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Abstract

This chapter gives insight into how principals of SAP schools can leave a legacy that promotes the uniqueness of SAP schools in preserving traditions whilst reinventing themselves to thrive in a globalized world as well as in nurturing bilingual and bicultural students with a sense of responsibility to the nation. This chapter asserts the importance of school leaders as culture builders. In this regard, the chapter draws from Sergiovanni's notion of the "cultural force of leadership", and Schein's notion of the "cultural leadership". Three cases of three school principals were used to compare and contrast the cultural nuances that are manifested in the day-to-day school activities and events. From these cases, it is evident that effective school leaders play a significant, deliberate and conscious role in building school culture, which serves as catalyst and capital for continual and sustainable school improvement.

10.1 Introduction

Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools were first established in 1979 to preserve the ethos of Chinese medium schools and to promote the learning of Chinese language and culture. They have done well and have remained very much sought after by students and their parents. However, the profile of students in Singapore schools has changed over the years. Among Primary 1 Chinese students, the proportion that came from English-speaking homes rose from 28% in 1991 to 59% in 2010 (Mother Tongue Language Review Report 2010). This shift in home-language

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B. Wong et al. (eds.), *School Leadership and Educational Change in Singapore*, Springer Texts in Education,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74746-0_10

background poses a challenge to SAP schools in fulfilling their mission of nurturing bilingual and bicultural students steeped in Chinese language and culture. Another challenge in SAP schools is the need to develop sociocultural sensitivity and awareness in students through sustained interaction and friendship with other ethnic groups in order to enhance social cohesion and harmony. Notwithstanding some criticisms, SAP schools are still perceived as relevant and valuable in the Singapore education system—as evidenced in the following assertion by the nation’s leadership.

Schools under the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) have a unique strength, with their strong Chinese heritage within a multi-cultural context.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 19 Nov 2013

This chapter examines how principals of SAP schools can leave a legacy that promotes the uniqueness of SAP schools in preserving traditions whilst reinventing themselves to thrive in a globalized world as well as in nurturing bilingual and bicultural students with a sense of responsibility to the nation. By corollary, the chapter asserts that school culture does have a significant contribution to good schools, and thus the important role of school leaders in building school cultures.

10.2 Theoretical Base

The two main theoretical bases of are used in this study are “the cultural force of leadership” and “cultural leadership” in Sergiovanni and Schein, respectively. According to Sergiovanni, when building a unique school culture, “the principal assumes the role “high priest”, seeking to define, strengthen, and articulate those enduring values, beliefs, and cultural strands that give the school its unique identity over time” (Sergiovanni 2009, p. 137). The main leadership activities by the principal include (1) articulating the school purposes and mission; (2) engaging in legacy building; (3) telling stories that reinforce beliefs and traditions; and (4) explaining “the way we are doing things here”. The two key aspects of cultural leadership are culture transmission and value cultivation from the leader to all the organizational members. Cultural leadership in culture transmission is a process of creating an organizational climate. Such a process comprises six cultural-embedding mechanisms, as Schein (2010) describes:

1. What leaders pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis;
2. How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises;
3. How leaders allocate scarce resources by observed criteria;
4. Leaders’ deliberate role modelling, teaching and coaching;
5. How leaders allocate rewards and status by observed criteria; and
6. How leaders recruit, select, promote, retire and excommunicate organizational members by observed criteria.

(Adapted from Schein 2010, p. 236).

Cultural leadership in value cultivation is a process embedded both in school administration and teaching and learning inside the classroom as well as outside of it. Such a process involves an identification of the core value system which reflects the unique cultural traditions of the school and exhibits the expectations of the personal qualities possessed by all its members; namely, the principal, teaching staff, non-teaching staff, and students alike. “Perseverance (continuous improvement)”, for example, is a traditional Chinese cultural principle and it is held as a core value in the three SAP schools. Such a Chinese cultural principle serves to guide organizational members in their process of conscientious self-cultivation, which is expressed by Zhang and Ng (2009):

1. The vitality and strength of a person come from the continuous and unceasing efforts in cultivating one’s inner strength and character;
2. This cultivation requires one to exercise perseverance, in doing things conscientiously and maintaining consistent efforts to cross hurdles and overcome difficulties; and
3. This continuous self-cultivation results in inner strength building. Thus the character of perseverance is long held as one of the most important values.

