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**Principal preparation and training:  
A look at China and its issues**

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## **Principal preparation and training: A look at China and its issues**

### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to provide an understanding of principal preparation and training in China. It does this by providing a background discussion of principal preparation in a number of countries. As an illustration, it provides an overview of the curriculum used in the initial preparation of school principals at Beijing Normal University.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

The paper draws mainly upon writing and research from China, Australia and the United States to explore principal preparation and training in China.

#### **Findings**

In addition to providing a rich description of principal preparation in China, the paper's main findings comprise seven key challenges that confront China as it endeavours to provide quality principal preparation. These challenges include China's diversity and uneven social, cultural and educational development; limited resources in some regions throughout China; the place and importance of study tours for principal preparation; the teaching approach used to train principals; the process used for assessing principal learning during their training programs; the limited transfer of learning from the classroom to the school environment; and the timing of training for principals.

#### **Practical implications (if applicable)**

Each of the challenges raised in this paper raise important practical implications for developers of principal training programs.

#### **Originality/value**

The paper paints a picture of principal preparation in China and raises a number of issues and challenges with which it continues to grapple. Of note is that China is not alone in facing some of these ongoing concerns.

#### **Keywords**

Principal training, China, challenges, preparation, international

## **Principal preparation and training: A look at China and its issues**

Very few countries in the world have not been affected by global forces that have spearheaded a range of educational reforms including, for example, a decentralised model of school governance (known as school based management), restructured curriculum and pedagogy; and new forms of accountability for leaders and staff (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998). Some authors have argued that many of these changes have had significant implications for school leadership (Beare, 1991, 2006), particularly the shift to school based management which has altered existing governance arrangements in schools.

In response to the educational reforms, systems around the world have begun to not only look more closely at their succession planning programs in order to attract good quality principal aspirants but also to give careful consideration to the initial preparation and ongoing professional development of school leaders (Feng, 2003; Hallinger, 2003). That leadership preparation and development for school leaders has emerged as a key issue is unsurprising for two main reasons. Firstly, research over the last couple of decades has consistently shown that school principals are powerful players who can affect school improvement and bring about change (West, Jackson, Harris & Hopkins, 2000; Stoll & Fink, 1996) and, for this reason, their development is a critical factor in school effectiveness. Secondly, given the complex socio-cultural milieu in which school principals now work and the challenges posed by changed governance arrangements, school principals require new sets of skills and competencies to enable them to thrive in these new environments.

Of most interest to this paper is the initial preparation of school principals. The paper begins by providing a brief discussion of some of the approaches used by a number of countries around the world in the initial development of school leaders. It alludes to the global shift towards the use of standards and competency frameworks in leadership development and assessment. It then focuses on principal training and development in China, a country that has the greatest number of students, teachers and school principals in the world today. The paper concludes by identifying some key achievements and ongoing challenges for principal training in China.

### **Initial principal preparation and training: an international perspective**

Initial principal preparation and training of school principals tends to vary considerably across countries throughout the world. For example, it is a requirement for principals in the United States of America (Levine, 2005) and Singapore (Bush, 1998) to complete mandated programs of university study before they are entitled to take up the role of school principal. While candidates in the USA are required to complete successfully a masters program in educational administration, their counterparts in Singapore are required to complete a Diploma in Educational Administration (a one year full time program) before they are eligible to become principals.

Before the late 1990s, principal training in the United Kingdom was *ad hoc* and took place at the induction stage (Bush, 1998). Everything changed in the late 1990s with

the advent of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). The NPQH is a mandatory qualification that prepares experienced teachers for the role of headship (NCSL, 2005). In addition to this qualification the NCSL also provides a suite of leadership development programs for emerging and current leaders.

