Values-Driven Leadership Through Institutional Structures and Practices: How Successful Schools in England and Hong Kong “Absorb” Policy

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Paul Wilfred Armstrong (corresponding author)
University of Manchester, United Kingdom
paul.armstrong@manchester.ac.uk
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8089-3384>

James Ko
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
jamesko@eduhk.hk
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7576-2286>

Darren A. Bryant
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
dabryant@eduhk.hk
<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8723-1642>

Running Head: **How successful schools ‘absorb’ policy**

Abstract

This paper analyzes how principals of high performing secondary schools in England and Hong Kong establish structural arrangements aligned to their core values as educators. Such values-driven structures provide a platform by which principals create the conditions in which policy and reform can be managed and absorbed without compromising the core purpose and contextual priorities of these schools. The findings reveal how the participating school principals have carefully embedded and institutionalized these structures within the cultures of their organisations as part of a multi-layered approach to leadership.

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How school principals address externally imposed accountability measures whilst meeting the educational and contextual needs of their schools and the students they serve has been subject to increased scholarly attention since the turn of the millennium (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley & Beresford, 2000; Gold, 2003; Ko, Hallinger & Walker, 2012; Copeland, 2014). Furthermore, the intensification of government-mandated reform as a vehicle for educational improvement resonates internationally as administrations across the globe seek to systemically improve student outcomes and the quality of teaching (Hallinger & Ko, 2015; Cheng, Ko & Lee, 2016; Sammons, Gu, Day & Ko). The intent of such reforms is articulated clearly through various policy mandates and initiatives. However, the means by which these reforms impact upon practice at the school level remains contested (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012; Qian & Walker, 2013) and subject to a combination of contextual and individual factors. These include the personal and professional values of individual school principals (Bottery, 2007) and the leadership strategies they employ.

Within this paper, we explore the notion of values-driven leadership amongst principals of successful and improving schools in England and Hong Kong. Specifically, we focus on the ways in which such practice is manifested through the institutional structures these principals employ. In doing so, we argue, principals build capacity amongst their staff by creating links between different leadership levels, positioning themselves and the schools they lead to mediate government reform and *absorb* policy. We suggest that this metaphor is helpful in making sense of the means by which successful principals navigate the educational policy landscape and subsume reform agendas in ways that ensure their core educational values and the contextual priorities of their schools are not compromised. The empirical basis

of the paper is drawn from a two-year bilateral research project in England and Hong Kong that analyzes how leaders of high performing secondary schools in both contexts mediate government reforms.

The paper contributes to the field, first by illuminating the means by which successful school principals establish and embed institutional practices that reflect their values and facilitate the absorption of policy. This adds nuance to the notion of ‘policy enactment’ (Braun, Maguire & Ball, 2010) by showing how principals of successful schools respond to and incorporate policy demands in schools’ improvement trajectories. Secondly, it reinforces and builds on the contention that successful school leaders enact complex and nuanced strategies, developed over time in line with their values and the contextual priorities of their schools (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016). Third, the comparative perspective supports research findings that similar practices characterise successful school leadership across different contexts and cultures (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011; Moos, Johansson & Day, 2011). Further, prior research comparing on Hong Kong and England has focused on the national or system-level (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010), or on student outcome data (e.g. PISA, TIMMS). Conversely, little research compares how educational and leadership practices have been developed and sustained by teachers and leaders within these two policy contexts.

The following section discusses values within the context of educational leadership. We then draw on the notion of leadership distribution through concertive action (Gronn, 2000; 2002) and ‘connective leadership’ (Walker, 2012). These concepts provide useful lenses through which to interpret how successful principals within this study established institutional structures to build teachers’ leadership capacity. This allows for policy demands to be absorbed without compromising principals’ core values or their diagnosis of the contributes to the field contextual needs of their schools.