(Adapted from Zhang and Ng 2009, pp. 155–168).

10.3 Method

The case studies comprise a primary SAP school and two secondary SAP schools. The school historical legacy plays a significant part in supporting the school culture, and hence, the choice of SAP schools as they typically have a longer history than other non-SAP schools. Also, the choice of sampling is based on our convenient sampling as we have known the principals in our previous academic engagement (e.g. LEP participants). The limitation of resources further compels us as researchers in the selection of the sample schools. It is worth pointing out that as researchers, we suspect that a strong culture is not solely or predominantly dependent on the type of school (e.g. SAP, government, government-aided, or independent schools); rather on the school leader. Hence, the importance of investigating on how school leaders building school culture is underpinned in this study.

In terms of ethics procedure, permission was sought from the Ministry of Education, and confidentiality was agreed upon with research participants. The primary data collected was from individual interviews with principals, from which consent was given, and field notes. Data were collected in April 2014. Thematic coding was applied to generate relevant findings. The authors posit that the challenges of SAP schools are not peculiar to a single school, and that common themes would emerge among the three schools. The aims of the case studies are:

1. to examine how the principal harnesses the cultural force of leadership to promote and sustain the particular school's notion of success (Sergiovanni 2009) and how the values, beliefs and assumptions of the principal determine his practice of leadership; and
2. to portray leadership activities through which the cultural force is expressed, i.e. how the principal embeds and transmits culture (Schein 2010) and in enacting cultural leadership, how the principal inspires the commitment of students, teachers and others to pursue the school's purposes and mission.

Readers will find in the case studies how the three school principals harness the cultural force through carrying out the activities, to build up their respective legacy. Readers will see culture transmission and value cultivation processes in the three cases below with examples of the principals manifesting the above cultural-embedding mechanisms. Through our interviews and observations, we have noted the pertinence and effectiveness of these mechanisms the principals use in transmitting the school cultures to all the students, teachers and other non-teaching staff of the schools.

10.4 Case Study 1: Principal Huang

Principal Huang leads a popular primary SAP school. The culture which Principal Huang first encountered when he joined the school was one where the right of access to resources in school was determined by academic achievement. The school channelled the best resources to the best students. This was the deep-seated expectation of staff, students and parents. Students worked hard and competed for a place in the top classes, believing that they would get better resources and better teachers. This belief generated an overemphasis on academic achievement among all stakeholders.

Principal Huang's personal experience as a student was in stark contrast to the school experience of his students. He grew up as a student in a mainstream school. Mainstream schools, in our view, are considered mainstream schools insofar as they are government funded, not affiliated to religious or ethnic associations (e.g. SAP schools) and, are located in public residential locations. The school was not highly ranked in terms of academic results. He and his peers from diverse backgrounds initially struggled to improve the school, but their effort subsequently led the school to become successful. This personal experience shaped his views about human potential. Moreover, his experience as a teacher in mainstream schools further reinforced his belief that the potential of every student is limitless. He maintains that a school should not stereotype students at a young age and determine opportunities simply based on academic results.

Principal Huang recognized that changing the culture of a school which was much sought after by parents for its perceived high performance was not an easy task. In order for his teachers to change their beliefs and practices, he needed to

employ an evidence-based approach. He worked with his teachers to analyse data of their students' performance in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), a high stakes national examination is taken at the end of Primary 6. They observed that students in the top classes achieved good results, as expected, because they were streamed from a very young age (i.e. Primary 2), and annually throughout their primary school years. This practice means that from Primary 2, the expectation of a child's achievement has already been set. In addition, resource allocation was differentiated. Students in the top classes were given access to more challenging tasks. While this practice, at first glance, may seem to be educationally sound, for example, academically more able students would be better able to access more challenging mathematical problems, Principal Huang believes that the potential of the students from the middle and low progress classes may not be fully developed.

