

What is a ‘good’ principal? Perspectives of aspiring principals in Singapore

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Abstract This paper presents the findings of an exploratory research project that examines what aspiring principals in Singapore think a good principal is, based on a framework of personal, interpersonal, and organizational dimensions of school leadership. According to the findings, a good principal has a moral purpose centered on personal values, a humble disposition, and exudes wisdom. He or she exhibits excellent relational skills, engages in people development, and develops trust among staff. He or she also develops a positive school culture for teaching and learning, builds fruitful relationships with stakeholders, and manages complex issues competently. The findings also suggest that the idea of a good principal is more about who the person is and what he or she stands for, rather than what he or she is capable of. Moreover, while Singapore principals are capable of making hard-nosed decisions and delivering results, they are actually motivated by the ideals of education. This study offers some empirical evidence of the attributes of a ‘good’ principal in the Singapore context.

Keywords Singapore · Principal · School leadership · Values · Humility · Wisdom · Relational skills · People development · Trust · School culture · Stakeholders · Complexity

1 Introduction

Leadership in school traditionally falls under the responsibilities of the principal (Cranston 2007). Principals are generally seen as people who lead a school and have significant impact upon the success of the school (read for example Dinham 2005; Fullan 2014; Gurr et al. 2005; Hallinger and Heck 1996; Leithwood and Jantzi 2006; Leithwood et al. 2006; Day et al. 2010; Sergiovanni 2005, 2012). However, they are often preoccupied with administrative duties and have very limited, sometimes non-existent, involvement in the teaching-learning dynamics within the classroom. Their impact comes indirectly from the success of these dynamics

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through the school conditions and climate they set (read for example [Boyan 1988](#); [Crum et al. 2009](#); [Hallinger and Heck 1998](#); [Heck et al. 1990](#); [Leithwood et al. 1990](#); [Elmore 2000](#); [Schneider and Burton 2008](#); [Garza et al. 2014](#)). Improvements in student performance are markers that help determine whether school leadership practices are considered successful ([Cotton 2003](#); [Marzano et al. 2005](#); [Leithwood and Riehl 2005](#); [Silins and Murray-Harvey 1998](#)).

Literature on school leadership covers an extensive range of scholarly discussion regarding the forms of leadership that are considered most effective in implementing and sustaining school reforms. Studies on leadership concepts such as ‘instructional leadership’ (for example, [Blase and Blase 2000](#); [Glickman et al. 2001](#); [Hallinger 2003](#); [Marks and Printy 2003](#)), ‘transformational leadership’ (for example, [Geijsel et al. 2003](#); [Hallinger 2003](#)), and ‘distributed leadership’ (for example, [Spillane 2005](#); [Harris 2008](#); [Harris and Spillane 2008](#)) illustrate the multidimensional nature of school leadership. The complexity of the principal’s duties and responsibilities stems from this multidimensional nature of school leadership. According to Day, Harris, and Hadfield (2001, p. 55):

The complexity of the role they faced and the tensions and dilemmas which they managed meant that no single theory could explain existing practice, but that the leadership practices adopted reflected diverse and often competing theoretical perspectives.

So, what is a good principal? This paper presents the findings of an exploratory research project that aims to examine what aspiring principals in Singapore think a good principal is. The study offers empirical evidence of the attributes of a ‘good’ principal in the Singapore context.

2 Literature review

It is difficult to define a ‘good’ principal. ‘Good’, as a concept in itself, can be very subjective. It is riddled with ambiguities and open to various interpretations. School leadership literature often uses terms such as ‘effective school leader’ ([Hallinger and Heck 1998](#); [Johnson et al. 2008](#)) and ‘successful principalship’ ([Leithwood and Riehl 2005](#); [Hallinger 2011](#)) to describe a good school principal.