Values-driven leadership

Values can be understood as standards or principles that shape our judgements and therefore the decisions we make (Hodgkinson, 1978). They tend to be influenced by a combination of personal and professional life experiences, and contextual factors (e.g., historical, cultural, social, economic, religious). Values define the ideals and convictions that influence our behaviour and our view of the world (Halstead & Taylor, 1996). In any given profession, the values held by an individual are likely to shape their practice in a multitude of ways. According to Greenfield (1986), school leadership is inherently a values-led profession whereby the educational values held by leaders shape their practice and underpin the means by which they lead and manage schools. Indeed, there exists a considerable body of literature exploring the influence of values on the practice of school leadership (see for example, Sergiovanni, 1992; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Gold, 2003; Day et al., 2000; Day, Hopkins, Harris & Ahtaridou, 2009; Bottery, Ngai, Wong, Wong, 2013; Copeland, 2014). However, the professional obligations of school leaders and the policies that shape their practice may not align and may even conflict with the values that they hold.

The pace, volume and diversity of educational reform potentially stimulates values conflict amongst educators who try to satisfy the demands of policy whilst prioritising the context-specific educational needs of their students (Walker & Ko, 2011). Some research suggests that the pressure of government directives form the most prominent driving force behind the behaviour of school leaders and the decisions they make (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015). However, other international empirical evidence finds that principals of improving and successful schools lead and manage their schools without sacrificing their broader educational ideals and practices in spite of government-mandated results-driven policy (for example, Day et al., 2000; Gold, 2003; Jacobson & Day, 2007; Day et al., 2011). Other research finds that successful principals exercise creativity in mediating reforms and central

policy directives to ensure local priorities are met and to limit the extent to which their values as professional educators are compromised (Rayner, 2014; Day et al., 2016). Indeed, Hoyle and Wallace (2005) suggest policymakers have failed to appreciate the extent to which school leaders and the members of their workforce adapt policy to fit their specific contextual priorities.

Distributing and connecting leadership through institutional structures

The notion of leadership as dispersed or distributed is by no means a new concept (e.g. Gibb, 1969; Barnard, 1968; Brown & Hosking, 1986). However, it has found a new lease of life within the field of education in the last two decades amongst researchers in the fields of educational leadership and organizational design (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001; Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009). Popular interpretations of this concept assume leadership as quantifiable, the total amount of which can be dispersed amongst all members of an organization leading to the assumption, in theory at least, that everyone can be a leader at some point. Gronn (2002) refers to this as distributed leadership by numerical action. However, he also suggests an alternative and more holistic perspective that construes distributed leadership as concertive action, as a values-led collaborative process that can take three forms:

First, there are collaborative modes of engagement which arise spontaneously in the workplace. Second, there is the intuitive understanding that develops as part of close working relations among colleagues. Third, there is a variety of structural relations and institutionalized arrangements which constitute attempts to regularize distributed action. (p. 429)

Structural relations and institutional arrangements have particular relevance to the

leadership enacted within the case studies across both contexts. In this form, Gronn (2000) considers the distribution of leadership work as conjoint or collaborative:

That is, the satisfactory completion of discretionary tasks is attributable to the concertive labour performed by pluralities of interdependent organization members. Leadership and influence comprise part of that labour within those structured relationships. (p. 318)

Linked to this we draw on Walker's (2012) notion of *connective leadership* that posits three pathways or 'connectors' within schools: *cultural* (such as norms, beliefs, values), *structural* (i.e. the formal and physical structures of the organisation) and *relational* (i.e. the means by which members relate to and interact with one another). These connectors bind the school as a collective and synchronised organisation. Successful principals are those who understand the properties and intricacies of these connectors and can manage and manipulate them to the benefit of their schools.

The product of connective leadership activity in schools is a more clearly articulated, closely aligned and consistent organization—one in which there is a high degree of internal harmony between the structures, values and relationships which guide student learning and lives. In other words, practice flowing from leader and school purposes resonates with greater consistency throughout the school. (p. 237)

Central to connective leadership activity is a clearly articulated purpose that resonates through the cultures, structures and relationships (connectors) that bind the school together. According to Walker (2012), such purpose provides the foundational basis for all connective activity within the school. Successful school principals "know well the importance of regularly returning to their roots, clarifying beliefs and articulating values—what they are and

want to be known for and why they want this” (p. 242). From this perspective, principals’ values become central to their leadership, including the organisational structures they establish and employ:

In schools purpose underpins the design and construction of structures which are best for students. Purpose resonates in the structures which bind the school ... For purpose to resonate through structure, outdated organizational configurations may need to be disconnected to make smoother connective pathways. (p. 247)

The evidence we present in this paper illustrates how principals of successful schools in two contexts embed institutional arrangements and structured relationships akin to those described by Gronn (2000; 2002) and through a process of connective leadership (Walker, 2012).