He urged his teachers to work at stretching the learning of the middle progress students, and supported them through better resource allocation. The school was able to significantly improve the achievement of an additional 10% of students from the middle progress classes in PSLE 2011. Their students' success moved the teachers to gradually abolish academic streaming. In the process, the school had to slowly win parents over and ensure that academic results were not compromised. At present, every class from Primary 1 to Primary 4 has a mixture of students with "low", "middle" and "high" levels of academic readiness. Teachers have high expectations of all students. Every programme is implemented across the entire level so that every child benefits. This broad-based approach has resulted in all students being given the opportunity to opt for Higher Chinese as a subject when in the past it was offered to the best-performing students only. Another outcome is that the school has done away with printing class positions in the report books, and awards are given to the top 10% of students without identifying the first, second and third positions.

Principal Huang is mindful that the school needs to persevere in developing a culture where every child is valued and given the chance to flourish, no matter which class he or she may be in. Again he turns to data to demonstrate that students who show a learning deficit in the early years need specific intervention so that the learning deficit would not accumulate over the years. Principal Huang launched a special programme which seeks to identify the intervention measures necessary to bridge the learning gaps in students who comprise the bottom 20% of the achievement table. The school recognizes that assessment literacy is an area teachers needed to focus on, and that success of the intervention measures centres on interdepartmental collaboration.

A challenge for Principal Huang in leading an SAP school is to preserve the strong Chinese culture of SAP schools among students whose home language is the English language. The additional funding which the school receives as an SAP school provides students with greater exposure within the curriculum time to aspects of Chinese culture such as Chinese brush painting, *gu zheng* (古筝) practice, and Chinese literature. For example, at Primary 3, 4 and 5, the SAP department developed school-based texts using Chinese classics like Journey to the West (*Xi You Ji* 《西游记》) and Romance of the Three Kingdoms (*San Guo Yan Yi* 《三国

演义》), which students enjoy. An advantage of being a much sought after school is that parents are very clear about their purpose in selecting the school. They are also very well-informed about what the school has to offer. While many of the parents had an English language education, they selected the school for their children because of the exposure to and immersion in Chinese language and culture. So, while the parents might not be proficient or frequent users of the Chinese language, they are all supportive of the focus on the Chinese language and the exposure to Chinese culture that their children receive. The parents give very strong support to the activities and programmes which are designed to improve their children's proficiency in the Chinese language. A valued outcome of the school's culture-building efforts is that many of their graduating students have chosen to continue their education in secondary SAP schools.

One of the key values that the school seeks to inculcate is showing gratitude because the school increasingly realized that the students take for granted what the school has done for them and do not readily express appreciation for what they have received. Therefore, the school explicitly creates avenues for the students to learn to express gratitude, and one way is the introduction of a wall where students can write notes to teachers, their fellow students or the school to express appreciation for the good things they have received. An example is that at the beginning of 2014, the school requested donations from parents for the purchase of additional standing fans for the classrooms, informed students about the donations, and asked students to write notes of thanks to the parents. Another way the school inculcates the value of gratitude is to help students realize that they have a responsibility to ask what they can do for the school and for one another, instead of focusing on what the school and others could do for them. The school gives students an opportunity to serve the school through activities which inculcated greater student ownership in caring for the school environment.

