the impression that they were doing very well. But actually not. The ex-P did an excellent job in marketing the school and identifying certain CCAs for the school. But academically it was going down.....*

He leverages on the CCA while working on improving the academic outcomes, adding, “A lot more focus on the academic while we continue to sustain and keep the strong CCAs. F I have introduced a lot of things to really build up the academics.”

Bob strongly believes that what gets focused gets done. He has this to share, “Our brain will focus on whatever it has been conditioned to believe what is important.”

Bob uses symbols and rituals to frame and focus the mind of his stakeholders. He coaches his students and staff to know what they actually want and condition them to notice things in that direction. He explains:

*I see the value of conditioning for success. I notice that generally for those who are easily distracted, they may not have conditioned their brain to know what is important. They don't have the habit. To me, a habit is simply a conditioned set of responses to a particular situation, and people create and maintain habits through repetition.*

Bob truly believes that to change it, one need to break the repetition, and condition an alternative habit. He adds, “This process needs desire, courage and discipline.” [B1]

### **Desire and Courage**

Bob created the desire among his stakeholders in different ways. For the staff, he went about creating a shared sense of purpose by highlighting the actual academic achievements of school B so far; acknowledging the success while expressing concern about the unfavourable outcomes for academic results. B8 expresses how the staff felt when Bob showed them the results:

*Honestly, when he showed us the expected targets and the results, I was a bit shocked. Quite surprised that we were so far away from the national results and where we were supposed to be.*

B3 shares her view on Bob's attempt to create the shared sense of purpose:

*For me, when he says things like parents will worry more about academics.....it speaks to me. I can see that this is the person I can believe in ..... I can see that he really has a heart for the children.*

This perception also holds true for another teacher who comments:

*In many schools, the express results are important and schools tend to neglect the Normal stream students. For Bob, he is concerned about them. This sends out a message that every child is important. That is a leader I can respect because his value - it makes it easier to move with him, following his vision. [B9]*

It is clear that the goal Bob sets for school B resonates with the staff. He creates a similar desire among the students and parents through his messaging. He clearly understands parents' desire for their children and knows how to create the 'wants' in the students. B12 comments on what she heard during a closed door session for students:

*During the Principal dialogue, a boy asked if they could have the musical moment, an activity Bob has removed. Bob's response was – "do you want to have the 5 'O' levels?" If you want you have to believe in what I am doing for you. I thought that came through strongly. Imagine, he has created the desire in the students. Of course as teachers, we all also want results for the kids.*

Bob's success in creating a shared desire and galvanizing his community to follow him is enhanced by his reputation as a leader who has turned around other schools. This encourages the stakeholders to move with him.

## **Discipline and Reward**

Bob never hesitates to discipline. While he motivates his staff by directing them to a shared sense of purpose and rewards positive behaviour, he never hesitates to correct behaviour that distracts them from the goal. As B5 puts it: “He never minces his words and very blunt. As a result, we just decide to follow his instruction. We know he does it for the good of the kids.”

Bob holds the following view about discipline:

*Discipline is making the right choice. The correct choice builds self-esteem and reinforces continued action. As a leader, I need to help everyone focus on their purpose and their desired outcome....*

Bob adopts the intimidator approach where his high-pressure tactics have pushed the staff and students beyond the comfort zone to excel in ways they never could imagine possible. Some people find his straightforwardness hard to take. They shared that for those who chose not to follow, they were told to leave. Bob explains how he uses his high-pressured tactics thus:

*Every parent session, I say this in front of the teachers: I don't have perfect teachers. But I assure you I have dedicated and committed teachers. That's another added pressure. I just said you are good, you are dedicated, committed. You better live up to that expectation.*

Discipline and correction is also extended to the parents and students if the situation warrants it. Bob explains:

*If the situation warrants, I will explain to parents why there is a need for discipline. Most parents understand what I am trying to do and accept the discipline imposed on their children.*

The narrative above shows how Bob structures approaches to create a shared sense of purpose for the school community. He goes beyond articulation of the direction. He works on securing the commitment to the vision by focusing, conditioning and creating desire and courage of his staff. His focus and consistent practice for the goals set provides clarity and consistency for the school community on the school's direction.

### ***Leader's Presence***

To Bob, the leader's presence is an important leadership practice. He strongly believes that as leaders, it is important to cultivate a habit of engaged communication and feedback in the transformation of the school. He holds the following view on leader's presence:

*As a leader, when you are totally present, others around you will also be totally focused on the matter. The result of the leader's presence would be people spontaneously trust, have confidence in you and respect you.....*

That is the feeling Bob has elicited when he boldly shared the reality of the school's academic outcome with his staff. His passion to do what is right for the students; constantly reminding staff that every child is important and of the importance of treating each child like his/her own child elicits trust and respect for him and hence staff buy-in for what needs to be done.

As B4 puts it:

*Bob may be a demanding and no-nonsense principal. However, when he passionately reminded us that every child is important and we owe it to them and parents to help them to move to the next level, his goals resonate with us. We know he has no hidden agenda. We just know he wants to do it for the students.*



*On hindsight, I think he is able to create that emotional linkage for us to move forward....*

Bob is also mindful of his communication with stakeholders. His messaging on the school goals to his people is always consistent and clear. B9 explains, “Bob follows through on things. What he says he will deliver.. “

Bob says: “I will tell the staff through the policies so that students know exactly what is expected of teachers while at the same time teachers know what is expected of the students.” Such an approach gives clarity and consistency to what needs to be done.

He also sees the need to seek authentic feedback from his stakeholders especially the students. He elaborates further:

*I introduced a student suggestion box. Only I have the key and I will read them personally in front of the students and teachers. Complaints about teachers –I will mention but will see them separately. The teachers know that students have access to me through the suggestion box...*

The feedback from teachers comes through platforms such as Staff Contact Time and management meetings for Key Personnel. However, it is interesting to note that the staff feedback increasingly becomes less forthcoming. The vice-principal observes:

*Bob and I have been talking about this- some of the management meetings are so quiet; only he and I speak. It's frustrating for both of us because nobody is challenging the ideas but the emphasis has always been to share ideas.*

Middle managers interviewed attribute this to Bob's leadership style and personality:

*Bob has a very forceful personality. As a seasoned leader, he knows what he wants and how we should go about it. Personally, I find that there is no room for*

*error. I know every Principal sets high expectations, but how he communicates, plays an important part. Somehow the way he communicates make us very stressed out [B5]*

When asked if Bob knows how the middle managers feel, B7 elaborates: “I am sure after the climate survey.”

One wonders if this lack of feedback from staff is a result of his messaging of his personal belief and expectations. As he has shared in an earlier section, his style can be very directive and he only allows a consensus if issues at hand are not crucial to him. Such practices over time may have led the staff to believe that there is no point offering ideas, as eventually Bob will make his own decision.

Throughout the interview, it is telling that some participants are clearly yearning for a balance of a consultative and authoritative approach. When asked if a different leadership approach would have yielded the same or even better outcomes, B12 comments:

*Possible...The direction may not be so obvious. With another P, perhaps it may be more consultative but I think we will still achieve. I think a balance between the consultative and directive would work well.... If too consultative, both parties may not know where to go. I think if there is a balance, the impact of the change would be lesser for us and it would be less stressful for everyone.*

The outcome of Bob’s effort to ensure the leader’s presence by cultivating a habit of engaged communication was not as expected for all his stakeholders. While the students enjoy being given a voice through the student suggestion box, the feedback from staff is not so forthcoming. Despite the clarity and consistency of his leadership practice to deliberately involve his, they have not been spontaneous when giving feedback.

## ***Culture building and Structures***

Bob advocates the idea that as a school leader, he needs to be very clear about his philosophy of education and has the courage to see this belief through to completion. He remarks: "I think you must have the courage to see through your beliefs. You need to prioritize. Be very focused as to what's essential and what's not. "

In outlining success factors for school B, most of the stakeholders (B2, B3, B4, B6,B7, B8,B9, B11, BG 13, BG14) interviewed attribute it to Bob's strong leadership, setting high expectations and putting in place appropriate structures. As articulated by the B2:

*Bob looks at things that are important; what's critical to that breakthrough will be in terms of expectations .Because of the high expectations, there is the motivation to work towards that goal. I think high expectation is very important.*

Bob shares his view on the need to develop a climate of high expectations:

*Literature shows the importance of the principal in establishing a school culture that promotes and values learning and that embodies realistic but high expectations for all. We must be knowledgeable on ways to go about this. My practices are guided by research.....*

He continues to clarify the high expectations he sets for his staff and students, "ANo doubt capacity of staff is important, however, for me, expectations, structures are more important...."

B4 confirms the practice that Bob adopts:

*Bob sets high expectations for the staff. One thing I learnt about Bob is the firm commitment that, "No kid should fail during his time". We get that sense a lot.*

*And everyone can make it - the commitment to see every child succeed in their academics. I could hear his passion. He reminded us that every child should be treated like our own. ....*

However, Bob does not stop there. He ensures that appropriate structures are put in place to actualise this goal. His thought on the importance of putting structures in place comes through clearly when he shares his view about staff capacity.

He continues to share how he leverages structures to overcome the issue of staff capacity, stating –

*In the English department, teachers are doing very well. I will tell my HOD: “Find out from the teachers what they have been doing right and ask them to share.”– institutionalize that. That’s the structure. Everyone gets to learn too...*

It is worth noting that Bob has quickly institutionalized successful strategies and processes instead of leaving it to chance for the practices to be cascaded.

B5 describes how Bob puts in place structures for teaching and learning:

*Structures like how we conduct our lesson observation, timetabling – this will form baseline expectation. In terms of value-adding, it will be what the teacher can do in the classroom. He will meet people who don’t meet the expectation. There is also this constant messaging from Bob –“I am a firm believer that no teacher would want to see any student fail; if it takes something to get the students to pass, I am sure they are willing to try.” As they say, success begets success. Seeing the school going somewhere, they are more willing to follow the structures...*

Bob also sets high expectations for the students. He clearly articulates his confidence that every student can do well and at the same time puts in place structures to

support this goal. B11 elaborates how Bob builds structures to focus students on positive thoughts:

*We drill into the students, the whole idea of positive mind set; what you believe is what you will achieve. We even have a wall with the maxim. The kids know and if you ask them they will be able to articulate that. I think that's critical; putting in place structure where there is belief and the high expectation.*

B4 comments:

*Bob reinforces this maxim with the students every day, sharing with them his own success stories and that of teachers and students. So they are aware that the leader of the school believes in them. In that sense the teachers also bought into this maxim.*

A teacher explains how she and the students buy-in to this maxim:

*Bob actually models it; putting up the quote, making the kids memorize, and then testing them. It is so popular that you just have to mention Overcomers, they will just continue... At first we thought it's a bit cheesy, but later we realized that it actually gets to the kids. The former students shared that it gives them a sense of self-belief. So, it actually does work. [B8]*

Students interviewed also share how they feel about the motivation wall. Two of them commented on how this structure of self- belief has impacted them:

*For me, it's a kind of inspiration. Bob makes it a point to relate whatever he said and get back to what's written there. To me, it's relevant to us doing our homework. This is what the teacher told me - take your goals one at a time and it works for me – to me I internalize and apply it. [BG13]*

*I used to be very naughty in school – and teachers know me. When Bob keeps on saying these few lines, it makes me reflect – how can I change myself. I decided to give it a try. It works! Even my dad noticed the change. After that I continue that habit.... I think it works for me.... [BG14]*

While similar high expectations are also practiced in other school, it yields different outcomes. For school B, the key difference may lie in the way Bob has put in place the right structures to support these high expectations, and the way he follows through with staff and students to secure commitment. Findings show that Bob fosters a culture of excellence by promoting learning, yet at the same time embodies realistic but high expectations for all. He uses focus and conditioning to shape and spur stakeholders into embracing the culture as evident in the way he uses the maxim “what I believe, I can achieve” with his stakeholders. His frequent and consistent actions and communication to all his stakeholders give greater clarity and consistency to his chosen leadership practice.

### ***Command and Control strategy***

From the interview data, it is clear that Bob puts great emphasis on “Command and Control” as a leadership style. This seems to differ from his predecessor who adopted an empowerment strategy. B4 who has worked with both Bob and the previous principal states:

*I think the ex-P’s style is more consultative and nurturing... She lets the HOD try... if you are given a task, she will let them try and give ideas along the way. For Bob, he will ask the HOD to see him and he will give his input. Often, we will follow his input because he already has his expectation at that point in time. So, the style is quite different.*

This view is also echoed by another middle manager who feels that there is less room for error under Bob:

*The ex-P could be very persuasive and would get collective ideas from the staff. Bob believes in his approach and he knows it's tested and he makes it clearer. I think the difference is he makes it clear that he wants that method done but the ex-P would not make it clear what she wanted done in a certain way. I feel this is important as it will affect the way people respond. [B3]*

Despite the change of approach, there seems to be minimal tension among the staff. One of the heads clarifies the situation thus:

*At the transition point, we already know his background, his style – definitely there was some tension... but along the way, we learned to adapt to his style. Instead of approaching him at the end, we approach him in the early stage of the task, share with him our input. [B6]*

When discussing this observation during the interview, Bob explains:

*From experience, the contextual variables such as time, readiness and complexity of the task will determine my approach. The urgency of the situation dictates my use of instructional leadership. I am confident that the strategies which I adopt will improve the outcomes. There is no time to waste. Every year, one batch of students will pass us by....*

This is a clear indication of Bob's ability to read and understand the situation at hand and to adopt the right strategies to move the school forward. His ability to make sense of the organizational contexts at that point in time and his decisiveness to implement and manage the change helps to gain the confidence of his stakeholders.

B4 cites the way Bob adopts the command - control strategy when he decided that the science results must improve:

*When Bob came in, he told us in no uncertain terms that he wants the result to improve and how he wants it done. We started building up the younger teachers. We know we couldn't depend on the anchor teachers all the time. We asked the more experienced to mentor and guide the younger teachers in terms of resources, skills and areas of focus. I have to put more effort in dealing with underperforming teachers and guiding them - so that the department can move as one. He puts in place school wide structures to help the department too....*

B2 attributes Bob's command- control strategy to his forceful personality and also his experience. He elaborates:

*I think he is very sure of his moves. He is involved at every level - to the detail, the planning and execution. I think that comes from his personality and his experience and he believes in leveraging on that.*

While staff seem to accept this leadership style, one could sense that they miss the good old days. A teacher comments:

*For (Bob), the culture is very obvious - the focus is on academic and believing in yourself. For the ex-P, it's not so much on individuality but more on the school as a community. We had to re-focus our energy and attention. The culture is different. With (Bob), we have a specific goal in mind and we know we have to somehow get used to working with that. [B8]*

This sentiment is again echoed by B12:

*To me, the most important thing that he did was the goal he set for the school. To everyone, that was obvious - everyone is to focus on the academic goal. He is very demanding in that aspect. All our energies and time are channelled into that. Because he believes- we follow through.*



Teachers interviewed describe how the students feel about this change of strategy when Bob took over:

*Students felt a sense of loss because they were not used to following orders. The ex-P talked to them like a mother. But with (Bob), it's more authoritative. In the end the students got used to him and he is also very good at building them up by using the 'overcomers' cheer. This is his way of bonding with the kids. [B10]*

Stakeholders interviewed commented that he is very directive with the staff too:

*He is very directive with the staff too but I think he tries to show his appreciation to the staff in his own ways. For example, he will acknowledge your contribution. So, I think that's his personality. He's not the pally kind... [B9]*

Staff interviewed feel the need for such a type of approach to evolve now that the profile of students is different from that at the beginning:

*Students could be overly spoon fed. We have been giving them clear structures, sometimes they feel lost when the structure is taken away. That's why we are trying to understand why the distinction rate is not there yet. I think it's because we have yet to develop students who are thinkers. But it may not be possible with structures.... [B11]*

Middle managers also feel that this command- control strategy can and should evolve into a more balanced approach w. B4 says:

*The way to achieve buy-in can be improved. Currently, it is top-down. Perhaps if it is done in a more tactful way, it can be more engaging and create more ownership. So, I feel this part of communicating the belief can be improved.*

He went on to suggest how it could be modified and improved:

*I think the communication part- perhaps not so militant. The message can still be conveyed without having to be so authoritative. If there is a mistake, perhaps it would be good to highlight to the individual concerned rather than to the whole staff. This will foster a new culture. This is important especially when we want staff to try out different innovations.*

Another staff member adds to the changes that could be made for students:

*The rapport with the kids could be improved. For the better kids - the rapport is good but not for all. These kids have a mind of their own. The maxim, we can keep them but how this is done can evolve; more towards feeding them rather than giving instructions. [B5]*

The need for change is also reflected in the recent school climate survey data which doesn't seem promising. B5 tries to explicate the possible reasons for the findings of the climate survey:

*I think the concern is more for the leadership side. One reason would be the messaging part. I know (Bob) said that he put in place structures to take care of the teachers' welfare, but I don't know whether it comes across to the teachers. Perhaps he can show more in his actions....*

Staff interviewed are confident that the change would be a way forward to sustain the student outcomes in the school. Some of them comment thus:

*(Bob)' style is kind of top-down. He wants to impose his sphere of control. The systems and structures that are in place, I credit him for that. But I believe if another P comes in with a different approach, the P will still have the systems and processes. I believe he will still succeed. [B12]*

The success factor and the way Bob runs the school is nicely summed up by B3:- “The way Bob runs the school is one of the key success factors. It’s pretty systematic and structured. His messaging and practices are quite clear and consistent to all his stakeholders to follow. “

It is evident that Bob’s strong conviction on the importance of education for every child has spurred him to create powerful and equitable learning opportunities for both his students and staff. His focus on learning comes in the form of intervention targeted at classroom practices and school curriculum by putting in place school wide structures to drive the desired behaviour. Such a focused approach spells clarity, consistency and scalability to his leadership practice.

When leading his stakeholders in learning, Bob does not only set the stage for learning, he also takes concrete steps that ensure they learn. For example, he leverages on the skills and knowledge of his staff, encouraging those with potential to step up and accept leadership and responsibilities. To level up staff capacity, he is quick to leverage on the expertise of good teachers by institutionalising successful strategies so that everyone learns.

Findings also reveal that Bob adopts a more top-down approach in his leadership practices. For example, in developing staff, while he practices shared leadership among the school leadership team, he also makes known to them that he will veto any decision on matters of importance. His directive approach may have resulted in less forthcoming feedback from the team during the meetings despite Bob’s effort to involve them in engaged communication.

In leading and managing change, Bob translates purpose and strategy into reality for all stakeholders. He is acutely aware that change without an understanding of context or buy-in from his staff will not work. Going beyond the articulation of the need for change, Bob ensures that tested structures and communication of clear, realistic but high expectations are there to support his stakeholders in the change.

Again, the change process is very much a top-down approach where Bob initiates the necessary change and stakeholders are expected to follow his call for action.

Data analysis of Bob's different leadership practices shows that he spends the bulk of his time engendering activities that work towards improving student outcomes. However, he does not focus on enacting the instructional leadership alone. He has tactically embedded and combined instructional, transformational and shared leadership in such a manner that best suit the context and profile of his stakeholders. Bob's ability to make sense of the organisational context and his decisiveness to implement and manage change from the onset has resulted in positive student outcome. His knowledge of what works for that particular context and his choice of leadership practices help. Bob's ability to structure and sustain the intensity of his different leadership actions helps him to maintain clarity, consistency and communicate his own commitment while exercising scalability in his leadership practices. The manner in which Bob applies his leadership practices to suit the unique situation in his school defines his successful influence on the student outcomes.

While Bob's ability to make sense of the context from the onset guides his leadership choices that enable him to move the school forward, findings indicate that his stakeholders perceive a need for his leadership style - which is predominantly a command-control approach - to evolve into one that is balanced with empowerment. This is in keeping with the maturing organizational context. However, clarification with Bob shows that he does not share the same sentiment as the stakeholders. He insists that apart from his top-down approach which he deems necessary in view of the context, he has been empowering his stakeholders which according to him, is evident in the way they are involved in decision making and shared leadership.

From the data analysis of school B and subsequent discussion of Bob's leadership practices to improve student outcomes, the following propositions emerge for the principal's leadership of case school B.

Proposition I: Success in improving student outcomes depends on the type of leadership practices Bob exercises. Bob's choice of leadership practices is dependent on his ability to understand and the way in which he makes sense of the organizational contexts, and his decisiveness to implement and manage the change.

Proposition J: While the same leadership practices may be practiced by many principals, it is the degree of consistency, commitment and clarity of the goal that will impact on the success of improving student outcomes. Bob's ability to maintain clarity, and his own commitment to the goals for his staff to follow and the consistency of his leadership practices to support his goals – are what distinguishes his style.

Proposition K: There appears, however, at least on the part of some stakeholders - a need for Bob's leadership style and strategies to evolve in keeping with the evolving organizational context. What stands out presently in Bob's leadership is his command- control strategic practices, which he leverages on to implement and manage change in school B. However, with the changing context in terms of changing profile of students, and maturity of staff, it is evident that stakeholders perceive the need for a re-balancing of the command- control strategy with an empowerment strategy.

### **5.2.3 Stakeholders' views of the Principal's leadership influence on the process of improving student learning outcomes**

In order to understand the stakeholders' views of Bob's influence on improving student outcomes, two interview questions were asked. The first has to do with how the stakeholders (vice-principal, teachers, key personnel and students ) in the school perceive the principal's leadership influence on student outcomes, while the second centres on how they perceive what the principal has done or not done in regard to improving student outcomes in the school.

Interviews with the participants of school B clearly show that Bob has a clear influence on the process of improving student outcomes. This is confirmed by Bob who shares how he was directly involved in putting in place structures to discipline students for the morning reading programme. He elaborates, "Sometimes you have to do this and it impacts directly on our students. It's direct: because I introduce policies that impact them directly."

Stakeholders who were interviewed concur that Bob's strong leadership has impacted positively on the learning outcomes over the years. They also perceive that while in general his influence may be indirect, in many ways his influence is direct. Some of them cite examples of the structures that he has instituted. This includes creating platforms for voices of students to be heard and building self-belief in the students. B12 shared what students have told her:

*As I talk to the former students about his every day reminders, they shared that it gives them a sense of self-belief. It actually works. In other words, he builds this structure whereby students are focused on positive thought. To me, this as part of character development...*

*I think he wants them to be focused. It all runs from the quotation and then 'what we believe is what we will achieve' and then to target setting - it all falls nicely*

*into place. So, the kids have nothing to think of but the goal - working towards this goal. [B10]*

B9 feels that Bob's greatest contribution in the area of discipline. She elaborates, "The P plays a part in setting the tone - the discipline."

A student gives his view of how they perceive Bob influences their student outcomes and affirms that he has a direct influence on them:

*Bob gives us a voice; the suggestion box and even closed door feedback. From the feedback which he will read out, you can hear suggestions to improve our school. Sometimes for some of the suggestions he explains why it cannot be implemented. He will read out the suggestions to the school unless the person requested otherwise. (Bob) also makes it a point to check with us after reading out, how many of us agree with the suggestion. It feels good to know that we are also part of this. The fact that we have a say in the decision making... [BG14]*

During the interview session, another student shares that this fortnightly process helps him in his decision making. It is interesting to note that compared to other case schools, there are many ways in which principal's influence is a direct one for school B.

B10 echoes the same sentiment that Bob gives students a sense of identity for the school: "For Bob, the culture is very obvious. With him, we have a specific goal in mind. It gives us a direction and a sense of identity for the school..."

