

Original Paper

Challenges of Being a Chinese Principal: Practitioner Perspectives

Linda R. Vogel^{1*} & Dongfang Liu²

¹ University of Northern Colorado, Campus Box 103, 501 20th Street, Greeley, CO 80639, USA

² Southwest University, USA

* Linda R. Vogel, University of Northern Colorado, Campus Box 103, 501 20th Street, Greeley, CO 80639, USA

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined how public-school principals spent their professional day, the challenges they faced, and their advice to new principals regarding how to respond to the challenges they identified. The themes that emerged from the data underscored the demands of high-stakes test preparation that the participants felt undermined education quality and stifled student creativity. The relationships across themes that emerged identified being a good teacher and life-long learner as essential to instructional supervision and maintaining one's focus on raising the quality of student's educational experiences. Demonstrating a good moral character was even more critical, however, to maintaining one's priorities and serving as a role model for teachers and students.

Keywords

principals, Chinese education system, school leadership

1. Introduction

As Zhao (2009) eloquently explained, America and China view each other as primary competitors economically and, as a result, have adopted reforms to achieve greater educational outputs by students in order to achieve economic dominance. In international education assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), Chinese students have scored higher than American students for over a decade (Zhao, 2012). While there are several recent studies on how changing policies have impacted American school leaders (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Markow, Marcia, & Lee, 2013; Fuller, Young, Richardson, Pendola, & Winn, 2018), there have been relatively few studies on the impact of national education policies on

the work of Chinese principals (Chu & Cravens, 2012; Walker & Qian, 2015). Standardized, high-stakes testing and national control of education policy has been the hallmark of Chinese education since its inception that persists to this day (Xie, 2012), despite numerous reforms in since the 1990s (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018; Yang & Ni, 2018).

The education system in China in 1949 following the formation of the People's Republic of China reflected the planned socialistic economic system of the nation with highly centralized and unitary government control over all aspects of education (Yang & Ni, 2018). Through 1956, the education system which was entirely public tried to address the 80% illiteracy rate and train workers for various jobs needed to support the growth of China's socialist economy. From 1957 through 1965, the Communist Central Party issued policies to give local governments more authority over local schools. During the Cultural Revolution period of 1966 through 1976, tests were eliminated and students were assigned directly to jobs regardless of their academic performance in an attempt to mitigate advantages, promote equality, and particularly improve the conditions of working-class students. Economic reforms under Mao Zedong in 1978 led to reforms in the educational system, as well. Deng Xiaoping, the Vice President of the Central Committee of China's Communist Party led the modernization of the country as well as the education system (Yang & Ni, 2018). Party leaders at the provincial and county level were to administer and supervise the system of schools. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping announced the transition of China from a socialist planned economy to a socialist market economy. This change in national economic focus resulted in subsequent changes in the system of education in China that have led to a slow decentralization in administration and, more recently, a decrease in the overt emphasis placed on political ideology. Student choice, creativity, and cultivation of good moral character were viewed as critical to global economic competitiveness (Zhao, 2012).

At first, business evaluation models such as the ISO9000 Standards were used to monitor production in all sectors of the economy including education, however that decreased as more education-specific guidelines were developed (such as the Professional Principal Standards in 2007) (Fengchun, Vogel, & Zhaoyu, 2014). The Chinese Ministry of Education eliminated primary school examinations during this period, however Yang and Ni (2018) discussed the limitations of the examinations currently used at the junior and senior secondary levels particularly in limiting students' choices and detracting from overall moral, intellectual, and physical development. The national college entrance exam is still accorded primary importance in the eyes of students and parents who strive to advance themselves economically by attending a tier-one institution of higher education (Liu, 2017). Given that perhaps the first standardize test is believed to have started during the Sui Dynasty (581-618 A.D.), it is perhaps not surprising that high-stakes tests are still viewed within Chinese society as a justifiable measurement of accomplishment and determinant of future opportunities (Liu, 2017; He, 2000; Xie, 2012).

The national Chinese education system has experienced several systemic policy changes in the past several decades (Chu & Cravens). Starting with the 1993 *Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education in China* from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State

Council and further explanation of the goals of education reform in the 1999 *Decision on the Deepening of Educational Reform and the Full Promotion of Quality-Oriented Education*, a student-centered and learner-centered focus has mandated that curriculum and instruction address “suzhi” which means “quality” in order to prepare students to be well-rounded, moral citizens and economic contributors. While external accountability measures remain unchanged, the new education policy also now included “human development and contribution to social cohesion and harmony” (p. 180). The new policy was intended to shift school leadership away from political pressures toward a student-centered focus on the overall development of students, morally, intellectually, and physically (Yang & Ni, 2018). School leaders thus found themselves having to maintain high student test scores to fulfill continued parent and state expectations that had dominated the Chinese education system while also addressing humanistic educational outcomes that were not clearly defined.

The role of principals changed a great deal in the new era of Chinese education reforms (Chu & Cravens, 2012; Yang & Ni, 2018). A shift from managers who carried out government-issued mandates regarding curriculum and virtually all aspects of school governance were now faced with the challenge of becoming instructional leaders who shared authority with stakeholders, particularly teachers, and actively developed and supervised locally relevant curriculum and student-centered instruction (Chu & Cravens, 2012; Liu, XU, Grant, Strong, & Fang, 2017). While a review of pertinent studies regarding the new role that Chinese school leaders have found themselves in regarding the implementation of recent reforms follows in the next section, Haiyan, Walker, and Yulian (2016) found that there are relatively few empirical studies that have been conducted to enlarge the understanding of what Chinese principals are asked to do and how they respond to those professional responsibilities. The study described here attempted to add to that understanding by conducting an empirical qualitative investigation based on the following three research questions:

- What are the daily professional activities engaged in by Chinese public-school principals?
 - What challenges do Chinese public-school principals identify regarding enacting positive change in the educational experiences of students?
 - What advice would Chinese public-school principals give to those entering the profession regarding how to respond to the challenges of enacting positive change in the educational experiences of students?
- The findings of this study add detail to themes reflected in the existing literature, particularly a shift toward more a humanistic educational philosophy and reflection of traditional cultural values of morality and learning.

