Key Challenges of Principals Trainings and their Professional Development in Henan Province, China: A Qualitative Inquiry

Cabaran utama dalam latihan kepengetuaan dan pembangunan profesional di Wilayah Henan, China: Satu siasatan kualitatif

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Abstract

This study sets out to investigate the key challenges of school principals’ training and professional development in Henan Province, China. It allows for a deeper understanding of principals’ views regarding their roles and leadership practices in an era of educational reform. This article aims to assess the professional development needs of Chinese school principals and to elicit their perspectives through a qualitative research inquiry. Data was collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from thirty-seven secondary school principals and six training providers. Observations of training programmes were also triangulated to support the research findings. For the purpose of qualitative data analysis, all transcribed data was coded and analysed using Atlas.ti to interpret the findings.

Keywords: principal training, professional development, school leadership, Chinese education, qualitative research

Introduction

Internationally, research into principal leadership has accelerated over the last decade. Interest has been driven by the demand for change, which requires a deeper understanding of what type of leadership works and how it works (Luyten & Wolf, 2011). The learning environment and schools’ educational objectives, associated with students’ achievement and school performance, are largely concerned by school leaders, whom are constantly under pressure to maintain high academic performance. Professionally competent school leaders are required for maintaining high standards of achievement and demonstrating commitment to supporting the interests and achievements of their school community. However in China, the nature of accountability among school leaders, lies in having to fulfil their political obligations to the Communist Party of China, since the Standing Committee of this party holds the authority over the appointment of school leaders and other academic positions (Li & Yang, 2015).
In China, the school principal is viewed as the school leader, who is in charge of school development. There has been an increasing interest in these school principals professional development, their leadership roles and the challenges they face (Chen & Xu, 2009; Chen, 2010; Chu & Cravens, 2012). In order to keep pace with China’s social and economic changes and to meet the ever-increasing expectations and challenges faced by schools, Wu & Ehrich, (2009) emphasise that principals preparation and professional development programmes need to be reinforced in order to better equip them for their leadership roles and social skills needed in the rapidly changing social-culture. In actuality, school principals require the competency and capacity needed to lead and manage their schools. However, the challenges and constraints they face have to be identified in order to ensure effective trainings and professional development programmes are implemented for the school principals of Henan province, China. The purpose of this study is to provide a nuanced illustration of the complexities within which these principals enact their leadership roles. The following research objectives have been formulated to achieve these aims.

Research Objectives

This article sets out to address the following objectives:
(a) to explore the changing landscape of the Chinese education system and the development of school leadership in China.
(b) to trace the development of principal trainings and their professional development in Henan province.
(c) to identify the major challenges faced by Henan principals in China.

School Leadership in China

School leadership throughout China has all the while been shaped by the Central Chinese Government and research in this area has been rather limited in comparison to western counterparts. Local school leadership research also lacks of high quality empirical research, as published articles and books mainly reported on doctoral theses. It is clear that from the decade-long research on school leadership in 24 countries, where Arlestig, Day & Johansson (2016) claimed that empirical research for Chinese school leadership is still in its infancy and that the principal leadership can make a difference in school outcomes. Furthermore, many of the published studies on school leadership is written in Chinese language because of the language preference in this country. Publications in English are rather limited. This is also evidenced by the review of research on Chinese principals published between 1998 and 2008, which states that 156 out of 170 published studies were written in Chinese, and that they were largely non-empirical but based on prescriptions and commentaries about how school leadership is expected to be executed. To the international research community, school leadership research in China is relatively scarce and further empirical research
studies are needed to be embarked upon, more so after the international attention China had received because of its OECD-PISA scores in 2009 (Qian et al., 2017; Tucker, 2011). Thus, we see the need for further empirical research in the area of educational leadership and its approaches to educational reforms for systemic transformation in China.

The Chinese Education System

The education system in China is the largest in the world and its population has a long tradition of valuing education. However, a large proportion of its cultural traditions still prevails in China’s education system (OECD, 2011). This stems from the Confucianism ideology embedded in Chinese traditional culture, which advocates the attributes of morality and humanitarian benevolence, as the most fundamental characteristic an ideal leader should possess (Lin, 2008; McDonald, 2012; Liu, Li & Liu, 2014). In 1992, the Chinese Ministry of Education placed emphasis on four espoused values of effective leadership, namely ‘values (moral and ethical leadership)’, ‘abilities (management skills and knowledge)’, ‘diligence (diligent leadership behaviors)’ and ‘achievement (leadership performance measured by student achievement)’ (Sun et al., 2012; Yuan & Luo, 2012).