Given the multidimensional nature of school leadership, a framework of personal, interpersonal, and organizational dimensions of school leadership (as shown in Fig. 1) is adopted

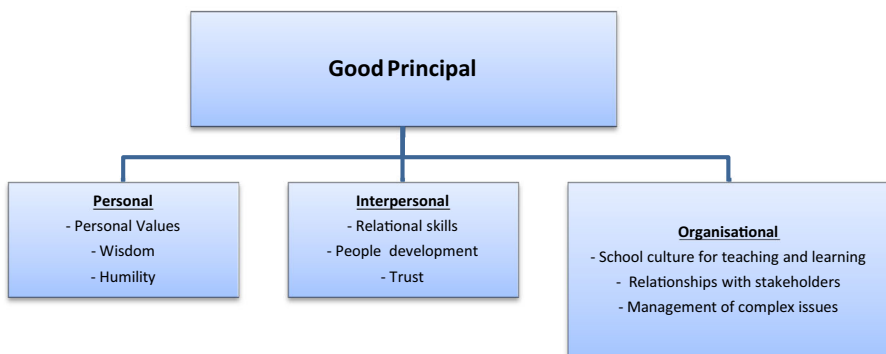


Fig. 1 Three dimensions of school leadership

in this research project to review the literature and analyze the data. The personal dimension is concerned with the individual values and attributes of the principal. The interpersonal dimension is concerned with how the principal relates with and leads other people. The organizational dimension is concerned with how the principal leads the school toward sustained improvement and success. These three dimensions are intricately interwoven and impact leadership practices in a complex manner.

2.1 Personal dimension

The main elements in the personal dimension of principalship are as follows:

- personal values
- wisdom
- humility

2.1.1 *Personal values*

School leadership is a moral undertaking (Fullan 2003). Therefore, the personal values of a principal affect the nature of his or her principalship. Indeed, according to Day *et al.* (2010, p.7), the “headteachers’ values are key components in their success.” Personal values, coupled with a deep moral purpose for education, are fundamental to the leadership practices of principals and can be shaped over time by the various experiences in school leadership.

A study of school leaders in the United Kingdom revealed that “values, more than the power of context, dictated the leadership approach adopted by principals in the study” (Day *et al.* 2001, p. 55). Leithwood and Stager’s (1989) previous study of school principals showed that experienced principals were exceptionally clear and committed to their personal values. Hallinger (2011) argues that principals rely on values to solve problems that are riddled with ambiguous information. Furthermore, values guide principals in upholding high standards to “shape the thinking and actions of leaders and represent a potentially useful tool for working with and strengthening the school’s learning culture” (Hallinger 2011, p. 129). Self-regulation and intrinsic regard for maintaining high standards (Day *et al.* 2001; Cranston 2002) contribute to improved school performance.

2.1.2 *Wisdom*

Wisdom is a deep understanding of people, things, and situations. A person with wisdom is perceptive and is able to apply appropriate judgments and actions. School leaders require wisdom in carrying out their roles and responsibilities (Sternberg 2005). Often, wisdom is the guide that helps one to control one’s emotional reactions so that principles, logic, reason, and knowledge are upheld in exercising leadership in difficult situations.

Sergiovanni (2005) opines that leaders who exercise wisdom in their leadership rely on others’ expertise, time, and skill to complement their own so as to get the job done. Such leaders “cultivate and amass the intellectual capital needed for the school’s organizational IQ to increase” (Sergiovanni 2005, p. 123). Wise leaders are more effective in this way because they know that they alone cannot build a school.

2.1.3 *Humility*

Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski (2005, p. 1331), in a systematic review of the various definitions and perspectives of humility, define it to be “a personal orientation founded on

a willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective.” Although sometimes perceived as a form of weakness (Exline and Geyer 2004), humility is an integral trait of an effective leader. It allows the leader to have self-knowledge and to learn and improve (Morris et al. 2005). Working with others requires humility because one often has to relinquish one’s opinion and a certain degree of control. This is the premise of distributed leadership. In this area, great leaders exhibit “a paradoxical blend of extreme personal humility and intense professional will” (Collins 2001, p. 20). This is what Collins (2005) refers to as Level 5 leadership, wherein leaders exhibit both personal humility and professional will to succeed.