The following sections provide a brief overview of the two contexts from which data were generated and the logic of their selection for this comparative research.

The English context. Recent years have seen an intensification of political interest in the management of state education in England (Whitty, 2010). Structural shifts and the dismantling of district level support and management of schools have created an increasingly decentralised system in which school leaders operate under relatively higher degrees of autonomy and accountability (Day & Armstrong, 2016). The government has adopted three key reforms: i) encouraging competition among schools using the metrics of teachers’ data-led decision-making, performance tracking of students, and test and examination results (Muijs & Chapman, 2009); ii) developing a ‘self-improving’ system (Hargreaves, 2010) by encouraging all schools to become self-governing, nationally-funded ‘academies’ that would provide families with greater school choice and eliminate district bureaucracy (Adonis, 2012); and iii) promoting collaboration among schools through the establishment of multi-

academy trusts and networks of 'teaching schools'. The latter would play a key role in the training and professional development of teachers and leaders, thereby strengthening the notion of a self-improving school system (Gu et al., 2016). Successive governments in England have viewed these three policy reforms as key drivers to educational improvement.

The Hong Kong context. Hong Kong is a useful context through which to explore school leadership and policy given the educational reform agenda that has been in place since the turn of the century. During this time, the Hong Kong administration has pushed forward mandatory reform and restructuring across the education sector. Such restructuring has included changes to secondary and tertiary progression, curriculum and assessment, student allocation and school-based management (Education Commission, 2000). There has also been an introduction of principal certification programmes (Walker, Bryant & Lee, 2013) and reforms to school governance (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006). The driving force behind these changes, as in England, has been a shift towards increased school autonomy through school-based management and decision-making with regards to budgeting, resource and curriculum development coupled with an increase in accountability through external inspection and competition via parental choice (Cheng et al., 2016).

Over the last two decades, both countries have experienced considerable change through systematic reforms aimed at improving student outcomes. At the same time, policymakers in both contexts have simultaneously increased school autonomy whilst intensifying external accountability measures, creating similar pressures for teachers and leaders related to increased workload and reduced morale (Ko, Cheng & Lee, 2016; Glatter, 2012). However, the pace and volume of change, particularly from a structural perspective, has been much more intense in England where the number of different school types and collaborative arrangements (between 70-90) has created a very complex landscape (Courtney,

2015). This contrasts with the Hong Kong system where there are just three main types of school: government, government aided and independent.

Methods

This research analyses data collected as part of a longitudinal mixed-methods study that examined the means by which legislation and policy are mediated by principals, senior and middle leaders and teachers in improved and effective schools in England and Hong Kong. Eight secondary schools (four in each country) were selected for case studies via a purposive approach using criteria based on performance, context and size. First, the selected schools had demonstrated significant or higher than average improvement in their value-added scores in English (in England) or Chinese (in Hong Kong) and Maths over the three-year period prior to the commencement of the study. Second, the proportion of students entitled to free school meals in England and the indicators of the medium of instruction and school sponsoring body in Hong Kong were used to select four schools from each country that served communities of contrasting socioeconomic contexts. Third, schools were selected from a range of sizes from small to large. In addition to the above criteria, the schools had participated in previous research project led by the principal investigators. This allowed for the generation of rich, longitudinal accounts of the strategies, actions and practices undertaken by principals, senior and middle leaders and teachers in the mediation and enactment of government policy.