China launched a series of national curriculum at institutional reengineering in 1980’s, shifting the focus from exam-oriented education to a more student-centered holistic emphasis (Qian, Walker & Li, 2017) and the guiding concept of ‘quality-oriented education’ (Su Zhi Jiao Yu) with the promulgation of the ‘Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Promoting Quality-Oriented Education’ (Li & Yang, 2015; Chu & Cravens, 2012). The quality-oriented education was fully enacted as the hallmark of curriculum reform, representing the drive for systemic transformation in China. Meanwhile, the educational development in China has been undergoing momentous transformations through the 9-year compulsory education and enhancing the quality of public universities in Beijing and Shanghai, for instances Peking University and Tsinghua University as the major prestigious universities in the country (Clark, 2010; Michael & Gu, 2016).

Principal Leadership Development in China

Dating back in 1989, the Chinese education system has set forth the priority for improving leadership among school principals after experiencing a radical change since the establishment of the People Republic of China. The issuance of the ‘Opinion on Strengthening the Training for the Principals of Primary and Secondary Schools’ (MOE, 1989) rooted the close relationship of education system reform and the basic institutional framework for school principals’ training and development in structuring the principals’ development training (Lu, Chen & Zheng, 2010; Gong,
2012) and establish an institutional connection between principal training,
employment and evaluation (Chu et al., 2009).

Principal Leadership Training

The training curriculum in the ‘Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005)’ were a
standardization phase with new curriculum reform that included education reform,
and individual needs of school principals’ professional development (Xu, 2011).
Zheng et. al. (2013) added the positioning of school leaders and the development
training was emphasized as the policy stated: ‘principal training is the basis for basic
education reform and development, thus it has strategic meaning for the implementation of the
nine-year compulsory education and the improvement of the overall quality of education and
administration’ (SEC, 1995). The deepening phase of ‘Eleventh Five-Year Plan’ in the
year of 2006 to 2010 was addressed to push forward the educational reform and
implement quality-orientated education (MOE, 2007; Lu & Chen & Zheng, 2010; Wang,
2013) and to magnify the training coverage to rural and low-performing school
principals (Zheng et. al.,2013). The concern on the equity training opportunities is
prominently addressed.

According to Xing (2013) and Li (2007), there are three types of in-service principal
trainings provided in Henan province, namely Qualification Training, Improvement
Training and Advanced Training. The Qualification Training offers a 300-hour induction
training on providing principals the knowledge and skills necessary for effective
practise of school leadership, as the prerequisite eligibility to participate in the
Improvement Training programme. For the Improvement Training programme, offered for
240 hours, principals are required to ensure their participation within five years of
having obtained their Qualification Training certification. As for the Advanced Training
programme, this is a professional certification which offers principals the flexibility of
participating in a month’s long training programme, which incorporates advanced
topics for in-depth learning and research, as well as lectures and school visits.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, by drawing on the
perspectives of various school principals to understand their views regarding
their roles and their leadership practices in an era of educational reform. In order
to study this phenomena in depth, a purposive sample of 37 secondary school
principals participated in semi-structured interviews. In addition, six training
providers were also interviewed, as they represented the implementers of the
leadership training programmes. The interviews sessions allow the principals and
trainers to express their view and experience from their individual perspectives.
The interviews were conducted in Chinese and later transcribed into English after
the ‘member checking’ process was completed by the interviewees on the Chinese transcripts to confirm its accuracy.

In the qualitative research, the respondent validation has been posited as an important aspect of establishing validity in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In selecting the research participants, the sampling criteria was based on their willingness to provide their reliable and truthful opinions about the professional development of principal leadership in Henan province.

The interviews were constructed with a set of open-ended questions closely aligned to this research inquiry, so that their specific experiences can be identified and justified. Observations at different research sites also supplement the analysis of these findings and were used to triangulate the findings from the interview data sets. As for analyzing the qualitative data, the qualitative analytical software, Atlas.ti was used. Atlas.ti is useful for coding passages of text in the transcripts, followed by the processes of categorizing and the identification of themes (see Coding Framework in Table 1).

This qualitative software is also useful in enabling a systematic way of organizing the various qualitative data sets such as semi-structured interviews and observations, which enables a triangulation of these data sets to validate the findings, matching with this multiple site case study design to enhance the validity of this study. In line with research ethics and for further confidentiality purposes, the names of principal interviewees were not revealed. Instead, the names of school principals were represented by identifier codes, such as I-1, I-2, etc.. Further identifier codes like ‘I’ denotes interview with principals, while ‘T’ represents training organizers.