Asked if she thinks Bob has an important role in improving student outcomes, one middle manager says:

*Definitely. In fact, I was checking it out with some students whether they would miss (Bob). Some of them told me yes. When I asked them why, they shared that*

*they missed the part where he kept on reminding them about the values and the goal. So, how they reinforce the values is actually very important. [B6]*

She goes on to share that she sees value in some of the structures Bob has instituted and how it has helped teaching and learning in the classroom:

*Reading and writing programmes; simple things of coming to parade square to start the reading. I feel that this kind of calm them down before they go to class. When I was in X, I noticed that when they did not have this reading programme, students are very hyper when they went in to class....[B6]*

The students perceive that Bob has a great influence on them because of the way he encourages them in their self-belief. Students share that structures and programmes in the school make them better persons. Students cite the following examples:

*For me, I remember (Bob) always saying this phrase "what you believe is what you achieve" Over time, I feel it is true.... I have never thought I could achieve and be in the top 40. I am actually very proud of myself because I have other friends who are smarter than me - soon enough, my teacher started to give us the tests and target setting form - test after test, I begin to see myself improving. Instead of wasting time outside, I am going home to study. With the results, it makes us more confident. [BG13]*

*It develops my character. When I was in primary school, I was the type of person - not very enthusiastic; scared to voice out my opinion. But in this school I changed. Now I am more confident to voice my thoughts, talk to teachers - what I like; what I don't like. [BG14]*

When asked what has caused the change, he is quick to attribute it to the principal:



*Bob inspired us to write suggestions. Teachers sometimes ask us to write journals – from there I can voice out my opinion. No need to be scared of other people. I found out that in this school the Principal and teachers, at the beginning they will set rules. But once we get to know them better, there is no barrier. We can just talk like friends. [BG 14]*

Students interviewed also shared how Bob's indirect influence through policy implementation helps them in their personal growth. One student gave a glimpse of what it was like when he enforced student taking literature; a subject deemed difficult to score at 'O' level:

*He just explained why he was implementing it. The thought of having to take literature is scary. I don't like to read. But for lit, no choice - forced to read. Now I love to read. When (Bob) shared with us that one of his ex-pupils who at first complained about taking literature but now likes it, and scored a distinction.... we accept the challenge... [BG14]*

Another student gave his view about the routines that have been established for the teachers in the classroom:

*Initially, we felt uncomfortable but now we are used to it. What is good is that everyone practices the same thing- e.g. you know you have to keep the place clean. To add on, we have this best class award – that's the motivation. We don't mind because we saw the benefit of the routines. [BG14]*

It is interesting to note that in school B, despite being uncomfortable with some of the policy implementation introduced by Bob, stakeholders seem to be accepting and affirming in their perception of the principal's leadership influence on improving student outcomes. The reasons for this positive stakeholders' perception of Bob's influence is nicely summed up by the following student and staff comments:

*Yes, the Principal's leadership is key. To me, I think in (school B), the communication between the Principal and the students is very clear and so this helps in the communication between the P and parents; my parents would always feedback to (Bob) the effort of my teacher in helping me to achieve. My parents communicate through the meet-the-parent session - they will ask questions. [BG13]*

*In fact most of his structures have proven to work. He has the experience and he knows what works. I don't mind trying out some of his ideas. Even he could have been authoritative in the first few years, but it worked nicely ..... [B8]*

Stakeholders acknowledge that while they may not be comfortable with some of the leadership practices Bob has adopted, they see the positive impact of instituting these policies and structures on the student outcomes. In addition, they also sense the sincerity and single-mindedness of the principal in his pursuit. The vice-principal gives his view about what lies behind the quick success in turning round school B:

*For (Bob)'s case, it was very clear, he wanted to take the school in that direction. Through his personality, the way he communicates, the expectations that he put on everyone, he did it. So I would think where we are right now – is attributed to his leadership... I think with the other P, we will get there, but it may not be as quickly as what we have had under the leadership of (Bob). I think that is also his strength.*

He hastens to add that Bob's single-mindedness and focus which led to the quick achievement of the outcomes further builds the confidence of the stakeholders. As a result, they just 'bite the bullet' and follow Bob.

While the perception of the principal's role in managing the process of improving student outcomes remains positive, slowly the perception of staff on how this can be done is changing. Interview data shows that although staff are accepting and affirming

in regard to how Bob should exercise his leadership practices, some are of the view that many of these existing leadership practices should evolve in the light of changing times and progressively changing profile of student intake. While this change of view does not come through so strongly from the students, a shift of perception on how the principal could bring a difference to the way he leads comes through strongly from the staff. Teachers and middle managers interviewed cite different instances where they feel the structures and policies should evolve.

They too question if some of the structures are still relevant and whether there is a need to evolve. One of them declares:

*Structures must be there but they have to evolve to fit the kind of students we are having. With better intake, I am not sure if the time that is used for teaching and drilling is necessary. Instead, wouldn't it be better if you used it to engage them in outdoor activity that stretches them? I don't mind the long hours, but I think the long hours must match the ability. [B5]*

This includes discipline which forms the basis for the tone of the school. B4 explains:

*Discipline has various levels, the lowest level being monitoring and of course the structures that we put in place. Now it's about getting students to take that ownership of their learning. The next level is through trust - we must trust that our students can do it. Because we always said that what we believe is what we achieve. We must believe that the students can do it. Perhaps bear with a bit of messiness initially...*

Some staff feel that there should be a more balanced focus. They perceive that Bob has been focusing far too much on academic outcomes at the expense of non-academic outcomes. One middle manager comments:

*(Bob) has done the standardization that the academic results must be the focus and whatever others must move around this. While it solves some problem (i.e. creating more time for the academic), it is at the expense of the others ..... I think there should be a balance... [B5]*

The vice-principal however, feels that the school has been focusing on both academic and non- academic. He provides a glimpse of the school leaders' thinking:

*If you look at Character Development (CD) for instance, there is always this emphasis on what students of school B should be like, how they become an 'overcomer' - how they overcome difficulties and challenges... How they should demonstrate the school values... We feel that CD should not be done in isolation; it should be done in the instructional programme as well. ....*

Many feel that Bob's leadership style of command-control needs to evolve into one that is more consultative. This will eventually impact on the staff culture. A middle manager shares her yearning for such a change in culture:

*The ex-P called it a no-blame culture. I guess we felt safer. Whereas under (Bob) - not that he blames, but like I have said earlier, you think there is a big brother watching, they felt that it was a bit more threatening.. [B4]*

They yearn for times when Bob will give autonomy to the middle management team to explore ways to achieve certain outcomes rather than just following his structured methods. As one of them puts it:

*Perhaps he can be more consultative; a little bit like our ex-P who is very persuasive and gets collective ideas from the staff. (Bob) is a little bit different. He believes in his approach and he knows it's tested and he makes it clear. [B6]*

While there are differing views between different groups of stakeholders within school B on Bob's leadership influence to improving student outcomes, data analysis reveals that there is greater shared perception between the different groups. For example, all agree that Bob has a clear influence on the process of improving student outcomes and that his strong leadership and forceful personality have impacted positively on the outcomes. However, students and staff perceive differently in regard to what and how Bob should exercise his leadership influence. For example, while staff acknowledge that his command- control strategy has helped the school to improve, they see a need for his leadership style to evolve by placing a greater emphasis on empowerment in the school. Students on the other hand have a different perception about his leadership influence. They view Bob's direct involvement and influence on their learning through building their self-belief and giving them a voice and taking their feedback seriously, as impetus to their learning. Unlike the staff, students are not averse to his command- control approach as they believe he is doing it for the good of the students. Bob's frequent efforts to interact and bond with the students through different platforms, reinforces their sense of his care for them.

Data analysis on Bob's leadership practices shows that he cultivates a different approach to social relations. Despite his top-down approach, Bob enjoys fruitful social relations and exercises relatively good interpersonal skills with his staff and school community. This is evident in the way his stakeholders responded to his calls for action to improve academic outcomes. His passion and commitment to provide the best for all students and the goals he sets for the school resonate with his stakeholders. His effort to create a shared sense of purpose for his stakeholders and his established reputation for turning around other schools strengthen his relationship with his stakeholders, as they have confidence that he can lead the school to achieving the set goals. Despite his directive leadership style and occasionally intimidator approach, his staff and students continue to follow him as they know he has the student interests at heart. Analysis of the stakeholders' perception of Bob's leadership influence suggests that their perceptions are accepting and affirming. A

series of successful academic outcomes reinforces stakeholders' perceptions and strengthens the social relations of the principals with his stakeholders.

Three further propositions emerge as a result of this analysis of stakeholders' perceptions in school B:

Proposition L: The organisational context of school B influences the way in which Bob exercises his leadership practices to improve student learning outcomes. In this case, Bob's vision resonates with the stakeholders, especially the staff. His command and control leadership style that he uses extensively to initiate and implement change suits the context as it enables him to put in place tested structures and expectations for staff to follow.

Proposition M: The degree of success of his leadership practice is dependent on Bob's social relations as principal; in particular, his interpersonal relationships with the stakeholders. How stakeholders perceive him and what he is doing – whether positively or negatively - depends very much on the social relations and interpersonal skills of the principal in relating with them. Bob's passion and commitment to provide the best for all students resonates with all stakeholders. His strategies of finding common ground by creating a shared sense of purpose for his stakeholders motivate them to follow him in this improvement journey. His eventual successful leadership influence reinforces the positive social relations of the principal with his stakeholders.

Proposition N: How the stakeholders perceive Bob's leadership influence on improving student learning outcomes relates to what he does and how he in fact exercises his leadership practices. In school B, stakeholders were accepting and affirming Bob's leadership practice from the outset. This encourages him to do more of the same and has resulted in improving student outcomes.

## 5.3 Conclusion

Eight inter-related propositions relevant to how the principal of School B leads and manages the process of improving student learning outcomes emerged from the analysis of the case study data for school B. Table 5.4 provides a summary of the propositions.

Proposition G	Bob's perception about his leadership and management influence to improve student learning outcomes is shaped by his values orientation, beliefs and personal characteristics. His strong values orientation stance for an ethic of justice dominates his other values orientations. Together with his beliefs and personal characteristics, they shape how he perceives and conceptualizes his leadership and management influence.
Proposition H	Bob's strong conviction about what students deserve and his optimism about what they can do if given opportunity shape his leadership practices to improve student outcomes in school B.
Proposition I	Success in improving student learning outcomes depends on the type of leadership practices Bob exercises. Bob's choice of leadership practices is dependent on his ability to understand and makes sense of the organizational contexts, and his decisiveness in implementing and managing the change.
Proposition J	While the same leadership practices may be practiced by many principals, it is the degree of consistency, commitment and clarity of the goal that will impact on the success of improving student learning outcomes. Bob's ability to maintain clarity, and his own commitment to the goals for his people to follow and the consistency of his leadership practices to support his goals – are what distinguishes his style.
Proposition K	There appears, however, a need for Bob's leadership style and strategies to evolve in keeping with the evolving organizational context. What stands out presently in Bob's leadership is his command and control strategic practices, which he leverages on to implement and manage change. However moving forward, there is a need for him to balance command & control strategy with empowerment strategy.

Proposition L	The organizational context of school B influences the way in which Bob exercises his leadership practices to improve student learning outcomes. Bob's vision resonates with the stakeholders, especially the staff. His command and control leadership style that he uses extensively to initiate and implement change suits the context as it enables him to put in place tested structures and expectations for staff to follow.
Proposition M	The degree of success of the leadership practice is dependent on the Bob's social relations as principal; in particular, his interpersonal relationships with the stakeholders. Bob's passion and commitment to provide the best for all students resonate with the stakeholders. His strategies of creating a shared sense of purpose for his stakeholders and his established reputation as a leader motivate them to follow him in this improvement journey. His eventual successful leadership influence reinforces the positive social relations of the principal with his stakeholders.
Proposition N	How the stakeholders perceive Bob's leadership influence on improving student learning outcomes relates to what he does and how he in fact exercises his leadership practices. In school B, stakeholders were accepting and affirming about Bob's leadership practice from the outset. This encourages him to do more of the same and has resulted in improving student outcomes.

Table 5.4: Summary of propositions for school B

This set of propositions that emerged from the data analysis of case school B will be brought over to Chapter 7 for comparative analysis with the emergent set of propositions from case schools A and C. Chapter 6 is a discussion of the findings of case school C.



# Chapter 6

## Case Study: School C

### *School improvement: The effect of right leadership actions and consistent practices on student learning outcomes*

#### 6.0 Introduction

This chapter accounts for the ways in which a third secondary school principal in Singapore leads and manages the process of improving student outcomes. Throughout this thesis the school referred to in this chapter is termed 'School C'. The school was selected on the basis that it has difficulty in achieving breakthrough results and features lowly in the school achievement tables. The first part describes the organizational overview of the school while the next part of the chapter presents the research findings of the study. The case concludes with a summary of the propositions developed from the data in relation to the main research question of this study.

#### 6.1 Organizational Overview

##### **School Profile**

School C is a co-educational government secondary school established in the late 1990s and it caters for students aged 13 to 17. It started with 6 Secondary one classes and 25 staff, and at the point of study, the enrolment stood at 1300 and 75 teaching staff. The age of the teaching staff falls within 20-40 years with 36.8 % below 30 years old. Similar to case schools A and B, it has a relatively lower SES intake compared to

the average secondary schools in Singapore, a good racial mix of Chinese, Malay and Indians and a high percentage of its staff are graduates.

The school believes that every child can learn and is committed to developing students as holistic and active learners. Since the start, the percentage of Junior College intake for school C has remained low. While the school has achieved value added-ness for academic achievements (bronze) once, it has not been able to sustain this aspect of student outcomes. As a result, the Sustained Achievement Award (SAA), a national measure of schools being able to sustain their improved academic outcomes, has never been accorded to the school. The principal has identified students' lack of motivation and complacency as one of the key challenges to the school.

### **Principal Profile**

The Principal, Carol, has been a secondary school principal for 5 years. It is her first principal-ship and she is the second principal of school C. During her career, she completed her Master degree while serving as a principal. As a leader who has extensive experience in overseeing policy planning and system wide policy implementation, she holds high expectations of school C and expects the school to raise the bar and achieve breakthrough outcomes.

## 6.2 Research Findings

This section outlines how Carol exercises her leadership and management influence to improve student outcomes. The findings are structured based on key themes that arise in response to the SRQs and also through developing arguments and findings based on quotations from participants. Participants' quotations are coded as follows:

Participants' code	Participants' Role	Gender	Years in school
C1(Carol)	Principal	Female	5
C2	Vice Principal	Female	5
C3	HOD	Female	4
C4	HOD	Male	10
C5	HOD	Male	5
C6	HOD	Female	5
C7	HOD	Male	3
C8	Teacher	Male	6
C9	Teacher	Female	5
C10	Teacher	Female	10
C11	Teacher	Male	3
C12	Teacher	Female	4
CG13	Students Group 1	5 Sec 3 students from mixed streams	3
CG14	Students Group 2	5 Sec3 students from mixed streams	3

Table 6.1 Profile of participants in case school C (accurate as of 2010)

### **6.2.1 Perceptions and Worldview of Principal on Leadership and Management influence**

To understand the perception and worldview of Carol on her leadership and management influence, four interview questions were posed to her. First, how does she define student learning outcomes? Second, what is her perception of a successful school? Third, in her view, is School C a successful school? , and lastly; how does she view the influence of principals in improving student learning outcomes?

Similar to other case school principals Ann and Bob, Carol perceives that principals play an important role in improving student outcomes and shares similar views about characteristics of successful schools. In her view, a successful school is dependent on context and one needs to be realistic about the comparison of success. She elaborates: “ I would define a successful school as one that produces value-added results in both academic and non-academic areas, whatever intake it has; more importantly, what the community perceives of the children when they pass out of the gates. “

However, she is of the opinion that where a relatively young School C is concerned, she needs to be realistic when defining success against more established schools. She acknowledges that a successful school is highly dependent on the people who are important in developing the students. In her view, students should first develop their values and then their academic excellence. She reveals her concern that excelling academically should not be at the expense of developing character and values. She explains:

*As a school, we cannot run away from academic excellence. But more importantly, I feel that academic outcomes will come if the students' character and value systems are sound. For example, they must understand the reason for academic excellence; not for pragmatic reasons but the fact that they can contribute to the community and to the world at large. That's the social*

*responsibility we must teach them. We must focus on their value system first.*  
[C1]

*The key people (school leaders, middle managers and teachers) who are involved in the development of the students must understand the reason for academic excellence in terms of value system. They should not be driving excellence at the expense of character. [C1]*

Carol feels that principals have the influence to exert such checks and balances to ensure that their staff do not drive excellence at the expense of character. She adds:

*....school leaders hold that clarity as they rate things going on in the teacher's life. Somebody in the school system has to be very clear about the direction, the core values and I think that is the responsibility of the principal.*

One wonders if this philosophy might have contributed to Carol's inaction and willingness to let events take their own course, rather than planning and nudging them along when the situations warrants her to act. Her strategy is different from Bob of School B, who was proactive in setting directions and structures.

Carol acknowledges that principals have a part to play to ensure structures and processes are in place and also to provide the relevant resources at the right place and time to improve student outcomes. She remarks:

*As a principal, if you are not clear on the outcomes, I don't think you will know what processes and structures you want to build, what resources you want to pump in. Definitely, you must be very clear upfront in regard to the student outcomes you want....*

Where student learning outcomes are concerned, Carol feels that both academic and non-academic aspects are important and is of the opinion that the academic is easier to manage. She elaborates:

*The academic, as I mentioned, is easier in terms of research studies and knowledge and skills. There is sufficient information for us to build on because Singapore schools are not failing schools. So as a system for academic excellence and some of the more observable areas of work where it helps us to become a more successful institution, we are very fortunate.*

She holds strong views that while soft skills and academic excellence are important student outcomes, soft skills is even more important and difficult to learn than the others. She adds: “One has to spend a lot of time grasping these soft skills ....I can’t compare myself with a school that has been forty years in establishment....”

This is quite a different view from the principals of Schools A and B. These two principals hold the view that both academic and non- academic are important and they work on academic excellence to develop the mind-set and skills which drive excellence in the non-academic, including the soft skills. They also hold the view that holistic education must lead to success and it should start with building a positive school culture that will lead to excellence in the academic and non-academic areas. In Carol’s case, her strong perspective seems to shape her decision to allocate her time and responsibility to build soft skills in the students first. Unknowingly, she has conveyed the message that it is important to first develop the soft skills which in her view are necessary to subsequently developing the academic excellence of her staff. This same sentiment is echoed by C8:

*It is very dangerous to put weight on just exams; theory, practical, assessment and so forth. At the end of the day, if you want to define student outcomes, you have to look at the overall environment of the school; the spirit of the school. That’s why we emphasize a lot on soft skills /character development, discipline*

*and tone of the school first. Once this is in place, academic outcomes will come as they will be motivated to learn.*

Like Ann and Bob, Carol also feels that principals have the power to influence the building of values and school spirit, which will eventually lead to improved student outcomes. She strongly believes that when students feel good about the school, they will want to do more and learn more. This has been one of her key focus since she joined School C. She feels that her influence in this area is especially important due to the profile of her relatively young and less experienced staff. In her view, this is a great dampening factor to improving student outcomes as the younger generations are not familiar with such concepts and there is a need for her to work on changing their mind set and equipping them with the skills. Interestingly, the staff interviewed hold a different view about the young staff profile. C3 who has been in the education service for 16 years, comments:

*I did notice when I first came in, the KPs<sup>11</sup> were all young and dynamic and the teachers were also very young. Unlike my previous school where the KPs were all near retirement already; they were very experienced, very mature and they could handle a lot of situations even when the P was not around. Over here, the young ones, you see a different dynamic. They are willing to try new things, a lot of energy.*

While they acknowledge that School C has a relatively young staff, they see it as an advantage as they perceive these young staff as more energetic and daring to try new things. On the contrary, Carol sees the staff profile, in particular the KP team, as a challenge. She laments how it prevents her from achieving many things.

Carol believes strongly in her role as a people developer and she holds certain perceptions about learning. She reckons that persuasion and buy-in is a better approach than a directive approach and such learning cannot be rushed. In her view,

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<sup>11</sup> KPs refers to Key Personnel or the Middle Managers

it is better to let such learning be caught rather than taught. She has this to say about her staff:

*I have a largely Gen Y population. So, you can imagine the education bit for them even before they reach the students.... Because I really think they are really young and they can't juggle this at their level; unlike us who are more experienced, we can detect the teachable moments. So, right now we are changing that perception of our young people - slowly but surely. But first of all we need to prod them up with structures so that they can learn....*

She is realistic that she cannot support all, and there is only so much she can do. She remarks, "There is only so much we can influence. The rest is very much up to the individual. I am a cynic by nature; may be our Asian culture ....."

This view speaks clearly to Carol's belief and values orientation toward learning for both the students and her staff. While Carol subscribes to the fact that value-added-ness to a child's learning outcome is important, she perceives that it must be pursued in terms of a value system, and that success is highly dependent on the staff profile. One wonders if such divergence of her view which eventually impacts her conceptualisation of the leadership practices is one of the contributing factors to the poorer outcomes in School C.

Through the data analysis of values<sup>12</sup> held by Carol, it has been found that there is a list of dominant values to which she subscribes. This includes values of relationship success, change, risk-taking, security/loyalty/integrity, perfectionism, empowerment, pessimistic /passiveness, idealism, independence, inflexibility and non-pragmatism. Table 6.2 shows the values orientation of Carol.

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<sup>12</sup> Values: In this study the term has been used very liberally to include elements of dispositions and qualities as defined by Henderson and Thomas. See details in Chapter 7.



Values held based on analysis of data	Dominant value to which Principal subscribes
*Integrity/loyalty/security *Relationship ( teamwork)/ care Hard work; Care; Empowerment; Risk-taker; *Change ; Entrepreneur spirit; *Success (overly ambitious); *Competition; Commitment; *Independence ; Challenging rules ( non-conformist); Diversity; *Non pragmatic ; *Pessimist; Unrealistic; *Perfectionist	+ Relationship + Integrity; security/loyalty + Empowerment + Success + Competition + Change + Inflexibility + Perfectionist + Pessimistic/passiveness + Idealistic + Independence

Table 6.2 Values Orientation of the principal in school C

Findings from the analysis of Carol's interview data indicate that she holds a predominant value stance of relationship and connection and this aligns with her leadership perception of her critical role as a people developer to improve student outcomes. However, further analysis of the data reveals her strong values orientation towards innate predisposition and inherent human nature shapes core values orientations. Her lack of optimism as to what her staff and students can do leads her to perceive that the task of improving student outcomes is an uphill one. In addition, her concern about being mindful of academically excelling at the expense of character development, or at the expense of others, reveals her values orientation stance towards security/loyalty, which may have contributed to her indecision and inaction regarding some critical leadership practices to move the school forward. Her values stance toward non-pragmatism, idealism, independence, inflexibility and perfectionism, contributes to her inconsistent leadership practices and the play out of which to improve student outcomes in her day to day activities.

Data analysis of school C shows that Carol is enthusiastic and highly motivated towards helping children achieve their best. She holds the belief that every child

matters. She believes strongly in system of equity and this is shown in her concern about being mindful of excelling at the expense of character or others. Like Ann and Bob, she is achievement oriented both for herself and for the whole school community. She wants the best for her school and believes strongly about the importance of sound education for all children. She also sets high standards and expectations for herself and her school community. Regrettably, she gets a different outcome. Instead of inspiring stakeholders to follow her, they tend to be judgemental and some are even resistant to her leadership. Findings show that her lamenting mind set, tendency to see 'barriers' as impediments and her lack of 'can-do' spirit influence her perception and conceptualisation of her leadership influence to improve student outcomes.

Carol subscribes to a people-centred stance through shared leadership. However, her belief that her young staff are inexperienced and lack the capacity and mind set to equip the students with the relevant skills leads her to perceive that her young staff profile is a dampening factor to improving student outcomes. In short, she lacks faith and confidence in her staff.

The data above suggest the following propositions where School C and Carol are concerned:

Proposition P: Carol's worldview and perception of leadership influence over improving student outcomes is shaped by her values orientation, beliefs and personal characteristics. Her strong values orientation stance towards believing in the importance of the innate predisposition of people and inherent human nature of man overshadows her other core values orientations. Together with her beliefs and personal characteristics, they shape how she perceives and conceptualise her leadership and management influence. Table 6.3 provides a summary of Carol's values orientation, beliefs and personal characteristics which together result in how she perceives her leadership and management influence.

Values Orientation	Personal Characteristics	Beliefs
1.Strong values orientation towards innate predisposition; inherent nature of man shapes her other core values orientation 2. Values orientation towards security/loyalty 3. Strong values stance of non-pragmatism, idealism, independence , inflexibility and perfectionism	1. Lamenting mind set 2. Tendency to see 'barrier' as impediments 3. Lack of 'can do' spirit	1.Strong belief stance of equity 2. Developing soft skill is more critical than academic excellence 3. Belief that her young staff profile are inexperience and lack the capacity and mind set to equip students (less optimistic about what they can achieve) 4. Her belief system that while she has a critical role to play as a people developer, she is realistic that she cannot catch all and there is so much she could do – sign of limiting herself
Carol's perception on her leadership and management influence		
1. Influence through development of soft skills development is more important 2. Influence through putting in place structures and process for learning 3. Perceive her staff profile as her great dampening factor to school outcomes.		