In contrast to the United States, United Kingdom and Singapore, a far less co-ordinated and systemic approach is used in Australia and New Zealand. In both of these countries, leaders begin their careers as teachers then move up the ranks (i.e. through to Head of Department then Deputy Principal) to the principalship (Su, Gamage & Mininberg, 2003). In other words, in Australia and New Zealand, there is no formal pre-service preparation needed to become a school principal apart from attending induction programmes by the government or employing body. While Australian and New Zealand universities offer masters and graduate certificates in educational administration and management, these courses are taken up voluntarily by participants and are not necessarily part of any pre-requisite criteria for promotion. With this said, however, some commentators have predicated that a future trend in Australia will be for selection panels to give preference to candidates who hold higher degrees (Su et al. 2003)

### **Standards and Frameworks for School Leaders**

An important international trend across many countries has been the design and implementation of standards, frameworks or competency statements that explicitly state the role, expectations, behaviours, skills and work practices required of school principals. As an example, the English qualification, the NPQH is underpinned by a set of standards called, *The National Standards for Headteachers* (Department of Education & Skills, 2004). These standards identify the professional knowledge, understandings and personal qualities necessary to carry out the role of headship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In Australia, each state and territory has devised its own standards for school principals. For instance, *Leadership Matters*, the standards developed by the Department of Education and the Arts, (the State Government provider of education in Queensland, Australia) identifies key roles and capabilities expected of school leaders. According to the framework, school principals are expected to provide “a quality public education system that delivers opportunities for all students to achieve learning outcomes and reach their potential” (p.1). In order to achieve this, school principals are required to demonstrate capabilities across five key areas and these include personal, relational, intellectual, organisational and educational. As the document states, *Leadership Matters* is to be “used to guide all leadership development activity for Education Queensland principals” (p.1).

Common to these and the English standards, and those in other countries and areas such as Hong Kong (Walker, Begley & Dimmock 2000), Florida, United States (University of Florida, 2004), and New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1998), is their dual function of directing and guiding leadership development for leaders on the one hand and acting as a control or accountability mechanism for leaders' performance, on the other.

Like the standards mentioned above, the national document, *Requirements of holding the post of principal and the demands of the position*, launched by the Ministry of

Education in China in 1991, identifies the basic requirements and demands expected of school leaders. The document identifies four main duties of principals as:

- (i) the implementation of the national education policy;
- (ii) the development of democratic management strategies in order to work effectively with teachers to stimulate their creativity and activity;
- (iii) duties relating to working cooperatively with parents and members of the wider community; and
- (iv) several school management duties such as demonstrating leadership in moral education; instruction; physical education; aesthetics education; labor education; leadership in logistics; and duties relating to cooperating with the Community Party and other organisations.

According to Feng (2003), this document can be construed as a set of goals rather than a document to guide the design of curriculum used in principal training. This lies in contrast to the standards from other countries and areas identified previously that have formed part of the design and focus of principal training and development. According to Feng (2003), principal training in China has been slow to develop the types of competencies and skills required for effective principal practice in a changing and complex environment.

### **The case of China**

Prior to the late 1980s, principal training in China consisted of an apprenticeship style of training model where talented teachers were selected to become school principals, as currently used in Australia and New Zealand. Over the last 15 years, a comparatively integrated system came into being (Ministry of Education, 1989) and principal training was linked to professional qualifications becoming the work of universities. Since that time, a network of principal training centres has been established under the structure of three levels of city, province and county. Under the macro-guidance and management of the Ministry of Education, principal training is coordinated and organised according to these three levels. The executive base of the network is located at the local 'normal' university (i.e. normal university means the university specific for teacher's training in China) and Colleges of Education and Advanced Schools (i.e. these institutes provide "on the job" training for primary and secondary school teachers). From 1999, the Ministry of Education created two centres specific for primary and secondary school principals. The former was set up at Beijing Normal University in 2000 and provides a model for developing initial ongoing and advanced level training for primary school principals. The latter was established around the same time in East China Normal University and targeted secondary principals.

In recent times, then, principal training in China has received increasing attention. This is not surprising given that principals have been identified as those who are best placed to implement a range of education reform agendas driven by fundamental changes in governance, curriculum and management. For instance, principals have been charged as those who are accountable in schools for providing educational services to students from the age of 6-15 years. An undertaking of this nature requires principals to demonstrate both leadership and management skills. Managing resources has become an increasingly difficult task for principals in some geographical areas

according to Mingchu (2004) who refers to the increasing disparities of economic development between regional and urban areas in China. The impact of this is one of gross inequity in educational provision. Principals are required to assist teachers to implement curriculum reforms in order to meet the needs of a changing society and to enhance the learning of children. Another key imperative for principals in China (and overseas for that matter), is their responsibility to both manage schools efficiently and, at the same time, lead their schools with passion, vitality and compassion. These are key concerns that are uppermost in the minds of trainers of school principals in China.