**Findings and Discussion**

Guided by the qualitative methodological approach, this article illuminates the key challenges faced by Chinese school principals in Henan Province, based upon seven broad themes that surfaced through the Atlas.ti analysis. Refer to the Coding Framework of Table 1 for the theme, categories and codes that underpin this qualitative inquiry.

The analysis of the principal interview data is presented below according to the following categories: training content, training method, and qualified trainers.
Training Content

The training content of principal training programmes refers specifically to the training curriculum or teaching materials prepared by the trainers, in order to facilitate and guide the participants of the leadership trainings in Henan Province. The researcher was privileged to have made various observations onsite to discover the administration and conduct of principal training programmes at the various training institutes.

Table 1: Coding Framework

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<th>Theme</th>
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| Challenges faced by principals in their professional development trainings. | Training Content         | 1. Training Needs  
2. Practical Needs  
3. Curriculum  
4. Theory |
|                                            | Training Method           | 1. Communication  
2. Engagement  
3. Combined Trainings |
|                                            | Qualified Trainers        | 1. Training Quality  
2. Experience  
3. Professional Expertise  
4. Training Teachers  
5. Principals Needs |

(a) Training Needs

It was reported that the principal participants were given handouts and some reading materials, as part of their training programme. However, it was during the principal interviews, that some principals revealed that the training content was not in line with their training needs and expectations. Below are the testimonies of four principals (I-2, I-3, I-1 and I-4), who expressed their disappointments with the training content because they felt that the training content was largely theoretical based and that it did not satisfy their professional leadership competencies:

“The training content is always repeating, and is not targeted… In my view, I think the training organizer should investigate the school principals’ training needs in advance, to understand what kind of training we really need and what kind of training can help us manage our school better”. (I-2)
“The training content doesn’t help that much sometimes… the content is comprehensive and lots of content was covered, but it lacks focus… also our practical work needs were neglected”. (I-3)

“I think the content of trainings should be more concerned with teaching principals how to deal with their school management issues, rather than focusing so much on theory”. (I-1)

“School principal trainings are necessary, but what’s important is practice. The training should be based on practical applications where principals can benefit more so that they can apply the knowledge gained in the actual context of their schools.” (I-4)

(b) Theoretical Emphasis

These qualitative findings suggest that the training content or course materials used for principal training programmes in Henan province failed to connect with the expectations and leadership needs of school principals and many of the principals reiterated the fact that the training content lacks sufficient attention to the actual needs of school principals. The following are testimonies from six principals (I-9, I-7, I-11, I-5, I-8 and I-10), who testified about the training content being too theoretical, and with little emphasis placed on school management practical needs:

“I feel that the training content can rarely be applied with our school leadership practices… it is merely theoretical and not practical”. (I-9)

“Some of the training content were purely theoretical and even then, some theories are not in keeping with the development of time”. (I-7)

“I wish training institutes would take into consideration the education condition in rural areas and practical problems of school principals.” (I-11)

“I found that the training curriculum is not updated and cannot be applied to my present situation in school”. (I-5)

“It is more of a theory course, with less practical emphasis”. (I-8)

“Both Qualification Training and Improvement Training cover too many theories. These trainings are mainly lecture-based and lack the practical aspect. From my viewpoint, the training content should be focused on the principals needs. School principals should be taught about school management.” (I-10)

The above testimonies of the school principals’ imply that the training content of what is being covered at their principal training programmes, do not really meet the expectations of the principal participants. From the above testimonies, it is obvious
that these school principals prefer to have more practical-based trainings that can help them better understand the philosophy of school management and more importantly, how to apply their new gained training knowledge to their respective school environments. In addition, Hu & Walker (2012) pointed out that although principal trainings are gainful, there will be no impact on the leadership competencies of principals, if the training content is not relevant to principals school leadership needs. Therefore, training providers should seriously consider modifying the training content and curriculum, so that it would be more beneficial to school principals. Moreover, principals would feel that it is worth devoting their time for attending principals training sessions.

Various studies have reported that the principal training programmes in China are mostly theory-oriented and that the training content appear to be detached from actual leadership practices (Wang, 2013; Wang, 2011; Han & Dong, 2014). However, the training content should be modified so that it can be more relevant and focused on meeting the actual school leadership needs of school principals. According to Gu (2011) the training content of principal trainings, should reflect the integrated processes of school leadership practices, whereby school leaders are made aware of effective leadership practices that can make a difference in their leadership.