2.2 Interpersonal dimension

The main elements in the interpersonal dimension of principalship are as follows:

- relational skills
- people development
- trust

2.2.1 Relational skills

Relational skills are essential to connect principals with staff, students, and stakeholders. Leaders who effectively implement change possess a multidimensional set of relational skills (Gilley et al. 2009), including the ability to innovate, motivate, communicate, coach, and reward others appropriately. Leaders need to understand that relational skills and effective change implementation are highly related and they need to proactively enhance these skills (Gilley et al. 2009). Leadership is exercised in a set of relationships. The principal’s ability to communicate and collaborate with others is vital for establishing the kind of leadership that exemplifies the values of the school (Cranston 2007; Schneider and Burton 2008). Principals who do not relate well with staff members tends to feel a sense of isolation. They become less attuned to the needs at the ground level. This eventually leads to diminished efficacy in leading their schools (Cranston 2002).

2.2.2 People development

As leaders become more involved in the relational dimension of school leadership, they become more aware of the diversity of talent and potential among their staff (Spillane et al. 2004). Principals who are attuned to the leadership potential of their staff and focus on people development are able to bring out the best from their pool of talent. Studies indicate that progressive distribution of leadership role and responsibilities (Day et al. 2010) as a form of people development is positively correlated with the career growth and development of school leaders. Capacity building, distributing responsibility, and empowering others are essential to draw contributions from others and yield positive school performance (Cranston 2002; Fullan 2014; Harris 2007; Robinson et al. 2008).

2.2.3 Trust

Progressive distribution of leadership hinges upon the degree of trust between the principal and the staff members. Building trust, however, necessitates some degree of accountability for it to flourish (Day et al. 2010). Schools function well when all individuals acknowledge

the “role relationships” (Hage and Powers 1992, p. 7) and assume the responsibilities of the role (Sergiovanni 2005). How is trust developed? According to Bryk and Schneider (2003), principals gain respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary actions. They couple these behaviors with a compelling vision to advance the interest of the school. If they are consistent with their words and actions, and manage competently the daily school affairs, “an overall ethos conducive to the formation of trust will emerge” (Bryk and Schneider 2003, p. 43).

By building trust in role relationships, principals create the conditions needed for the school to transform (Sergiovanni 2005). This relational trust serves as the “connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of the students” (Bryk and Schneider 2003, p. 45). Schools, where there is a high degree of trust, exhibit greater likelihood to adapt to change, demonstrate improvement in student learning (Smylie et al. 2007), and enjoy a more positive school climate (Wahlstrom and Louis 2008).

2.3 Organizational dimension

The main elements in organizational dimension of principalship are as follows:

- School culture for teaching and learning
- Relationships with stakeholders
- Management of complex issues

2.3.1 School culture for teaching and learning

A positive school culture for teaching and learning is the metaphorical blood of the school body. A good principal is able to develop a positive school culture where teaching and learning is valued and supported (Hallinger 2011). The findings of a study in Hong Kong suggest that a positive school culture reflects the competence of the school principal (Wong 2004). According to Day et al. (2010, p. 3):

The leadership of the head has a direct effect on teachers' expectations and standards. This includes the way they think about, plan and conduct their teaching and learning practices, their self-efficacy, commitment and sense of wellbeing, and their organisational loyalty and trust, all of which indirectly influence pupil outcomes.

2.3.2 Relationship with stakeholders

A school exists in a wider community and has many stakeholders including parents. An effective principal builds mutually fruitful relationships with the stakeholders of the school. Indeed parental involvement in school leads to increased student achievement (Jeynes 2003, 2007). Strong leadership is pivotal to the formation of collaborative partnerships between schools and stakeholders and in fostering shared decision-making (Anderson 1998; Goldring and Sims 2005; Leithwood et al. 1999; Riehl 2000). For example, principals who are committed to facilitative governance or distributed leadership tend to have stronger school councils (Leithwood et al. 1999). Principals who involve parents as equal partners are able to engage them in owning school processes (Giles 2006). These principals enhance school capacity by actively involving community members in activities that directly or indirectly contribute to student learning.