Data collection

The evidence reported in this paper is drawn from six of the eight case studies (three in each country). Two of the case studies (one from each country) were removed from the analysis for this paper due to insufficient volume and depth of interview data generated at

these sites relating to the issues discussed in this paper. The six that were selected were done so as exemplars for the purposes of maximum variation. Namely, these schools were chosen because they provided sufficient variation in relation to the sampling criteria, therefore affording an insight into a range of leadership practices and to allow for the development of alternative perspectives of these cases (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; Creswell, 2007).

Within each case study school, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and a selection of middle leaders (n=6-8) and teachers (n=6-8). The main criteria for participant selection for these sub-groups were to ensure a spread of expertise across different subject areas and to ensure a range of experience with regard to years served in the post. As such, the participant samples for the interviews were co-constructed with the case study schools to ensure these criteria were met. We acknowledge that allowing school involvement in the generation of the sample may have led to the selection of participants on the basis that they would provide more favourable accounts of their professional experiences within the case study schools. This clearly poses a risk to the validity of the data. Despite this, we were confident that the high numbers of staff members interviewed in each school would go some way to alleviating this risk.

Interviews were conducted in two phases, once at the start of the academic year and again towards the end of the academic year generating a total of 24-30 interviews in each school. In addition, the existing datasets and findings relating to the history, contexts and leadership practices of the case study schools from the two parallel studies served as the baseline for the design of interview protocols, and were used to construct longitudinal accounts of real-time change in the schools' educational practices. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences of the initiation and mediation of external policy from their particular perspective and position, and the extent to which they felt such policy was

prioritized in respect of the broader educational needs of their school. They were asked to comment on specific policy initiatives, to provide examples of how such policies are enacted in practice, and to assess the influence of this process on the culture of the school.

Findings

The following section analyses research data generated across six school, by pseudonym: Shaw Lane School, Colebrook School, and Dale Street School in England, and St John’s College, Christian Brothers’ High, and Trinity Secondary School in Hong Kong. In discussing St. John’s College and Christian Brothers High, we relate some findings from the Hong Kong study published in this issue (Bryant et al., 2018). Whereas the Hong Kong paper examines a range of strategies that principals used to shape policies, this paper elaborates and provides more detail specific to school structure and introduces findings from a third case. The interview data show how the leadership of these successful schools was values-driven and how such values are translated into practice through the creation, development and embedding of structures that facilitate the strengthening of connections between leaders at different levels of the school. The findings are presented cross-case and organized into two sub-sections that demonstrate how values-aligned institutional structures (Gronn, 2000) established by the participating principals enable connectivity between leadership levels (Walker, 2012) and the subsequent strengthening of leadership capacity. In order to provide sufficient depth and detail within the scope of this paper, we discuss data and provide quotations that best illustrate the means by which participants were engaging in leadership connectivity (two examples) and capacity building amongst middle leaders (four examples).

Linking leadership levels

At Shaw Lane School in England, the principal’s values are rooted in her belief that

her staff should actively participate in the leadership of the school. These values underpin the design and construction of the institutional structures and practices she has established and that have enabled connectivity between different levels of leadership. For example, all middle leaders (i.e. faculty and departmental heads) are line managed by a member of the senior leadership team with whom they meet regularly during a weekly slot within the school timetable to discuss the curriculum. These meetings provide a means of strengthening links among staff members at different levels of seniority and a forum for colleagues to share their thoughts, ideas and concerns around the school's teaching and learning agenda:

We finish teaching early every Wednesday and we have a two-hour slot used for training or for meetings. I would say the structure is very effective because what gets discussed at senior leadership is then presented at the middle leaders' level and people are given the opportunity to go away and discuss and bring things back.

(Assistant Principal)

These institutional structures also serve as a vehicle for the dispersion of leadership responsibility, providing staff members with confidence that perspectives are valued and understood thus facilitating alignment between leadership levels:

It's a listening school and I feel that you've got the freedom to say what you are happy with and what you feel might need to be improved. For example, I've mentioned about this new exam format to the deputy head and I said that 'yes, we can work with this ... because it's a whole school policy but we will need to look at how it is going to look in lessons.' We do have our own power to do things our way.