2. Literature Review

Even principals who were not entirely comfortable with the very top-down historical national management of education found the new policy expectations set forth in the 1993 *Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education in China* that included expectations of authority delegation and development of building-level leadership teams to implement school-wide strategic planning,

curriculum and instruction reforms, teacher development, and performance reviews challenging (Chu & Cravens, 2012). Curricular reform that was to be led by principals focused on individualized instructional strategies including greater relevance to real-life contexts, “more practical hands-on experiences, more project-based inquiry learning, ‘white-space’ for local and school-based curricula, and more choices for students (optional modules)” (p. 183). Quality-Oriented Education was “the hallmark of the nationwide educational reform in 1999 and was fully enacted in 2001” (p. 179). Chu and Cravens (2012) articulated the many challenges principals faced as they undertook a systemic transformation of schooling at every level that redefined quality, emphasized equity, and embraced shared governance. Given that schools were still expected to meet national testing expectations while implementing these dramatic structural, curricular, and pedagogical changes, Chinese principals were “for the first time” expected to serve as instructional leaders through the design and evaluation of new curricular content, classroom observations, and teacher professional development (p. 183).

Principals were expected to implement these reforms despite resource inequity across regions and disparity of teacher quality (Center for Educational Policy Analysis, 2007; Tao & Yuan, 2010; Zhu, Ruan, & Liu, 2010). As the standard of living rose, an achievement gap emerged between poor rural areas and more affluent urban centers (Hallinger & Liu, 2016). While the Chinese educational reform policies made school governance more decentralized (with more power given to the local county level), market-oriented, and diverse, principals were expected to assume a true leadership as opposed to only management role (Chu & Cravens, 2012). This required working knowledge of scientific school management, democratic school management, and distributed leadership which were new concepts for Chinese principals as Chu and Cravens explained. China did adopt policies in the 1990s to support the training that principals would need in order to transform from top-down managers into instructional leaders who shared authority, but professional development efforts were not fast enough or as widespread as needed to meet the needs of all of school leaders. In 2012, China offered induction training for new principals, continuing training for current school leaders, and research training for acting principals who have demonstrated exemplary leadership. Research on the impact of principals’ evaluations of teachers in improving student learning outcomes showed that the process was hindered by many of the factors that have also been identified in research regarding American teacher evaluation system usefulness including lack of evaluator credibility, usefulness of feedback, and the lack of consequences for poor performance (Donahue & Vogel, 2017; Zhao & Wang, 2007). Chu and Cravens (2012) summarized the need for Chinese principals to be given the training and support to develop “transformational and moral leadership toward the fulfilment of a new mission of education that promotes humanistic values of equity, integrity, and creativity” (p. 194).

A 2007 articulation of a new school evaluation framework centered on student development both academically and socially (Chu & Cravens, 2012). In 2013, the Ministry of Education in China issued the first national Professional Standards for Compulsory Education School Principals which outlined the criteria for qualify school leadership (Liu, Xu, Grant, Strong, & Fang, 2017). Primary and junior

secondary education is considered to be compulsory levels of education in China (Yang & Ni, 2018). While national college entrance examination scores remained the main benchmark for school performance, the Professional Standards for Chinese principals were based on the principals of morality, cultivating student talent, development of teacher skills, and modelling life-long learning with an overall emphasis on instructional leadership and very specific guidelines. As explained by Jensen, Downing, and Clark (2017), the Professional Standards for Chinese principals include the following:

- (1) Setting the school development plan
- (2) Cultivating a nurturing school environment
- (3) Leading curriculum improvement and instruction
- (4) Leading teacher professional development
- (5) Optimizing organizational management
- (6) Adjusting to external contexts

Clearly, instructional leadership was the goal for Chinese principals to aspire to in their schools according to these Professional Standards.

Instructional leadership has a relatively long history, particularly in the United States and other Western nations, that has been shown to positively impact both teacher and student performance (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Matthews & Crow, 2009; Mitchell, Kensler, & Tschannen-Moran, 2015; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014; Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017). Brookover and Lezotte (1982) were the first to hone in on instructional leadership as a critical, primary task of an effective school leader during the effective schools movement that started in the late 1970's, and momentum through research has only grown over time (Hallinger, 2005). Research regarding instructional leadership in China since the 1999 education reform policy was initiated is still somewhat limited, however.

Walker and Hallinger (2015) compared research conducted in five East Asian countries, including China. They found that Chinese principals still leaned “toward managerial and political, rather than instructional leadership roles” (p. 560). Liu, Hallinger, and Feng (2016) found that instructional leadership (which they also referred to as learning-centered leadership) did have a moderate mediating effect on teacher professional learning. Qian, Walker, and Li (2017) found in a qualitative study with 22 primary school principals that Chinese principals enact their instructional leadership in a context where “they are required to accommodate both imported reform initiatives and traditional expectations” (p. 186). Li, Sun, Chen, Zheng, and Zhang (2016) found that instructional leadership had no significant positive effects on student achievement in their study but determined that the narrow focus on instructional behaviors impacted their findings. A subsequent study by Zheng, Li, Chen, and Loeb (2017) found that a broader inclusion of principal instructional leadership factors showed a positive relationship to both student reading achievement and learning efficacy as well as on many aspects of teachers' perspectives on their jobs such as efficacy and lower occupational stress. In 2018, Liu and

Hallinger examined the impact of principal instructional leadership on teacher self-efficacy and professional learning in Qingdao, China. Principal instructional leadership, particularly time management and principal self-efficacy, was found to have a moderate direct and indirect effect on teacher professional learning.