2.3.3 Management of complex issues

Educational leadership involves a high level of complexity (Morrison 2008; Ng 2011). There are many factors at play that do not lend themselves to simple and linear analysis for decision-making. Schools should be viewed as ‘ecologies of practice’ rather than ‘economies of performance’ (Stronach et al. 2002). Therefore, leadership of schools demands “a delicate balancing act between conformity and diversity, and between standards and innovation” (Ng 2008, p. 123). In the midst of many complex challenges, “maintaining focus amidst considerable change and uncertainty are some of the emergent tensions schools leaders must deal with in order to effectively lead their schools” (Cranston 2002, p. 7). School leaders, therefore, need the sort of professional development that addresses both the theoretical and practical aspects of how they could deal with the complex challenges of school leadership (Ng 2013).

2.3.4 Summary

The operational context of school leadership is an important factor in determining the necessary values, skills, and knowledge needed for the effective exercise of leadership. It is within the organizational context that leaders must determine what effective forms of leadership may be (Gilley et al. 2008). However, effective school leadership does share some fundamental qualities across different context. Schneider and Burton (2005) studied the perception of two distinct groups of aspiring principals. One group comprised experienced teachers, while the other retired military officers. They discovered that these aspiring principals, although of completely different background, shared similar perception on qualities an ‘ideal’ principal should possess. So, there seems to be some legitimacy to studying attributes of successful principalship, without the findings rendered completely inapplicable in another context. The eight key dimensions of successful school leadership by Day et al. (2010, p. 4) are the examples of such a study, where successful leaders:

- define their values and vision to raise expectations,
- set direction and build trust
- reshape the conditions for teaching and learning
- restructure parts of the organization and redesign leadership
- roles and responsibilities
- enrich the curriculum
- enhance teacher quality
- enhance the quality of teaching and learning
- build collaboration internally
- build strong relationships outside the school community

Comparative case studies of principals from Australia and USA (Garza et al. 2014) also reveal that successful principals are commonly driven by a philosophy of social justice; ascribe to a strong notion of care; are highly ethical and morally responsible, demonstrate a high degree of resiliency and persistence; and are courageous. In summary, the qualities of a good principal are manifold. This research project adds to the literature by exploring the attributes of a ‘good’ principal in the Singapore context through the lens of aspiring principals and through the framework of personal, interpersonal, and organizational dimensions.

3 Background of the study

According to Ng (2008, 2013), Singapore practices a form of educational governance called 'centralized decentralization,' in which schools align themselves to strategic directions set by the education ministry but are empowered tactically to innovate on the ground. The key person to lead schools to do so is the principal. The demands and expectations on principals are high as schools navigate through a fast changing education landscape (Ng 2012).

Consequently, Singapore needs high quality, responsible, and dynamic principals to lead schools. Principals in Singapore serve as the primary interface between the ministry, school, and school stakeholders. They are responsible for communicating changes in the education system to the teachers, parents, and the community at large (Teo 2001; Heng 2012). However, they are also entrusted with increasing autonomy for decision-making on the ground so that they can make the best judgement how policy should be carried out for the benefit of their students (Teo 2001). Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, addressing new principals at their appointment ceremony, said that "fundamentally, a leader in education must be anchored on strong and sound educational philosophy and beliefs" (Heng 2012).

So, it is obviously important for Singapore to have 'good' principals. The question is how 'good' should be understood or described, given the context of Singapore. This exploratory research project focuses on the views of aspiring principals on these issues. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the views of these aspirants are significant, given that many of these aspirants will become principals in the future. The pre-entry phase to principalship is an important one (Shoho and Barnett 2010). Before becoming a principal, pre-conceived notions of an 'ideal' principal can influence the job expectations of aspiring principals. Their views will provide information on how school leadership preparatory programs can potentially better prepare them for their role. Secondly, aspiring principals are usually vice-principals who have worked very closely with principals. They are in a very good position to comment on what they think a good principal should be. Instead of a study that is based on the views of current principals, the research findings of this project make an important contribution to our understanding from another perspective about 'good' principalship.

4 Research methodology

The Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) at the National Institute of Education is a six-month full-time milestone program that prepares selected vice-principals or equivalent education officers for principalship in schools. This paper now presents an exploratory research project that examines the LEP participants' perspectives of the leadership qualities of a good principal. The investigation was guided by the following research question: from the perspective of aspiring principals, what is a good principal?