Trainers of programs for principals in China are generally research fellows and professors from three main university faculties including Management, Psychology and Education.

Currently, there are three kinds of basic training programs provided for school principals. These are:

- (i) *Qualification Training* for new principals (minimum of 300 hours) that provides basic knowledge and skills development. All principals complete a written assignment and receive a professional certificate if they pass
- (ii) *Improving Training* for principals who have already obtained the certified qualification of principal position (minimum of 240 hours within 5 years);
- (iii) *Advanced Training* seminar for selected principals (there is no time requirement here but principals who attend are encouraged to live on campus for one month during which time they participate in discussions, lectures, and visit local schools. They are required to submit a written paper identifying their learning journey.

While the qualification training for new principals offers basic knowledge and skills necessary for new school principals, the focus of improved training is broader and exposes principals to a range of curriculum and educational administration issues. Advanced training seminars are designed for principals who have demonstrated outstanding work performance (Feng, 2003) and who wish to enhance their skills, methods, and knowledge (Li & Feng, 2001).

Depending on the type and nature of training, both short-term and longer term programs are provided by universities for school principals. Short courses can last between one week to one month, while longer courses can take one year and are offered during summer / winter vacations and public holidays. Most courses offered to principals take place during weekends, school vacations or via part-time study.

### *Curriculum*

The curriculum used in the initial preparation of school principals at Beijing Normal University consists of three main components. The first component includes traditional university subjects covering areas such as philosophy of education, management, computer and information technology. The second component is connected to practice in the field. Excellent school principals are invited to attend the

university to give lectures to school principal trainees. The final aspect is an internship which provides principal with visits to schools within China and in some cases, overseas. In the past, new principals have visited countries such as the United States, Australia, and countries in Europe to visit schools and deepen their intercultural understandings of school leadership.

The rationale behind this curriculum is that it provides a balance between theoretical perspectives and constructs taught in class and exposure to practice (via visiting principals' discussions and through internships). The overarching aim of the training is to develop principals who are competent managers and leaders. According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), a manager is a person who accomplishes goals and tasks and manages resources, while a leader guides, directs and inspires others. The perspective taken at Beijing Normal University is that both management and leadership are essential functions for effective schools. While both functions are separate and distinct, they are complementary (Kotter, 2006). In other words, neither one is superior to the other; and effective principals are people who can demonstrate skills and capacities in both areas.

By way of example, the focus of a five week program offered to new principals by Beijing Normal University in December 2005-January 2006 included:

- Importance of communication between principals and teachers
- Quality education and quality of teachers
- How to enhance Principal's influence
- Curriculum and curriculum reform
- Management innovation
- School development planning
- Motivating and motivation
- Successful principalship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- Psychology of leadership
- Art education
- Creating a learning organisation
- Professionalisation of the principalship and governance according to the law

These topics are not surprising given the need for school leaders to have an understanding of leadership (i.e. motivating others, creating a learning organisation, communication with others, influencing others) management (management innovation, school development planning) and curriculum (curriculum reform, art education) issues. An emphasis is placed upon curriculum because in China, principals are seen as "head" teachers; those people who have instructional leadership skills and abilities. Because of this emphasis, their knowledge and understanding of key curriculum trends and issues is critical. This is particularly the case due to current curriculum reform initiatives that have demonstrated a shift in thinking about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Vice Minister of the Ministry of Education of China, Zhan Wang (2002) summarised his views on the key aims of basic education curriculum reform:



1. a shift from a system based previously on knowledge transfer to one that encourages students to be active and creative agents in their own learning and learners who are capable of learning on their own;
2. a shift from a system based previously on prescriptive and discrete subject knowledge to one which integrates curriculum in a more balanced and holistic way that gives students more subject choice;
3. a shift from a system based previously on traditional content from books, to one which connects to students' daily life, social interests and needs; and reflects the needs of a world influenced by science and technology;
4. a shift from a system based previously on a learning style that emphasised rote and mechanical learning to one which encourages students to learn by discovery, curiosity, problem solving, and working collaboratively with others;
5. a shift from a system based heavily on evaluation and monitoring to one that places at the centre, a focus on student and teacher learning; and
6. a shift from a strong centralised system of management of the curriculum involving three layers of management: state, local and school, to one where management resides more in the hands of the local level which is considered to be the best place for meeting the needs of students and staff.