(Middle Leader)

For wider participation in considering whole-school changes, all staff members are

invited to attend regular professional development meetings and submit their views on particular policies, how they feel they should be implemented or could be improved. Staff members clearly perceive these structural connectors as enabling them to lead the enactment of policy within their departments. These structures reflect the principal's participative values: that all staff members should be consulted on policy issues that may affect the whole school. This level of communication ensures that staff members are prepared for policy initiatives and given time to negotiate how it will be enacted and absorbed:

Mostly the senior team is very good and they will consult with middle management and we have a group set up where we will meet up at lunchtimes or after school sessions where, if the senior team have got certain policies that they are going to implement, they will take our views on board before they implement the policy.
(Middle Leader)

In addition, there is a forum for departmental heads to discuss the implications of policy changes through their monthly curriculum meetings before returning to their departments to relay these discussions to their teams and consult them on any changes that may have been proposed. One middle leader highlights the recent changes to the national curriculum in England by way of example of how external policies are absorbed and managed:

Information Technology [ICT] is no longer a topic in itself – it's changed to computer science – and we were looking at that yesterday and whether we can do an ICT audit across our curriculum because every subject is responsible for teaching ICT. This is what the government is saying and we need to adjust to these changes.
So it's in curriculum meetings and it's in faculty meetings as well because when we

go back we discuss it as a faculty on the necessary changes that are taking place.

(Middle leader)

Examples such as this reveal that even with the mandatory policy the institutionalised structures that have been established afford staff the opportunity and space to discuss how such policy may 'fit' with school and departmental level priorities.

The principal of St John's College in Hong Kong, expresses her values similarly to that of Shaw Lane. She established a Management Leadership Team (MLT) in order to foster collective decision-making and participative leadership. The team is composed of the principal, three vice-principals and five senior teachers who also sit on the Academic Committee. According to the principal, the design of the team was intended to oversee all aspects of school management, including teacher professional development, student development, curriculum development, and International Baccalaureate (IB) implementation. A further purpose of involving teachers on the MLT was to provide mentorship opportunities in support of teachers' professional growth and leadership development. The MLT in turn interfaced with a range of 5 committees (Steering Committee, Academic Committee, Moral Education and Pastoral Care Team, Discipline Team, and Information Technology Team) in order to distribute leadership and encourage a multi-directional flow of communication. Long-serving key staff members reported that the establishment of the MLT has served to facilitate effective communication and decision-making:

When the principal came, she introduced an administrative structure so that more colleagues can take part in the decision-making process... Because [we] have this Management-Leadership Team... [if teachers] don't want to go directly to the principal they can come to us and reflect whatever they would like to reflect. (Vice Principal, Career Guidance)

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3 The Steering Committee focuses on strategic priorities and areas of school
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5 development that extend beyond subject areas as a key priority. Accordingly, the composition
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7 of core groups and the focus of their work changes to reflect annual strategic goals.
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9 The Academic Committee comprises the heads of core academic areas and provides a
10
11 conduit for teachers, who are members of subject area panels, to articulate concerns through
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13 to the MLT.
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17 For the school initiative policies, even the school is already very transparent, before
18
19 any policy is implemented; we've got the Academic Committee that involves every
20
21 panel head... (Panel Head, Maths)
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24 Further, members of the Key Learning Areas from both primary and secondary
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26 schools participate in the Interfacing Working Group (IWG), which reports to the Academic
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28 Committee. The main purpose of the IWG is to support the development of an articulated
29
30 curriculum, inclusive of instructional pedagogy and assessment. This dialogue is facilitated
31
32 through lesson observations and the analysis of assessments. The committee also works in
33
34 conjunction with the Moral Education and Pastoral Care Team in order to help students and
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36 parents to adjust when transitioning from primary to secondary school. In sum, the school
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38 organizational structures serve to maximize faculty contributions to the decision-making
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40 process, create transparency about decisions, and provide a platform for teachers to exercise
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42 leadership by taking on formal positions of authority.
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47 Give them [teachers] a place where they find themselves useful and interested. Give
48
49 them opportunities. I stress less on hierarchical positions. At the same time I make
50
51 sure that there will be opportunities for development, opportunities for those I think
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53 are capable of doing so. (Principal)
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As in the English school, the leadership structure at St John's College not only serves as a mechanism to prioritize initiatives, it serves to develop key staff, provide an opportunity for promotion and share responsibility for important policies. Such structures are values-driven enabling participation and leadership dispersion amongst staff members in line with the model of collective decision-making established by the principal at this school.