Another value that the school seeks to preserve is self-discipline. There is a perception among teachers who have been in the school for many years that current students do not seem to have as high a level of self-discipline as students of the past. Teachers observe that the students are not taking responsibility for their own learning, are less attentive in class and are not as responsible as students in the past in handing in high quality work punctually. To verify the teachers' observation, Principal Huang decided that the school should again employ the evidence-based approach to better understand students' experiences in school. He led the school in conducting a study on how social-emotional factors of his student's impact academic results. The findings of the study show that students perceive themselves as being low in control, where control is described as whether their friends follow the teachers' instructions, and whether they are on task. The data from the survey served as an impetus for the school to develop a special programme, which emphasizes self-management and relationship management. The programme adds to the holistic education that the school envisaged for the six years that the students spend in school. The school's vision is to develop each student into a dynamic learner who is socially responsible, and an innovator, bilingual communicator, and a sports and cultural enthusiast.

Principal Huang believes in the power of vision in shaping the curriculum. In developing every student into a dynamic learner, the school is very conscious of its responsibility in raising students' understanding about the multiracial complexity in Singapore. In cultivating the sports enthusiast, the school leverages on sports as a good platform for students to get to know students of other races and religions. In developing the bilingual communicator, the school raises students' awareness about racial harmony, and the need for sensitivity in the choice of words used for communication. For instance, the Primary 5 students worked with the nation's Internal Security Department (ISD) to learn about the impact of racial sensitivities on security in Singapore. As part of the project, students visited the ISD Heritage Centre to better understand the racial riots which occurred in Singapore in the past. In addition, they carried out research into ways to foster racial and religious harmony. The project culminated in an outreach where the students promoted greater awareness of the need for racial and religious harmony among visitors to a park near the school. Principal Huang acknowledges that his school has yet to arrive at the ideal state where every child in the school has opportunities to make friends with children of other races and religions. At the moment, the school tries its best to raise awareness, appreciation and sensitivity to other races and cultures.

10.5 Case Study 2: Principal Ng

Principal Ng leads a popular SAP secondary school. He has served in the school for a considerable number of years. Having grown with the school and having been immersed in its culture for a long time, he is confident of the alignment between the school values and his personal values. He emphasizes three school values: (1) Continuous self-improvement, (2) Win-win, and (3) Gratitude.

Principal Ng considers *Continuous Self-Improvement* to be absolutely necessary for the school's continued progress. Therefore, no matter how well the school has done, the school community strives to do even better. In its quest for continuous improvement, the school seeks to learn from other schools, local industries as well as education systems in other countries. For example, when a student team loses a competition, the students reflect on the strengths of the opponent and learn from the incident to improve their skills and attitude. The school teaches their students that they should not expect to win just because they have trained intensely and fought hard in the game nor should they dwell on self-pity when they lose. And, at the school level, it is *Continuous Self-Improvement* that motivated the school to look beyond Singapore to collaborate with schools and universities in the United States, Europe, Australia and China in developing a curriculum for the twenty-first century. For such an international collaboration to be successful, teachers themselves need to improve continuously, carry out research and envision the dispositions and competencies that would enable their students to thrive at the cutting edge of change. The school's progressive perspective has also attracted other foreign schools as well as multinational corporations in Singapore to seek collaboration in science research

and engineering. The school's philosophy of *Win-Win* shapes the school's teaching on effective teamwork, an essential competency in the twenty-first-century workplace. Students are taught that just as they desire to win in any given situation, they must also ensure that others are given fair opportunities to compete and succeed too. The value on gratitude is modelled by many alumni of the school who return to their alma mater to contribute time, money and resources. This mirrors the value of filial piety in the family context where young working adults are expected to care for their parents.

Principal Ng is deeply aware that as a cultural leader, a principal's words and actions will be scrutinized by the community and will have a great impact on both teachers and students. Thus, he takes every opportunity to make reference to school values when he talks with teachers and students so that those values guide the decisions made at various levels. Decision-making based on school values gives rise to a high level of consistency in the quality of decisions. Principal Ng engages his students in solving problems which directly impact the student body. He guides them through questioning in making values-based decisions.