The shifts in curriculum understandings as identified by Wang Zhan (2002) raise many issues not only for school leaders but also teachers. They reinforce the necessity for training and development of school leaders to help them be more prepared to implement the raft of curriculum reforms and their associated teaching and learning practices effectively in schools.

The five week program identified above, like most teaching approaches used in the training of principal programs, relies heavily on a lecture format, with some small group discussions, and visits to a couple of local schools. It is at the conclusion of the 300 hour principal trainee program that principals are required to submit a final paper, approximately 4000 words in length.

The approach taken by trainers at Beijing Normal University for most of the programs on offer is to follow a fairly flexible model of delivery that caters for the needs of particular groups who are undertaking the training. For example, the curriculum used in the training of educational supervisors (i.e. the supervisors of school principals) tends to have a strong focus on legal issues and legislation. The reason for this is that supervisors are required to have a good working knowledge of the law and its implications for schools and school leaders. In contrast, the curriculum used in the training of rural school principals tends to emphasise strategies for accessing resources in the wider community and the effective management of financial resources for the reason that such areas struggle for adequate financial resources to keep them afloat.

### *Some Achievements to date*

Given that principal training in China did not become a coordinated and integrated system until the late 1980s, it has achieved several key outcomes since that time (Feng, 2003). Firstly, there has been a significant increase in the number of policies released from both the Central and local governments that not only underscore the

role of principal training within educational reform, but also point to ways that are likely to enforce its ongoing implementation and improvement (Faculty of Education Administration, 2002). Secondly, given the size of the principal population in China, it is estimated that more than one million school principals have participated in initial and ongoing training programs since this time. This is no small feat considering the logistics of coordinating so many people in so many programs. Thirdly, the move towards the professionalisation of the principalship demonstrated by the increasing involvement of universities in principal development and delivery is viewed as an important outcome for China (Feng, 2003). Furthermore, university staff have played a pro-active role in assisting government officials in designing and appraising local training programs (Feng, 2003). Recognised scholars are those persons who provide the training and teaching to incumbent and more experienced principals. Finally, research in the field of the principalship has begun to be recognised as making a significant contribution to policy, theory and practice (Feng, 2003).

### **Ongoing Challenges**

China, like so many other countries in the world, continues to face a myriad of challenges regarding the design and development of its leadership preparation programs. One of the ongoing questions confronting all systems is: what is the most appropriate means by which to prepare principals to work effectively in a turbulent and changing world? Yet this is not a question that can be easily answered. As Hallinger (2003) and others (see Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Oplatka, 2004) have argued, solutions regarding the planning and delivery of effective leadership development programs must be derived from the local context. Oplatka (2004) underscores this point when he says that the structures of educational systems differ widely across countries and, for this reason, individual countries are best placed to devise their own leadership programs that are sensitive to the wider cultural, social, organisational, political and economic contexts. Dimmock and Walker (1998) and Hallinger (2003) go as far as saying that individual countries need to begin to develop an “indigenous knowledge base” on school leadership. Such a knowledge base would value research and practice developed within the local context and would therefore avoid the necessity of applying or adopting knowledge gleaned from the experience of other countries. According to Feng (2003), it seems that in recent decades, China has begun to develop a strong research base. He claims that not only has the number of research projects conducted on principal training increased since 1990, but also the work of university researchers has played a key role in shaping policy and practice for principal training. It is argued here that China and other countries around the world have much to gain through cross-cultural learning and sharing about what constitutes effective leadership development and culturally responsive approaches to leadership (Hallinger, 2003). It is anticipated that this type of global sharing and co-operation would strengthen our understanding of the principalship in different national contexts. The remainder of this paper, then, identifies seven key challenges facing leadership developers in China. While some of these challenges are unique to China, others have been identified as those facing systems in other parts of the world.