Table 6.3 Summary of values orientation, personal characteristic, beliefs and perception of principal from school C

Proposition Q: Carol's beliefs and lack of optimism about her staff (and possibly human nature in general) shapes the ways she conceptualizes her leadership practices to improving student outcomes in school C. Her lack of optimism in what her staff and students can achieve leads her to perceive that the task of improving student outcomes is an uphill one. Her belief system that while she has a critical role to play as a people developer, she cannot support all and there is only so much she can do within limits, affects how she conceptualises her leadership and management influence in school C. Her response is to set too high a level of expectations on her staff and to over-rely

on putting structures in place, leaving her staff to work out details of implementation.

### **6.2.2 Core leadership practices to improve student learning outcome**

Common themes of leadership practices that Carol has adopted to improve student learning outcomes in school C emerged from the interview and document analysis and are grouped in the following themes: Sharing Leadership, Facilitating Professional Development, Rebuilding Structures and Leading with an instructional orientation. Each of these themes will be discussed in the sections below.

#### **Sharing Leadership:**

The first thing that Carol did when she first joined the school was to re-forge structures to enable shared leadership. She started by reviewing the school structures that circumscribe the ability of teachers to work together and which constrained initiatives to promote shared leadership. She reckoned that for shared leadership to take place more effectively, she needed to be assertive in reshaping structures in the service of developing a deeper pool of leadership. She shared that this was especially important given her young staff profile. Carol adds:

*I have a team of KPs; 5 of them internally appointed. 10 of them are less than 5 years of experience. That leaves me with 5 so called experienced ones. Of the 5, some are so many years in the thing - 5 to 6 years in the same position; not a healthy thing. That's why there is a need to change the profile and do a bit of restructuring....*

In nurturing shared leadership through changing the structures, Carol crafts opportunities for teachers to exercise leadership, including providing them with the space and authority to engage in the work of shared leadership. She also forges new policies and institutionalizes practices that support those structures. She structures staff development and benchmarks the school practices against People Developer (PD) Standards. She explains, "This is my way to check if the processes for developing people are right. However, there was a lot of resistance because the PD process generated a lot of paper work."

This situation is compounded by the fact that the experienced KPs who had been working alongside the former principal, challenged the changes that were introduced. At that point in time, they perceived Carol's new moves and remarks about the school as someone who was inexperienced but always wanting to experiment. C4 who had the opportunity to work with both the principals, comments: "Unlike the ex-P, Carol's remarks about the school make us wonder if she knows what she is doing. We are sceptical whether her new moves will work."

Despite their resistance, Carol persisted with the endeavour as she sees this as necessary strategy to level up the capacity of her young staff. The VP shared that she struggles along with the principal, although she may not agree with everything she does - "We struggled together and so I empathize with her although I may not agree with everything that she does or she says. But we shared a lot of times struggling together and in building the school." [C2]

Carol put in place a policy that all departments must go outside the school to learn from another organization. Every staff member was encouraged to present papers outside the school. In an effort to build the capacity of the Middle Management team, Carol involved KPs in learning from others through platforms such as External Validation attachments at other schools. She ensured that learning is intentional and strove to nurture a mind-set of wanting to learn. This is clear when one of the teachers excitedly shared this learning opportunity: "After learning about the possibility of instituting night studies, I am very excited. We were wondering how did they manage and we continued to find out. I am excited about trying this out in our school ...." [C9].

However, not all hold the same mind-set as evidenced by the remark made by C12. "Yes, the culture of learning in this school is definitely there, but somehow despite all our hard work, it did not show in our school results....."

Carol invests time and effort to engage the middle management team in decision making and planning. KPs interviewed share that she never hesitates to talk to KPs during school management meetings if she has an idea or observation and she always makes time to talk to KPs. As C5 puts it:

*If she spots any trend, she will discuss with us. But each time, we will have to find our own solution. Often times, we left the discussion there and did not pursue the matter until it is necessary to do so.*

This reveals Carol's inconsistent leadership practice and her intent. One wonders if she truly believes in the inclusiveness and sharing of leadership. Was there an assumption that once the structure is in place, the team would then know how to go about sharing leadership? On the other hand, would the situation be different if the KPs have been more proactive and pursue the matter with Carol if they are not sure on the course of actions?

To facilitate shared leadership, Carol decided to get more people involved in the year end strategic planning exercise. Since 2009, she made it a point to invite high potential teachers to join the school leadership team in planning and decision making. To increase exposure and broaden the scope of young KPs, Carol introduced a policy of duties rotation. She felt that this was important for the KP team to learn new things. Such practices garner mixed responses from the staff. One teacher who was invited explains: "To me, Carol values what we think and I find this interesting as I realize certain decisions are not easy to make. I am glad to be given this opportunity. But not everyone feel this way...." [C10]. In regard to the policy of duties rotation, some believe that rotating too frequently does not play to the strengths of the teachers. As C8 puts it:

*When come to duty rotation ... you are not playing to the strengths of the teachers. If you keep switching teachers around committees, thinking that they*

*want to switch when actually their specialty is. Not everybody can do everything.....*

The above shows Carol's effort in promoting shared leadership and a culture of learning in school C which in her view would be an excellent form of development for her young staff profile. However, while she is keen to develop staff experience and her strategy seems logically justified; her effort does not seem to translate into positive outcomes, as evidenced in the comments made by the staff. This begs one to question if indeed the shared leadership is well-established and embraced by staff at different levels, or does it reside with the school leaders only. While the structures to enable shared leadership are in place, it is clear from the interview data that there is a lack of buy-in from the staff on what is important for the school. Real change takes place when there is a strong conviction for it and consistent practice. Unlike the scenario in case school A, this leadership practice does not cultivate ownership and develop the shared vision. Carol's inconsistent practice and lack of clarity for her staff to exercise shared leadership prevents cultivation of ownership and development of shared vision for this practice. Findings indicate that Carol merely articulates the direction for the school after showing them the reality of the school based on data. Data analysis of this case study shows that she did not have a clear plan that works on securing the commitment of her staff to the vision.

### **Facilitating Professional Development and Rebuilding Structures**

One of the leadership practices adopted by Carol to improve student outcomes involves shaping the quality of education by growing her staff. When asked about which aspect of the current leadership practices which they feel the school should keep, staff mentioned 'people development'. They feel that people development is the highest calling of leadership and where school C is concerned there is a need to put in place People Development structures and processes to ensure "people who come and go, get to have proper knowledge transfer and minimize area of weakness. This will eventually translate into student outcomes." [C7]



One of the KPs interviewed thinks that Carol's previous exposure in HQ helps to make things more structured and a lot of effort has been put into planning and thinking through strategies for school improvement in School C. This is further confirmed by other participants when they make comparisons with the former principal. They observe that Carol has put a lot of structures in place. As one teacher put it:

*I think the way we do things is more structured. Even before I came, the structures are already there. But there is a lot of fine tuning. A lot of time spent on review and after action review. Here, we talk a lot about how we can improve the next round.*  
[C11]

Like Principals in other case schools, Carol focuses on continual improvement and time expended on doing things differently for improvement. As C4 puts it, "Carol always challenges us to re-look and re-think about the way we are doing things. Be it curriculum, character development or leadership programme. All these will directly or indirectly impact the student outcomes....."

A teacher who was already in School C when Carol took over the school shares:

*I guess for Carol when she came in, she needed to get a sense of what was happening. So there was a lot of consolidation on her part. She was asking for a lot of information to be fed to her. At that point in time, people were wondering why she is checking on everyone. But for Carol, I find her a bit more structured and more detail-oriented while the ex-P is less structured ..... [C10]*

Carol sets the direction for innovation to take place by encouraging learning from others and putting in place structures for Action Research (AR). She puts in place the policy that everyone in School C must be involved in AR and advocates a bottom-up approach to innovation. One participant remarks on how the young profile of staff should be an advantage for such a pursuit:

*Being young, they have nothing to lose. I find they are very creative and innovative. That's why when I came in I saw the way they do AR, and how they do it for the students and currently how they are tweaking it to teach them 21st century skills - I was like quite impressed - they can pick up very fast. They can multi task... [C3]*

This sentiment is not shared by all. Some participants felt that not all are ready to embark on such pursuit. C5 comments:

*A lot of time has been spent on AR. While I see the advantage, it is very time consuming. Some teachers are taking time to do this at the expense of their classroom work. I think our students need us more. Some teachers who are still struggling with the basics of teaching and learning should not be expected to take part. They should be given a chance to concentrate on improving their teaching and learning practices.*

This raises the question if Carol has chosen the right and appropriate structures for school C.

When asked about her view on the principal's influence on student outcomes, C6 has this to say:

*The teacher is our frontline. But what goes on behind the teachers is all the guidance, giving of directions, setting structures for teachers and to guide them along. The School Leader is probably the one with the biggest picture in the school. Hence they have to set the direction. Ultimately the flow is from the top.....*

She continues:

*The School Leader monitors quite closely especially the teaching and learning bit. The KPs are pretty much guided by her. (Carol) also sits in the department meetings,*

*to see how things are going. It's not about pin pointing where we go wrong. We also play a very important role in grooming the teachers. Also here you see different echelons of teachers being identified for certain roles, given opportunity to go beyond the level required. I think it's very important to provide the necessary challenge... [C6]*

Carol takes the time to develop KPs on their optimal use of information; teaching them what to do and instituting relevant structures to guide their behaviour. She remarks: "I figure out that there is a need to create structures to help them to see the connections and also to rewire their mind set."

One of the structures Carol put in place to engender this change was to re-design the way KPs are seated in the HOD room. She adds: "Apart from training them to better use data, I see the need to use structure to 'force' them to start asking deeper questions as they interact with each other."

Rebuilding structures of such nature serves the principal's intent of promoting collaborative effort among the KPs which according to C4, is vastly different from the past. He explains:

*During the former P's time, it was very territorial and compartmentalized; Everyone is looking out for their own turf; Carol encourages KPs to work as a team; she reminded us that if KPs are fragmented, everyone working below them will be fragmented; there is a need to be cohesive; there was quite a fair bit of reinforcement from her, this includes telling off people who worked in 'silos'.*

Despite the amount of time, effort, spaces and structures expended to facilitate professional development, school C is still grappling with achieving the goal it set out to improve student outcomes. In outlining the lack of success for school C despite Carol's effort to build structures to guide them, staff interviewed attribute it to Carol's choice of strategies and their appropriateness for the context. Many (C3, C5, C6, C7,

C9, C12) feel that Carol has set too high a standard for them to achieve and her unclear communication on how to achieve the goals has compounded the situation. C6 shares the following view:

*Carol believes that we should discover for ourselves how we go about achieving the goals. While she puts structures in place to 'force' us to work together, very often, we are using our instinct and limited experience to find our way. A lot of time is spent on trying out...*

She continues to explain how Carol facilitates professional development in school C:

*There are a lot of opportunities to learn in School C. To encourage the mind set of wanting to learn, Carol gives us a lot of freedom. She is very flexible with what we want to learn and leave the choice of courses and training very much to the individual. As KPs, we were told to encourage staff to participate in professional development. Very often, this training takes teachers away from their lessons. We are concerned with the lack of transfer of learning and the eventual impact on students. [C6]*

One therefore questions the quality of professional development in school C. Are these professional developments really growing the staff and levelling up their competencies? While Carol exercises flexibility on the leadership practice of growing her staff, one wonders if greater monitoring to ensure transfer of learning for each of these staff who embark on such professional development would have reaped better student outcomes. While Carol may have adopted the same leadership practice of growing her stakeholders and ties professional development into the main goal of improving student outcomes like the other case principals, her lack of understanding about the needs of her staff and providing timely and appropriate scaffolds and support for them hampers the scalability and impact of these practice.

## **Leading with an instructional orientation**

Similar to the other case school principals, Carol is anchored in strong and sound educational philosophy and beliefs. She has strong conviction of the critical importance of education to the student's life and holds the belief that every child is important and can learn. A firm believer in holistic education and student outcomes involving both academic and character development, Carol leads learning in school C by championing holistic development of students. She adopts a series of interventions to influence her stakeholders in this endeavour.

One of the interventions involves changing the mind-set of the stakeholders. One participant feels that while parents expect successful schools to produce academic results, there is a need for parents to acknowledge the importance of students' character development. He elaborates, "... this is one area the school is working on; changing the mind-set of stakeholders that success in study is not just academic. Character development is equally important' [C8]

He continues to explain how this is done. For example, to signal the importance of holistic development and to create motivation for students to work on their character development, the school embraces holistic assessment where motivation to work on character development is tied to putting a certain emphasis on their academic outcomes. Carol clarifies why such an approach was adopted:

*The staff are young and they can't juggle both at this level. They are more academically focused and unlike us, they don't have the experience to detect the teachable moments. So right now we are changing that perception of our young people by putting in place structures linked to the academic; something they are familiar with. [C1]*

Another strategy Carol adopts, to influence the mind-set of the staff is to enhance their involvement in decision making and planning. She invites high potential

teachers to join the school leadership team for strategic planning. One of the KPs interviewed, states, “In fact, I spoke to some of the teachers and they shared that they enjoyed it.” [C4]

It is interesting to note that through creating such opportunities for staff to be involved, they can better appreciate the difficulties of some decision making in particular those related to holistic development of students. They in turn can be the ‘spokesperson’ for the school management and hence have the power to influence, change and shape the conversation in the staff room. However, participants interviewed noted that such influence was left very much to individual’s initiative.

When asked to cite some examples of the principal’s practices to improve student outcomes, participants agreed that Carol focuses a lot on teaching and learning. She looks into creating equitable learning opportunities for students and staff, motivating and compelling them to take on these opportunities. She looks into teacher training and puts in place structures to support teaching and learning. For example she revisits the structure of timetabling in an attempt to provide support for staff and students. One teacher participant explains:

*To support teaching and learning, Carol looks into the welfare of staff and students through the timetabling schedule. How we can make it less tiring for everybody. A lot of all these small things really add up. Staff and students can see the effort although they may not know that Carol is involved. Very often, the communication of the review and change is carried out by the team rather than the principal. [C12]*

KPs interviewed confirmed this observation. C3 explains that perhaps teachers and students may not be able to see Carol’s involvement, as a lot of decisions and communications reside at the school management level. She elaborates, “... a lot of things are done in consultation with Carol at the school management meeting.” [C3]

C12 continues:

*A lot of her leadership practices towards supporting teaching and learning and character development of students.....even her involvement in discipline; we really want a culture whereby kids are self-responsible. A lot of money is pumped in to developing staff here.*

Surprisingly, despite the focus on professional development, there seems to be little impact on making significant improvement in student outcomes as evident in the lack of breakthrough results. Further clarifications with participants provide a clue on the professional development focus and its challenges in school C.

When asked about the things they perceive as having been done well in School C, participants (C5, C7, C8, C9, C11) single out strategies such as target setting, analysis of results and knowing what the kids are capable of are particularly important for improvement of student outcomes. They reveal that while the staff awareness level of staff was not so high in these areas in the past, recent shift in focus to put in place appropriate structures, effort to identify targeted training in these areas and directions provided by the school leaders have raised the awareness of staff and provide greater focus and monitoring for the staff. C11 remarks:

*Knowing where we are supposed to go helps a lot. For target setting, it's something that most people will know rationally that it's a good thing. It's only teaching the teacher how to do it. Very often, people don't adopt something mainly because they don't know how to do it - not that they don't want to do it..*

This suggests that one of the problems lies in the inability of the staff to know how to deliver the goals. One therefore questions the quality of professional development in school C. Is the professional developments really growing the staff and levelling up their competencies fast enough for them to know how to achieve the goals set out by the school?

Participants argued that while Carol may not have a direct influence on student outcomes, she strives to work through different channels to influence student outcomes. She initiates change in classroom practices by creating time and space for staff to be involved in innovative projects. C3 elaborates:

*Carol structures timetabled time during curriculum hours for staff to be involved in school improvements. She encourages teachers to put in staff suggestions and take part in innovative projects. This platform has been reviewed and over the years it has evolved into one where different weeks we have different theme for discussion. Teachers are encouraged to try out these different ideas in their classrooms.*

Unlike school B which institutionalizes successful classroom strategies that yielded positive student outcomes, innovation in the classrooms is left very much to the individual teacher in school C. One teacher participant expresses his concern about what is happening in school C:

*While new and innovative classroom practices are good, the implementation and try-out should be closely monitored. Some teachers are spending so much time in trying out the new ideas that they have no time for marking students' work. Some of them are not strong in their academic area and needs time to hone the basic skills. [C8]*

Another teacher echoes the same sentiment:

*The school expects us to try out innovative practices in our classrooms. In fact, it is part of our appraisal. I am concerned with those strategies that work. Although these strategies have been shared with others, if we can scale up that practice across the level, it would benefit all students- less teacher dependent. [C10]*



Generally, while teachers acknowledge that experimenting with different classroom practices is interesting, they feel that a more structured approach and closer monitoring as well as guidance to implementing innovative classroom practices would have been more meaningful. It is evident from the interview data that Carol is still experimenting to get the right formula to achieve breakthrough in student outcomes. She invests leadership effort and encouragement to get staff to innovate with the aim of improving teaching and learning. However, her unclear communication and less guided approach to classroom innovations results in not so productive and sustainable outcomes.

One also wonders if too much experimentation and inability to pin down practices that work may be one of the reasons for the lack of sustainability in improving student outcomes, especially in academic area. Compared to principals of School A and B who are quite clear about where they are heading and knowing how to lead the staff there, Carol's inability to pin down what needs to be done to improve and sustain academic excellence is causing staff to lose confidence in her ability to lead and pace out. The VP makes the following comment: "too high a standard discourages some good people when they cannot reach the level. They feel very lousy... the reaction from Carol doesn't help matters either..."

Data analysis of Carol's different leadership practices shows that she devotes the bulk of her time and attention to conceptualising and enacting her practices; a situation similar to principals of school A and B. However, the types of activities conceptualised, time and attention given to operationalizing each of these leadership practices in her day-to-day activity in school, differs. For example, in enacting the leadership practice of sharing leadership and promoting a culture of learning in school C, her focus on the type leadership activities differs as evident in the comments made by the participants. While Carol has re-forged structures that enabled shared leadership, she fails to secure buy-in from the stakeholders on what specific best practices should be adopted across the school. One wonders if the outcome would have been different if she had worked more on securing the commitment to the vision

by detailing the best practices requiring implementation and working with her senior and middle management colleagues to secure adoption. Her young and inexperienced staff would benefit from greater support and guidance. Her inconsistent practices and lack of clarity for her staff to exercise shared leadership prevents cultivation of ownership and development of shared vision for this practice. Findings show that her effort did not translate into significant improvement in student outcomes.

To drive student outcomes, Carol embeds a combination of instructional, transformational and shared leadership within the practice of leading learning. However, analysis of the interview data shows that there is a significant difference in the intensity of actions. Carol tends to spend more time on instructional and shared leadership practices as evident in her focus on promoting shared leadership and leading with an instructional orientation. Possible reasons that may have resulted in the lack of positive student outcomes have been identified and discussed in the earlier sections on these different leadership practices. For example, like Ann and Bob, Carol's effort to encourage staff to innovate with the purpose of improving student outcomes is clear under her leadership. However, her intervention in this area does not seem to yield breakthrough results. Findings show that Carol is still experimenting to get the right formula to improve student outcomes. Her inability to pin down successful moves and institutionalize these good practices is a concern for her followers. Stakeholders (C2, C3, C5, C7, C9, C10) perceived that her leadership practice lacks clarity, consistency and follow through when she frequently tries out different things. This raises the question if too much experimentation will lead to staff losing confidence in her ability to lead the school forward.

Evidence from the case study shows that while Carol may have enacted a set of leadership practices similar to the other case principals, the focus and intensity of her practices is different. For instance, Carol uses data to effect change. While she puts in place structures and sets high standards to drive the desired behaviour, the difference is that her standards are perceived as too high for her staff; as a result, they have difficulty achieving the goals. Would the outcome be different if Carol had taken steps

to intervene and provide the necessary scaffolding for staff facing this challenge? Findings clearly point to Carol's lack of understanding of the organisational context and her inability to structure and pace out the right leadership practices for the school. Her lack of understanding of how to lead in concert with one's context undermines the success of her leadership practices.

Based on the data analysis and discussion of the principal's leadership practices to improve student learning outcomes, the following propositions emerged for school C:

Proposition R: Success (or lack of it) in improving student learning outcomes hinges on the types of leadership practices exercise by Carol and the focus of those practices. While the leadership practices she exercises are similar to practices of Ann and Bob, the difference lies in the way Carol fails to operationalize these leadership practices in her day-to-day activities in school. Her choice, time and attention given to these leadership activities fails to yield positive student learning outcomes in school C.

Proposition S: While the same leadership practices may be adopted by the principals, their degree of success depends on the clarity, consistency and scalability of these practices. In school C, while similar practices are adopted to other case schools, the lack of clarity, consistency, level of commitment, flexibility and scalability of these practices prevents the school from achieving breakthrough results. Carol's inability to maintain clarity, secure commitment to the vision for her stakeholders to follow and her inconsistent leadership actions prevents scalability of these practices.

### **6.2.3 Stakeholders' views of the Principal's influence on the process of improving student learning outcomes**

To understand stakeholders' views of Carol's influence on improving student learning outcomes, two interview questions were asked. The first has to do with how the stakeholders (vice –principal, teachers, KPs and students) in the school perceive the principal's leadership influence on student outcomes, while the second centres on how they perceive what the principal has done or not done in regard to improving student outcomes in the school.

When asked about their views of Carol's leadership influence on improving student outcomes, many (C2, C5, C10, C11, C12, CG13, CG14) concur that her influence is an indirect one. They view school leaders driving positive student outcomes by inculcating an excellence mindset and having a caring culture for all. As C12 puts it:

*....The caring culture that I am talking about is not only extended to the students. The teachers are also extremely important. And the caring culture must not only just be in the form of staff wellbeing. It's also in how you develop the teachers. Teachers are eventually the people to reach out to the students.*

They share the same view as Carol that student outcomes should include both the academic outcomes and the whole school experience of a child that links to character. CG 13 confirms how this view is translated into reality: "We have many programmes and opportunities to build our confidence and different life skills..."

The vice-principal perceives Carol as a visionary leader who 'dreams' to stretch the school while she and the KPs work on implementing her dreams. She feels that what works against the successful implementation of many policies is that Carol sets too high a standard and as a result, many find difficulty living and matching up to the standard. C2 elaborates: "Carol sets standards. Teachers feel that it's very difficult to reach that kind of standard. "

Teachers perceive that it is difficult to match up to the standards set by Carol in view of the constraints of resources and time. One wonders if this is an issue of pitching at the right level and also an issue of appropriate coaching or an issue of negative culture prevailing in school C.