Principal Ng believes that it is critical for the school to recruit teachers whose personal values are aligned with those of the school. At the selection interview during recruitment, he would explicitly inform the candidate that the school's value on *Continuous Self-Improvement* necessitates teachers to work very hard and seek continuous improvement. If the candidate is not prepared for this, then the school will not accept the application. At the Principal's first meeting with students during Secondary 1 orientation, he would similarly stress on the value of *Continuous Self-Improvement*. Principal Ng is of the opinion that school values must be the subject of frequent meaningful conversations among members of the school community in order that those values are well inculcated and expressed in daily life. Therefore, as a result of the attention given to the school values, students would look out for the expression of those values by their teachers and, among the teachers themselves, there would be a high level of peer expectation to live those values.

Principal Ng highlights the role modelling of gratitude by the alumni to impress upon his students that such gratitude of former students should inspire them to continue to serve the school even after graduation. He assures them that every effort is appreciated. The school has had a long history of dedicated service by members of the alumni.

Principal Ng opines that interpretation of Chinese values must also evolve with changing context. For example, respect for authority must not be taken to mean blind obedience, as in the past. It entails giving respect when respect is due; that is, people in authority must earn the respect of others by their words and deeds, and not expect to be respected by virtue of their position. For instance, while Principal Ng expects his students to respect their teachers, he first expects his teachers to be worthy of the respect of their students. In his endeavour to build a culture of respect, Principal Ng appreciates the significance of partnership with parents in the character formation of his young charges.

Values taught in school are expected to be reinforced and modelled at home. At the start of every school year, Principal Ng meets with the parents of all his students. Besides informing them of the focus of the school year and updates in the curriculum, he gives emphasis to respect for teachers. He contends that if a parent does not respect his child's teacher, neither would the child respect his teacher. In such a scenario, the child would not benefit from the education that the school offers. However, he also stresses that teachers in the school must first earn the respect of the students.

The school is cognizant of its responsibility to prepare its graduates to succeed in a multiracial and multicultural work environment in Singapore as well as abroad. In fact, Chinese culture in Singapore can be different from Chinese culture in Beijing. Hence, the school introduced a course on cultural intelligence to explicitly teach students respect for other races, nationalities and cultures. Additionally, in so doing, it seeks to address the perception that the students in SAP schools do not have sufficient opportunities to learn to live in harmony with students of other races in Singapore. In light of the evolving demographics in Singapore, Principal Ng views it as vital for schools to teach respect for and appreciation of other cultures and nationalities, not just races. The course on cultural intelligence is augmented by opportunities for interaction with students of other races through combined co-curricular activities and community involvement programmes with neighbouring schools. Principal Ng believes that if the school's philosophy of *Win-Win* and respect for others is internalized, graduates of the school will be able to work harmoniously with all people in Singapore, regardless of race or nationality. It was reported that the fact that numerous graduates of the school have excelled as leaders in industry and public service is testimony to the school's success in values inculcation.

Similar to other SAP schools, a challenge for this school is in fulfilling its mission of nurturing bilingual and bicultural students who are steeped in Chinese language and culture. Principal Ng said that the school is in the process of redesigning its curriculum so that the learning of Chinese language will be more inviting to the students, and the expected standard of the subject will not seem so daunting and out of their reach. Most notably, the school would de-emphasize examinations and focus instead on the joy of learning the language in order to strengthen students' motivation and proficiency in learning. As teachers are instrumental in creating the change, he assures teachers in his school that they need not be overly worried about grades but should instead focus on encouraging a love for the language. The intent is to enable students to appreciate the beauty of the Chinese language and enjoy Chinese drama, songs, historical accounts and other aspects of Chinese culture. This approach encourages students to think in the Chinese language when they use it in daily life, instead of thinking in English language and then translating their thoughts into the Chinese language. Proficiency in the Chinese language will be advantageous to his students when they interact with Chinese-speaking people the world over.