Building leadership capacity

At Colebrook School in England, the principal and his senior leadership team acknowledge that mandatory policy drives cannot be ignored. However, it remains the case that the values underpinning the structures and practices at this school are the key drivers of improvement whereby policy is adapted to align with these values:

Obviously, we have to implement the policies that the government have put in place but I think the driving force is the senior leadership team and then filtering down to the middle leaders. For me, a lot of it is the personnel in the school and their personal standards and aspirations for the school that drive it forward and not necessarily the policy. (Deputy Principal)

Building leadership capacity has been a key priority at this school with the ultimate goal of delegating increased responsibility to middle leaders. This was achieved by distributing leadership through structural arrangements whereby a sub-group of middle leaders were tasked with identifying areas of the school requiring improvement and then instigating change:

We took the base core, senior middle leaders – from maths, science and so on – and said to them that they were our core middle leader group and we want you to

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3 implement our policies and take that across the whole school. And they took that
4 responsibility and they still do. (Principal)
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8 In addition, each middle leader is partnered with a member of the senior leadership
9 team. By connecting the two tiers of leadership in this way, the senior leaders are able to
10 provide staff with support, building confidence and capacity across the middle leadership
11 team while also allowing them a greater insight into the senior leadership decision-making
12 process. This served to strengthen the shared ethos or connectivity within the school,
13 creating, according to the principal *‘a staff with unified values and expectations’* who are *‘all*
14 *singing from the same hymn book.’* These institutionalised structural connectors have fostered
15 positive ‘relational connectors’ and a productive dialogue among staff at different leadership
16 levels, key ingredients for the process of policy absorption:
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29 At senior leadership team meetings, we always follow the lead of whoever is in
30 charge of that particular area. We then discuss, regurgitate, think, plan and then we
31 give that to the middle leadership team and it goes through the same process. We let
32 them talk about what can be talked about but make it clear that there are some things
33 that cannot be changed because we can’t change certain things. But middle leaders
34 should have that involvement because they are on the ground, day to day, working
35 with their teams. (Assistant Principal)
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45 As this staff member explained, the process by which decisions are taken at
46 Colebrook is embedded within the organisation. It has become a regularised and institutional
47 arrangement that provides a means by which staff can contribute to the leadership within the
48 school.
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54 At Christian Brother’s High in Hong Kong, the school’s official leadership structure
55 reflects the school’s student-centred values and purpose. Different teams and committees
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3 have formal responsibility for directing areas core to the school's purpose. Although this
4 formal structure is located in a hierarchical framework, participants indicate that the
5 leadership model has provided opportunities for key staff and teachers to participate in
6 decision-making.
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12 We, as middle management ... assess which things are so important that we need to
13 talk to [the principal]. ... For policy, we don't need to report every single thing to her
14 in detail. (Chair of School Development Committee)
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20 The Student Affairs Committee (SAC) exemplifies a structure designed to enhance
21 participative decision-making. The head of the SAC acts as a coordinator to encourage and
22 facilitate dialogue across four sub-committees. Similarly, the School Policy Committee
23 (SPC), includes ten middle managers in initiating policies that address school needs. The
24 School Development Committee includes representatives of the nine Key Learning Areas and
25 is chaired by the Head of Curriculum Development. Such structures serve to disperse
26 leadership and build capacity and are clearly driven by the student-centred purpose of the
27 school.
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37 In an example of connective leadership, the principal at Christian Brother's High
38 responds to new policy initiatives by creating cross-departmental teams drawn from members
39 of the various standing committees to encourage coordination across the school.
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45 Yes, the principal thinks highly of teamwork. The principal stresses on team spirit all
46 day long. Always tell us that as a school, we are a whole team ... The principal
47 introduced a collaboration culture between colleagues and also departments. And the
48 principal also encourages more communication between departments. Because of
49 that, we get to know each other and different departments better. (Key staff, Student
50 Affairs)
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3 In a similar way to her English counterparts, the principal of this school in Hong
4 Kong has designed structures that enable her teachers and middle leaders to participate fully
5 in decision-making relating to educational policy and school improvement priorities. Such
6 structures also serve to connect leadership activity and practice across the school, building
7 capacity amongst and trust between staff.
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13 In this respect, parallels can be drawn with Dale Street School in England where the
14 principal has established structures that are underpinned by notions of trust and autonomy. At
15 this school, the principal has built a large and influential middle leadership team who are not
16 only handed responsibility for implementing internal and external policies but also given
17 freedom to adjust and refine these policies in line with their own ideas, knowledge and
18 experience. As this classroom teacher explains, *'we've always been allowed to experiment*
19 *and try new things and I've been allowed to influence stuff on a whole school level from*
20 *almost the start and it's always stayed like that.'* In a similar example, the head of the English
21 department highlights her role in improving the level of communication between the school
22 and parents in relation to their policy decision to abolish statements of special educational
23 need:
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38 We discussed, as a team, that we felt that we needed to improve the way that we
39 communicate with families and children ... I decided what we could do to improve it
40 and the gap for me was that when I get my annual school report there is lots of
41 language in here that maybe I'm not so sure about. I want the children to have
42 contributed to this because it is about their learning and making them more
43 accountable and so I've designed a sheet that the children will be involved in writing
44 ... I proposed all of this to the senior leadership team after Easter and they discussed
45 it and they've approved it and that's how we do things generally. (Middle Leader)
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Similarly, the pastoral manager describes a ‘clear chain of command and accountability’ within the school but also a sense that she ‘can impact on the way that my teamwork and on the way that we want things to change’ while describing an ‘open culture where we can share ideas.’ These examples demonstrate the means by which institutional structures can act as a vehicle for connective leadership that facilitates relational bonds and cultural alignment amongst staff members.