In 2012, Walker et al. had reviewed 170 research publications from 1998 through 2008 that included journal papers, book chapters, and doctoral dissertations and Masters theses. Ninety-one no empirical and 79 empirical publications were included in Walker et al.'s 2012 study. The no empirical works addressed what principals should do to respond to reforms, how to incorporate Western models of leadership, discussions of famous or "heroic" principals' actions and attributes, and the importance of Communist Party ideology to successful school leadership. Commentaries on principals' concerns addressed school finance and resource acquisition, academic outcomes and the national university entrance examination, and the forming of good connections and relationships for upward mobility. The empirical studies focused on the application of Western leadership models to Chinese school contexts and the unique Chinese cultural and political contexts that "painted a picture of principals caught between a connected series of contradictory forces" (p. 387).

Haiyan, Walker, and Yullan (2016) provided an update to the review of research regarding school leaders in China completed by Walker, Hu, and Qian (2012). Between 2008 and 2013, Haiyan et al. found 136 nonempirical articles published regarding Chinese principals and 17 articles discussing empirical studies that had been conducted. Of the nonempirical journal articles, most were written by school principals and shared information on promising school practices with an emphasis on moral or ethical attributes unlike the nonempirical articles analyzed in 2012 that focused more on political expectations of principals. The nonempirical articles also discussed what it meant to be a Chinese school principal, the issues surrounding leading curriculum reform, and the professional development of principals. The empirical studies were classified by the authors as using either Western or "imported" frameworks to frame their investigations (five articles), context-based studies (11 articles), and one study that attempted to develop a Chinese instructional leadership model. The latter study by Zhao and Liu (2010) found that the status, location, and size of the school, the school's financial situation, the number of years the principal had been with the school, the principals' power to hire and promote teachers, and the number of vice-principals employed at a school impacted a principal's instructional leadership.

Haiyan et al. (2016) lamented the dearth of empirical studies regarding Chinese principals given the changing educational policies in China discussed earlier and the continued student success of Chinese students on international assessments. Walker and Qain (2015) also called for more research on the experiences of Chinese principals given that school principals have "found themselves struggling with the contradictions, tensions, and ambiguities between traditional cultural expectations and the requirements of recent reform initiatives" (p. 480).

This qualitative study of 23 Chinese principals attempts to add further context and detail to the

experience of Chinese school leaders who are still responding to the educational reforms made in the 21st century. This study examined how a small sample of rural, suburban, and urban Chinese public-school principals spent their professional day, the challenges they faced, and their advice to new principals regarding how to respond to the challenges they identified. The themes that emerged from the data underscored the demands of high-stakes test preparation that the participants felt undermined education quality and stifled student creativity, embracing a human development rather than purely academic achievement discourse (Armstrong, 2006).

3. Methodology

A constructionist epistemology was used in this study to examine the phenomenon of the practice of Chinese principals. The constructionist perspective allowed the researches to focus on the meaning that each individual created based on their beliefs and experiences (Crotty, 2013). In order to let the unique voices and perspectives of the participants be heard, a grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data and organize the findings (Strauss & Corbin, 2014; Vogt, Gardner, & Haefele, 2012).

The research questions guiding this qualitative study were as follows:

- (1) What are the daily professional activities engaged in by Chinese public-school principals?
- (2) What challenges do Chinese public-school principals identify regarding enacting positive change in the educational experiences of students?
- (3) What advice would Chinese public-school principals give to those entering the professional regarding how to respond to the challenges of enacting positive change in the educational experiences of students?

Public-school principals were focused upon because of their direct management by the Chinese Ministry of Education for curriculum and resources. Snowball sampling was used to counteract the reluctance of perspective participants to engage in research with a foreign researcher. Participants were from the Chongqing province because one of the researchers had developed relationships with public-schools in the region. While the researchers had hoped to obtain a balanced sample of rural, suburban, and urban principals in the Chongqing province of China, more urban Chinese principals agreed to participate in the study during the time period which the interviewers were collecting data. The researchers were limited by both time and resources, having a specific window of time during which meetings explaining the study and interviews could take place.

Twenty-three Chinese principals participated in the study with 15 serving urban schools, four serving suburban schools, and four serving rural schools. The size of the schools with each geographic division varied greatly with the rural schools having a population between 1805 and 3000 students, the suburban schools having between 1921 and 4305 students, and urban schools serving between 1000 and 6000 students. Sixteen of the principals who participated in the study led primary schools, five led schools that housed both junior and senior high schools, and the three remaining participants led a stand-alone junior high, senior high, and kindergarten through twelfth grade schools. The researchers did not

attempt to balance the gender of the participants since that was not a focus of the current study. Eighteen (78%) of the participants were male while the remaining 22% were female, all of whom led primary schools.

The data was collected using open-ended interview questions after approval of the project from the Institutional Review Board and consent forms were completed with each participant. Interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone after personal contact had been made by either one of the researchers or a known mutual professional acquaintance. One of the researchers spoke fluent Chinese and served as the translator during each interview. Transcripts were shared with participants to ensure that trustworthiness.