**Training Method**

The principal training programmes organized in Henan province managed to expose the principals to different training methods by the trainers, such as face-to-face lectures, school visits and course presentation. Although the training methods appear to be wide-ranging, the principals were not contented and they complained on monotone knowledge delivery and less communication made during the training. This was one of the observation made by the researcher and serves as qualitative evidence that triangulates the results and reinforces the significance of this finding. Refer to Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Principal training session in progress](image)
(a) Interaction between Trainer and Participants

Throughout the training sessions, the principal participants sat listening to the trainer’s presentation (see Figure 1). A very little spontaneous interaction between the trainer and the participants was observed. Instead, most of the participants were found engrossed with their smartphones, browsing and texting while waiting for the training session to carry on. The following school principal (I-7) shared his view about the lack of two-way communication between the trainer and trainees:

“The opportunities for two-way communication were rare... the training times were too short. Moreover, in the limited time, trainers need to complete different disciplines and training tasks, which result in less communication between trainers and trainees”. (I-7)

(b) Combined trainings

This research study revealed that the principal trainings organized in Henan province are conducted for school principals and vice-school principals concurrently. Some of the principal participants were disagreed to the idea of combining training sessions with vice principals. The in-service school principals think that they should be privellaged in the training as they held a higher post in comparison to the latter. Some of them expressed their discontentment at the arrangement of the training. Below are some of views and opinions expressed by school principals (I-11, I-4 and I-6) regarding combined training sessions meant for principals professional development:

“The training institutes placed academic affairs school principals, logistics principals and school principals together. After attending so many trainings, I have still never seen a school principal training exclusively for school principals”. (I-11)

“I cannot understand why the training institutes mix school principals, vice-school principals and party secretaries together during the trainings; I do not think we should be put together as our responsibilities are different with one another”. (I-4)

“Training organizers should have a different purpose of training school principals and vice-school principals; you should try to avoid the occurrence of this phenomenon. You should know what kind of courses principal training involves, and what kind of courses vice-principal training involves, and after all, there is a huge gap between school principals and vice-school principals”. (I-6)

The discernments on their face-to-face classroom instructions, are a clear indication of what they generally feel about being restricted in a non-interactive classroom environment. Wu (2009) and Han & Dong (2014) are among some of the literature that assert about the importance of principal trainings encompassing more scientific and diversified training methods. However, in recent studies, Dong (2014) and Lu (2014), has reported that classroom lecture delivery has a strong influence on developing the quality of teaching as the lecturing method would be a better learning experience for principals.
Qualified Trainers

The shortage of professional trainers reported at the training institutes of Henan province appeared as a part of the qualitative evidence. Both principal participants as well as the training providers acknowledged the lack of qualified trainers further impose constraints on the professional development of school principals. It was also discovered a marked difference in the proficiency of county-level trainers compared to provincial and city-level trainers. County-level trainers were found to be at a lower, elementary training level and are yet to be really proficient in their training skills. The following are the comments by some of the principal participants (I-14, I-9, I-7, I-11 and I-15) regarding their concerns raised about the credibility of the trainers:

“To be honest, the competent teacher trainers at the county level is limited. Actually, they did not have any teaching experiences. After they graduated from colleges and universities, they were assigned to training schools. Some of them were employed there because of connections. In reality, trainings are casually arranged, and many training teachers know nothing about leadership theories”. (I-14)

“The trainers are not school principals…. they are pseudo-experts…. They are dealing with top-level school leadership, without having actual experience as a school leader. Conducting school principal trainings in their own training institute, in my opinion, is not appropriate”. (I-9)

“Some of the training teachers are just ordinary trainers. They are teachers from teacher training schools and colleges of education. They do not have much administrative management and education management experiences”. (I-7)

“The trainers theoretical knowledge may be high, but because they do not have experience as school principals, therefore, the theory they teach in class cannot be connected to school principals’ real practice”. (I-11)

“Generally, trainers are from teacher training schools. Those from the national level are not qualified. School principal training classes should be taught by managers, but we were lectured by ordinary teachers. These are teachers who have never been a school principal for even a day… neither have they managed a school for even a day”. (I-15)

The testimonies of these principals evidently illustrate their concerns about the quality of trainers that they are subjected to, during their principal trainings. School principals are encouraged to attend and register for the various principal trainings to promote their professional development. Moreover, the inept trainers might have adverse impact on the overall quality of these principal training programmes. Thus the credibility of trainers is very critical in determining the quality of the training delivery to ensure that the principals training needs are met. In addition, the competency of
individual trainers is important as it impacts significantly on the school principal participation in future training programmes.