Likewise, the principal of Trinity Secondary School in Hong Kong indicated that a key facet of his approach to school improvement has been to empower his staff. This has involved the establishment of institutional arrangements, namely a number of different committees (steering, management and administrative) that are responsible for setting policy decisions. These structures also allow for bottom-up input from departmental and subject area level. Externally, the Plan-Implement-Evaluate (PIE) framework advocated by the Hong Kong Education Bureau, feeds into the school’s short and long-term planning but the planning itself is achieved through consensus building:

Empowerment is one of my strong beliefs. The principal cannot do everything. If the principal does everything, he will take up responsibilities that belong to the staff of other rankings. As a result, the principal cannot get his own work done and the other staff cannot grow. (Extra-Curricular Activities Chair)

The PIE cycles have become a focal point for dialogue on school improvement at this school, allowing teaching departments to identify growth areas and contribute to the school’s annual plan and for the senior leadership to convey priority areas of school-wide concern to these departments. As a result of utilizing the PIE cycle, the participants report that a consultative, connector culture has developed. As this subject leader attested when issues arose that affected particular departments, the senior leadership asked the concerned

department to *'think about it first and discuss thoroughly'* prior to involving the senior leadership in decision-making.

The mentality of the PIE is rooted in the departments and panels. When we work and think, we would think about our strength and weaknesses. Using our data, students result or whatever data we find, we can foresee the problems and measure whether a plan works or not. (Vice Principal, Former Geography Panel Chair)

Seminars for middle managers occur every three years to facilitate brainstorming sessions around the school's future development. This allows many voices to be heard. Although the senior leadership set the overall school-aims, the consultative practices encouraged through PIE and the leadership framework ensure staff voices are communicated to the administrative committee through the middle leadership. Interviewees commonly stated that this framework has engaged them in decision-making:

Our administrative pattern is not that the decisions are made by a few key school members; we do not run like that. (Chinese Panel Chair)

The leadership does not want to hear the voice of the principal only; they want to hear from experienced colleagues. (Extra-Curricular Activities Chair)

The examples discussed within this section throw light on the means by which the principals of these high-performing schools in England and Hong Kong have built cultures and designed institutional structures that provide a forum for leaders at different levels to engage with one another and contribute to their school's improvement agenda of which the enactment and absorption of policy is a key pillar.