Using NIVO 11 software, the interview transcripts were first open coded, then axial codes were developed among and between response. Finally, the axial codes were collapse into themes. The relationships between themes that emerged related to each research question were then analyzed and a working theory of the relationships between the themes that emerged related to each research question were then analyzed and a preliminary theory of the relationship between the daily professional activities of the principals participating in the study, the challenges that they identified regarding improving the educational experience of students, and the advice they would give to new principals was developed.

4. Limitations

There are numerous limitations to the findings of this study. While the study was intended to provide a more detailed understanding of the daily professional activities of Chinese principals and the challenges that they faced, as well as what advise they would give to others as to how to handle such challenges, the number and geographic areas represented by participants was limited by the time and resources that the researchers were able to spend in China collecting the data. The limitations of this study include the following, many of which will be further discussed in the section on recommendations for future research:

- (1) Although the study was qualitative, the number of principals interviewed (n=23) was relatively small which limits the transferability of the findings.
- (2) The participants in the study were disproportionately from urban areas, thus the findings predominantly reflect the activities and challenges of urban school principals. The low number of participants from rural and suburban schools (n=4 for each geographic region) meant that the responsibilities, challenges, and overall voice of principals of rural and suburban schools in China are not adequately represented in the findings. This lack of representation also made it difficult to identify variations in themes specific to each of the three geographic types of schools (rural, suburban, and urban).
- (3) The sample in this study also was not stratified regarding levels of schools led, thus no findings could be drawn regarding the unique responsibilities or challenges of primary (elementary), junior

secondary (middle), or senior secondary (high) school principals.

(4) The participants were predominantly male with only five female principals participating in the study. This means that the perspectives reported by the participants reflect more of a male voice than a female principal voice.

(5) Since some interviews took place over the phone after an initial meeting to explain the study, participants' answer may not have been as lengthy or detailed as the participants who were interviewed in a face-to-face setting. Participants in the phone interviews may also not have felt as much of a personal level of comfort with the researchers which may also have impacted the length, detail, and openness of the responses.

(6) The data collected were from principals in only one central province of China limiting transference of findings to principals in other Chinese provinces. Principals in other provinces may experience different responsibilities and challenges.

As listed above, there are several factors that limit the transferability of the findings of this study. First, the sample of participants is relatively small, confined to one province, and disproportionately reflects the views of male urban principals. Principals in rural and suburban areas in different provinces may have different responsibilities that make up their daily professional activities and different challenges and responses to those challenges. Female principals may also experience unique expectations on a daily basis and challenges that may require different responses than those suggested by this study's participants. Many of these limitations serve as recommendations for future research later in this article.

5. Findings

Background information collected from the principals participating in this study included informal and formal preparation for the position of school leader, and previous professional positions held in order to better understand the contexts in which each person came to their current position as a school leader. The responses are shown in Figure 1. Each of the participants had been a teacher, and 87% had held a school-level grade or subject level position. Four participants had served as an assistant to a principal and had then moved into a vice principal position. Over half of the participants (56%) had held the position of vice principal prior to being appointment to serve as a principal. Over a quarter of participants also indicated that they had held various leadership positions in the local Communist Party.

Table 1. Summary of Responses Regarding Prior Professional Positions Held and Informal and Formal Training to be a Principal

Prior Professional Positions Held		Informal Preparation		Formal Preparation	
Teacher	23	Good Teacher	15	Government Training Program	17
Grade Advisor/Director	8	Won Teaching Contests	9	School Training Program	2

Instruction/Subject Director	10	Developed Good Relationships with Colleagues	7	Graduate Degree (MA)	6
Head Teacher	2	Developed Good Relationships with Students	1	Teaching Contest	3
Leader of Local Party Committee	6	Good Management and Organization Skills	2	Party Training	1
Assistant Principal	4	Continuous Learner	2		
Vice Principal	13				
Entrance Exam Designer	2				

Being a good teacher was identified by 65% of the principals in this study as important informal preparation for assuming the position of principal. Nine participants (39%) specifically discussed winning teaching contests and being recognized for their teaching ability. Slightly less than a third of participants noted the development of positive relationships with their colleagues, with two principals specifically discussing the establishment of trust and three principals noting the exchange of professional expertise, as a source of informal preparation to become a school leader. Striving to continuously learn and improve one's practice, particularly in the area of management and organization, were discussed by 17% of the participants.

Government training programs were identified by nearly three-quarters of the principals as providing the formal training that they needed to assume their current positions. Two principals explained that they had taken their formal training at their own school, while 17 participants said they had completed their formal training at a government site. Only a quarter of the participants had earned an advanced degree (Master's) as formal preparation for the principalship. None of the participants held a degree beyond a Master's. Winning teaching contests was viewed as part of their formal principal training, and one principal felt that his training in leadership in the Communist Party had prepared him for the principalship.

6. Daily Professional Activities

In response to the first research question regarding the professional activities that the principals in the study engaged in on a daily basis, instructional supervision was the most dominant theme with 97% of participants reporting that they spend time each day supervising teachers. This included classroom observations, meetings with teachers to discuss pedagogy and student progress, and reports from department heads regarding instructional issues. Principals described spending much of their day "walking around and talking to faculty and students in classrooms" and meeting with teachers and observing classes in order to "improve the learning efficiency". Meeting with new teachers to review their lesson plans and organize professional development that might be needed was also part of the instructional supervision duties discussed by participants. Monitoring student data and meeting with

department heads and grade and subject level directors were also part of what the school leaders in this study did on a daily basis regarding instructional supervision.

