Running Head: LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Leadership for School Improvement:

Exploring Factors and Practices in the Process of Curriculum Change

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Abstract

This paper describes research into leadership practice for school improvement in Hong Kong preschools at a time when there was a move towards increased accountability. Two schools were selected for study, both of which were rated as excellent in the quality assurance inspections of the Education Bureau. Leadership practice for school improvement and related factors were investigated from the perspectives of various school stakeholders. The findings indicate that the two case study schools adopted different approaches to the process of change. One school principal delegated more to her subordinates and sought a radical change in the curriculum. In contrast with this, the other school principal imposed more restrictions on the exercise of authority in decision-making and delegation, and tended to follow the logic of a quick-fix approach. Overall, though the two schools adopted different approaches to curriculum change, the exercise of leadership in both schools was still highly centralized. The characteristics of leadership practice perceived by various school stakeholders were different from the concepts of distributed leadership documented in the Western literature.

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Curriculum Change

The concepts of quality and quality assurance taken from private corporations have been used in the field of education since the 1980s. There is, however, no agreement as to the definition of quality. Moss (2005) argues that education is diverse and complex, and involves values and subjectivity, which leads to there being multiple perspectives on how quality is defined in early childhood education. Given this background, identifying strategies to improve and ensure the quality of early childhood programmes is a priority in many developed countries, as education in the early years lays the foundation for future development (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2002).

Following the general trends of globalization, the government of Hong Kong, Special Administrative Region of China, has become increasingly concerned with the quality and development of local preschool education. The quest for quality education and school improvement has posed new challenges and placed significant demands on school principals. As there have been very few studies on leadership phenomena in a policy-driven, Chinese preschool context, the policy and practice of pre-primary education largely follows the trend of decentralizing leadership in many Western developed countries, including the UK, USA and Canada (e.g. Harris & Muijs, 2005; Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009). Walker and Dimmock (2000) argue that translating values between different cultural contexts is potentially difficult. It is problematic to develop policy and practice relating to local pre-primary education on the basis of knowledge of other cultural contexts. In view of this, the present study examined the relevance of a decentralized form of leadership for school improvement in Hong Kong preschool contexts. This form of leadership is often viewed as an ideal in the Western literature.

Through case studies of two local kindergartens, I examined the leadership practice for school improvement and related factors influencing the process of change. The purpose of the study was to develop new, locally relevant insights into the specificity of leadership practice for school improvement in a policy-driven, Chinese preschool context.

Leadership for School improvement

There have been different perspectives on the concepts of leadership for school improvement depending on the specific context. In many Western developed countries, promoting decentralized, democratic, and inclusive forms of leadership is often associated with school improvement. Research findings from diverse countries have revealed the efficacy of distributed forms of leadership in securing school development and change (e.g. West, et al., 2000; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001). Recent evidence suggests that shared leadership can assist capacity building within schools which contributes to school improvement (Harris, 2004; Hallinger & Heck, 2003). The literature on school leadership also indicates that a model of decentralized leadership is helpful in empowering others to lead and is associated with school development (Harris & Muijs, 2005). High degrees of teacher collaboration and involvement in decision-making have been identified as key elements for successful change (Holden, 2002; Silins & Mulford, 2002). Lam (2001) recognizes that a decentralized structure is one of the major internal factors contributing to school improvement in schools in Hong Kong. In sum, existing literature in the West views diffused and fluid leadership as effective for school improvement.

Process of School Change

Proponents of the management of change describe it as a process of transformation involving individuals, groups or institutions, leading to a realignment of existing values,

practices and outcomes (Morrison, 1998). Fullan (1999) argues that a process of school improvement includes three phases: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. Initiation refers to the process leading up to and including a decision to adopt or proceed with a change; implementation refers to attempts to put an idea or reform into practice; and institutionalization refers to building the innovation into everyday practice. Wallace and Pocklington (2002) address the complexity of change, and classify it into two types: single-order and second-order. The former describes attempts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of existing practice without disturbing the basic organizational structures and roles. The latter describes more radical attempts to restructure the institution and roles within it. Some key themes in school improvement include vision-building, initiative-taking and empowerment, staff development and resource assistance, restructuring, monitoring and problem-coping, and evolutionary planning (Mastrangelo, Eddy & Lorenzet, 2004). The restructuring of a formal school system in the process of change may also include a number of measures: "open decision-making processes, distribution of decision-making authority, team teaching arrangements, brief weekly planning meetings, frequent problem-solving sessions among sub-groups, and common preparation periods for teachers needing to work together" (Coppieters, 2005, p.135).