One KP shares what Carol has gone through during her early years as a principal of school C:

*The staff observed that unlike the ex-P who is a seasoned principal and knows exactly what she wants. Carol is young, inexperienced and always wants to experiment. At the beginning they started to question if she knows what she wants. .... [C4]*

Carol perceives that there was no support from the former principal when she went through a rough patch during the transition stage and communicated this to the staff when she first took over. This issue is compounded by the fact that Carol does things very differently from the former principal. She faces a fair bit of resistance. C2 remarks:

*..... and also we realized that the two of us did strategic planning very differently from the previous P.... We surfaced a lot of gaps but we felt that really at the end of the day, it's not about surfacing the gaps but whether we have effectively addressed the gaps. I suppose we had not done too well. That's why you see for the last few years, the school results couldn't really live up to the expectations.*

Carol perceives that School C was doing badly when she first joined the school. However, this is perceived differently by other staff. C2 continues:

*I don't think that was a fair statement. You know when you are able to drive a new organization from scratch picking the people that you want and organizing the philosophy ... you are considered to have done well. We had a few pioneering*

*staff who were not really performing. We had to remove them and build up the young ones. But to say that the school was doing poorly - I don't think so.*

C2 attributes the failure to achieve a breakthrough in the student outcomes to a deployment challenge. She explains:

*In terms of conceptualization, we are there. But when you talk about the whole school moving forward, there is first the conceptualization and the part of deployment. So, for conceptualization, we are pretty strong in that. But I think deployment is the part where things went wrong.*

A member of staff interviewed believes a contributing factor that has led to the failure to achieve sustained improvement in academic results is “the school leadership team lacks the strong curriculum vision which is critical in improving and sustaining student outcomes. We are always experimenting and always changing strategies...”  
[C10]

The VP shares the same sentiment as she perceives that this constant experimentation results in an inability of the school leadership team to lead the teachers to achieve the vision, and to a lack of a consistent, sound team approach to drive the vision. She also attributes the challenge to Carol setting too high a standard; when teachers see that the standards set are too difficult to achieve, they give up. She adds:

*On hindsight, perhaps we shouldn't have set such a high standard. Setting high expectations would have been better. Let me explain. If we had set high expectation or positive expectation, we are not setting the line there and say you must reach here. Rather we are telling people that we must always think positively. Don't tell us the children cannot learn...Don't tell us that the staff cannot do it. Tell us what are the ways; not always searching for an answer. It's fine if you can't reach there. People get encouraged. Whereas a high standard*

*imply that if you don't hit there - you are lousy. .... In setting the standards, we have discouraged some good souls. Because they couldn't reach to that level and I could see the teachers struggling. [C2]*

This is an interesting observation. Carol's lack of follow-through and lack of understanding of the need of her staff is evident here. Would the outcome be different if appropriate scaffolding/intervention had been provided? Such intervention would have then been perceived by staff as the principal taking the step to provide care and support for the staff in scaling new heights. C2 comments, "That has got every implication for them to see that you are caring. You know teachers. That was how I felt. "

Carol concurs that this is one area of her leadership that she could have done differently. She shares that in the process of setting high standards, sometimes people cannot reach them, and in the process, some will get hurt.

Stakeholders (C2, C6, C7, C10, C11) interviewed perceive that Carol's actions stem from her personality. They feel that often times, she is not able to control her temperament and shows her displeasure and impatience on matters at work very easily. One KP remarks:

*For Carol, she can be emotionally weak. I know the leadership position can be very challenging. When we are helping we can be seen as being cruel as well, and sometimes she cannot take the response and will react. So her communication with the staff sometimes can get a bit strained. In her anxiety to change things, sometimes she addresses them there and then and her comments can be very curt. Staff may think she cares more about the issue than them. [C6]*

Another area in which the staff think Carol can do more is staff engagement. Teachers concur that while they understand the need to ensure that things are done properly, perhaps the extra effort of school leaders to expend more time to interact with the

staff and seek to understand the situation and provide the necessary support would come a long way. Often times, Carol prefers to use emails to engage staff and where parents are concerned, she sticks to the formal platforms such as Parent-Teacher-Meet and letters. C11 explains, "Sometimes I feel... her email becomes very curt and cutting ....."

The VP reveals that as a result of her impulsiveness, Carol often sends the wrong message which she later regrets. She notes that the principal is slowly learning over time. While she still uses email a lot to communicate with staff, she tries to address some negative things face to face. C2 attributes this to Carol's personality where she will just 'shoot out'.

*She is somebody that could not hide her feelings. When she is irritated by something, she will show it on her face and people can pick it up very quickly...*

*Sometimes I feel she sends the wrong signal about how she truly feels and people misunderstand her. And she can be impulsive..... I feel that her communications with her teachers could be improved.*

Staff (C3, C6, C8, C9, C11, C12) share that while there is a learning culture in School C, they feel that there is a lack of people engagement collaborative culture and the element of care. They strongly believe that the staff could work together a lot better.

When posed with the question if they are satisfied with how Carol's leadership practices have influenced the process of improving student learning outcomes, they share that they are disappointed as the school is not able to make breakthrough in academic results.

The VP explains:



*They probably felt very tired as well. In others, they felt that we have led them in many ways but couldn't shape what was the most important to the teachers: Because that's where they lay pride in what we do. If students have done well, the school has done well, it shows that they have worked effectively. If we couldn't do that, they may feel that to a certain extent, we are not that effective. The other thing is that ... they probably felt not very appreciated, especially when the P got angry. So, it could be that kind of a feeling.*

C6 reveals this could be the reason for some to gang up and leave:

*Besides feeling tired they just want to gang up. A lot of these people who left were actually some of our high capacity staff. They are also very strong in character and could be in conflict with Carol. ... I just feel that the caring culture is important...*

Staff feel that the element of care could be more visible in actions and deeds. One of the participants adds:

*Sometimes I asked myself, what do I look for at a workplace. First, I must be engaged. Even things that I don't like to do but have to do, I must find a meaning. If I find a meaning, I am willing to do it. Secondly, I want my boss to support me. If I want to do a job well, this person has to support me with resources, gives me the recognition, and gives me the support. When I make mistakes, even helps me by accommodating the mistakes and helps me to move on. These are the kind of things that I look for. Not so much of playing the blaming game... [C11]*

The VP adds:

*Because you see, when you get angry, people know you are not happy with the outcome. In fact, are you blaming me? .... Carol could be very impulsive, she could even say things like - I am going to give you a D... But luckily a lot of times it was*

*just in front of me. But I think she forgot herself when she got very angry and then when you say such things, the HODs would think, if it were me, that's how I would be treated. ....*

From the comments made by the staff, one wonders if the lack of breakthrough could be a result of Carol's lack of understanding of the phase of school improvement cycle. Research has shown that a lack of synchronization between a principal's leadership priorities and school cycle could lead to possible instability in school strategic direction. On the other hand, would the outcome have been different if the agency of staff in the school had been different, that is, staff more proactive and taking initiative? With shared leadership, it follows that there should be shared accountability. Staff could have exercised agency and taken initiative to approach Carol about issues they perceived were barriers to breakthrough, and together they could have sought a solution to this challenge, rather than leaving the matter to run its own course.

From the analysis of the data from school C, stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's leadership influence on the process of improving student outcome, differ. Findings reveal that compared to school A and B, there is a lower degree of shared perceptions between the different groups of stakeholders in school C. While all concur that Carol's influence is indirect, the view of the different groups - in particular, that of students, middle managers and teachers differ significantly. Middle managers seem to have a clearer picture of what and how Carol is influencing student outcomes than teachers and students. For example, students perceive that the degree of influence the principal has over the process of improving student outcomes is the least compared to parents and teachers. They commented that there is little opportunity to interact with Carol except on occasions when they were called upon, due to discipline issues or during the assemblies. Some felt that while there are opportunities to give feedback, they felt that more could be done for their feedback to be acted on. Students felt that Carol could do more to address their concerns. On the other hand, staff perceive the presence of her leadership influence in terms of her

personal characteristics and providing support. The former includes her competence in understanding the staff, skilled communication, decision making, flexibility, resourcefulness and knowledge of curriculum and deployment of resources while the latter considers creating an environment for professional development, staff engagement and trust building.

Data analysis of the ways in which Carol enacted her leadership practices show that she has cultivated a style of social relations which is very different from the other case principals. Right from the start, Carol had poor social relations with her staff, in particular her KP team who have been very loyal to the former principal. By lamenting the challenges she faced due to the lack of support from the previous principal and playing down the hard work put in by the previous principal and the school leadership team, she has compounded the difficulties of planning and taking the school forward. Her interpersonal relationships with teachers and students are also poor. Students interviewed felt that Carol is very distant from them and they hardly have the opportunity to interact with her. They shared that opportunities only arise if a student has discipline issues or is being called upon by the principal. Teachers feel that Carol could have engaged with them more by improving her social interaction and interpersonal skills. They feel that if the principal makes extra effort to spend more time interacting with them, seeking to understand situations better and provide the necessary support, it would have helped school improvement efforts. They also attribute her poor social relations to her personality which in this case, her inability to control her temperament and showing her displeasure and impatience too easily. The situation is also compounded by her inaction when situations warrant her to act. This results in the stakeholders - in particular the staff - losing confidence in her influence. Analysis of the stakeholders' perception of Carol's leadership influence suggests that their perceptions are accepting and appraising. The staff perception of Carol's indecisive actions and inconsistent leadership practices prevents them from following her wholeheartedly. Their inclination to do things their own ways hampers the achievement of the positive outcomes as the implementation strategies are disempowered. Staff response to actions taken by the principal frustrate and

discourage Carol from doing more, resulting in her adopting the limiting attitude that there is nothing much she could do.

Three propositions emerge from this analysis on stakeholders' perception in school C:

Proposition T: The organizational context of school C influences the way in which the principal exercises her leadership practices to improve student learning outcomes. In this case, Carol's inability to understand the organisational contexts and her indecisiveness in implementing and managing change results in her setting a vision and standard that is too high for her colleagues. Her perception of the lack of support from the former principal and lack of staff capacity in her relatively young staff profile has also led to her inaction and inconsistent leadership practices. Her negative view of her main resource- her colleagues and her failure to understand them and getting the best out of them indicates a lack of Carol's leadership ability.

Proposition U: The degree of success of the leadership practices exercised by the principal depends on her social relations; the interpersonal relationship between Carol and her stakeholders. How stakeholders perceive her influence depends very much on the social relations and interpersonal skills of the principal when she communicates with them. In Carol's case, her inactions when the situation warrants her to act have led to dissonance among her community and lack of confidence in her influence. In addition, her lack of a consistent temperament and her inability to control her temperament results in weak social relations and interpersonal relationship between Carol and her stakeholders.

Proposition V: There is a link between how stakeholders perceive the principal's influence on improving student learning outcomes and over what and how the principal exercises leadership practices. In school C, stakeholders

are still adapting and appraising. Their perception of Carol's indecisive actions and inconsistent leadership practices prevent stakeholders from following her wholeheartedly and instead, preferring to do things their own ways. In turn, their responses and actions discourage Carol from doing more.

## 6.3 Conclusion

Seven inter-related proposition relevant to how the principal of School C leads and manages the process of improving student learning outcomes emerged from the analysis of the case study data. Table 6.4 summarises the propositions for school C.

Proposition O	Carol's worldview and perception of leadership influence over improving student learning outcomes is shaped by her values orientation, beliefs and personal characteristics. Her strong values orientation stance towards believing in the importance of the innate predisposition of people and inherent human nature of man overshadows her other core values orientations. Together with her beliefs and personal characteristics, they shape how she perceives and conceptualizes her leadership and management influence.
Proposition P	Carol's beliefs and lack of optimism about human nature shapes the ways she conceptualizes her leadership practices to improve student learning outcomes in school C. For example, her lack of optimism in what her staff and students can do and achieve, leads her to perceive that the task of improving student learning outcomes is an uphill one.
Proposition Q	Success (or lack of it) in improving student learning outcomes hinges on the types of leadership practices exercise by Carol and the focus of those practices. While the leadership practices she exercises are similar to other case principals, the difference lies in the way Carol fails to operationalize these leadership practices in her day-to-day activities in school. Her choice, time and attention given to these leadership activities fails to yield positive student learning outcomes in school C.
Proposition R	While similar practices are adopted in school C, the degree of

	<p>clarity, consistency, level of commitment, flexibility and scalability of leadership practices necessary for successful implementation is lacking, thus preventing the school from achieving breakthrough results. Carol's inability to maintain clarity, secure commitment to the vision for her stakeholders to follow and her inconsistent leadership actions prevents scalability of these practices.</p>
Proposition S	<p>The organizational context of school C influences the way in which the principal exercises her leadership practices to improve student learning outcomes. Carol's inability to understand the organizational contexts and her indecisiveness in implementing and managing change results in her setting a vision and standard that is too high for her colleagues. Her negative view of her main resource- her colleagues and her failure to understand them and getting the best out of them indicates a lack of Carol's leadership ability.</p>
Proposition T	<p>How stakeholders perceive Carol's influence depends very much on her social relations and interpersonal skills when she communicates with her stakeholders. In Carol's case, her inactions when the situation warrants her to act have led to dissonance among her community and lack of confidence in her influence. Her lack of a consistent temperament and her inability to control her temperament results in weak social relations and interpersonal relationship between Carol and her stakeholders.</p>
Proposition U	<p>There is a link between how stakeholders perceive Carol's influence on improving student learning outcomes and over what and how she exercises her leadership practices. In school C, stakeholders are still adapting and appraising. Their perception of Carol's indecisive actions and inconsistent leadership practices prevent stakeholders from following her wholeheartedly and instead, preferring to do things their own ways. In turn, their responses and actions discourage Carol from doing more.</p>

Table 6.4: Summary of propositions for school C

This set of propositions that emerged from the data analysis of case school C will be brought over to Chapter 7 for comparative analysis with the emergent sets of

propositions from other case schools. Chapter 7 presents a cross-analysis of the findings for the three case schools.

# **Chapter 7**

## **Cross- case analysis**

### **7.0 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings of three case studies presented in Chapter 4 to 6 outlining the perspectives of participants in the study reported in this thesis. The study is designed to gather a richness of data from the principals and stakeholders of the case schools about the ways in which principals influence the process of improving student outcomes.

The decision to focus on three selected schools as case studies is justified by the potential of case studies to permit the researcher to get as close to the participants as possible and thereby enable the uncovering of subjective understandings of the phenomenon under study. The outcome of principals' leadership and management practices to improve the process of student learning varies in the case schools. In schools A and B, the principals' practices led to positive learning outcomes while in school C, the practices did not seem to yield breakthrough results. Through the use of inductive analysis, a total of twenty one propositions were derived from the three case studies. In this chapter, these propositions will be brought together and a comparative analysis will be carried out to further refine these three sets of propositions. In addition, the findings in relation to each set of propositions from these three case schools will be compared and contrasted in a cross- case analysis.

The chapter starts with an introduction, followed by discussion of the clusters of propositions and discussion based on each cluster. The chapter ends with a brief conclusion of the findings.



## 7.1 Clusters of Propositions

There are a total of twenty one emergent propositions (see Appendix 7.0) arising from the interviews conducted at the three case schools. These propositions were examined, compared and refined across the three case schools. In doing so, cognisance was taken of Miles and Huberman's (1984) recommendation to use an interpretive 'tactic' of proposition grouping. This tactic was called 'clustering' by Sarantakos (1993, p309), whereby "events, sites, actors and processes that have similar patterns or characteristics may be sorted into categories, and grouped together". This process yielded a total of eight propositions as shown below:

Proposition 1: Principals' values orientation, personal characteristics and beliefs shape how the principal perceives his/her leadership and management influence to improve student learning outcomes.

Proposition 2: Principals' beliefs and optimism about human nature shape the ways they conceptualize their leadership practices in relation to improving student learning outcomes in school.

Proposition 3: The success and sustainability of student learning outcomes hinge on the type and focus of leadership practices exercised by the principal in a school.

Proposition 4: The choice of the leadership practices adopted is dependent on principals' ability to understand and interpret the context they operate in, and their decisiveness in implementing and managing change.

Proposition 5: While similar leadership practices may be adopted by different principals, the degree of success each encounters depends on the clarity, commitment, consistency, flexibility and scalability of these practices.

Proposition 6: The organizational context of a school influences the way in which the principal exercises his/her leadership practices to improve student learning outcomes.

Proposition 7: The degree of success of the leadership practices exercised by principals depends on the quality of their social relations with colleagues and stakeholders. How stakeholders perceive their influence depends heavily on the social relations and interpersonal skills of the principal when communicating with them.

Proposition 8: There is a link between how stakeholders' perceive principals' leadership to influence the improvement of student learning outcomes, and the ways and extent in which the principals can actually deploy their specific leadership practices.

Continuing with interpretive tactic of proposition grouping, the final eight propositions were grouped into three clusters: The first four propositions were categorised by themes and they in turn formed two clusters of propositions, namely Personal Dispositions (Propositions 1 and 2) and Leadership Practices (Propositions 3 and 5). The remaining four propositions formed a third cluster, giving rise to the theme Context (Propositions 4 and 6), Social Relations (Proposition 7) and Stakeholders' view (Proposition 8). This clustering was conducted using a matrix containing the twenty one propositions derived from the three case studies, thus enabling the researcher to identify themes and trends (see Appendix 7.1). In choosing 'labels' for each of the propositions and the subsequent clusters, some of the words actually used by the participants in the study were adopted.

## **7.2 Cluster One: Personal dispositions**

This section briefly outlines how the case principals perceive and conceptualise their leadership influence on the process of improving student outcomes. It discusses how values orientation, beliefs and personal characteristics of the principals influence their perception and conceptualisation of their leadership influence.

### **Perception of school principals**

All the principal respondents perceive that the principal plays an important role in improving student outcomes. Both Ann and Bob, for example, believe that they play a critical role in moving the school forward. More specifically, they feel the need to take the lead to initiate culture change and processes which culminate in improving outcomes. While the principals share similar views of what constitutes a successful school, it is interesting to note that their perception of how to achieve it varies. Ann for example, perceives that her influence involves working towards a school where people are happy in the organisation, while Bob sees the need for him to emphasise academic press. In the case of Carol, while she subscribes to that fact that value-added-ness to a child's learning outcome is important, she perceives that it must be pursued in terms of a value system, and that success is highly dependent on the staff profile.

While Ann holds the view that both the academic and non- academic outcomes are important, she perceives that her influence and focus on academic excellence is important as this will develop the mind set and skills which drive excellence in other areas. This perception is also shared by Bob who believes that his influence comes in the form of his leading the school to focus on academic success which will boost confidence of the stakeholders. This is in contrast with how Carol perceives her influence. While believing that both the academic and non-academic aspects are important, Carol feels that it is more important to influence the soft skills

development first as they are more difficult to learn from others. This perception seems to shape her decision to allocate her time and responsibility to building soft skills in the students.

Ann perceives that her leadership influence can be effected through working on her relationships with her stakeholders, and in particular her staff. This perception differs with Bob and Carol. Bob perceives that showing students the possibilities and building their self-belief is important in the journey of improving students' outcomes. He believes in adopting a school wide approach by putting in place tested structures and expectations, a process seen as important to ensure sustainability in the outcomes. While Carol acknowledges that principals have a part to play to ensure structures and processes are in place to improve student outcomes, she perceives that the profile of her young staff is critical and she views her staff profile as her great dampening factor to improving outcomes in her school.

### ***Personal Disposition***

The difference in these principals' perceptions of their leadership influence regarding improving student outcomes stems from their values orientations, beliefs and personal characteristics which are conceptualised as Personal Dispositions in this study.

Disposition is defined as values, beliefs, attitudes and characteristics demonstrated over time through professional interaction, decisions and observable behaviours with the entire school community (NCATE, 2007). Usher (2002) explained that dispositions typify a person as an individual and are controlling, perceptual qualities that determine the person's usual ways of thinking and acting. This in turn impacts on their perceptions and how they conceptualise their practices. Deal & Peterson (1993) argued that the dispositions of the leaders have a definite effect on the culture of the school. They explained that the actions of the principal are

noticed and interpreted by others as what matter and are valued. Ritchhart (2002) contended that “dispositions concern not only what we do, but what we are actually likely to do, addressing the gap we often notice between our abilities and our actions” (p.18). In this study, personal dispositions will be categorised into personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientation of the case principals. Each of the qualities in the label ‘Personal Disposition’ is further elaborated below.

### ***Personal Characteristics***

Case principals were recognised for their distinctive personal characteristics which include being enthusiastic and highly motivated towards helping students achieve their best. All were achievement oriented both personally, and for the whole school community and set high expectations for themselves and the school community.

Both Ann and Bon demonstrated strong personal drive and sense of mission to do what it takes to help students to achieve academic success. Their narratives provide the link between their personal experience and their passion to go all out for the students. Stakeholders in school A and B described them as being single-minded in their pursuit of academic excellence, persistent and determined. According to participants, neither was contented with the status quo as they continually “raised the bar” personally and for the school community. They shared that what motivated them to follow their leaders was their optimism of seeing ‘barriers’ as ‘challenges’ rather impediments. They had great interpersonal and communication skills; especially so for Ann. The participants described Bob as being single-minded and assertive. They perceived him as one who would remove all obstacles to ensure the set goal is achieved. What sets Ann apart was her capacity to build trust based on the integrity, care and respect through her role modelling.

In contrast, the stakeholders of school C provide different narratives for Carol. While she sets high standards, her inability to understand the organisational context led to dissonance between reality and aspiration. The stakeholders were not inspired

to follow her, instead they were judgemental and some were even resistant to her leadership. Unlike Bob and Ann, her lamenting mind set, tendency to see 'barriers' as impediments and her lack of 'can-do' spirit influenced her perception and conceptualisation of her leadership influence to improve student outcomes.

### ***Beliefs***

Theorists investigating leadership in the context of effective leaders advocate research that specifically addresses the beliefs of leaders relative to their leadership perception and behaviour (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002). Sarros & Santora (2001b) and Krishnan (2001) concluded that effective leaders indeed possess values and belief systems that are distinguishable from other types of leaders.

Case principals were able to articulate a set of educational values and beliefs that guided their vision and actions. They clearly wanted the best for their schools, and held strong beliefs about the importance of sound education for all children. Common beliefs held by all three included - every child matters and can learn; every child can achieve its fullest potential, and principals can make the difference. Each case principal is characterised by their belief system that centres on: - first, innate goodness and passion - demonstrated through honesty, empathy and commitment; second, equity where everyone matters, demonstrated through being open and exercising flexibility; and third, people-centeredness, where all students can learn and achieve demonstrated through shared leadership and responsibility. The different degrees of their beliefs around these three categories define the way they perceive and conceptualise their leadership influence.

In school A, Ann strongly believes that creating high-trust relationships throughout the school is the answer to improving and sustaining student learning. As such she perceives that her leadership influence can be effected through working on her relationships with her stakeholders. She believes in her staff and students' abilities to exercise responsibility with accountability. Her strong conviction that

every child matters guides her decision making. Her belief in the need for innovation in order for school A to progress influences how she conceptualises her moves to foster a culture of change where staff and students are empowered to be change agents.

Bob holds strong views that the principal and staff have the responsibility to provide the best for the students. His strong belief stance of innate goodness of people is clearly shown in his perception that every child can achieve through building on student's self- belief. This gives rise to his strong conviction and values orientation that every child is capable, if given the opportunity. Such optimism and his earlier experiences reinforce his perceptions that in turn influence how he conceptualises his leadership practices in school B. This belief system is also extended to his staff and parents, with whom he strives to create a shared purpose for his stakeholders.

Carol holds strong belief systems of equity. She reveals her concern about being mindful of excelling at the expense of character, or at the expense of others. She strongly believes while soft skills and academic excellence are important, developing soft skills is more critical. This has influenced her perception about her leadership influence. This belief system is different from Bob and Ann who believe that the importance of academic success is a basis to motivate students to succeed in other areas. While Carol subscribes to the people-centred stance, which is demonstrated by her perception of shared leadership, her belief that her young profile staff are inexperienced and lack the capacity and mindset to equip the students with the relevant skills leads her to perceive that her young staff profile is a great dampening factor to improving student learning outcomes. In contrast to the belief system held by Ann and Bob, who held strong optimism about their colleagues, she is less optimistic about what they can achieve. Her belief system is that while she has a critical role to play as a people developer, she is realistic that she cannot achieve all and there is only so much she can do, a view which further compounds the situation. Her beliefs influence how she conceptualizes and operationalizes her leadership practices in the day to day activities in school C.

## ***Values Orientation***

Henderson and Thomson (2003) define values as the sum of preferences and priorities. Preferences are what we would like to have in our life while priorities indicate how important each preference is in relation to another. An enduring belief is one that is personally or socially preferable (Rokeach, 1973). Awareness of values enables us to understand our underlying motivations, beliefs and assumptions behind our decisions and behaviours (Gerhart, 2008). Value awareness also acts as guidance or standards of a person's behaviour and represents the way people think and behave. It therefore, contains a judgement element in that it carries an individual's ideas as to what is right or desirable. Thus, in this study, value refers to the sum of preferences and priorities and the term is used liberally to include elements of dispositions and personal qualities.