Dealing with government mandates was reported by 52% of participants from both rural and urban or suburban schools as a daily activity that included reading updates on mandates, preparing for inspections, and writing reports to be submitted to the Ministry of Education. Participants discussed a variety of new initiatives regarding curriculum development that they engaged in on a regular basis with various teams of teachers (Time spent with teacher teams on the implementation and feedback on new curricula was considered as instructional supervision). Principals also reported spending time each day to ensure that they understood current government policies particularly regarding school performance assessment which then informed their work, both alone and with various school leaders, on developing their school's annual self-assessment and preparing for government inspections.

Time spent in meetings with a variety of stakeholders (teachers, other administrators, government officials, and parents) was the third most frequent expenditure of time each day reported by 43% of the Chinese principals in the study. Some of the meetings discussed overlapped with the prior to themes in that they focused on teaching content and methodology (instructional supervision) as well as the development of school self-assessment reports, preparation for inspections, and development of new curricula. Meetings was identified as a separate theme, however, because of the diversity of topics discussed by participants that were covered in regularly scheduled meetings and the numerous discussions of how much time was consumed by such meetings.

Time spent planning was cited as a daily activity by 35% of the principals that included the securing and allocation of resources, updating school safety measures, and student activity and teacher professional development planning. Developing and monitoring school budgets were a part of daily routines for 13% of the principals. Rural school principals comprised the majority of those specifically mentioning budget and resource planning. A quarter of the study's participants from both rural and urban schools discussed their efforts in organizing school teaching competitions and providing teacher professional development. Making sure that their school was clean and attractive with no safety issues was also a priority that six urban principals specifically noted regarding how they spent their days. Student activities that the principals reported planning included both local academic and sports competitions. Interestingly, 17% of participants (mostly from rural schools) said that they taught classes on a daily basis, and explained that they set aside time each day to prepare for these classes. As one suburban principal explained, "I am always planning for the future—for the school, for the students, and for the teachers and what they need".

Student supervision (including discipline) was reported as a daily activity by 30% of the participants. One principal explained that he supervised the computer labs if they were "double-booked". Another urban principal described how he spends much of his time before school, during lunch periods, and after school as well as between classes walking around "so students don't skip and teachers are always ready." He also talked about walking through the dormitories on his school's campus each evening to

make sure students were “in their places”. Two rural principals explained how they also supervised extra-curricular activities after school. Of the principals who discussed discipline as part of their daily responsibilities, they indicated that they spent from 30 minutes to as much as two hours each day dealing with student issues.

Providing professional development to teachers, problem-solving, developing community partnerships or engaging in public relations activities were also each reported as daily activities by 17% of the principals in the study. As discussed earlier, 17% of the participants in the study taught classes to teachers each day, providing their teachers with in-school and easily accessible professional learning opportunities. Problem-solving that was reported by another 17% of the principals included working with both teachers and parents regarding student academic and behavioral issues, as well as with local parent groups regarding school improvement initiatives. “Every week, our school administration team has a panel meeting to discuss the latest events in the school and consider solutions for problems that have emerged”, one rural principal shared. Another 17% of participants explained how they attended community events, met with local business leaders, and talked to various community and parent groups regarding the success of their schools. As a principal of a rural school serving 1,805 students said, “It is up to me to establish the connections, relationships, to improve my school and society through family partnerships.” Developing a network among teachers, parents, and the community to support student learning and moral development were identified as important by this group of principals.

7. Challenges

The most frequently discussed challenge in enacting positive change for their students was a need to focus more on the quality of education and stimulation of students’ creativity rather than test scores with 78% of the principals identifying this as a major challenge. “We need to cultivate students’ creativity skills and shatter the test-oriented system”, one participant explained. Over three-quarters of the principals noted that they tried to focus on providing students with a quality education that was well-rounded while also ensuring that the students scored well on the university entrance exams. Two urban principals discussed that they work diligently to keep up with examination policies for junior and secondary high school students and try to adjust their curriculum in order to ensure that their students do well on the national university entrance exams. “The policies change so fast in the past decade”, one principal exclaimed in frustration. One rural principal explained how he feels that ensuring educational equity, including preparation for university entrance exams, is his biggest challenge. “We are aiming to provide an outstanding education for rural kids and supervise those kids whose parents work in a big city and cannot take care of them”, he shared. An urban principal noted that it took long hours of service for him to ensure that his students were working hard and that the teachers at his school were delivering high-quality instruction in all the areas that were tested as well as teaching students to be good, moral citizens.

Staying current with knowledge and technology was the next most frequently discussed theme with 22%

of participants voicing concerns about staying internationally competitive. Urban and suburban principals in this study expressed concerns about making sure that their schools' curricula were current enough to help their students "negotiate the local and global dynamics" of a more internationalized Chinese economy. Another urban principal explained that, "current knowledge in books might fall behind what is needed for social development. How can we combine the advanced information into our education? That is a real problem" Providing new technology in a "high-tech classroom environment" was also a concern expressed by five of the principals, three of which led rural schools. "They need to know how to use the latest technology tools as well as up-to-date information in order to compete" with students from across China and the globe one rural principal shared. As one urban principal explained, "We need to keep learning high and also high tech!"

The third challenge identified by a third of the principals in the study was in developing a team spirit and motivation among teachers and the administrative team. "Everyone in the school has to know what needs to be done and happy to get it done," one urban principal shared. Another principal discussed her efforts to constantly motivate her teachers to improve their teaching quality. "That means we all must work together to achieve a quality education", she stated. These principals also discussed the importance of being trustworthy and developing trust among all school personnel as well as mutual respect.