10.6 Case Study 3: Principal Poh

Principal Poh heads a popular SAP secondary school which offers a 6-year programme. He leverages on symbolic and cultural leadership to take his already high performing school even further. He believes in the effectiveness of balance. He leads his school in attaining a balance between:

1. The inculcation of traditional Chinese values and the cultivation of critical and innovative thinking;
2. Developing biculturalism and appreciating multiculturalism; and
3. The best of thought in Eastern and Western philosophies to inculcate values in students.

He said that a visitor to an SAP school will first notice the artefacts such as the logo and landscaping, which identify it as a school where Chinese culture is pervasive. However, this is only the surface layer of the SAP culture. The deeper distinguishing feature of the SAP school is in the inculcation of values. The school strives to ensure that all students have an internal moral compass to navigate their life so that they can make the right choices and do right things even when no one is looking. School values are emphasized at the induction of new staff by Principal Poh, his Vice Principals and other key personnel, including the Administration Manager. New staff and visitors alike will see these values displayed in many areas of the school. He believes in intensive enculturation so that new staff can fit well into the “family” culture of the school where all are expected to work very hard in a collegial environment. The school values are similarly emphasized at the orientation of new students.

Principal Poh also pays attention to the cultural artefacts in the school, and references them when talking with staff, students and visitors about the merits of preserving traditional values. He uses these symbols, signs and images to focus the mental, physical and emotional energy of the school community to strive for the school mission as well as school vision. Principal Poh draws attention to the teachings of Confucius, which guide the character formation of his students.

In addition, Principal Poh believes that the best way to serve is to be the leader. Although the school is high performing in the academic domain, Principal Poh does not emphasize academic achievement but emphasizes the need for his students to learn that as leaders, they ought to care with a good heart, serve diligently and lead with wisdom. Principal Poh is a firm believer that a happy child will be a performing child.

On gratitude, each time a student wins an award, he or she will take a photograph with the Principal as a reminder of the value of gratitude and the call to serve his or her alma mater. Alumni who return to serve the school take photos of themselves a visual record of their commitment and for remembrance. These photos, in turn, inspire current students and transmit the value of gratitude. Former principals of the school form strong bonds with one another and with the incumbent principal by fervent identification with this value. These former principals model

the value of gratitude through their continuing support of school events which serve as opportunities for them to rekindle good relationships with one another and with the school.

How does a school which places great emphasis on the inculcation of traditional values balance it with nurturing students in twenty-first-century dispositions and competencies? The school explicitly states this desired outcome: “twenty-first-century skills—effective in collaboration, communication, critical thinking and innovation”. This is achieved through their customized curriculum consisting a multiple of programmes to promote interdisciplinary learning and application of knowledge to real world problems. Students develop not only the language skills but also the appreciation of culture when they learn both English and Chinese as their first language in the school. Furthermore, Principal Poh takes it upon himself to personally develop high potential staff and students by giving them stretch assignments and mentoring them to a high level of performance. Staff and students know that when they discuss work with Principal Poh, he would add value to their work by challenging them to think in novel ways.

Another distinguishing feature of SAP schools is the nurturing of bilingual and bicultural individuals. Principal Poh credits the success of this feature in his school to the strategic development of bilingual culture in the school. Students experience immersion in both languages, i.e. Chinese language and English language. All school publications, including the school website, are in two languages.

Principal Poh leads in culture building by using both languages when he gives speeches and also when he communicates with staff, students and parents. In his speeches to parents, Principal Poh would use English language 80% of the time and Chinese language 20% of the time if his speech was on systems, processes or programmes. He would use Chinese language 80% of the time and English language 20% of the time if his speech was on Chinese tradition or values. However, Principal Poh uses the English language at meetings with teachers who are not Chinese. He takes pride in the fact that a number of non-Chinese teachers have served in the school for more than 20 years. The key personnel of the school also model proficiency in both languages in their communication.