One matching research findings revealed in Fan (2009) that some of the trainers demonstrated a limited knowledge and skills required for training purposes. The shortage of qualified trainers has been a shared phenomena and challenge faced by most training institutes (Bai, 2006; He, 2008; Chu, 2009; Song, 2014). This also suggests the quality of the principals’ professional development training programmes will be compromised due to the said challenge.

Principal Leadership Needs

The preparation and professional development training programmes provided by the training institutes in Henan Province is an important means of equipping school principals for their leadership role. In this study, the school principals were found to be genuinely interested in improving their knowledge so that they can contribute towards their school’s effectiveness and improvement. The qualitative results of this study provided further evidence to suggest that the school principals who participated in principal training programmes conducted in Henan province, found that the informal sharings on school leadership matters with other experienced principals, were found to be very useful for their leadership and management needs.

These trainings actually provided an avenue for principals to exchange views and discover various innovative ways of leading their schools. The following are the testimonies of various principals (I-16, I-20, I-11, I-25, I-23 and I-10) who shared their views about how they benefitted from the sharings of other principals and experts in the field of school leadership, whom they met at the training institutes in Henan province:

“By communicating with former school principals, we understanding their ideology of running a school and the knowledge that I gain helped me implement changes in my school.” (I-16)

“I used to communicate with other school principals, to try to understand the way they think”. (I-20)

“To be honest, I had learnt a lot from other leaders. I always communicate with other school principals to know how school principals run their schools holistically”. (I-11)

“I listened and followed the advice of excellent school principals to learn good management practices”. (I-25)
“I learnt from the experiences of other successful educators. It helped me expand my horizon and improve my abilities as a school leader and school manager by learning from others”. (I-23)

“In recent years, I have been learning really hard from old school principals, which enables me to learn some really useful things for my work. Besides, some of my classmates are also school principals, if I encounter problems, I call them for consultation”. (I-10)

The above extracted quotations were part of the qualitative interview data that showed evidence of school principals in Henan province, leveraging on every opportunity they get, to learn from other experienced school principal and experts in the field of school leadership. The informal gathering of principals at training institutes, offered school principals the opportunity to discuss and share common ideas regarding the betterment of schools through enhanced principal leadership practices. It was an opportunity for these principals to learn about effective leadership practices that can help solve their school problems. In Wang (2011) and Walker & Qian (2015), it is reported that school principals have a strong appeal for sharing informally regarding their job dynamics. It also builds stronger human relationships, draws emotional support from each other and forges strong bonds, which is typical of the Confucian approach to leadership (Zuo, 2014).

Conclusion

Among the school communities of Henan province, the principal has always been respected as the school leader and role model that the stakeholders look up to. The essentials of effective principalship depends fundamentally on the quality of principals professional learning experiences and their initiative to continuously participate in principal training programmes for improving their leadership and management skills. Principal training programmes in Henan province provide preliminary support for incumbent principals as well as provide continuous professional growth for all in-service principals. These training programmes are aimed at preparing new principals for their leadership roles and to encourage practicing principals to prioritize their professional development, so that they can be equipped with sound leadership knowledge regarding effective leadership practices that can guide them accomplish their set goals.

This study has highlighted the various constraints that school principals are facing in Henan province, which were found to stifle the aims and objectives of these training programmes implemented for school principals. The findings from this study have also identified the constraints and challenges faced by training providers in attempting to provide more effective training programmes that can suit the objectives
and preferences of the school principal training participants. These strengths and weaknesses of these training programmes have been presented with the intention of providing targeted and instructional cues for school principals to act on.

Principals are also encouraged to adopt and cultivate a more innovative mindset to upgrade their organizational skills and for creative problem-solving of their school matters. Professional development training programmes are also helpful for the school principals to lead their teachers through the nationwide curriculum reform agenda and cater the needs of students of a conducive environment that can promote school excellence. As a result, this qualitative research study does not seek to generalize the findings but serves as a guide for other researchers who are interested in further exploring the course of this study. Ultimately, the core of this empirical research has set the stage for further recommendations on future studies concerning the preparation and professional development of school principals’ leadership in various provinces across China.

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