8. Advice to Future Principals

Regarding advice they would like to give to those entering the principal ship, 74% of the participants stressed that one must first be a good teacher. Participants recommended that aspiring principals work hard to win teaching contests so that their teaching expertise was noticed by current education leaders. "Be a good teacher first," was a sentiment echoed by each of these principals. Being a good teacher included both knowing your subject as well as developing positive relationships with students and parents. "You must love your students in order to teach them well," one urban principal observed. Another urban principal exhorted future school leaders to "let your knowledge as a teacher change students' future!" The principal of an urban school serving nearly 5,000 students advised teachers who aspired to become school leaders to, "First become expert in the classroom, an excellent teacher. Then become an excellent teacher in student management and public relations with parents." Being recognized by your peers as a good teacher was viewed as the ideal way to earn respect and advancement. "Do your current job as a teacher well first and you will soon own recognition from your peers and supervisors," another participant explained.

Seventy percent of principals in this study advised future principals to embrace being a life-long learner in order to become a successful principal. "Work conscientiously to build your abilities to lead and organize," one urban principal urged, "Never stop learning!" Modelling life-long learning was viewed as a way to influence both teachers but particularly students. "Keep learning new things, new concepts in education so that you can pass the principle of life-long learning to students in a wise way,"

exclaimed a principal of a smaller urban school (with a student population of 1,000).

The development and demonstration of a good moral character was the most dominant theme, however, with 90% of the principals in the study identifying having high ethical standards; being a positive role model; caring for your students and “loving” your colleagues; and developing attributes such as humility, responsibility, conscientiousness, and hard-working. Aspiring principals were exhorted to maintain high ethical standards while remaining humble. A suburban principal in the study shared the following advice in order to be a moral educator: “Think before you do. Listen before you judge. Act based on facts. Work well with others.” Another principal shared that, “You must treat your school like it was your own family, both as a teacher and principal. Take your relationships seriously and as a great responsibility.” Serving students, the school, and the community in a humble and responsible manner was repeated as a guideline that aspiring school leaders should follow.

Those striving to enter the principalship were also advised to be patient and “wait their turn” by 26% of the principals in this study. “Wait for your turn to dance and you should get that chance,” one principal stated. Another principal who led an urban school discussed how one must become a vice principal first in order to learn how to “take care of human resources, finances, student performance, and teacher performance, as well as student affairs such as the Young Pioneers.” Patience in waiting to be recognized and recommended for advancement to the principalship was also closely linked to the virtue of humility that one should demonstrate as a ethical and moral individual as discussed above.

The school leaders in this study also encouraged new principals to think for themselves (17%). One principal advised that aspiring and new principals should “learn to observe, think, and form your own educational ideas” in order to be able to successfully deal with current and future challenges of the position. One urban principal advised aspiring school leaders to be “pioneers” and to “stay hungry and fresh.” This theme seemed in some ways to contradict other exhortations to “work as a team instead of becoming an individual hero,” however, the advice shared regarding thinking for own’s self and considering new ideas was also given within the context of doing so in order to share with others and becoming a leader in thoughts as well as actions.

9. Theory of Chinese Principal Responses to Daily Professional Challenges

The relationships of dominant themes across the three research questions is depicted in Figure 2 as a working theory of how the Chinese principals in this study perceived their daily professional activities, the challenges that they face in improving students’ educational experiences, and how they would advise those entering the profession of school leadership to prepare for and respond to the challenges that the participants in the study identified. Being a good teacher was viewed as essential to being a good instructional supervisor, enabling school leaders to focus on developing the quality of education offered in their schools rather than on just high-stakes test scores, and helping them stay current with the knowledge and technology use that their teachers and students need to be successful in providing high-quality educational experiences. Life-long learning was also linked by participants to a school

leader’s ability to serve as an effective instructional supervisor who understood the most current developments in education, management, and technology. Developing and demonstrating a good moral character was critical to being able to maintain one’s priorities in the face of complex pressures (such as from government mandates and test policies) as well as in setting an example and dealing with students on a variety of issues.