According to research studies (Leithwood and Steinbach, 1991, 1993) values influence principals' problem solving processes, both directly and indirectly. Values can act as preferences which influence principals' actions, or indirectly influence them by acting as filters that may lead to actions or inactions of their leadership practices. A further study conducted in the East Asian context (Law, Walker and Dimmock, 2003) casts further light on how values influence the principals' perceptions and management of problems in their schools. Using concepts drawn from the above literature, this study set out to explore the differences in the values orientations of Ann, Bob and Carol. The "value-based congruence theory" which is built on two premises is used to analyse the value orientation of the principals involved. One of the constructs this theory embraces is that values influence principals' perceptions of situations and subsequently how they make decisions (Leithwood and Poplin, 1992; Begley, 1988; England, 1967). The second premise has to do with the degree of congruence. It suggests that although principals hold different values orientations, which in turn influence their perceptions, the kind of perceptions and the leadership



practices they eventually employ generally match the dominant values to which they subscribe. Table 7.1 shows the values orientations of the case principals.

Case Schools	Values held based on analysis of data	Dominant values to which Principal subscribes
School A (Ann)	*Relationship(Team); *Trust (Belief in the good of people); Success; f*Change; *Care(everyone must be happy); Fight for a cause; *Hard work; Independence; *Empowerment; *Resourcefulness; Risk taking ; Persuasion; *Flexibility; Integrity; *Commitment; *Optimism, Sense of Mission *Dominant Value P subscribes	+ Relationship + Trust + Care + Change + Risk Taking + Hard work + Empowerment + Resourcefulness + Flexibility + Sense of Mission
School B (Bob)	Relationship(Teamwork); Success; *Fight for a cause; Change ; *Hardwork; *Religious Beliefs; Risk Taking ; Independence ; *Delegation/ empowerment; Enforcing; Justice/fairness; Care ; Integrity; *Passion ; Pragmatic ; *Optimism; Commitment	+ Fight for a cause + Hard work + Justice/fairness + Religious belief + Enforcing/Control + Delegation + Passion + Pragmatic + Optimism + Sense of mission + Commitment
School C (Carol)	*Integrity/loyalty ( careful about excelling academically at the expense of character); Relationship ( teamwork); Hardwork (different degree); Care; Empowerment; Risk-taker; *Overly ambitious (success); *Competition; *Change; Entrepreneur spirit; Commitment; *Independence ; Challenging rules ( non-conformist); Diversity; *Non pragmatic ; *Pessimist; Unrealistic; *Perfectionist	+ Security /loyalty + Empowerment + Success + Competition + Change + Inflexibility + Perfectionist + Pessimistic/passiveness + Unrealistic/Idealistic + Independence

Table 7.1: Values orientations of case school principals

From the data analysis for Ann, it is evident that she has a strong values orientation towards relationships and connections. This explains her strong stance in thinking that she can exert her leadership influence through working on her relationship and connection with her stakeholders. This relationship values orientation is found in the importance she places on putting events in their context and taking time to understand her stakeholders. Therefore, it is not surprising that her leadership is predicated on connecting with her stakeholders, which is confirmed when analysing her leadership practices. It is also interesting to note that relationship shapes her other core values orientations. It shapes the way she communicates, uses power, leads and interprets information. This relationship and connection values orientation could be the reason for her values orientation stance to power which tends to be different from the traditional view of having power over others. Where Ann is concerned, she is more inclined towards using power to build capacity in others through the practice of distributed leadership in the school. This may account for her strength in building teams that inspire and model trust at every level of the school. She has used this different orientation towards power to her advantage when she promotes and advocates the concept of agents of change. When the power with others concept is used, Ann's colleagues tend to have greater ownership over the change that is being suggested and therefore the change can be more sustained and successful.

Ann perceives that she exercises her leadership influence to create a school where people are happy in the organisation in addition to pursuing excellence. This is consistent with her orientation to ethics of care. She takes the context and her care for others into consideration when working through ethical dilemmas. This caring orientation also opens up the domain of emotions and time is spent reflecting on the emotional content of the message and the feelings of individuals in schools.

Ann's values orientation towards change explains why she is flexible and resourceful in her day to day approaches and is adaptable to change. She sees change as a process that unfolds in the context of relationship. Making connections with

people, finding agreement, and ensuring diverse participation drives her change process. This is evident in the way she promotes a culture of change by empowering colleagues to create change in school A.

Bob has a different values orientation stance towards relationship and connection. While he values relationship and connection with his stakeholders, his value orientation towards the ethic of care is through justice, which shapes his other core value orientations. He sees moral decisions through an ethic of justice. Unlike Ann who views the needs for others to feel important in her ethical decision making, he uses a different set of criteria to define fairness. He makes ethical decisions on the basis of universal principles and rules, and in an impartial and verifiable manner with a view to ensuring fair and equitable treatment of all people. This involves the application of formal rules that generally identify only a few key features of any situation as relevant so that a decision may be made with little delay and less time-intensive (Taylor, 1998). This is consistent with his perception and conceptualisation of his leadership influence. He perceives that his leadership influence to improve student learning can be exerted by adopting a school wide approach which entails putting in place structures and expectations for his stakeholders. His leadership practice of command and control strategy is evidence of his values orientation for an ethic of justice. Through putting in place tested structures and expectations that focus on academic success, creating different learning possibilities for the students as well as building their self- belief, he is able to achieve the outcome within the shortest time.

Bob's strong values stance to fight for a cause which in this case is helping all students to excel in academics and move to the next level drives how he conceptualises his leadership practices. His values orientation to power which he uses to exert control over decisions, actions and people under his charge, differs from Ann and Carol. This is evident in the way he exercises his command and control approaches to reward, coerce or gain assent and compliance from his stakeholders.

Coupled with his values<sup>13</sup> orientation stance towards pragmatism, sense of duty, commitment and hard work which influence how he perceives and conceptualises his leadership influence, he has repeatedly brought the school to new heights in terms of improving student outcomes. This is consistent with findings from England (1975) who found that successful leaders tend to uphold certain values orientations such as pragmatism, expertise, prestige and a sense of duty consciousness.

Carol's values orientation has some commonality with Ann and Bob. Like Ann, she holds the value stance of relationship and connection and this aligns with her leadership perception of her critical role as a people developer to improve student learning. However, her values orientation towards innate predispositions linked to the inherent human nature of man (Kluckhohn, 1953) shapes her other core values orientations. Her lack of optimism in what her staff and students can do leads her to perceive that the task of improving student outcomes is an uphill one. In addition, her concern about being mindful of academically excelling at the expense of character development, or at the expense of others, which reveals her values orientation stance towards security/loyalty, may have contributed to her indecisions and inactions characterising some critical leadership practices to move the school forward. Unlike Ann and Bob she tends towards the values of non-pragmatism, idealism, independence, inflexibility and perfectionism which attribute to her inconsistent leadership practices and how the same set of leadership practices are played out differently in her day to day activities. This is consistent with findings from England (1975) who established that less successful leaders hold the values of passivity, security, status quo (resistance to change and inflexibility), affection and pleasure and often their practices in influence by what they perceive.

The findings from this study show how values orientation, beliefs and personal characteristics of principals influence their perception and conceptualisation of their leadership practices. Table 7.2 summarises the differences between the case

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<sup>13</sup> The term 'value' is used liberally to include elements of dispositions and personal qualities.

principals in terms of their perceptions, personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientation. It seeks to distil the distinguishing characteristics attributed to principals who are able to improve student outcomes from less successful principal who faces the challenge of having breakthrough in improving student outcomes.

School A (Successful and Sustaining Principal)	School B ( Successful Principal )	School C( Less successful Principal )
Perception of case principals		
1. Influence through working towards a school where people are happy 2. Focus on academic excellence is important to develop mindset and skills that can drive excellence in other areas 3. Influence can be effected through working on her relationship with stakeholders	1. Influence by leading the school to focus on academic success which will in turn boost confidence of stakeholders 2. Showing students the possibilities and build their self- belief is important in the journey of improving student outcomes 3. Influence by putting in place tested structures and setting high expectations	1. Influence through development of soft skills development is more important 2. Influence through putting in place structures and process for learning 3. Perceive her staff profile as her great dampening factor to school outcomes.
Beliefs		
1. Creating high-trust relationships can improve and sustain student outcomes 2. Everyone has the ability to exercise responsibility with accountability 3. Principal's presence and availability and approachability inspire others to commitment and shared purpose 4. Innovation is the key to sharpen the school's competitive edge	1. Importance of principal initiating in the area of improving student outcomes 2. Believe that staff and P have the responsibility to provide the best for the students. 3. Believe that every child is capable if given opportunity	1. Strong belief stance of equity 2. Developing soft skill is more critical than academic excellence 3. Belief that her young staff profile are inexperience and lack the capacity and mindset to equip students (less optimistic about what they can achieve) 4. Her belief system that while she has a critical role to play as a people developer, she is realistic that she cannot catch all and there is so much she could do – sign of limiting herself
Values Orientation		
1. Strong values orientation towards relationship and connection that shapes her other core values orientation	1. Strong values orientation toward ethic of care through justice shapes other core value orientations. 2. See moral decisions	1. Strong values orientation towards innate predisposition; inherent nature of man shapes her other core values

2. Values orientation of ethic of care 3. Values orientation towards change	through an ethic of justice. 3.Strong values stance to fight for a cause 4.Values orientation to power 5.Values stance towards pragmatism	orientation 2. Values orientation towards security/loyalty 3. Strong values stance of non-pragmatism, idealism, independence , inflexibility and perfectionism
Personal Characteristics		
1. Strong personal drive and strong sense of mission 2. Single minded in their pursuit for academic excellence; persistent and determined 3. Not contented with status quo 4. Optimistic mindset; see barrier as challenge rather than impediment		1. Lamenting mindset 2. Tendency to see 'barriers' as impediments 3. Lack of 'can do' spirit
5. Excellent communicators with excellent interpersonal and communication skills 6. Build trust based on integrity, care and respect through her role modelling	5. Assertive 6. Will not hesitate to remove all obstacles to achieve the set goal	

Table 7.2 Summary of the relationship between perception of case principals and their personal dispositions

One key finding that emerged from the data is the relationship that exists between case principals' perception of their leadership influence to improve student outcomes, and their personal dispositions. As highlighted in Chapter 2, there is hardly any research on principals' perception of their leadership influence per se, and even less of a knowledge base in relation to leaders' personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientation and their connection with leaders' perception of their leadership influence. This study unravels some of the key characteristics of the successful case principals and their less successful counterparts. Successful case principals tend to hold personal characteristics such as strong personal drive, strong sense of mission, single mindedness, challenging status quo, optimistic mind set and perceiving barrier as challenge rather than impediment. Findings suggest that the successful case principal with sustainable student outcomes is not only single minded in the pursuit

of the school goal but also focuses on building trust based on integrity, care and respect. In contrast, the less successful case principal tends to exhibit personal characteristics of lamenting, lacking in 'can do' spirit, and has the tendency of seeing barriers as impediments – all of which explain her inability to achieve breakthrough in improving student outcomes.

The study also noted that case principals' values orientation and beliefs shape their perceptions and conceptualisation of their leadership and inform their decisions and actions to improve student outcomes. It found that the principals' strongest values orientation overshadows their secondary and other core values orientation and in turn influences their perception and conceptualisation of their leadership influence. For example, the principal who holds a strong values orientation towards relationship and connection perceives and conceptualises her leadership influence through building high trust relationship in her school. This values orientation shapes her other core values orientation of change, ethic of care and power.

Successful case principals hold a strong belief stance of the innate goodness of people. They believe in their staff and students' ability to exercise responsibility with accountability and hold strong beliefs that every child is capable if given opportunity. The less successful case principal is less optimistic about what her students and staff can achieve. Scholars argue that leaders have mental models that guide their actions (Avolio, 2007; Senge, 1990). Such models that are formed over time from observations, experience and trial and error become entrenched in the psyche of leaders and eventually dominate their actions and behaviours (Hackman and Wageman, 2007).

The findings demonstrate that successful influence is underpinned by personal dispositions which include personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientations of the case principals. Each of these qualities does not influence in isolation but work together to influence the principals' perception and conceptualisation of their leadership influence. This finding is supported by researchers who point out that

understanding leadership requires a consideration of how the joint combinations of particular characteristics, dispositions and attributes inform leadership behaviour and actions (Yukl, 2006; Zaccaro, 2007; Zaccaro et al., 2004). Figure 7.1 provides a diagrammatic representation of their relationships.

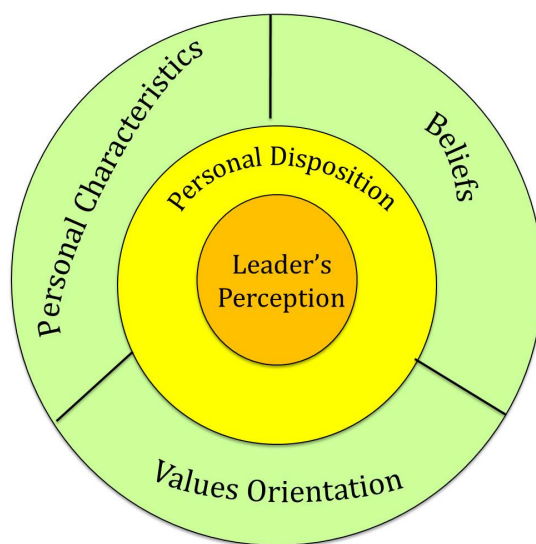


Figure 7.1 Relationships between the leader's perceptions, personal dispositions and other characteristics

The discussion above shows a relationship between personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientation of principals and their perception and conceptualisation of their leadership practices. These differences impact how they lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes and explain any differences in the outcomes of their leadership practice.

### **7.3 Cluster Two: Leadership Practices**

This section explores how the case principals play out their leadership practices once they have conceptualised them, and how these have impacted the student outcomes



of their schools. It also outlines how the type and focus of leadership practices impact on the success and sustainability of the student outcomes.

Interview data revealed that the three principals undertook quite different activities in their day to day operation in their schools. These differences could be accounted for by the principals' differing characteristics, beliefs and values orientations as discussed in the earlier section. The consequence of these differing beliefs, values orientation and personal characteristics can be seen in the leadership practices they conceptualised and played out. For example, Ann and Bob hold differing values orientation in regard to relationships and connections. Although both hold the same belief that academic success is important, they adopt a different practice to influence the outcomes. In some situations, while they may have adopted the same leadership practice, the findings show that the intensity of the focus differs between the principals. This leads to a different outcome and impact. Leithwood (2007) acknowledges that while there is a set of leadership practices that are necessary for success in almost all context, there should be variations in the way they are enacted. Table 7.3 summarises the types of leadership practices adopted by the case principals.

School A (Ann)	School B (Bob)	School C (Carol)
Looking into the future	Sense making and creating a shared sense of purpose	Sharing Leadership
Culture of Change	Culture Building and structure	Facilitating Professional Develop
Trust Building		Rebuilding Structures
Distributed Leadership and Capacity Building	Command and control Strategy	Leading with an instructional orientation
Connecting with others	Leader's Presence	

Table 7.3 Summary of the leadership practices adopted by the case principals

Generally, their leadership practices centre around five areas namely; leading for the future, leading culture building, leading learning, leading people and leading change. Each of the areas will be elaborated in the section below.

### ***Leading for the future***

Research has established that a school's success derives from the development of a shared purpose for the school (Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford, 2005). Evidence from the case studies indicates that case principals begin with the development of a school-wide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students. Research literature has consistently supported the notion that having high expectations for all is the key to improving student outcomes (e.g. Porter et al, 2008). In this study, it has been found that while the principals adopt the same leadership practice of shaping the vision for the school, how they go about this differs, which in turn leads to different impact and outcomes. While research has established that effective principals articulate and reinforce the school vision (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004b), how they go about securing the commitment and buy-in to the vision is not clear. Evidence from the case studies shows that while all respondent principals articulate and reinforce their mission and vision regularly, how their practices are played out to secure commitment to the vision differs in their day to day activities. Findings indicate that schools that succeed in consistently improving student outcomes go beyond articulation of the direction. They work on securing the commitment to the vision through different approaches in the day to day activities. In school A, for example, Ann articulates a compelling reason for her stakeholders to share the responsibility of moving the school forward. Her strategic vision according to her stakeholders is clearly communicated and responsive to different school contexts and this creates greater trust in the staff to participate positively in buying-in to the vision. To support sustained improvements in school performance, Ann works on extending deeper foundations for cultural change. This includes laying the foundation for long term improvements that focus on diagnosing cultural problems and taking early actions to change perceptions. She also models the importance of building personal and academic relationships and establishes appropriate collaborative structures in which roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are progressively distributed. Such scaffoldings provide further support for her stakeholders working towards the goal. While she sets high expectations for staff, she

also works on nurturing relationships between expectations, work ethics and efficacy alongside care, engagement and achievement. Her leadership practices displayed in her day-to-day activities consistently reinforce her focus on the vision and expectations she has articulated. Her structured and hands-on approach creates clarity and clear communication of a responsive vision for the school.

Leadership approaches are somewhat different in school B. Like Ann, Bob articulates high expectations that every student matters and shapes the school's vision. However, he adopts a different approach. To secure commitment by his stakeholders, he uses data to create a shared sense of purpose for his staff. He adopts a structured approach for creating this collective purpose through focusing, conditioning and creating the desire and courage of his staff. For example, in order to secure commitment of his stakeholders to the school vision, he creates the desire for this in his stakeholders, in different ways. For his staff, he uses data to show them the reality of the unfavourable outcomes for academic results in school B and proceeds to show them how to go about achieving the goals set. Finding indicates that his vision for the school resonates with his staff and this in turn galvanises them to take action. He also creates a similar desire for the students and parents through his messaging of his vision for the school. To secure stakeholders' commitment to the vision, Bob also uses symbols and rituals to frame and focus the minds of his stakeholders towards this endeavour. His focus and consistent practice for the goals set provides clarity for the school community on what needs to be done.

This picture is completely different again for Carol in school C. While she articulates high expectations for all, and uses data to secure their commitment to follow her vision, the outcome is different. Findings indicate that while she articulates and reinforces the vision, her daily leadership practice is not consistent as she does not have a clear plan that works on securing the commitment of her staff to the vision. This leads to her stakeholders' perception of the lack of clarity of direction for the school.

### ***Leading Culture Building***

Leading culture building entails creating a shared vision and leadership that encourages the staff to provide the educational experiences that will bring out the best in every student. Research has shown that effective principals not only shape school buildings characterised by the basics - safety and orderliness - but also see to it that schools create an atmosphere in which students and staff feel supported and responded to (Mendels, 2012). They also promote a culture in which innovation and risk-taking are encouraged and supported (Mulford, 2005).

Generally case principals work on cultivating leadership in others by fostering a learning culture and shared leadership. For example, on her arrival at school C, Carol forged structures to enable shared leadership with the aim of promoting a culture of learning and the building of staff capacity. She introduced new policies and institutionalized practices that supported these structures. To facilitate shared leadership, she also worked on enlarging her staff resources involved in decision making by inviting high potential teachers to take part in the strategic planning together with the school leadership team. As articulated by the stakeholders, this learning culture is evident in the school.

In school A, Ann fostered a culture where staff are empowered as change agents to move the school forward. Stakeholders view her role in fostering a culture of change and innovation as essential to the school's success in improving student outcomes. She initiated the cultural change by encouraging teachers to be involved in pilot projects, changing the way performance is measured by constantly sharing with staff what better performing schools are doing and how they measure their performance. She also helped them to develop new perspectives on students, parents and competitors. In particular, her constructive response to local and national policy initiatives helped to foster a climate in which staff viewed participation in change more positively. Ann encourages a climate in which change is viewed as a necessary and positive dimension of school culture. For example, she does not consider policy

changes as an imposition but rather as opportunities for the school to reflect and improve its current practices. Her consistent messaging in this helps staff to change their perspectives about change and become a willing partner of change.

Bob however, fosters a culture of excellence that promotes and values learning, yet at the same time embodies realistic but high expectations of all students and teachers. He does this by promoting a climate of high expectations and putting in place appropriate structures to support staff and students to achieve the goal. He uses focus and conditioning to shape and spur stakeholders into embracing the culture. For example, he uses symbols and rituals to frame and focus the minds of the students and staff by working on their self-belief with the maxim, “what I believe, I can achieve”. Unlike Ann and Carol who adopt a more bottom-up approach to fostering the desired culture, Bob adopts a command and control strategy to drive stakeholders to the desired culture. He is not hesitant to challenge the status quo and make known to all the community that he will do what it takes to achieve the desired culture. Researchers on school culture suggest that challenging the status quo and even outright objecting to the way things are done can begin a healthy discourse and lead to even healthier outcomes (Thacker, Bell and Schargel, 2009).

### ***Leading Learning***

Evidence from the case studies indicates that all three case principals are anchored in strong and sound educational philosophy and beliefs. They have strong conviction of the critical importance of education to the student’s life and hold the basic belief that every child is important and can learn. Each principal looks into creating powerful, equitable learning opportunities for students, staff and motivating or compelling them to take advantage of these opportunities. Generally, case principals accomplish this by engaging in a series of interventions depending on the needs and context of their schools. These interventions can be area focussed or a school-wide approach. Datnow (2005) reported that “for reform to be sustained, it must become institutionalized (school-wide approach) or taken-for-granted feature of life in a school”.

Findings note that depending on the extent of their beliefs, values orientation and their personal characteristics, the leadership practices in these interventions are played out differently in their day-to-day activities. The similarity and differences are described below.

Apart from communicating her strategic intent that focuses on learning and improving student outcomes, Ann builds professional communities that value learning through practicing distributed leadership in school. Participants interviewed concurred that the practice of distributed leadership is important to the success of the school in terms of sustaining improved student outcomes. To her school community, this strategy is important as it works to cultivate the ownership and agency of staff in teaching and learning. Such practice enables staff to contribute effectively in setting priorities and targets and tracking them. The practice of distributed leadership enables middle managers to build leadership and management capacities.

Bob's focus on learning comes in the form of intervention targeted at classroom practices and school curriculum. He puts in place school wide structures to drive the desired behaviour. For example, where there is success in any area within the school, he is quick to institutionalise these successful strategies and processes instead of leaving it to chance for the practices to be cascaded to the rest of the school. In any subject area where he lacks the expert knowledge, he leverages on external partnership by building relationships and securing resources from outside groups that can foster students' or teachers' learning. Such a focused approach spells clarity, consistency and scalability to his leadership practice.

Carol leads learning by focusing on championing the character development of students which in her view will take care of the academic learning of the students. She adopts a school wide intervention by embracing holistic assessment. To create motivation for students to work on their character development, the assessment is tied to a certain percentage of their academic outcomes. Like Ann and Bob, her effort with, and encouragement of, staff to innovate with the purpose of improving student

outcomes is obvious under her leadership. However despite her series of interventions in this area the outcome does not yield breakthrough results. Findings show that Carol is still experimenting to get the right formula to improve student outcomes. Stakeholders perceive that her leadership practice lacks clarity and consistency when she frequently tries out different things. One wonders if too much experimentation will lead to staff losing confidence in her ability to lead the school forward.

Evidence from the case studies indicates that principals in leading learning not only set the stage for learning, they also take concrete steps that lead to student, professional and system( school-wide) learning. It is worth noting that in school A, the series of interventions Ann adopts engender in her and the staff a coherence by connecting student, staff and system learning with one another and with learning goals. This creates a more holistic picture for staff and this seems to contribute to her ability to sustain improving student outcomes. Such an approach contributes to the scalability of her practice. Research has established that leaders pursuing a few of the actions while ignoring the other may not achieve the learning results they seek (Knapp, Copland and Talbert, 2003).

### ***Leading People***

One of the leadership practices adopted by the principals to improve student outcomes involves shaping the quality of education by growing their staff. Research has illustrated how principals' attention to building organizational capacity in ways that were culturally appropriate positively influenced student outcomes (e.g. Jacobson et al, 2005; Mulford et al., 2008). Generally, these principals help staff to strengthen their professional values and deepen their pedagogical skills and knowledge. They work on helping staff become skilful and caring educators and energizing them to give of their best in the day-to-day dealing with students.