Moreover, the school introduced a subject where students learn about Chinese tea culture, calligraphy, painting and Beijing Opera. This subject is non-examinable and is infused into the daily curriculum. Students at Secondary 3 are introduced to Chinese translation. Students can pursue this learning further in a Chinese translation course to be offered as an “A” level subject. More importantly, students with English-speaking home background are immersed in Chinese language and culture from the moment they join the school through the comprehensive induction programme where the school’s history and heritage are explained in the Chinese language. Their proficiency in the Chinese language is further developed because all students are given the opportunity to offer Higher Chinese as a subject.

With such a strong focus on bilingualism, how then can the school develop sociocultural sensitivity and awareness in students living in a multiracial and multicultural society? Principal Poh asserts that Chinese culture is itself an inclusive one. To inculcate the appreciation of other cultures, students learn the Malay

language. The school collaborates with other schools in the neighbourhood on combined learning journeys, co-curricular activities and cultural performances. Furthermore, some students of the school participate in an exchange programme with a school in Malaysia. Going forward, the school will continue to create opportunities for their students to have sustained interactions with students of other races in schools within the neighbourhood.

10.7 Discussion and Conclusion

The three principals of the SAP schools demonstrate that they are able to harness the “cultural force” in building unique models of school culture. They share a common purpose in developing their students into persons of character. As cultural leaders, they prioritize the character formation of students in their schools, where values such as gratitude, diligence, responsibility and excellence, are inculcated. When these principals demonstrate the cultural force of leadership, they define, strengthen, and articulate those enduring values, beliefs and cultural strands that give the school its unique identity (Sergiovanni 2009). In articulating the school purposes and mission, in inducting new members of the school and in reinforcing beliefs and traditions, the principals as cultural leaders, create in the staff and students a sense of identity and feelings of belonging to a moral community.

The study of the three principals affirms the impact of a principal’s personal beliefs and values on the culture of the school. In the case of Principal Huang, his experiences as a student and teacher in mainstream schools, provides a different lens through which he views success for all students. An evidence-based approach together with an early success which appealed to the emotions of the teachers enabled him to initiate a cultural shift in his school. Principal Huang perseveres in deepening his teachers’ belief in the new story of success so that the new culture can firmly take root. On the other hand, Principal Ng strengthened the culture of his school and enabled it to move further towards its ideals because of the tight alignment of his personal values and the values of the school. Principal Poh makes visible his belief in achieving balance through his leadership actions.

The practices of the three school principals with respect to culture transmission and value cultivation show that all of them emphasized the heritage of the Chinese culture; accentuating the values of “sincerely (*cheng* 诚)”, “integrity (*xin* 信)”, and “perseverance (*zi qiang bu xi* 自强不息, continuous self-improvement)”. This displays the principals’ shared belief that a manifestation of the core values, once firmly taking root and embodied by the teachers, will warrant a success in the students’ character building.

In assuming their cultural leadership, the three principals have successfully transmitted their schools’ values through a set of “culture-embedding mechanisms”. As leaders of SAP schools, they have developed visions to build on the unique

character of their schools in developing students who are grounded in traditional values, yet twenty-first century ready and bilingual, adept in relating well in a multicultural society. The principals led in the design of curriculum to achieve their vision but more importantly, they communicated the significance of what they had to do, energized stakeholders and induced commitment. Their daily actions had to reflect their purpose and intention so that the attention of staff and students would be directed to what is of value to the leader, participate in work which is highly meaningful and which gives them a sense of personal significance and motivation.

10.8 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. To what extent might the challenges of culture building in mainstream schools be similar or different from culture building in SAP schools?
2. What might be the challenges faced by school leaders in developing school culture in new schools?
3. What might be the challenges faced by first-time principals in developing school culture?
4. What Asian cultural values underpinned successful and improving schools in Asian societies?
5. What further research questions need to be answered in matters of culture building?

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