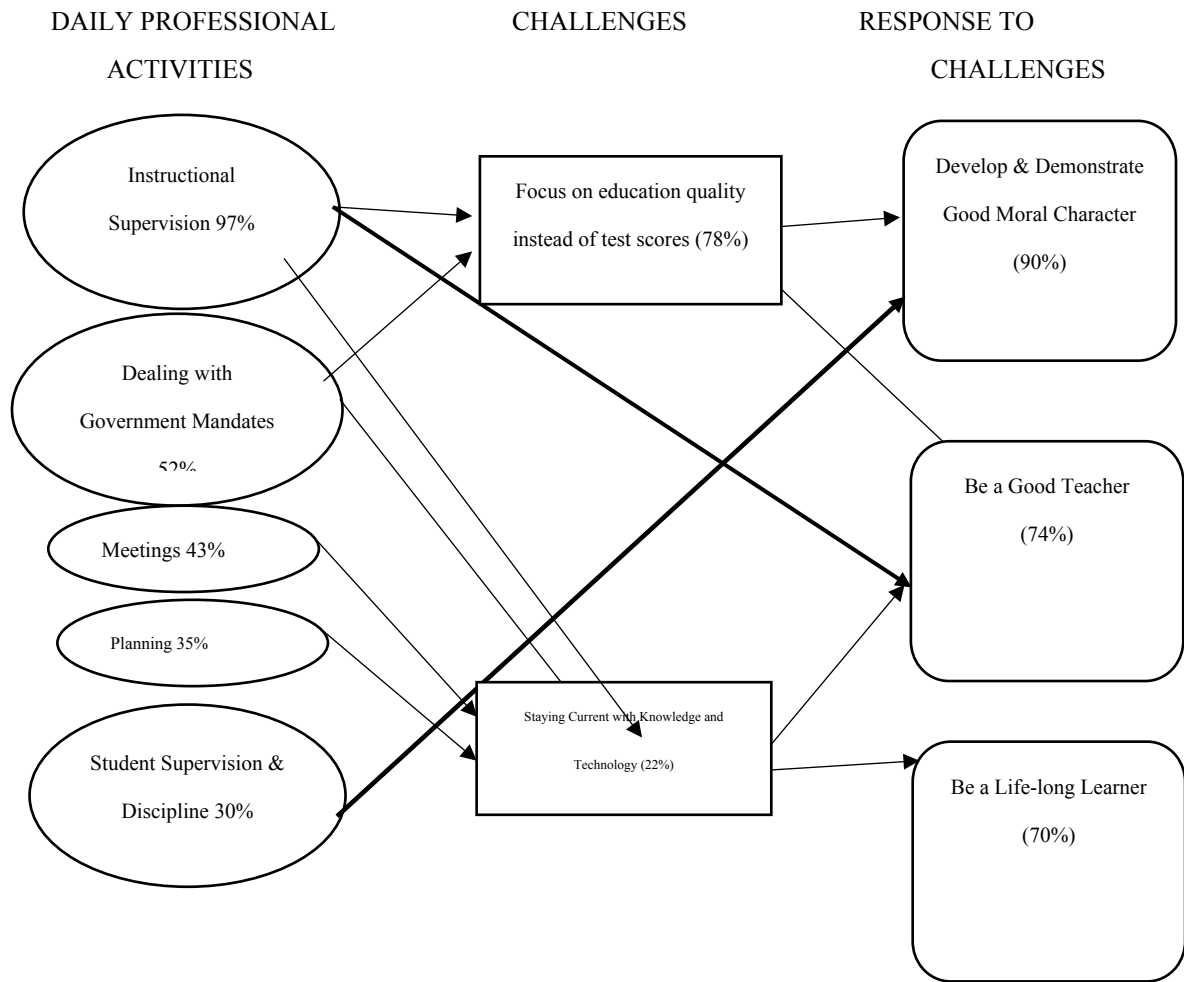


Figure 1. Theory of Chinese School Leader Perceived School Leadership Challenges and Advice in Relations to Daily Professional Activities (in Order of Percentage of Participants Who Reported Engaging in Each Activity on a Daily Basis)

10. Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that Chinese principals spend a large amount of their daily time engaging in instructional supervision (which also could be considered instructional leadership) that they consider to be critical to their efforts to improve the quality of education for the students in their schools. They also spent daily time responding to government mandates even though they expressed frustration with the educational system’s emphasis on competitive student test scores, particularly for

the college entrance exam that is considered to be a significant factor in shaping a student's life-long economic potential (Larmer, 2015; Zhang, Chen, Yu, Wang, & Nurmi, 2015). Despite efforts by the Ministry of Education in China to lessen the emphasis on high-stakes testing (Zhao, 2009), policy changes are not evident at the school level in this study.

The theory of how the Chinese principals in this study responded to the challenges that they perceived that they faced emerged from the principals' responses. Discussions of how they engage in their instructional supervision responsibilities were frequently linked to explanations of how they try to stay abreast of instructional strategies and the creation of a positive classroom and school culture. It was repeatedly stressed that, in order to be a good instructional supervisor and provide sound guidance and feedback to teachers and to students, a principal must first be a good teacher and provide both leadership and clear, correct information to those that they lead. It was also emphasized by the participants that, in order to focus on education quality that addresses all aspects of students' development (moral, academic, and physical), a school leader must demonstrate the well-rounded and moral virtues that they hoped to see their teachers and students develop. Participants in the study also expressed that focusing on a well-rounded, high-quality education instead of narrowly focusing on test scores required school leaders to possess "the right priorities" of a good teacher. Caring for one's students and colleagues was viewed as essential to both being a good teacher and also a good individual who could inspire others to follow them as school leaders.

The demands of dealing with government mandates regarding curriculum development that addressed the local culture and moral development of students meant that principals in this study must not just focus on test scores (particularly on the university entrance exams) and also continue to learn how best to meet students' individual needs in order to help them become economically-contributing, civic-minded, and moral adults. Government mandates regarding the involvement of a variety of stakeholders in the educational process, including the monitoring of school conditions, student learning, and curriculum development, required the principals to continually hone their own knowledge of interpersonal relationships, instructional best-practices, safety issues, management and organizational best-practices, and content that could support the moral and academic success of their students. Over a third of the principals emphasized the time that they spent each day planning for school activities and resource management as well as efforts to advance the knowledge and skills of their teachers. Whether leading meetings with teachers, parents, students, or community stakeholders, the principals in this study felt that their own knowledge and skills, including the effective use of technology, required them to be life-long learners and to demonstrate all of the qualities that had earned them identification as a good teacher.

A third of the principals in this study identified student supervision and discipline as daily activities that they engaged in. These principals often linked the modelling of good conduct and a variety of moral virtues to their ability to successfully carry out their student supervision and discipline responsibilities. Reflected in their responses was a focus on demonstrating sincere care for all aspects

of students' development.