Discussion and conclusion

The data presented in this paper has focused on the commonalities in values-driven leadership practices and strategies (Greenfield, 1986) between principals of high performing secondary schools in England and Hong Kong. We have focussed specifically on the means by which these individuals have designed institutional structures (Gronn, 2000) that are a manifestation of their core values (Walker, 2012). These structures typically act as foundations on which leadership capacity is built through engagement in significant decision-making and the fostering of autonomy amongst staff members thus creating the conditions in which policy and reform can be absorbed.

Examples of such practice include the Management Leadership Team at St John's College in Hong Kong, established to facilitate collective decision-making and participative leadership amongst staff members at different levels. Similarly, the sub-group of middle leaders that has been created at Colebrook School in England to drive improvement from within, a remit that includes the enactment and absorption of policy, is indicative of concertive leadership distribution via institutional structures and process. In Hong Kong, the 'bottom-up' approach to decision-making informed by the PIE Framework at Trinity High School and the committees established at Christian Brother's High to promote participative decision-making is also revealing of such institutionalised practice as are the professional development groups at Shaw Lane in England. The principals of Trinity and Christian Brothers High Schools in Hong Kong and Dale Street School in England are all committed to empowering their staff through promoting high levels of trust and autonomy. The internal participation and decision-making structures in these schools reflect these values, handing middle leaders decision-making responsibility over school improvement priorities including, amongst other things, the consideration and absorption of external policies. At Shaw Lane School in England the principal's strong values of consultation inform the structures she has

established and that provide senior and middle leaders a forum to voice their opinions and share their views on issues such as policy. The MLT and associated sub-committees established at St John’s College in Hong Kong have been similarly developed to create a culture of participative leadership and shared decision-making in line with the principal’s educational leadership values. These examples illustrate how the principals have carefully designed and institutionalised staffing arrangements within their schools to align with their values through a continuing process of connectivity (Walker, 2002) and leadership dispersion (Gronn, 2002).

The findings align with those of Day et al. (2016) who suggest that principals who build and sustain success in schools do so not solely as a result of leadership ‘style’ but through a more nuanced and complex diagnosis of their school’s contextual needs and priorities. They describe how the successful principals in their research:

... made judgments, according to their values and diagnoses of context, about the timing, selection, relevance, application, and continuation of strategies that created the optimal conditions for both the motivation, well-being, and commitment of staff and effective teaching, learning, and pupil achievement. (p. 244)

These are applied as facets of a more complex and interrelated set of ‘layered’ practices (Day et al., 2016), underpinned by their values as educators.

This paper has drawn on six case study schools across two contexts, focusing on specifically on the means by school principals in high performing schools in England and Hong Kong have carefully crafted their staffing structures to provide the conditions to build capacity and enact policy in line with their values. Despite the contextual differences between the two countries, and also between each of the six schools considered, the findings indicate commonalities in values-led leadership practices (Greenfield, 1986; Gold, 2003). This

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3 concurs with research that suggests principals leading high performing schools draw on a
4 similar canon of strategies and approaches to their practice (Arlestig, Day & Johansson,
5 2016; Day et. al., 2016; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), and contributes to the growing body
6 educational leadership knowledge that is applicable across contextual and cultural
7 boundaries. The data we have presented add weight to the argument for more
8 acknowledgement and appreciation from policy makers of the values held by individuals in
9 school leadership positions. It also nuances the notion of ‘policy enactment’, suggesting
10 instead that successful schools are those that can effectively ‘absorb’ policy, thus restricting
11 the impact of reform to ensure their existing values, cultures and relationships are not
12 compromised.

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