As part of a larger project which aims to examine the learning needs and challenges of the school leaders, this project was conducted over two cohorts of the LEP. The sampling method was purposive because the participants were pre-determined to be LEP participants who had both leadership and teaching experiences in school. They were therefore able to examine the idea of good principalship from both leadership and teaching angles. The sampling method was convenient because the participants who took part in this research were attending the LEP and therefore 'easily accessible' from a data gathering point of view. The final sample size was 74.

Quality data were collected through the paper dialog methodology. Similar to a focus group interview, but usually with more participants per group, the paper dialog uses writing

rather than speech as the main means of communication. The paper dialog is an effective approach to draw out authentic opinions from participants, break down barriers to effective and reflective communication, and serve as a helpful qualitative data collection tool (read [Ng and Liang 2011](#), for a more complete understanding of this tool). Data were gathered and grouped according to the categories of the research framework wherever possible. After the initial data analysis, the researcher interviewed three randomly chosen participants from a subsequent cohort to solicit their views regarding the findings that emerged. In particular, the researcher requested the participants to explain why they thought a particular theme has emerged and what that could mean in a deeper way. The sharing enhanced the original data set with more elaborations and elucidations. The findings are strengthened and enriched through this two-layer analysis, and are presented in the next section.

5 Research findings

The research findings are grouped into the three dimensions of the study framework: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. Many of the participants' comments interweave these dimensions together, illustrating their inter-connection and the intrinsic complexity of the notion of a 'good' principal. Each dimension is discussed in detail in the following sections.

5.1 Personal dimension

There are three sub-dimensions in the personal dimension, namely, personal values, wisdom, and humility.

The emphasis on personal values is consistent and strong in the participants' responses. According to the participants, good principals are constantly guided in their work by a strong moral purpose of education ([Fullan 2003](#)). The following quotes highlighted the critical importance of the moral purpose:

It is very important to have a clear moral purpose.

A good principal should uphold the highest standards of morality.

A principal's moral purpose is coupled with a set of personal values which is aligned with that purpose. This helps a principal to pursue his or her moral purpose to serve even in the face of external pressure. One participant wrote that a good principal:

...needs to be grounded by good values and principles. It should never be about my own glory, but what I can do to value-add in the capacity I'm holding. A good principal needs to be a person ready to serve.

Another elaborated that:

...a good principal should be anchored on values and have courage to hold on to these values.

Steadfastness in one's values and principles provides clarity of reason in making critical leadership decisions ([Day et al. 2010](#); [Hallinger 2011](#)). But, it is not always easy to balance ideals and reality. One of the most interesting responses was from a participant who felt that a good principal should be a leader who, paradoxically, "*is able to think with his HEART, and feel with his HEAD!*" (capital letters used by participant). Another participant articulated:

Do what is right no matter how you feel; in doing right, you'll feel good.

Regarding wisdom, participants perceived it to be a critical attribute of a good principal. Wisdom was generally understood as being clear and focused in varied situations, while remaining humane in the exercise of leadership. Wisdom is important as principals have to make many decisions and exercise good judgment in areas where right and wrong are not clearly defined (Sternberg 2005), as the following remarks showed:

Good principals need to have the wisdom to navigate the complexities and challenges of managing limited resources to meet every growing needs, and the heart to make decisions in the best interest of the child.

A good principal is one who is clear, focused in his/her thoughts, care for his/her people and able to lead them forward through varied situations and challenges.

Many practices of leadership require wisdom. These include dealing with such ambiguities and finding the balance between control and empowerment. According to the participants, when principals exhibit wisdom in their decisions, respect from subordinates and peers will follow naturally. Besides rational thinking and logical decision-making, exercising wisdom in leadership also includes the more delicate and affective aspects of human relationships (Collins 2005). One participant articulated that wisdom allowed space for "*empathy and human-centered approach in solving problems.*" Another quoted a common wisdom saying, but adapted it to the context of a principal:

To have the courage to change the things that need to be changed (for the benefit of the children) and the serenity to accept things that cannot be changed.