Firstly, China is a country that has significant diversity and uneven development socially, economically, and educationally (Li & Feng, 2001). It is not unsurprising, therefore, that there is considerable variability in resources (both human and material) that are used in the training of principals between institutions in the city and those in

rural areas. In some remote areas in China, there is a lack of suitably qualified trainers and resources. According to Guan Peijun and Song Yonggang who are Director and Associate Director of the Human Resource section in the Ministry of Education respectively, this issue is one that has been identified as needing attention in the immediate future (Guan, 2000) since there is a large concentration of principals working in remote and poor areas. A related problem raised by Feng (2003) is that some training certificates awarded to principals in rural areas are devalued because of the quality of the training received during the programmes. In these remote and rural areas, there is also the difficulty of identifying suitable schools for trainee principals to visit. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen are highly modernised and international trends in school management are more apparent in these big cities than in rural areas, that struggle with different sets of difficulties.

Secondly because of limited resources in some locations in China, sometimes the materials used to teach principal trainees are also used for principals who are undertaking advanced training so there is little match between the content used and the stages / phases of the participants. This is highly problematic and likely to be frustrating for participants who are seeking more challenging and stimulating topics of study and delivery methods. It also violates one of the basic tenets of adult learning theory which holds that learners' needs should be met (Knowles, 1990).

Thirdly, there is the question of whether study tours should constitute an effective and efficient professional development approach in the training of school leaders. For many years now across many systems and countries, study tours have been heralded as a way of helping school leaders to learn about different systems and to implement new practices. Yet, the cost of these tours and programs often prohibits their implementation. According to Ng (2005), study tours have been offered to a small number of school leaders and teachers in Mainland China for some years' now. He gives an example of a partnership between Guangzhou University and the Centre for Educational leadership (University of Hong Kong) that has been involved in the training of school principals in China since 2002. A study tour to Hong Kong constitutes a major component of a one-month Upgrading Training Program for experienced principals from six cities across China (Ng, 2005). Based on his experience of study tours, he identifies three desirable conditions under which a tour is most effective. These are (i) participants need to know the purpose of the visit and the problems faced by his/her own school context; (ii) the tour needs to provide a comprehensive understanding of practice; and (iii) action is required to be taken by the participant on his/her return to his/her country. These points are salient for those who are planning this type of professional development activity for principals in China, as well as those living elsewhere around the world. Ng's recommendations highlight the necessity not only for careful and purposeful planning of study tours, but also the point that any type of tour should ultimately contribute to overall objective of education which is student learning (Ng, 2005).

A fourth issue that has been identified in principal training relates to old fashioned methods that continue to be used. Feng (2003) describes these as 'chalk and talk' and refers to the knowledge transmission model that underpins teaching delivery in China. In commenting on leadership preparation in the United States, Hallinger (2003) comes to a similar conclusion when he states that lecture style instruction continues to be

used in many principal pre-service programs. Yet current thinking in management development highlights innovative and problem based methods to stimulate the thinking and creativity of managers. According to Wu Yan, Zhao Shuxian and Shang Jing (Wu, Zhao & Shang, 2003) who draw upon post-modern insights for understanding contemporary management, the implication for principal training points to the need for de-emphasising the knowledge transmission model characterised by a structuralist approach to one that is non-linear, provides stimulating and creative teaching approaches and helps participants view problems in new and challenging ways. Yu (2003), for one, highlights the need for principal trainees to visit schools and get out of the classroom, while Yang (2004) has argued for more on-the-job training to accelerate principals' professional development.

A fifth problem is that the assessment process used for initial principal preparation of principals relies written papers and, in some cases, examinations. Yet, multi-evaluations in the form of other activities would provide a more holistic perspective and are more in keeping with adult learning theory. Other assessment methods are also likely to allow participants to demonstrate other key aspects of the job.