Ann works on growing her staff by first building trust and then connecting with them. She exercises trust in such a way that it is broadened, deepened and embedded over time. She is highly persuasive in her approach to dealing with staff and always acknowledges the part that others play and there is always affirmation and gratitude on work done. Her stakeholders note that her frequent and consistent actions and communication on what is important reinforce trust in the school and motivate others to be more receptive to her coaching and development. Ann also develops staff through the practice of distributed leadership. Ann's key emphasis in enhancing school capacities is to get the right people on board. She works on getting the best staff members and finding ways to motivate and retain them. This is done through providing them with as much support as she can and exercising flexibility to serve their needs. In addition, she encourages staff involvement in innovation and empowers them to be the agent of change for school improvement. Such bottom up practice of growing people inspires many to buy in to her coaching and development which eventually benefit students and classroom practices.

Bob adopts a more top-down approach to developing staff. While he practices shared leadership among the school leadership team, he also makes it clear that he can veto any decisions on matters of importance. Like other principals, he makes good use of all the skills and knowledge among staff, encouraging those with potential to step into leadership roles and responsibilities. Unlike Carol, he leverages on structures to overcome the issue of staff capacity. This is done through his quick action of institutionalising successful strategies instead of leaving it to chance for the practices to be cascaded.

Carol adopts the strategies of learning from others and sharing leadership to grow her staff. She crafts opportunities for staff to exercise leadership and this includes creating time, space and authority to engage in shared leadership. In building staff capacity, Carol involves her staff in learning from others and creates opportunities for learning through job rotation. However, this approach is not all well



received by the staff. Some perceive that the change does not serve their growth nor play to the strengths of the teachers.

### ***Leading Change***

In leading change, leaders translate purpose and strategy into reality for their staff, and respond to the constant movement over time, maintaining performance and remaining competitive. Research has shown that achieving change in a successful way depends on certain activities being done through the change process (Everard and Morris, 1996). The behaviour of a leader during the change process might either increase or decrease the success of the implementation process (Gokce,2009).

Evidence from the case studies indicates that all three principals lead change in their respective schools. Ann fosters a culture of change where staff are empowered as change agents as they go about doing what it takes for school improvement. She starts the journey through a culture of change by getting people to think differently and consider new ways of operating. In addition, she encourages teachers to be involved in pilot projects and changes the way performance is measured in school A. This sits well with the staff as they feel that encouraging staff to innovate and providing them a voice in how change can be implemented creates ownership for change at different levels of the school. What makes this change successful is the way Ann puts in place structures and reward systems to facilitate the change process. This bottom-up approach to innovation and change augurs well with the staff as it leads to the feeling amongst them that the school is always at the cutting edge, constantly moving forward.

For Bob, best use is made of data to initiate change in school B. He knows that changing for the sake of changing without an understanding of context or buy-in from his staff will not work. As such, he started the whole change process by showing them

the reality of student outcomes in the school based on PRISM<sup>14</sup> data and proceeded to share what could be done to make the change.

Going beyond the articulation of the need to change, he put in place tested structures and processes to effect the change. This is also accompanied by communicating clear, realistic but high expectations for his stakeholders. The change process in school B is very much a top-down approach where the principal initiates the necessary change and stakeholders are expected to follow Bob's call for action.

Like Bob, Carol uses data to her advantage to effect change. While she puts in place structures and sets high expectations to effect the change, the difference lies in her setting too high an expectation which tends to result in the staff finding difficulty in the achievement. The situation is also compounded by the way Carol communicates the need for change. While she uses the data to confront staff on the reality of the academic outcomes in the first instance, she does not acknowledge the positive contributions in the other areas made by the previous school leadership team, including the former principal. This results in staff resistance, in particular the KP team who have worked alongside the former principal for many years. They challenge the need for change and regard Carol as young, inexperienced and always wanting to experiment. Findings for case school C show that the non- favourable outcome to the change has to do with understanding the context. While Carol assesses that the school has done badly when she first joined the school, the staff think otherwise, despite being shown the data. This may lead to a lack of conviction for change. Real change takes place when there is a strong conviction for it and consistent practice. Table 7.4 provides a summary of the findings from the case studies in regard to leadership practices.

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<sup>14</sup> PRISM refers to Performance Indicators for School Management. It is a management tool for identifying schools with high value-added.

- Generally, the three principals in the study enact a common set of leadership practices to influence the process of improving student outcomes. This repertoire of leadership practices includes leading (that is, visioning) the future, leading learning, leading people, leading culture and leading change.
- While enacting this repertoire of leadership practices, the principals also exercise instructional leadership, transformational leadership and distributed leadership which they deem necessary as they influence the process of improving student outcomes. Findings show that these different types of leadership are embedded within their practices and exercised together but at different time and focus.
- While the principals conceptualise a common set of leadership practices, the time and attention given to operationalizing each varies in their day-to-day activities in school. Findings show that it is the particular combination of strategies based on the principal's diagnosis of organisational needs at different phases of school development that matters. How these leadership practices are played out in the daily operation of the school depends on the principal's ability to understand the organisational context and her decisiveness to implement and manage the change. This in turn impacts student outcomes.
- While leadership practices may be similar, there are significant differences in the intensity of actions and the use of certain strategies between the case schools.
- While similar leadership practices are enacted by the principals of the case schools, the degree of success to improve student outcomes depends on the clarity, commitment, consistency, flexibility and scalability of these practices.

Table 7.4: Summary of findings on Leadership Practices

The emergent findings from this study are consistent with research on successful leadership practices that identifies four dimensions of leadership practices - creating vision and setting directions, restructuring the organisation and redesigning roles and responsibilities, developing people and managing teaching and learning (Leithwood et al, 2006a). However, evidence from the present study also reveals that the success of the principal's leadership in improving student outcomes goes well beyond merely attending to these core set of leadership practices.

Compared to their less successful counterparts, successful case principals tend to devote the bulk of their time and attention to conceptualising and enacting their leadership practices. Rather than emphasising instructional leadership practice alone, they conceptualise tactically how employing a combination of instructional, transformational and shared leadership practices will drive student outcomes. The manner in which they apply their leadership practices in concert with their unique environments result in their successful influence on the student outcomes. Findings show that it is the particular combination of strategies based on the principal's diagnosis of organisational needs at different phases of school development that matters. Notably, successful leaders have good understanding of the necessity for synergy between leadership approaches and the developmental phase of the school (Chapman, 2004).

The practical wisdom these principals demonstrated by employing the core strategies in concert with their context suggest that knowing what their core strategies are, is a necessary but insufficient precondition to improving student outcomes. Rather, the findings suggest that it is the understanding of how to lead in concert with one's context that determines the success of principals' leadership efforts.

Successful case principals are adept at listening to stakeholders and understanding the nuances of context in which they work. However, as others have noted, this nuanced understanding and the respect for the stakeholders that come with it cannot be developed overnight (Fullan, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2010). They are influenced by principals' personal dispositions and they take time and commitment to develop.

Successful case principals also demonstrated greater degrees of clarity, commitment, consistency, flexibility and scalability when exercising their leadership practices than their less successful counterpart. For example, in school A (high performing school), what stands apart is how Ann exercises influence through

promoting a culture of change, building trust, capacity building through a practice of distributed leadership, connecting with others and ability in looking into (visioning) the future. What makes her leadership practices different is her ability to maintain clarity and consistency and to communicate her commitment while at the same time exercising flexibility and scalability in her leadership and management practices. This is different in school C (a low performing school). In Carol's case, she influences the process of improving student outcomes through facilitating professional development, rebuilding structures, promoting shared leadership and leading with an instructional orientation. While similar practices are adopted, the degree or lack of clarity, consistency, level of commitment, flexibility and scalability of these practices prevents the school from achieving breakthrough results.

## **7.4 Cluster Three: Context, Social Relations and Stakeholders' View**

This section discusses how context, social relations and stakeholders' view of the case schools influence leadership practices. These three categories found common ground in that they have to do with 'relationship-based' leadership. In the study of relationship-based leadership, Hollander(1995) highlighted that " a major component of the leader-follower relationship is the leader's perception of himself relative to followers, and how they in turn perceive the leader" (p55). Hence, this cluster provides a cross analysis of findings from the case studies on how context, social relations and perception of stakeholders in the case schools impact on what and how the principals of the case schools play out their leadership practices to influence the process of improving student outcomes. Findings suggest that the categories are inter-connected and work together to influence principals' leadership practices and eventually the student outcomes.

***Context:***

Evidence from the case studies shows that organisational context and leader's knowledge of context influence their leadership practices. In all three case schools, with different organisational contexts, leadership practices enacted are played out differently in these schools. Despite having similar student profiles, the organisational contexts in the three case schools differ in terms of school culture and maturity and expertise of their personnel.

Although Ann had the support of the former principal who eased her into the role nicely, she is mindful of the different subcultures that exist in school A. Her ability to read and understand the context enables her to conceptualise the right strategies to garner buy-in from her staff to move the school forward. Having understood the context and what needed to be done, she proceeded to look into ways to lay the foundation for long term improvements that focused on diagnosing cultural problems and to take early actions that began to change stakeholder perceptions. While she foresees the challenges that she will face in her promoting culture change, Ann is always mindful of the need to consider staff feelings and lead by example. For example, in her attempts to change perceptions of staff on work culture, she models the importance of building personal and academic relationships. Making changes while taking steps to take care of the feelings of staff sits well with her colleagues and typically result in the staff and students easing into the change well.

In school C, Carol experienced difficulties right from the start. Unlike Ann, she had a bad start with the former principal during the takeover. She claims little or no support from her predecessor and as a result she faced challenges during the transition. It did not help matters that she communicated her early negative feelings to the staff, most of whom had enjoyed a very good relationship with her predecessor. Problems were compounded by the fact that Carol did things very differently. Consequently, Carol faced considerable resistance when she launched changes to move the school forward. Her perception of the state of the school seems to differ

from that of the staff. For example, while she perceives that school C was doing badly when she first joined the school, the staff felt otherwise. They felt her summation was unfair. Instead, they perceived that the major reasons for poor implementation of change had more to do with Carol setting such high standards that they felt unable to live up to. This is an interesting observation. One wonders if the outcome would have been different if Carol had intervened and provided the necessary scaffolding for this group of teachers. Such an intervention would have been perceived by staff as Carol taking the step to provide care and support for the staff in scaling new heights. However, Carol's inability to understand the organisational context and her indecisiveness to implement and manage the change resulted in her setting a vision and expectation that is too high. Her perception of the lack of support from the ex-principal and lack of staff capacity in her relatively young staff profile has also led to her inactions and inconsistency in her leadership practices.

Findings for school B show that while the organisational context is similar to that of school C; that is, the transition was not as smooth as that of school A, Bob's ability to sense the context and know what works, helps him to a set of different and more positive outcomes. Similar to school C, school B was not doing well academically when Bob first joined the school. However, he shared this reality with the staff with the aim of creating a shared sense of purpose among them. While showing his concern about the unfavourable academic results thus far, he also acknowledged their success in other areas. Goals set for the school resonate with the staff. Coupled with his established reputation as a leader who has turned around other schools, he is able to galvanise the school community to join him in the changes he wants to see.

The finding that different organisational contexts call for different leadership responses is consistent with earlier research. Contingency theories emphasize the important role that context plays in determining the successful practices of a leader. These theories argue that leaders' effectiveness is maximized when they correctly make their practices contingent upon the situations in which they work. Fiedler (1993) suggests that it is the degree to which leaders are able to influence the

environment and its degree of structure and predictability that gives the leader a feeling of control over the outcome of the task and over the group process. Hersey and Blanchard (1982) argue for the need to examine the crucial interplay between leaders and their environments, acknowledging the presence of numerous contextual variables that influence leaders' practice. Unlike Fiedler who argues for adjustments in context to fit leader' style, Hersey and Blanchard advocate leaders adapt their style to the situation as it evolves. According to the work of Yukl (1982), leaders are most effective when they modify their practices according to the ability and confidence levels of their workers. They must be flexible and adaptable to their environment and those who ignore these factors jeopardize their chances of success in their particular workplaces. Evidence from case studies indicates that Ann and Bob's ability to understand the context from the onset enable them to correctly make their practices contingent to the situations of school A and B respectively. In contrast, Carol's inability to do so leads to her feeling of loss of control over the situation at hand.

Clearly, the organisational context in which Carol operates is not clearly understood by her; she is not able to successfully analyse changes in school situations and context, and consequently her planning and practices are vulnerable.

From the above data analysis, it is evident that the organisational context of the school and principal's ability to understand the context should necessarily influence the way in which principals exercise their leadership practices at any given time to improve student outcomes. For example, Carol's inability to understand the organisational context and her indecisiveness to implement and manage the change resulted in her setting a vision and expectation that was inappropriately high for her staff. Her perception of the lack of support from the ex-principal and lack of staff capacity in her relatively young staff profile further compounded the situation and has also led to her inaction and inconsistent leadership practices as played out in her day to day operation. In Bob's case, the choice of leadership practices stems from his ability to understand the organizational contexts and his decisiveness to implement and manage the change. His experience and his ability to sense the context helps him



to design a structured approach to create a shared sense of purpose for his stakeholders in school B. This finding is also consistent with claims made by both Leithwood et al (2006b) and Day et al (2010) who argued that while almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of leadership practices, the way in which these leaders apply these practices demonstrate responsiveness to the context in which they work in. Differences in the organisational and contextual conditions affect direction and pace of leadership.

Unique to case school B, findings indicated that while Bob's ability to understand the organizational context guides his leadership choice and enables him to move the school forward, stakeholders also perceive the need for his leadership style and strategies to evolve in keeping with the maturing organisational context. Bob's leadership style is based on a command and control strategy, which he uses to leverage on to implement and manage school change. With a changing profile of students, stakeholders perceive the need for a balance of command and control strategy with empowerment. They feel that it is therefore imperative for Bob to be increasingly flexible and adaptable to the needs of his stakeholders; adjusting and modifying his leadership practices accordingly. Interview data indicates that Bob does not share the same sentiment as the stakeholders. He insisted that contrary to what his stakeholders perceive, he has been empowering his stakeholders apart from adopting command and control strategy.

This raises the question if leaders' knowledge of the context alone is a sufficient condition that enables them to make their practice contingent to the context. Is there another underlying factor that triggers the decision of leaders to adapt their leadership style to the evolving context? Perhaps the answer can be traced back to Bob's personal dispositions i.e. his personal characteristics, belief and values orientation. As mentioned in section 7.2, while he values relationship and connection and thus recognizes the need to empower his stakeholders, his strong values orientation towards ethic of care through justice overshadows his other core values orientation (e.g. power). This is evident in the way he exercises his command

and control strategy which he is more inclined to reward, coerce and win compliance from his stakeholders. As a result, although he is aware of the need to balance command- control strategy with empowerment, the former strategy tends to be his default leadership style. In short, findings suggest that leaders' knowledge of the context is not a sufficient condition to ensure that their practice is contingent to the context. Leaders' personal dispositions, leader's knowledge of the context and the organisational context can influence how the intended leadership practice is played out and these factors mutually influence each other. This finding is supported by earlier studies on leadership. A number of leadership theories such as path-goal theory have included in their revised formulations contingencies such as personal qualities of leaders, experience and personality of followers which constitute part of the organizational context (Avolio, 2007). The finding is also supported by Vroom and Jago (2007) who claimed that situations (context and individual difference) shape how leaders behave. They noted that neither discipline (i.e. effects of external events) nor individual difference was capable of explaining behaviour by itself. The finding also corroborates that of Hallinger and Heck (2010a) who confirm that leadership practices and organizational context shape each other. Figure 7.2 summarises the relationship between leader's personal dispositions, context (i.e. knowledge of the context and organisational context) and leadership practices.

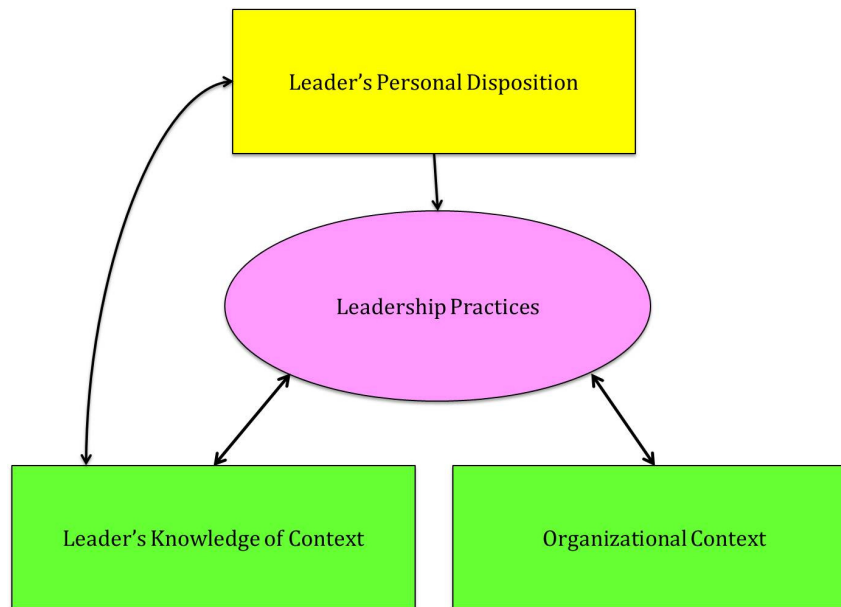


Figure 7.2 Relationship between leaders' personal disposition, context and leadership practice

### ***Social Relations***

Evidence from the case studies indicates that social relations of the principals with their teachers and school community in general are played out differently in the respective schools and this in turn impacts the degree of success of their leadership practices. A key finding is that how stakeholders (staff, students and parents) perceive a principal's leadership influence on student outcomes depends greatly on the social relations of the principal; that is, principals' interpersonal skills and their social interaction with stakeholders.

Findings reveal that Ann enjoys strong productive social relations and exercises good interpersonal skills when interacting with stakeholders. Her belief and optimism about human nature as well as her understanding about human behaviour and human needs enable her to explore ways to produce, sustain and transform

relationships into ones that build high trust throughout the school. This is vitally important in establishing meaningful communication with groups and individuals within the school. For example, Ann demonstrates a high degree of emotional intelligence in her leadership role and in creating an environment of positive morale and high productivity that result in sustainable staff engagement. She leverages on quality relationships and takes time to build credibility with staff and stakeholders. This, in turn spurs them to commit their time and effort to achieving the school goals. It is evident from the findings that Ann's strong, caring and involved presence at every level and her highly persuasive approach to dealing with staff is favoured by them and motivates them to show high commitment. Moreover, stakeholders attribute the sustainability of performance in school A to the Ann's ability to create a high-trust relationship at every level of the school. Successful leaders have the ability to develop school capacity to enhance learning through motivation of teachers, staff and students (Guarino , Santibuanes and Daley, 2006). Walsh (2002) also points out the importance of managing principal-teacher relationships and how these relationships affect student achievement.

By comparison, Bob takes a command-control approach to leading the school forward. While he understands human nature, behaviour and needs, he adopts a very different social relations stance from Ann. While he is persuasive in the way he goes about creating desires and a shared sense of purpose for his stakeholders, he is generally directive in his leadership style. He makes it clear that he only accepts a consensus if the issues at hand are not crucial to him. Otherwise, he makes it clear that he will veto. He also makes it clear that he never hesitates to discipline if the situation warrants it. It is interesting to note in school B that Bob also adopts the intimidator approach where he uses high-pressure tactics to push his staff and students beyond their comfort zone and excel in ways they never imagined possible. Many who have worked with him often say they find his straightforwardness hard to take. They confide that those who choose not to follow him have been told to move on. From the findings, it is evident that increasingly, there is a lack of bottom-up staff

feedback and communication between staff and principal is very much top-down in school B.

Carol adopts another form and style of social relations which differs from Ann and Bob. Evidence indicated that right from the start Carol had poor social relations with her staff, in particular her KP team who have been very loyal to the former principal. By communicating how she felt about her predecessor and commenting on how badly the school had fared when she first joined the school, she compounded the difficulties of planning and taking the school forward. Unlike Ann and Bob who both acknowledge the success of their respective schools in other areas before their time, Carol lamented the challenges she faced due to the lack of support from her predecessor and played down the hard work put in by her and the school leadership team. Staff also feel that she could have engaged with them more, by improving her social interaction and interpersonal skills. They concur that while they understand the need to do things properly, extra effort by Carol to spend more time to interact with the staff and to understand situations better and provide the necessary support, would have helped school improvement efforts. They also shared that often, Carol prefers to use emails to engage staff rather than face to face interaction. Stakeholders perceive that Carol's actions stem from her personality. They feel that she is not able to control her temperament and shows her displeasure and impatience on matters at work too easily. Her inaction, when situations warrant action, lead to dissonance among staff and lack of confidence in her influence.

Evidence from the case studies indicates that the case principals adopt different social relations stances towards their colleagues in their respective school contexts. This in turn impacts their adoption of leadership practices, their workplace relations with their stakeholders and their engagement with colleagues. It also provides a clue to the interpersonal skills of the three principals, which are vital for communicating and interacting with others. Findings in relation to their interaction with their stakeholders enable conclusions to be drawn on the state of self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills of the three principals. Ann

seems to have higher self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills than Bob and Carol. Her ability to find common ground and build rapport with her stakeholders and to treat people according to their emotional reaction helps her to build and exercise trust in her school. On the other hand, Carol seems to have low self-awareness and self-regulation. This is affirmed by the perception of her staff with regard to her personality and inability to control her emotions and redirect disruptive impulses and moods. As a result, although she adopts a persuasive approach, her inconsistent practices due to her personality and mood changes result in a different outcome. It is clear from the findings that the degree of success of principals' leadership practices depends on how they play out their social relations.

One concept emerged from the above discussion is the relationships and interactions between leadership practice, leaders' personal disposition and the social relations cultivated by the leaders. Different case principals cultivate different sets of social relations with their respective school staff and communities. This leads to differences in their leader-follower relationship which in turn influence the principal's perception of followers' commitment and followers' perception of the principal's influence. Howell and Shamir (2005) concluded that "followers play an active role in constructing the leadership relations, empowering the leader and influencing his/her behaviour and ultimately determining the consequences of the leadership relationship "(p97). Accordingly, the quality of the exchange relationship between leaders and followers will determine the qualities of leadership and outcomes achieved (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Compared to their less successful counterpart, the two successful case principals seem to have higher self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills which enable them to find common ground and build rapport with their stakeholders. Researchers agree that self-awareness and self-regulation is the starting point of authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2004; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Leaders with greater self-awareness and self-regulation know what is important to them and are more transparent and consistent

in their practice, hence are more able to withstand the external pressure and influence (Gardner et al, 2009; Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2005). It is evident from respondents' perspectives that the degree of success of principals' leadership practices in improving student outcomes depends, at least partly, on their social relations with members of the school community. How stakeholders perceive the principals' influence depends very much on the social relations and interpersonal skills of the principals with the stakeholders operationalizing their leadership practice to improve student outcomes. In short, social relations cultivated by the leaders, leaders' personal dispositions and leadership practice mutually influence each other. Figure 7.3 presents the diagrammatic representation of the interactions between leadership practices, leader's personal disposition and leader's social relations.

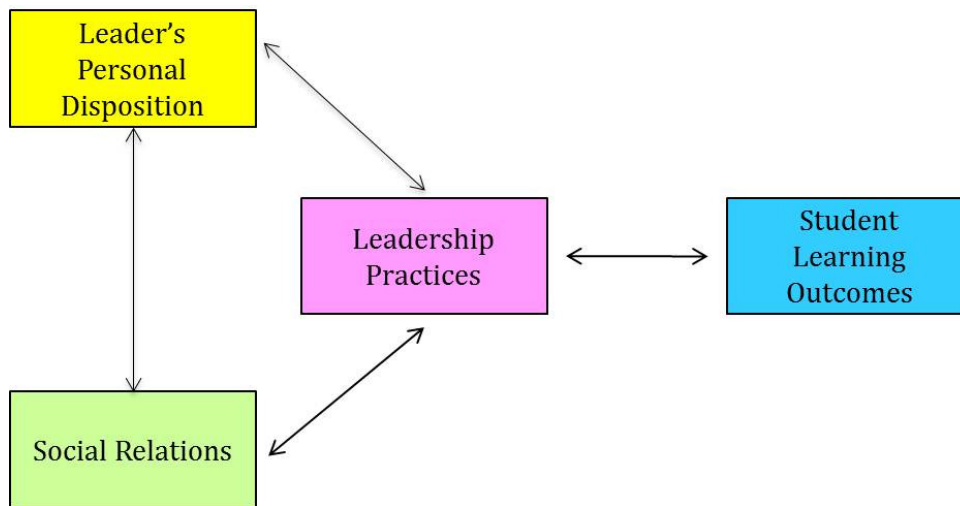


Figure 7.3 Interactions between leadership practices, leader's dispositions and social relations

### ***Stakeholders' Views***

Data analysis of each case school reveals that perceptions of the different groups of stakeholders in regard to principals' influence within the school, somewhat differ.