Humility is also an important personal trait of a good principal, according to the participants. Most of the participants associated the humility of principals with the willingness to learn and being receptive to suggestions. Such a principal, as one participant felt, was:

Someone who is humble to listen to the ground and allow staff members to give feedback to anything pertaining to the running of the school or school leadership.

Principals are of course the person in school with 'power' and 'status.' So one participant cautioned:

I believe firmly in humility of a principal... to be able to learn something continually. This often will conflict with the strong ego.

Another participant responded:

Agree it is balancing act. But humility and self-assuredness go hand-in-hand.

So, a good principal is, in the words of one participant, "*someone who takes an interest in helping people succeed and not in self-glorification.*"

The following remark from one participant, interweaving all these traits, showed how inter-related these personal sub-dimensions were in the practice of school principalship:

One with a clear sense of moral purpose; deep thinker, reflective practitioner who is able to relate and influence others; one with the heart in the correct place.

5.2 Interpersonal dimension

There are three sub-dimensions in the interpersonal dimension, namely, relational skills, people development, and trust.

Unsurprisingly, a good principal has good relational skills. There were a good number of comments that expressed a need to relate well with people. In particular, a good principal with a mission has to work “through the staff and stakeholders to achieve organisational goals”. However, what is more interesting is that beyond collegial surface level interaction, working well with others is about recognizing, valuing and taking care of people, as the following comments show:

He/she should value people and firmly believe that everyone (teachers/students) has true potential to excel.

(He/she) believes that if we take care of the people, the people will take care of the mission.

Anchored in values, caring toward staff and students.

If a principal truly cares for people, this will naturally lead to a school culture of recognizing people and feeling recognized, and of valuing others and feeling valued. This improves the professional relationships among people, as they galvanize themselves to achieve a common purpose. Staff members are inspired to follow their principals’ goals for the school when they feel recognized and valued for their expertise and effort in working toward that vision (Hallinger 2011). When principals take genuine interest in others and consider their needs, they are likely to be successful leaders (Schneider and Burton 2008; Gilley et al. 2009).

Good principals are good people developers. They develop their staff members because they know that a school system can be larger than the sum of its parts if they value and build their staff members. A few examples of comments that expressed the importance of developing people:

(A good principal) is a skilled people developer.

A good principal should be people-centered (students, staff), and focused on building them.

A good principal brings out the best in others – students and teachers.

Good principals must place others’ success before self... know when to seek assistance and attribute success to others.

Indeed, a school can only have the capacity for positive change when staff members have what it takes for change. One participant likened a good principal to “a conductor of an orchestra who is able to harness the individual talents of its members because he/she has a deeper understanding of how to make music come alive.”

Trust is the glue that holds together the interpersonal dimension of a principal’s work (Bryk and Schneider 2003; Sergiovanni 2005). Comments that related to trust include phrases such as “transparency and openness”, “open communication” and “being impartial.” However, to the participants, trust is not simply a matter of sharing more information. Understandably, sometimes it is necessary for leaders to exercise discretion when they convey information to the rest of the stakeholders. So, trust here is more about a two-way process of feeling that each party has the interest of the other in mind. An example that was raised was the

principal's support for the teachers in performing their duties. Staff members should trust that their principal, in the words of a participant, "have the moral courage to stand up for staff when they are right." Conversely, a principal should trust that staff members do not need a rigid structure to make their behaviors conform to what he or she wants, but in the words of another participant, "we should let the garden grow and nurture it at the same time." Moreover, a principal gains trust and will be "well-respected because this person is consistent in his/her approach in handling situations and fighting 'fires' in school."

5.3 Organizational dimension

There are three sub-dimensions in the organizational dimension, namely, school culture for teaching and learning, relationships with stakeholders, and management of complex issues.

As expected, the participants felt that developing a positive school culture for teaching and learning was the "bread and butter of a principal." Good principals are always committed to improving teaching and learning in their schools, as one participant elaborated:

A good principal should be concerned about students' learning. Everything that happens in school should be centered on students' learning.