An important initiative used in two provinces: Beijing and Shenyang, Liaoning Province, is an approach to development and assessment that is more holistic. In both of these jurisdictions, principals attend on-site training two or three times (for one week at a time) over a period of a year. During their time at university, they are exposed to important theoretical knowledge. Following this, they return to their respective schools and are encouraged to implement their learnings and new understandings. When they return to university, there is much discussion and sharing among the principals and principals reflect upon their recent experiences and come to new understandings about their work as professionals. Another component of this training is that the trainers, themselves, visit principals in their schools and provide them with one-on-one instruction, support and guidance. While this particular approach has met with much success and has enabled the use of a variety of assessment activities, it has not been taken up by other provinces. The main reason for this reluctance is affordability in terms of cost and time. The whole area of assessment for school principals is one that requires a careful rethinking so that assessment is meaningful and worthwhile.

A sixth challenge is that because most principal training programs focus on knowledge, principals are not given opportunities to develop practical skills and leadership competencies (Feng, 2003). A related problem is that there is not always transfer of training into the position. Hallinger (2003) concurs and says this problem is also an issue for pre-service principal preparation in the United States where there is a gap between the content covered and the realities that principals face in their daily work. A well-known strategy that has been promoted to help bridge the gap between knowing "what" and knowing "how" in the training of professionals is problem based learning (Stephenson & Galloway 2004). According to Boud and Feletti (1997), problem based learning is "a way of constructing and teaching courses using problems as the stimulus and focus for ... [learner] activity" (p.2). Problem based learning has been advocated as a relevant development tool for school principals and aspiring school principals since it provides opportunities for them to address problems that emerge from their daily work or to consider problems that "closely mirror the realities of the job" (Stein 2006, p.523). Common to problem based learning are the following

features: a problem is the starting point for learning; knowledge is organised around problems not disciplines; students as individuals and in groups take much ownership in directing their own learning; and learning occurs within small groups (Bridges & Hallinger, 1992 in Tanner & Keedy, 1995). To implement this type of leadership development approach in the preparation of school principals requires a different mindset from traditional lectures and transmission of knowledge. Not only that, but Tanner and Keedy (1995) argue that trainers (i.e. university professors) should undergo formal training in it so they understand it fully before they endeavour to use it the classroom. The decision to pursue problem based learning or any other type of an active learning approach for developing school principals in China would require careful consideration and planning given the dominant teaching approach is the transmission or lecture style model (Feng, 2003).

A final challenge, and one that has affected training programs not only in China but also internationally, is the fact that principals often do training in their own time, either part-time or on weekends or holidays (Feng, 2003). For this reason, there is a tendency for some principals in China to view training as one more task they are required to undertake to fulfil their work duties (Feng, 2003). This particular challenge points to the need for developers of training programs in China (and elsewhere) to plan training that is relevant, timely, flexible and connected to practice, so that principals engage in meaningful and authentic learning.

The work of Cheng (2000) is pertinent here and his triplization model (addressing the concepts and processes of individualization, localization and globalization) for reforming education has important implications for principal training. Translating his idea to principal training, we would argue that training for principals should meet the needs and characteristics of the principals concerned (this is known as individualization) by contributing to their initiative and development as lifelong learners. Training should also enhance principals' knowledge and understandings of the local and global contexts in which they work and are affected. And in so doing, training should provide them with opportunities to develop skills to utilise a variety of information communication technologies to assist them to share information, network, and build national and international alliances.

## **Conclusion**

There is little doubt that every education system faces its own set of challenges regarding the best method by which to prepare and develop school leaders. It seems there are no easy answers; and what works well in one system may not work well in another. Given that the principalship worldwide is a "job [that] has become tangled and difficult ... [and] involves long hours, lots of night work, lots of conflicting demands from various stakeholders (Hickcox, 2002, p.2), it is incumbent on education systems to provide quality training, ongoing support and appropriate remuneration for one of its key resources.

Given the extent of the reforms that have beset educational institutions over the previous two decades and the ongoing challenges brought about through globalisation, technology, and the marketisation of education, it is also incumbent on

school leaders themselves to become reflective lifelong learners who are open to learning and growth and who are able to facilitate the learning and growth of both staff and students. This is a challenge facing educational leaders in all contexts.

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