Different groups of stakeholders differ in their views of what is deemed important for principals to exercise their influence over in improving student outcomes, although all concur that the influence is indirect. For example, students perceive principals' influence in the context of the visibility, relationship and support given to them by the principal in the daily activities in school. Staff, on the other hand perceive the personal characteristics of the principals and the importance of the principal in providing them with support, as essential for the principal to improve student outcomes. Table 7.5 summarizes the features of perceptions of the different groups.

VP/HODs/Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal Characteristics of principal: having knowledge of instruction, curriculum and resources; being approachable, fair and consistent; having good communication and listening skills and being flexible, decisive decision maker and creative problem solver).</li> <li>• Providing support: (creating environment that supports staff personally and professionally. Eg. Professional development/ staff engagement/trust building/ caring environment).</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visibility: visible presence of the principal in their daily school experience/ approachability and availability of the principal )</li> <li>• Relationship: student relationship and opportunity to interact with the principal ; willingness to listen and</li> <li>• Support : knowledge/awareness of what the principal have done to support their learning ;</li> </ul>

Table 7.5 Perceptions of different group of stakeholders of Principals' influence within a school

These differences may be a result of their differing roles within the school and differences in power (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2010). Social cognitive theory suggests that although students and their teachers share a common objective experience, their differing roles within the school will likely lead to discrepant perceptions of the influence (Bandura, 2001). In addition, factors at multiple levels within a school may also influence student and staff perception of the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).



However, analysis across three case schools indicated that the degree to which the different groups of stakeholders have shared perceptions of the principal leadership influence to improve student outcomes varies across the schools. A higher degree of shared perception is found in school A and B while a lesser degree of concurrence is found in school C. One possible explanation could be the degree of clarity and consistency of the leadership practices enacted in the schools. A higher degree of shared perceptions may illustrate that both staff and students are aware of the principal's influence while a low degree of shared perceptions may signify less effective communication between the principal and the different groups of stakeholders resulting from a lack of clarity and inconsistent leadership practices enacted to improve student outcomes.

Evidence from the case studies shows that there is a link between how stakeholders perceive principals' influences the improvement of student outcomes and de facto, how principals exercise their leadership practice. Generally, stakeholder perceptions of the principal's leadership influence can be grouped into two categories: accepting and affirming; adapting and appraising. When the stakeholders are accepting and affirming, they will at first assess and align the shared purpose of the school to their personal values and then proceed to affirm and support leadership practices enacted by the principal to improve student outcomes. In turn, a positive perception of the principal's influence by stakeholders will encourage and affirm the principal to continue with their practices to improve student outcomes. Stakeholders who adapt and appraise will tend to adopt a passive or adjusting stance to the principal's call for action. They tend to adopt selective hearing on actions needed to move the school forward, and often opt to do things their own ways. Stakeholders who are adapting and appraising usually frustrate and discourage principals when the latter call for actions to move the school forward. This in turn, may affect how the principal operationalizes his/her leadership practices and what they focus on, to improve student outcomes. Sometimes it discourages the principal from doing more. In short, stakeholders' views and principals' leadership practices mutually influence each other over time.

In school C, the stakeholders are adapting and appraising. Their perception of Carol's indecisive actions and inconsistent leadership practices prevents stakeholders from following her wholeheartedly. Instead, they tend to do things their own ways. This hampers the achievement of positive outcomes as the implementation strategies to improve student outcomes are disempowered. Their responses to actions taken by Carol frustrate and discourage her from doing more, resulting in her adopting the attitude that there is so much more she could do.

Although Ann eased in well when she first arrived at the school-, she also had her fair share of challenges in terms of staff acceptance of her leadership approach. At this early stage, stakeholders' views about her influence on student outcomes was adapting and appraising. This was a cause for concern for Ann, as she was fully aware that staff might adopt selective hearing and does things their own way. This would hamper outcomes as the implementation of teaching and learning practices may not be what she wanted. In fact, this might be one reason for the drastic drop of academic results in 2003. However, Ann's swift action to analyze the cause of the dip and put in place structures to correct the slide caused stakeholders to rally around during this crisis. The positive outcome the following year affirmed that stakeholders had confidence in Ann's leadership, a reaction which served to further inspire her. Ann's efforts to change the mindset of stakeholders through her strategic vision for the school as well as creating high-trust relationship throughout the school, paid off. Stakeholders are now accepting and affirming about Ann's leadership influence. This is evident in the way they attributed her contributions to the success of the school. As such, this encourages her to do more and commit more time to engaging the stakeholders to continue to move the school to new heights. Trust is a valuable contributor to different forms of exchange; it facilitates strong relationships between individuals and organization (Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998). Norman (2006) stated that a trusting relationship between leaders and followers is one of the characteristics which differentiate mediocre organizations from the leading ones.

Analysis of the stakeholders' perceptions of Bob's influence on improving student outcomes suggests that stakeholders are accepting and affirming about Bob's leadership influence. Bob's vision that every child matters resonates with the stakeholders and this in turn, galvanizes them to follow him. Their response and the positive student outcomes are affirmative for Bob and encourage him to do more for the school. However, this is slowly changing to 'adapting and appraising' as stakeholders perceive the need for the leadership practices to evolve as befitting of the changing profile of the students and staff. Unique to case school B, findings suggest that there is a need for leadership style and strategies to evolve in view of the evolving organizational context. In this case, what stands out for Bob is his command and control strategy which he leverages to implement and manage changes in school B. However, with a changing context in terms of changing profile of students, it is evident that stakeholders perceive the need for a balance of command-control strategy with an empowerment strategy.

The above findings suggest that stakeholders' views impact on what the principal does and how, in terms of leadership practices in school. Leadership practices and stakeholders' views mutually influence each other and eventually impact on student outcomes. This confirms and extends Hallinger and Heck's (2011) findings. The relationship between leadership practices and conditions in the schools are interactive and reciprocal - while the principal can influence stakeholders, the opposite is also true.

The extent of stakeholders' views on the principals' influence can either enhance or diminish the leadership effect, which in turn impacts on the process of improving student outcomes. Earlier studies of stakeholders' perceptions have identified key areas that stakeholders associate as important for effective school leadership. These include relational leadership and responsibility to ensure quality and learning (Odhiambo and Hii, 2012). The findings of this study lend further support to the earlier studies of stakeholders' perception on leadership influence. Figure 7.4

presents the relationship between stakeholders' view, leadership practices and outcomes.

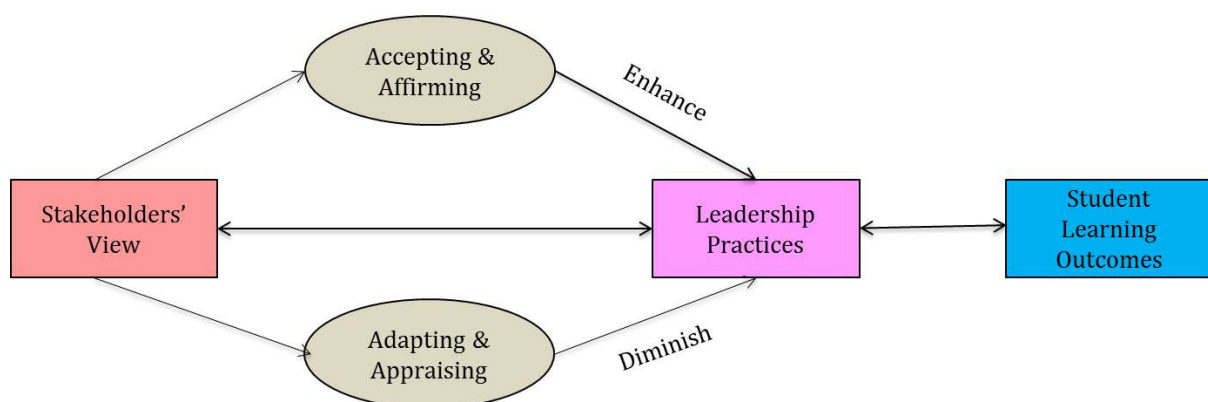


Figure 7.4 Summary of relationship between stakeholders' views and leadership practices

## 7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a cross-case analysis and comparative analysis of the propositions emerged from the case studies conducted in three different school settings in Singapore. These propositions are grouped into three clusters namely personal dispositions; leadership practices and organisational context, social relations and stakeholders' view.

The discussion has shown that all the principals hold differing perceptions of their leadership influence. The study suggests that the personal dispositions of the principals influence how their chosen leadership practices are played out in the daily operations of the school. This in turn, impacts on the student outcomes eventually.

This study has found that generally, principals conceptualise a common set of leadership practices which centre on leading change, leading learning, leading people, leading culture and leading change. A significant difference lies in the degree of clarity, commitment, consistency, flexibility and scalability with which these practices are pursued by principals and they can result in different effects of leadership on student outcomes.

The discussion has also shown how context, social relations and stakeholders' views influence the way leadership practices are played out in the case schools. From the analysis, the interactive effects of context, social relations, and stakeholders' views on leadership practices are shown to deeply affect the degree of success principals achieve.

The final chapter that follows highlights the study's original contribution to knowledge through developing conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and outlines the inter-relationships between the different concepts mentioned in the three clusters. It also presents the implications and recommendations that may inform practice and future research.

# **Chapter 8**

## **Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations**

This final chapter comprises three sections. The first section provides a summary of the overall aims of the study and the methodology used to meet these aims. The next section highlights the study's original contribution to knowledge and outlines the inter-relationships between the different concepts mentioned in the three clusters into which the eight propositions are grouped. The last section details the implications and recommendations of this study for practice and future research.

### **8.0 Introduction**

This thesis sets out to investigate perceptions of the contribution and influence of three secondary school principals in Singapore, each leading a school of differing performance in terms of improving student outcomes. It seeks to gain insights into how principals build and sustain successful schools, and how some turn around less successful schools, in regard to improving student. The study considers three levels of phenomena:

- The perspectives of school principals on how they think they have influenced student learning outcomes in their respective schools;
- What they actually have done, setup or implemented in their schools in regard to improving student learning outcomes; and
- How the stakeholders in their respective schools perceive what the principals have done or not done in regard to improving student learning outcomes.

This study builds on a conceptual framework based on the inter-relationship of key concepts of school leadership and management practices, and their influence on student outcomes

Following a review of relevant literature, the main research question that emerged is framed as:

***How do school principals in Singapore secondary schools lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes?***

To address this main research question, SRQs are posed. These questions are elicited from the main research question and relevant literature review. Each of these questions will be addressed in section 8.1.

In order to address the SRQs, the study has adopted the interpretive paradigm, in line with social constructivism (Guba and Lincoln, 2005) and a multi-case study design (Yin, 2003). Both the paradigm and design are justified by the nature of the research aims and research questions, namely, to gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives and experiences of principals and stakeholders, and the contribution and influence of school principals to the process of improving student outcomes.

A multi-case design has been adopted with three schools at different levels of improvement forming the main study. Together, they represent a range of school achievement regarding student outcomes, with other factors, such as socio-economic factors of students, remaining the same. The case schools comprise a high performing school, a low performing school and another school showing characteristics of a turnaround school. In total, semi-structured interviews have been undertaken with 66 participants from the three case schools. Data from the interviews were supplemented with other sources, including the analysis of key documents produced

by the case schools, web profiles of the schools as well as the researcher's insider observations, knowledge and information of the case schools.

The analysis of data in this study applied open and axial coding to identify themes and patterns embedded in the data. Following these coding procedures, a set of theoretical propositions in each case study has been developed by analyzing the data using modified inductive analysis (Bryman, 2004). The propositions that emerged from each case school were brought together in Chapter 7 for comparative analysis which involved comparison, consolidation and refinement of the inter-related propositions. This process of analysis yielded a total of eight propositions. The outcomes of the main research question and the study's original contribution to knowledge is elaborated in the following section.

## **8.1 Contribution to Knowledge**

Existing literature shows that while there has been extensive research confirming that effective leadership makes a difference to improving student outcomes, there appears to be uncertainty as to the more detailed processes by which principals' leadership in particular, affects improvements in student outcomes. This thesis seeks to explore these processes in depth. In addition, there has been little published research showing how secondary school principals in Singapore lead and manage the process of improving student outcomes in their respective schools. This thesis claims to make an original contribution to the knowledge base of school leadership by extending our knowledge and understanding of firstly, how and what principals do to wield influence on student outcomes, and secondly, how they do so in the Singapore secondary school context. This is done by using a multi-case design; investigating how secondary school principals in Singapore perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influence and how this translates into practice in the day to day running of the schools.



The rest of the section highlights the study's original contribution to knowledge by drawing conclusions to this study and outlining the inter-relationships between the concepts that emerged from the three clusters of propositions discussed in Chapter 7. The proposed Model of Leadership Influence on Improving the Student Outcomes (LIISO) will be discussed. It is hoped that this discussion may help to illuminate current models of leadership and reveal alternative perspectives on leadership and change. The outcome of the comparison between the proposed research model and LIISO will form the researcher's contribution to knowledge of the relationship between principals' leadership and student learning outcomes.

### **Managing the process of improving student learning outcomes**

This section draws conclusions on how the secondary school principals of the case schools lead and manage the process of improving student learning outcomes (RQ).

The conclusions are derived from consolidating the findings of the four SROs below:

SRQ 1: *How do principals define student learning outcomes in their schools?*

SRQ 2: *How do principals perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influences in regard to student learning outcomes?*

SRQ 3: *According to the principals themselves, what leadership practices do they use to secure improved student learning outcomes?*

SRQ 4: *How do other stakeholders (VP, HODs, teachers and students) in the same school perceive the principal's leadership influence on student learning outcomes?*

Given the limited scope and size of the study, it is not possible to make broad generalizations outside the three case schools. However, the insights gained from the study of the case schools suggest some significant findings that the reader may be able to apply to other schools on the basis of comparing the similarities and differences with the case schools investigated in this study. Each of the findings will be outlined below:

***SRQ1: How do principals define student learning outcomes?***

All the principal respondents define student learning outcomes to include both academic and non-academic outcomes. While they define and hold the same view that both academic and non-academic outcomes are important, the findings noted a difference in how they perceive and hence conceptualize their leadership practices to improve academic and non-academic outcomes.

The successful case principal perceives that their influence and focus on academic excellence is important as this will develop the mind set and skills which will drive excellence in other areas. Conversely, while believing that both academic and non-academic are important, the less successful counterparts perceive that it is more important to influence soft skills development first as it is more difficult to learn. Their perceptions shape their decisions and dictate the focus of their leadership practices.

***SRQ2: How do principals perceive and conceptualize their leadership and management influences in regard to student learning outcomes – that is, what are Leader’s Personal Dispositions?***

This study suggests that how case principals lead and manage the process of improving outcomes is influenced by their personal dispositions, namely personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientation. Principals’ personal dispositions influence how they perceive and conceptualize their leadership and how their chosen leadership practices are played out in the day-to-day running of the school.

The findings demonstrate that successful influence is underpinned by the personal dispositions which include personal characteristics, values orientation and beliefs of the case principals. Each of these qualities does not influence in isolation but works together to influence the principals’ perception and conceptualization of their

leadership influence. This finding is consistent with and is supported by a substantial body of research conducted outside of school (Begley& Johansson, 2003; Zaccaro, Kemp & Bader, 2004). The findings highlight and point to the need to consider how the joint combination of particular characteristics, dispositions and attributes inform leadership behaviour instead of seeing each as a separate entity.

In their study on leaders' efforts to improve schools, Jacobson et al. (2005) reported that successful leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking which has to do with leaders' personal characteristics. Similarly in this present study, successful case principals hold personal characteristics such as a strong personal drive, sense of mission, willingness to challenge the status quo, optimistic mind set and perception of barriers as challenges rather than impediments. They hold strong beliefs in the innate goodness of people and believe that everyone is capable if given opportunity. They also believe in their staff and students' ability to exercise responsibility with accountability.

Findings noted that in addition to being single-minded in the pursuit of the school goals, the principal with sustainable student outcomes is also focused on building trust based on integrity, care and respect. In contrast, the less successful case principal tend to exhibit personal characteristics of a lamenting mind set, lacking in 'can-do' spirit, with the tendency of seeing barriers as impediments that prevents her from moving the school forward. She is also less optimistic about what her students and staff can achieve. Leithwood and colleagues in one of their claims state that "... a small handful of personal dispositions explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness"(Leithwood et al., 2006b, p 14). Such personal dispositions explain why successful leaders facing daunting conditions are more likely to push forward to scale new heights.

This study noted that the principals' strong values orientation can overshadow their other core values orientation and this in turn influences their perception and

conceptualization of their leadership influence. The principal, Ann who holds strong values orientation towards relationship and connection for example, perceives and conceptualizes her leadership and management influence through building high trust relationship at all levels in her school. Such values orientation shapes her other core values orientation of change, ethic of care and power.

***SRQ3: What Leadership practices do principals use to secure improved student learning outcomes? – Leadership Practices, Context***

**Leadership Practices**

Generally, all three principals of the case schools conceptualize a common set of leadership practices for improving student learning. The repertoire of leadership practices centres on leading (visioning) the future, leading learning, leading people, leading culture and leading change. This finding is consistent with research on successful leadership practices that identifies four dimensions of leadership practices as highlighted by Leithwood et al., (2006a). However, evidence from this study reveals that the success of the principal's leadership in improving student outcomes goes beyond practicing the core set of leadership practices.

The study discovered that the difference between the effectiveness of principals lies in the time and attention given to operationalizing each of these leadership practices in their day-to day activities in their schools. In comparison with their less successful counterpart, the more successful case principals tend to devote the bulk of their time and attention to conceptualizing and enacting their leadership practices. Rather than emphasizing instructional leadership practice alone, they conceptualize by tactically employing a combination of instructional, transformational and shared leadership practices to drive student outcomes. The ways in which they apply their leadership practices in concert with their unique environment result in their relatively successful influence on the student outcomes. For decades, the educational leadership field has been calling for school principals to focus on

instructional leadership or learner-centred leadership (Murphy and Vriesenga, 2006). Research tends to suggest that principals are not doing enough instructional leadership and that many principals continued to be fragmented and pulled between managerial and leadership activities that prevent them from improving student outcomes. Findings from this study show otherwise. It is not the sole focus on instructional leadership that counts. Instead, it is the particular combination of strategies based on the successful diagnosis of organizational needs at different phases of school development that matters. Present findings confirm and extend the findings from the research discovered by Goldring et al., (2008). In their study, they found that principals' emphasis on various leadership activities differs. They concluded that not all principals seem to be distributing their leadership across a wide array of activities in the same manner and in fact there is a group of principals that spend a larger amount of time on instructional leadership. Their results pointed to the power that contextual factors have on principals' leadership practice. The factors that significantly distinguished between the three clusters of principals in their study are contextual conditions, indicating that context matters in shaping the degree to which principals focus on particular tasks. More on influence of context will be discussed in context section.

This study also found that while leadership practices adopted by the principals may be similar, there is a significant difference in the intensity of actions and the use of combinations of strategies in managing the process of improving student outcomes. This leads to a difference in the clarity, commitment, consistency, flexibility and scalability of the leadership practices which they enacted in their daily operation of the school. In this study, the two relatively more successful principals, Ann and Bob demonstrated greater clarity, commitment, consistency, flexibility and scalability when they operationalize these practices. They have a more structured approach to adopting their leadership practices, and the different combinations of strategies they adopt are clearly in line with the vision and goals they have communicated to their stakeholders. In the less successful case school, the same leadership practices are enacted, but the combination of leadership strategies used are constantly changing,

leading to inconsistency and lack of clarity as to what needs to be done. This finding extends the existing knowledge base on successful leadership and student outcomes improvement. While the finding is consistent with the four categories of basic leadership practices put forward by Leithwood and colleagues (2006a; 2010), it sheds light on the manner in which the successful case principals enacted these practices. Analysis from the present study suggests one useful refinement to the claim made by Day et al (2010), namely, the intensity of actions and the combination of strategies leads to different degrees of clarity, commitment, consistency, flexibility and scalability of the leadership practices when leaders operationalize these practices. This in turn, leads to a difference in the level of student outcomes achieved.

### **Context**

This study reveals that organizational context and leader's knowledge and sensitive interpretation of the context influence how leadership practices are played out in school, and with what effect. The combination of strategies used by principals to improve student outcomes depends on their accurate diagnosis of the organisational needs. How these leadership practices are played out in the daily operation of the school depends on the principals' ability to understand the organisational context and their ability and decisiveness to implement and manage the appropriate changes in response. The principals of the more successful case schools, Ann and Bob tend to make their practices contingent on the situation of the school. In contrast, the less successful case principal's inability to understand the organizational context and her indecisiveness to implement and manage the change resulted in her setting a vision and expectation that is too high for her staff to accept. Her perception of the lack of support from her predecessor and lack of staff capacity in her relatively young staff profile led to her inactions and inconsistency and lack of clarity of her leadership practices.

This new evidence provides confirmation of, and refinement for one of the seven strong claims about successful leadership recognised by Leithwood et al.

(2006b). While the finding is consistent with the claim that principals of successful schools adopt a common set of leadership practices regardless of the context, the present study has shown that how the leadership practices are played out in the day to day operation of the school and hence the eventual effect they have on student outcomes, is dependent on leaders' ability to enact these practices contingent on the situation of the school.

The successful case principals demonstrated practical wisdom when employing the core strategies in concert with their context. This finding suggests that knowing the core strategies is a necessary but insufficient precondition to improving student outcomes. It is the understanding of how to lead in concert with a sensitive understanding of one's context that determines the success of principals' leadership effort. Successful case principals are adept at understanding the nuances of context in which they operate apart from taking time to listen to stakeholders. This nuanced understanding and respect for stakeholders that comes with it cannot be developed overnight (Fullan, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2010). They are influenced by one's personal dispositions and take time and commitment to develop.

While the leader's knowledge of the context is necessary for principals to enact their practices contingent on the situation of the school, analysis of the data in the present study also raises the question whether leaders' knowledge of the context alone is a sufficient condition for them to make their practice contingent on the context. The finding from case school B points to the fact that the organisational context and principal's personal disposition, in particular their values orientation, can influence how the intended practice is played out. In the case of Bob, although he is aware of the need to balance a command and control strategy with empowerment in view of the evolving context of the school, the former tends to be his default leadership strategy due to his strong values orientation stance towards an ethic of care through justice (see section 7.4). While this finding is new for Singapore school principals, it is supported by earlier studies on leadership (Avolio, 2007; Vroom and Jago (2007). For example, earlier leadership theories such as the path-goal theory

have acknowledged the need to include personal qualities of leaders, experience of followers and personality of followers as the revised formulation of contingencies (Avolio, 2007). Vroom and Jago (2007) claimed that situations (context and individual difference) shape how leaders behave noting that neither discipline, context nor individual difference was capable of explaining behaviour by itself. In short, both the context and leadership practices shape each other.

***SRQ 4: What influence does the perception of stakeholders have on the principal's leadership influence on student learning outcomes? –social relations and stakeholders' view***

The study found that the concepts of social relations and stakeholders' view both influence principals' leadership practices. Each of these concepts is found to have a reciprocal effect on the other. Findings related to these concepts will be discussed below:

**Social Relations**

A key finding of this study is that how stakeholders (staff and students) perceive a principal's leadership influence on student outcomes depends greatly on the social interaction between the principal and stakeholders. The degree of success of the principal's leadership practices in leading and managing the process of improving student outcomes depends on their social relations with colleagues and stakeholders. The findings show that different principals in the study cultivate different sets of social relations with their respective school staff and communities. This in turn leads to differences in their leader-follower relationships which will then influence the principal's perception of followers' commitment and followers' perception of the principal's influence.