Sometimes, this entails breaking the mold and blazing new paths in pedagogical leadership (Schneider and Burton 2005). A participant opined that a good principal had to "have the courage to break new ground and approach real, present needs innovatively."

On the other hand, one must be careful not to lose focus and change for the sake of change. According to one participant, principals need to lead with "conviction towards education, clear-headed and keep in mind what matters in education." Another asserted that a good principal "needs to stay focused on the mission to educate and not succumb to pressures...". Yet another felt that a good principal should also be "able to hold good grounds" because, for this participant, it was "not always necessary to find breakthroughs all the time." Therefore, the true test is, as one participant articulated:

A good principal is one who is able to make a positive difference to the lives of the students and teachers.

It is necessary that the principal works well not only with staff but also with other stakeholders, especially the parents (Jeynes 2003, 2007). A school does not stand as an island on its own. It is clear that "a good principal must have a clear vision that needs to be shared with others...", and that after charting the direction of the school, "builds relationship with the community to go along with him/her!" At the end of the day, in one participant's word, a good principal is:

Someone who makes going to school meaningful because it is a school of choice for teachers, students, and parents where they can be the best they can be.

Dealing with complex issues is undoubtedly one of the main challenges of being a good principal. Education is, in the words of one participant, "a human industry." This means that clinical management will not work all the time. Principals need to have the skills and expertise to deal with the complexities involved in leading an organization as complex as a school (Cranston 2002; Hallinger 2011). The capacity to deal with uncertainties and emergent issues, with no clear solutions or guidelines to follow, is imperative. One participant asserted that "a good principal is able to navigate complexities and make the right decisions." Another participant felt that given the complex role of a principal:

[one] could never be fully ready or prepared, but willing to learn more and be ‘schooled’ by experience and people.

Interestingly, precisely because there is no established heuristic to deal with complex issues but to take them as they come along, decision-making in complex situations goes back to how a good principal is guided by his or her personal convictions. As one participant opined:

Principalship is about doing the right things rather than doing things the right way. Is about having the head, heart and hand for pupils/students and staff in relation to teaching and learning.

Another participant felt that “empathy and a human-centered approach in solving problems and designing solution is the key role of the principal.” In the midst of many changes, a good principal is, as one participant wrote, a person with “eternal optimism”; and as another wrote, “a leader who inspires confidence in the direction the school is heading and makes decision that is sound and uplifting.”

6 Conclusion

The findings of the exploratory research project help one begin painting a picture of the ‘good’ principal. On the personal front, a good principal has a moral purpose centered on personal values, a humble disposition, and exudes wisdom. On the interpersonal front, a good principal exhibits excellent relational skills, engages in people development, and develops trust among staff. At the organizational level, a good principal develops a positive school culture for teaching and learning, builds fruitful relationships with stakeholders, and manages complex issues competently.

In addition to the findings presented above, there are two interesting observations. Firstly, there are more comments about the personal traits, character, and values of the principal than the skills and knowledge that he or she brings. This suggests that to the aspiring principals, principalship is more about who the person is and what he or she stands for, rather than what he or she is capable of. Secondly, Singapore is known as a system that is result-oriented, competitive, and pragmatic. Yet, none of the comments focus on examination results or competition with other schools. This suggests that while Singapore principals are capable of making hard-nosed decisions and delivering results, they are actually motivated by the ideals of education. Therefore, one real struggle of school principals in Singapore is to find the balance in reconciling ideals with realities on a daily basis.

This set of findings, from an exploratory research project, merely scratches the surface of what, of course, is a deep question. There are certainly many areas on ‘good’ principalship that have not been adequately addressed and could be explored in future research. For example, what does a ‘good’ principal mean to a student? What does a ‘good’ principal mean to policy makers? With rapid globalization, societal values are changing and increasingly contested. What is good to one stakeholder may not be good at all to another. How then should educators understand the nature of a ‘good’ principal in such situations? While this research project does not provide an answer, the findings hopefully form a basis for further investigation with a wider and deeper agenda. As of now, principals who demonstrate the characteristics mentioned above should do well as leaders of their school.

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