The repeated emphasis on becoming a more knowledgeable and “good” moral person by the principals in this study eloquently illustrate the virtue orientation of the Chinese culture discussed by Hsu (2015) in *Education as Cultivation in Chinese Culture*. “Chinese culture promotes self-transformation for the perfect person,” according to Hsu (p. 4). Hsu goes on to discuss the Confucian teaching were learning is inextricably linked to moral improvement. As many of the authors in Hsu and Wu’s (2015) book discuss, Confucian and Taoist philosophies continue to dominate the world views and daily lives of Chinese citizens. The recent reforms in Chinese education policies harken back to the pursuit of moral goodness articulated in both traditions which places the school leader at a critical position to assist the moral development of others through his or her own positive self-transformation through continued learning.

The educational reforms in China have also required schools to become more student-centered (as compared to the historically teacher-centered pedagogy of rote repetition and memorization as discussed by Hsu, 2015) and “foster such capacities as creativity, innovation, collaboration, self-expression, engagement, enjoyment of learning, inquiry skills, problem-solving abilities, and the ability to apply knowledge in practice” (Haiyan, Walker, & Yulian, 2016, p. 335). Activities within classrooms and also in extracurricular encourage teamwork and the encouragement of others to become a more learned and more moral individual (Wu, 2015).

Confucian teachings saw learning to improve how others viewed an individual or to increase one’s profit-earning ability was an enemy of moral self-transformation (Yen, 2015; Yen & Wu, 2015). However, the improvement of one’s economic status through education has been a long-standing tradition in Chinese culture and society (Zhao, 2012). While recent Chinese education reforms have attempted to diminish the high-stakes focus on the *gaokao* system of university entrance exams, the attainment of high test scores on these exams in order to gain entrance to prestigious universities appear to continue to dominate the lives of students, teachers, and school leaders. Over three-fourths of the principals in this study expressed dismay as to the intense focus on test scores by students and parents. Parents with resources to provide their students with tutors and supplemental learning experiences in order to gain entrance into a junior and senior secondary school with a track record of having students achieve high scores on the university entrance exams, as well as even admission to kindergartens that have “graduated” students who have been successful on such exams, still do so in order to provide their children with the greatest economic opportunities in adult life as possible. This, of course, perpetuates the inequity of opportunities as well as socio-economic status that the recent education reforms were intended to diminish (Liu, 2017).

This study provides insights into the responsibilities and challenges of public-school principals in China. The responses of the principals from Chongqing province who participated in this study highlighted their instructional leadership roles that have increased as a result of the 21st century educational reforms that have been implemented. Their responses also highlight the deeply held value

placed on learning and self-transformation as a moral human being that is seated in Confucian and Taoist philosophies. The dominant challenges of focusing on well-rounded student development rather than test scores on university entrance exams that can impact one's earning potential for the rest of one's adult life underscored the persistent view of education as a means to upward social mobility and economic advancement by students and parents, regardless of the recent reform policies. The findings of this study cannot be generalized, however, the insights from these participants can help to inform the decisions and preparation of those considering or just entering positions as school leaders in China. It also provides insights as to the impact (or lack) of Chinese education policy changes at the national level on the consumers of public education, Chinese students and parents.

11. Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the earlier discussion of limitations of the study described in this article, the authors suggest the following research endeavors to further the field's understanding of how principals in China negotiate the responsibilities and challenges that they encounter as school leaders:

- (1) A mixed methodology study of a stratified sample of rural, suburban, and urban principals in a variety of Chinese provinces utilizing a survey to gather data on daily professional responsibilities and challenges they encounter as school leaders. The results from the survey data would then ideally be used to inform qualitative data collection through interviews of a stratified sample of principals in each of the provinces to provide more detail to survey categories as well as explore how the principals respond to the challenges that they encounter.
- (2) A qualitative study with an equal number of female and male Chinese principals at each level of education (primary/elementary, junior secondary/middle school, and senior secondary/high school) and in each type of school setting (rural, suburban, and urban) to gain insight as to differences in leadership gender as well as school level and setting regarding daily professional responsibilities, leadership challenges, and responses to the identified leadership challenges.
- (3) Smaller studies focusing on a specific gender of school leader, school level, province, or school setting would each contribute a clearer understanding of how Chinese principals lead their schools and responded to perceived challenges to their leadership.

12. Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations for practice for aspiring, new, and current Chinese principals are based on responses and findings from the principals who participated in the study described in this article:

- (1) Demonstrate excellence as a teacher and develop good relationships with colleagues, students, and parents in order to gain recognition and promotion to a school leadership position.
- (2) Continue to expand your knowledge of content matter, instructional strategies, organizational

management, and the effective use of technology to enhance learning opportunities and achievement.

(3) Become very familiar with current local and national governmental issues and policies.

(4) Practice distributed or shared leadership so that as many relevant stakeholders are involved in the development of a school's curriculum and culture to ensure the development of well-rounded students who are prepared to function civically, socially, economically, and individually within Chinese society.

(5) Model good character and moral virtues in order to be seen as a leader by one's peers, a role model by one's students, and a team-player who can facilitate the work of diverse stakeholders toward the goal of providing the highest quality of education to all students.

While it is apparent that Chinese principals must negotiate a plethora of factors in changing from top-down school managers to instructional leaders who practices shared leadership, the participants in this study painted portraits of dedicated educators who sincerely desire to create the best emotional and academic cultures in their schools as possible. Their suggestions and advice to future leaders of schools in China reflects the virtues valued for centuries in the Confucian and Taoist philosophies. Be a good person, a good teacher, and always continue to learn in order to become a better person and to help others become the best people that they can become as well is excellent advice to guide any educator, perhaps regardless of national context. It is hoped that the perspectives and experiences of the principals who participated in this study has added a meaningful dimension to the field's understanding of what is required to carry out the role of school leader successfully in twenty-first century China.

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