The more successful case principals, Ann and Bob seem to have higher self-awareness, empathy and social skills which enable them to find common ground and



build rapport with their stakeholders compared to Carol, their less successful counterpart. Such state of self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills for example, helps Ann (one of the successful case principals) to build and exercise trust in school A. In contrast, Carol (a less successful principal) who has a lower state of self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills has problems finding a common ground to build rapport and garner the support of her stakeholders. Stakeholders (particularly the staff) attributed her personality and her inability to control her emotions and redirect disruptive impulses and moods as barriers to providing clarity and consistency to her day to day operationalizing of her leadership practices.

Previous research has established strong reciprocal associations between student outcomes improvement and relational trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2002) and has claimed that trust in leaders determines organizational performance and is a product of organizational performance (Louis, 2007). In addition, earlier researchers agree that self-awareness and self-regulation are the basis for authentic leadership (e.g. Avolio et al., 2004; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). In their studies on sustaining successful leadership in Denmark, Moos and Kofod (2009; p717) noted that “principals in their studies were keenly aware of and influenced by the social relations, communication, interaction and forms of influence involving stakeholders in and out of school”. The present finding from this study confirms and extends these earlier findings. The degree of success of principals’ leadership practice in improving student outcomes depends, at least partly, on their social relations with members of the school community. Social relations and leadership practices mutually influence each other.

### **Stakeholders’ Views**

Evidence from the study shows that there is a link between how stakeholders perceive principals’ influence on the improvement of student outcomes and what and

how de factor, principals exercise their leadership practices. Leadership practices and stakeholders' views mutually influence each other and eventually impact on student outcomes. Moreover, the extent of stakeholders' views on the principals' influence can either enhance or diminish the leadership effect which in turn, impacts on the process of improving student outcomes.

Findings suggest that if the stakeholders' view of principals' leadership influence is accepting and affirming, it encourages the principal to do more, which becomes evident in the intensity of the actions of their leadership practices. The opposite is true for stakeholders' perceptions that are adapting and critically appraising. Stakeholders whose views are adapting and appraising frustrate and discourage principals from taking further actions to move the school forward as their moves are not totally supported, thereby discouraging the principal from doing more. The findings of this study extend the existing knowledge base on stakeholders' perceptions. Earlier studies of stakeholders' perceptions such as that of Odhiambo and Hii (2012) identified the key areas that stakeholders associate as important for effective school leadership. A case study in Portugal revealed that there is a high degree of agreement between the principals' view and the teachers' view of an effective leader (Pashiardis et al., 2005). While there are earlier studies that reveal the effect of stakeholders' perceptions of student outcomes, this present finding lends further support to indicate the interactive effect of stakeholders' views on principals' leadership influence and student outcomes. In short, the strength and degree of alignment of stakeholders' views on principals' influence can enhance or diminish the leadership effect on the process of improving student outcomes.

Both the concepts of social relations and stakeholders' view of principals' influence on leadership practices provide new perspectives on the complex practices of managing the process of improving student outcomes. While earlier studies on the leadership effect and student outcomes have shown various mediating/moderating variables including staff motivation, teacher classroom practices and student engagement (e.g. see Kruger, Witziers & Sleegers, 2007; Mulford & Silins, 2003) to

student outcomes, this study has shown that concepts of social relations and stakeholders' views are also moderating variables, and they exert reciprocal effects on leadership practices. In these ways, this study provides new perspectives and refinement to current models of leadership and improving student outcomes.

Evidence from this study also sheds light on how case principals build and sustain student outcomes. This study shows that while the reciprocal effects of the social relations and stakeholders' view suggest that leadership is an adaptive process (Hallinger & Heck, 2011), the case principal continues to be a driving force for the school. The impact of the principal contribution has to do not only with who he is but what he does and how he does it.

The findings from this study provide evidence of an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the links that have traditionally been thought to exist between leadership practices and student outcomes. The key factors which have been found are not simply individual findings but, when taken together, a combination of interacting factors that provide deeper insight into how Singapore secondary school principals in the case schools lead and manage the process of improving student outcomes. These interrelated factors influence how the leadership practices conceptualized by the principals are played out in their day-to-day activities in their schools and eventually how leadership impacts on the student outcomes. All the above findings can be summarized in the model of **Leadership Influence to Improving Student Outcomes (LIISO)** as shown in Figure 8.1.

The LIISO model provides a wide-angle lens for viewing the contribution of principals in the case schools to improve student outcomes. It has been found that there is no single influence that impacts the way case principals exercise their leadership practices; rather it is the cumulative effects of all the relevant influences that matter. The double-headed arrows in the model suggest that leadership practices both influence and are influenced by context( knowledge of context of the leaders and context of organization), perception of leaders on their influence, social relations

between leaders and the stakeholders, personal dispositions of leaders and stakeholders' view. In short, effects of the various factors are reciprocal in nature and the relationship between leadership practices and conditions in the schools are interactive.

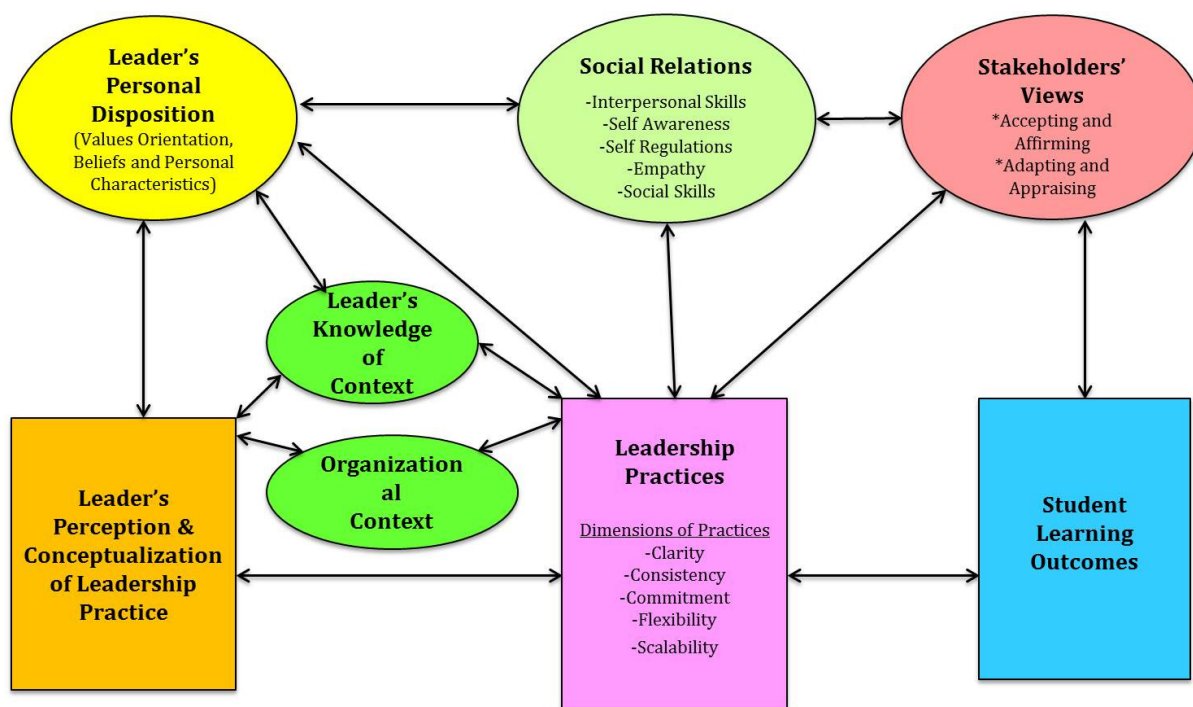


Figure 8.1 Model of Leadership influence over Improving Student Outcomes (LIISO)

The model suggests, as most previous research does - that leadership does not directly impact student outcomes; rather, its impact is moderated by the ways in which leadership is practiced in each context. While there is a common set of leadership practices used by case principals to improve student outcomes, the degree of success of their leadership practices is dependent on the clarity, consistency, commitment, flexibility and scalability of the practices. Leadership practice is also found to be influenced by the personal dispositions of the principals, and their

perception of leadership influence that is dependent on how they conceptualise the influence. These factors mutually influence each other over time.

The model highlights several assumptions about leadership of the case schools. It indicates that leadership is enacted within an organizational and environmental context. Hence, leadership practices of the case schools are both shaped by and respond to the constraints and opportunities in the school organization and its environment. In addition, the leadership practices enacted in each context are also influenced by the principals' knowledge of the context that includes their ability to understand it and their ability and willingness to show decisiveness in implementing and managing the appropriate changes in response.

In the model (Figure 8.1), the exercise of leadership (Leadership Practices) is moderated by personal dispositions of the principals themselves, in particular their personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientation as sources of variation in leadership practices. Each of these qualities does not influence in isolation but works together to influence the principal's perception and conceptualisation of their leadership influence.

The model suggests that successful influence of leadership practices is moderated by both social relations of case principals with their stakeholders and stakeholders' views. The degree of success of principals' leadership practice in improving student outcomes depends, at least partly, on their social relations with members of the school community. The different social relations stance cultivated by the case principals leads to differences in their leader-follower relations, which in turn influence how they perceive their followers' perspective of their (the principals') influence.

Stakeholders' view on the principals' influence can either enhance or diminish the leadership effect that in turn, impacts on student outcomes. If the stakeholders' view of case principals' leadership influence is accepting and affirming, it enhances

the exercise of leadership as it encourages the principal to carry on with the intensity of their policies and actions. On the other hand, where the stakeholders' view is adapting and critically appraising, it diminishes and discourages the exercise of leadership of the principal. Leadership practices and stakeholders' views mutually influence each other and eventually impact on student outcomes.

A comparison of the LIISO model with the hypothetical research model outlined in Chapter 2 of this thesis(see figure 8.2) shows the differences between what has been found empirically in this study and what was originally proposed based in the conceptual framework derived from the initial literature review. In the hypothetical literature-based research model from chapter 2, the relationship between each key concept has been conceptualised with each set of mediating factors affecting each other. However, the LIISO model emergent as a result of this study shows the relationship is not as simplistic. There is no single influence that impacts the way case principals exercise their leadership practices. Instead, there seem to be cumulative effects of all the relevant influences that matter. The model suggests that leadership practices both influence and are influenced by - context, perceptions and conceptualisation of leaders on their own influence, social relations of leaders and their stakeholders, the personal dispositions of leaders and the iterative effects of stakeholders' view. The findings from this study provide evidence of a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship that have been traditionally thought to exist between perception and conceptualisation of leadership influence, leadership practices and student outcomes.

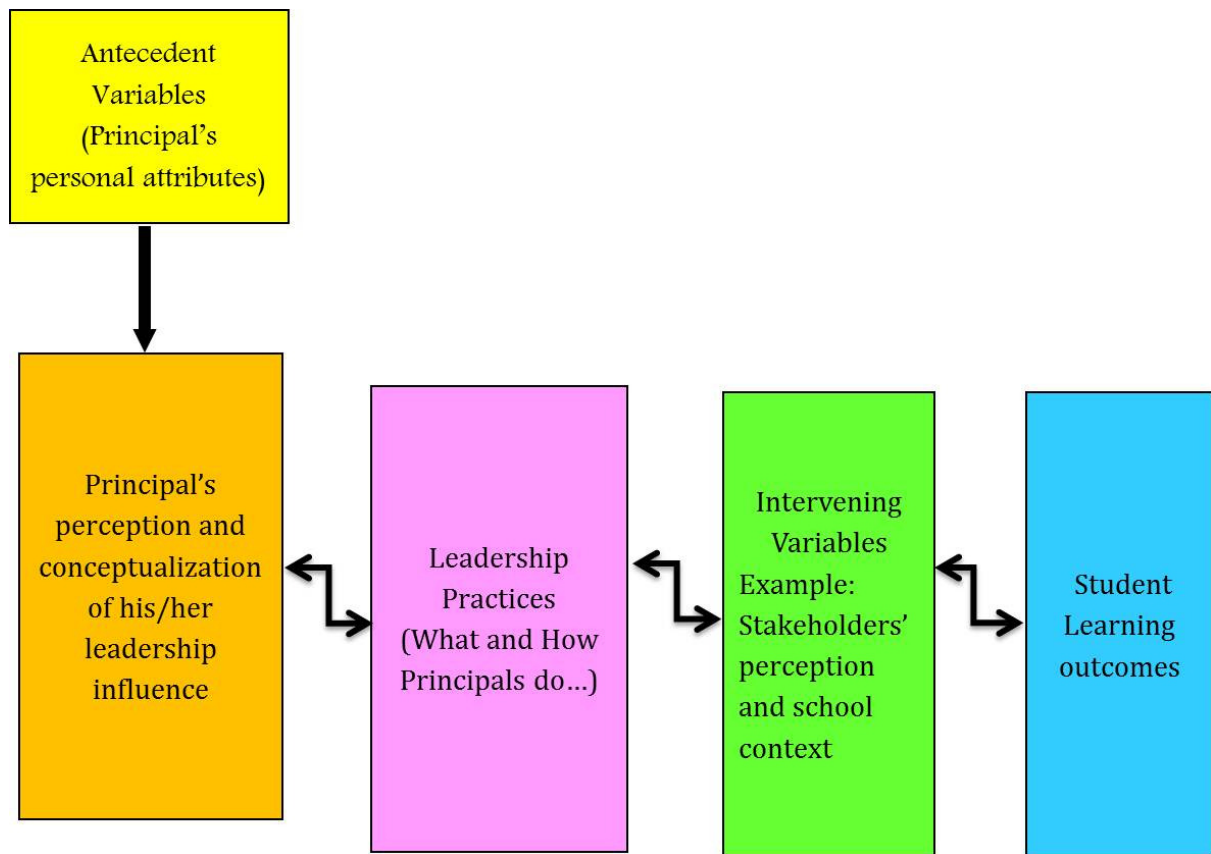


Figure 8.2 Proposed research model for analysing the influence of school leadership practices on student learning outcomes.

(As in Figure 2.1 of Chapter 2)

In summary, this study's original contribution to knowledge has been to clarify the complex practices through which three Singapore secondary school principals lead and manage the process of improving student outcomes. The findings on the multiple reciprocal effects of the different influences on student outcomes add to our existing knowledge of reciprocal effects (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). They go beyond confirming that mediated and reciprocal effects are the main ways by which principals affect student outcomes. In short, they recognize that the quality (hence the effectiveness) of these mediated and reciprocal relationships are dependent on various factors as shown in the LIISO model.

In addition, the study has shed light on how the case principals build and sustain a successful school and turnaround less successful schools – with varying degrees of success - in regard to their achievement of student outcomes. Findings from the study noted that the principal continues to be a major driving force for the case school that is able to build and sustain student outcomes, although it must be said that operationalizing leadership practices does not reside with the principal alone. The impact of Ann's contribution has to do with not only who she is but also what she does and how she does it. Who she is, that is, her personal dispositions helped to shape the culture of the school. Apart from interventions identified in the literature (e.g. Leithwood and Day, 2007b), she builds appropriate connections and alliances within the community that help provide support and resources for the school. Most importantly, she has the ability to build strong and sound relationship with a wide audience. Her leadership influence has been identified as helping the school sustains its current level performance and promotes continuous improvement. The original conceptual framework constructed from the literature review in chapter 2 (see Figure 8.2) shows the relationship between principals' perception and conceptualisation of leadership practices and eventually how these impact on student outcomes. The revised model resultant from this empirical study provides insights into a more complex set of practices involved, and a more sophisticated view of the interrelationship between the concepts of personal dispositions, context, and principals' perception of their leadership influence, social relations, stakeholders' views, leadership practices and student learning outcomes. The revised model 'Leadership Influence to Improving Student Outcomes (LIISO)' provides a new perspective on how the principals in the three case schools influence the process of improving student outcomes. The model also has implications for leadership training and development as well as the selection of school principals, especially with respect to how principals perceive and conceptualize their leadership influence and how different key factors can influence how the core set of leadership practices being played out in the context in which they operate. Although the model is generalizable only to the principals of the three case schools in Singapore secondary schools, it



claims to have implications for the development of theory, practice and future research more widely.

## **8.2 Implications and recommendations**

Although it is acknowledged that the LIISO model is generalizable only to three case schools principals in Singapore secondary school, the findings of the present study do have pertinent implications for theory, practice and future research on principals' leadership and student outcomes in general.

### **Implications for theory**

At the theoretical level, the study contributes an understanding of principal's leadership and management influence in regard to improving student outcomes in Singapore, a non-Western context. It also lends support to earlier findings that successful principals use a common repertoire of leadership practices for school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2006a). Simultaneously, it reveals that the success of the principal's leadership in improving student outcomes goes beyond practicing the core set of leadership practices. It establishes the importance of the key dimensions of leadership practices. How these core leadership tasks are practised determines their effectiveness.

With respect to the exercise of leadership, it is generally agreed that it does not directly impact student outcomes; rather, its impact is mediated by the degree of leadership practices and mediating variables that vary across each context. While there is a common set of leadership practices which the case principals in this study used to improve student learning outcomes, the degree of success of the leadership practices is dependent on five dimensions in particular: - the clarity, consistency, commitment, flexibility and scalability of their practices. These dimensions are

influenced by the personal dispositions of the principals and the way they conceptualise leadership and its influence. Hence, the exercise of leadership is moderated by personal dispositions of the principals themselves, in particular their personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientation as sources of variation in leadership practices. Successful influence of leadership practices is also moderated by other factors such as social relations of principals with members of the school community, stakeholders' views and context. In addition, leadership practices are both shaped by and respond to the constraints and opportunities in the school organisation and its environment.

In regard to sustaining improvement of student outcomes, the ability of the principal to build strong and sound relationships with a wide audience is a critical strategy in addition to key leadership practices that have been identified to influence outcomes. Scaling up and sustaining improvement entails securing the commitment of the whole school community to the same practices. The above represents an important contribution to theory as it sheds light on the conditions in which successful case principals can be influential when striving towards improving student outcomes.

## **Implications for Practice**

The study suggests a number of implications for practising principals. First, since personal characteristics, beliefs and values orientations predispose principals to certain ways of perceiving and conceptualising their leadership practices to lead and manage the process of improving student outcomes, it is important for principals to take time to reflect, clarify and adjust their personal dispositions to key requirements, including adaptation to context. Principals require the awareness that these qualities do not influence in isolation but work together to influence their perception and conceptualisation of their leadership influence. As such, they need to consciously adjust their personal dispositions to suit the context they operate in. In-service

training for principals should focus much more than is the case presently on understanding one's personal characteristics, beliefs, values orientations and should encourage reflection and the application of these personal dispositions to concrete and realistic situations.

Second, in view of the extended findings of this study, there is a need for principals to adopt a different perspective on how leadership practice is viewed. From the case studies and the interactions between the concepts, it is evident that school leadership practice is not merely an outcome enacted by the school principal alone. Rather, it involves others in the school (Harris, 2004; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Spillane et al, 2009). An understanding of how stakeholders' perceptions of principal's leadership influence how principals practice leadership, and in turn, student outcomes will help them to evaluate how they can operationalize their leadership practices and how they can influence stakeholders' perceptions to be accepting and affirming.

Third, while practitioners are aware of the basic sets of leadership practices that will drive a school forward in particular with regard to improving student outcomes, their ability to understand the context and enact these practices is important to ensure successful practice. Successful leaders do not just have command of a basic set of leadership practices; they apply them in a synergistic and contextually appropriate way (Day et al., 2010). As practitioners, this knowledge coupled with their commitment to seek support that could strengthen their tacit knowledge to understand the context would go a long way towards enactment of successful leadership practices to improve student learning outcomes.

Fourth, since the degree of successful leadership practices is underpinned by the clarity, consistency, commitment, flexibility and scalability of the practices, principals need to be more sensitive to how they enact their leadership activities. A deliberate effort to reflect, clarify, monitor the progress and impact of leadership activities while making necessary adjustment to ensure scalability of the practices

would be more meaningful and productive. Training institutes too should attend to this phenomenon.

Finally, given that it is the combined effect of transformational, distributed and instructional leadership that enhances the leadership influence on student outcomes, it may be useful for principals to take time to consider how they can tactically employ a combination of these leadership practices in concert with the unique environments in which they operate.

## **Implications for Policy**

The study also has implications for policymakers and principal training institutes. Due attention needs to be given to the recruitment of new principals and principal leadership development and preparation. The policy implication is that these interrelationship between the concepts of leadership practices, personal dispositions, knowledge of context, organisational context, principal's perception and conceptualisation of practices, social relations and stakeholders' view to improving student learning outcomes may be used as a research informed basis for leadership development and evaluation. Apart from emphasizing the key practices to build and sustain successful schools, highlighting the interrelationship between the concepts and how these can impact the day-to-day activities of improving student outcomes being played out in school will heighten the awareness of the aspiring principals as well as new principals during principal preparation programmes such as the Leadership Education Programme (LEP) in Singapore, the main programme for preparing aspiring principals in Singapore. Building their knowledge of the context and creating their awareness of how to assess and respond to different contexts will give them a head start to their leadership journey as they enter the principal-ship.

In addition, the new body of knowledge emanating from the present study suggests the need for more careful selection of potential leaders to this role. The kind

of leadership emerging from this study suggests that personal dispositions of leaders influence the way they perceive and conceptualize their leadership practices and eventually how these practices are operationalized in school. The current Leadership Situational Exercise (LSE) assessment for aspiring school principal in Singapore should be able to identify suitable principals by evaluating how the different practices are played out during the assessments. Instead of relying merely on what is being articulated during the assessment and interview, perhaps more could be done to align their articulation to practice. The idea of 'principal fit' -where a match between principals and the school context in terms of principal's personal dispositions and social relations stance is established - should be an important consideration when recruiting and deploying new principals. While such practice has been one of the considerations when posting principals to school, greater consideration could be given to how they would operationalize their daily leadership activities.

Educational institutes responsible for in-service professional development of leaders - in particular the National Institute of Education (NIE) and Leadership Development Division in Ministry of Education who are responsible for providing training and development for principals, should take heed of these findings too.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study generates three main areas for future research. The first has to do with the scope of study. As this study is based on only three case schools, a more extensive study to test the LIISO model would be useful. Future research could consider extending this study beyond government schools to different school types and contexts of Singapore schools and their leaders. Next, extending the study to primary school settings is another possible area for future research. A similar study conducted in Singapore primary school settings would enable comparisons to be drawn between principals' leadership of improving student outcomes in the two sectors – primary and secondary. An interesting outcome would be to see if the leadership practices in

the primary school context are different from that of the secondary schools as what have been found in Western literature. Lastly, since trust in leaders appears to be salient to teachers' thinking about their work and critical in sustaining school improvement, initiatives aimed at further developing school leader's capacities would do well to explicitly focus on the trust-building practices. A follow-up study that includes a deeper exploration of leaders' trust building practices with diverse ranges of teachers in different contexts would be useful as the characteristics identified in this study would be a contribution of knowledge to what and how school leaders can build trust in their respective organisations.

## **8.3 Conclusion**

The present study has investigated how three principals of secondary schools in Singapore – each with a different record of achievement in terms of student outcomes - lead and manage the process of improving student outcomes. The findings offer insights into how and why some principals of secondary schools are more /less successful than others in improving and sustaining student outcomes. The study yields an in-depth account of how each principal operationalizes their leadership practices. It has explicitly addressed the four SRQs posed in Chapter 1. After rigorously analysing the empirical data, emergent key leadership influences were assembled to form The Model of Leadership Influence to Improving Student Outcomes (LIISO). This model shows the relationship between perceptions and conceptualisations of principals' leadership influence in relation to the leadership practices they enact in order to improve the process of improving student outcomes. This study not only shows the complex practices involved, but it clarifies what they are, and how the interrelationship between the different concepts of personal dispositions, knowledge of context, principals' perception of their leadership influence, social relations and stakeholders' view eventually impact student learning outcomes in the school. All of them form a complex web integral to the principals' leadership.

While the context of this study is focused on only three case schools in Singapore, it is hoped that the findings, notwithstanding their limitations, may provide a better understanding of the complexity of leadership practices necessary to improve student outcomes in wider settings. In addition, it is the hope of the researcher that this study and its findings will serve as a springboard for future research on Singapore and Asian school leadership and organisational change.

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