The Hong Kong Preschool Context

Preschool education in Hong Kong is not mandatory or required by law but almost every young child receives a few years of schooling before they enter primary school. The underlying factors of this phenomenon are the demands of working parents, competition for admission to certain prestigious primary schools, and preparation for formal learning in primary schools (Opper, 1992; Chan & Chan, 2003). All preschools including both kindergartens and child care centres are private, either profit-making or non-profit-making. In other words, the local field is

privately run and market-driven. Recent statistics indicate that the natural increase rate in the population (i.e. births less deaths) decreased from 31.8 per thousand in 1997, to 10.2 in 2007 (Census and Statistics Department, 2008). The rapid decrease in birth-rate after 1997 has turned the sector into an oversupplied market. In this educational market, parents, as the service buyers, have indirect but influential power over school operation. As announced in the *2006-07 Policy Address*, fee assistance in the form of an education voucher will be provided for parents of children aged three to six years old and enrolling in non-profit making kindergartens (Hong Kong Government, 2006). The education voucher scheme promotes school choice as a means of increasing competition among local preschools. It signifies the formal recognition of the consumer power of parents (Ho, 2008).

Preschool teacher education had long been characterized by minimal training (Opper, 1992). In the past, those who had 11 years of basic education but no formal prior training could register as permitted teachers in kindergartens and as trainee workers in child care centres. After 1997, the local government made efforts to speed up the pace of upgrading teacher education and qualifications. For instance, all kindergarten teachers will have obtained a Diploma in Early Childhood Education and all kindergarten principals will be qualified at degree level by 2011-12 (Hong Kong Government, 2006). However, despite the fact that the upgraded training policy has been in place for over ten years, only 12.3% of teachers are university graduates or equivalent (Education Bureau, 2009). The overall level of qualifications of preschool practitioners in the local field is low and there is great diversity in professional qualifications among them.

Recently, a number of new policies have been introduced, including quality assurance, a curriculum framework and the education voucher scheme. The Education Bureau published *Performance Indicators* in 2000. Preschools are inspected on all aspects of their work, including

children's development, management and organization, learning and teaching, support for children and school culture. The overall performance of a school is graded at four levels: unsatisfactory, acceptable, good, and excellent. The policy of quality assurance inspections establishes a new framework for the service and functions of preschools in terms of quality and accountability.

To further enhance the quality of educare, the Education Bureau issued a new *Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum* in 2006 to replace the one published in 1996. The old document provided general curriculum aims, teaching principles, content, space, and suggested learning activities. However, there was no legal obligation for preschool staff to follow the recommended practices. In fact, preschools usually relied on the curriculum packages published by local publishers (Li, 2006). These commercial products were developed with a strong market orientation. The uniform set of learning materials provided teachers with little scope for individualization and decision-making. In contrast with this, the new *Guide* adopts the western ideologies of school-based curriculum development. Pre-primary institutions are encouraged to design their own curriculum based on the *Guide* and involve teachers in curriculum and pedagogical decision-making (Education Bureau, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, the *Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme* was announced in 2006. To speed up the pace of quality improvement, the local government has tied up the new curriculum policy with that *Scheme*. Only those preschools meeting the prescribed standards may redeem the voucher. As all local preschools are private and most rely on fees for their funding, it is imperative for schools to engage in curriculum improvement. Principals and teachers are now held fully accountable for the quality of their services.

Research Problems

The review of existing literature identifies the research themes relating to leadership practice in studies of non-Western education contexts. The present study examined leadership for school improvement in Hong Kong preschool contexts, which is driven by policies and strongly influenced by market forces. I specifically explored the factors influencing leadership practice for curriculum change, and whether leadership was exercised at a centralized level or in a diffused form. The study examined the extent to which the views of decentralized leadership documented in Western literature are relevant to the local field of early childhood education. I also investigated the strategies that the case study schools employed for curriculum change and examined their processes of change. It sought to explore the extent to which these strategies and change processes correspond to the findings of earlier studies on school improvement. Accordingly, two main research questions were posed: What are the processes and practices of school leadership in coordinating and leading curriculum change? And, what are the conditions that support and challenge the change process at school level?

Method

Participants

A qualitative in-depth case study strategy was used in this study. The main reason for this choice was that the context is pertinent to the various stakeholders' views on leadership practice. As the overall purpose of the larger study was to investigate effective leadership for quality early childhood programmes, schools were deliberately selected from those evaluated as excellent in the quality assurance inspections of the Education Bureau. In 2001–2006, 160 out of 1015 preschools were inspected (Education Bureau, 2007). Only a very few preschools were evaluated as excellent each year. The study was conducted in 2006. In order to capture the current phenomena of effective leadership as far as possible, those preschools judged to be excellent in

2004 and 2005, and in which there was no change in headship, were selected. With the help of the Education Bureau, two potential case study schools were identified, and both were willing to take part in the study.

The two schools in this study were run by non-profit organizations and were overseen by a school board of governors. The board established general policy for the school. Both schools were overseen by a co-coordinator who was also serving as a school governor and responsible for the overall development and management of the services. In both cases the parent organization operated them along with a number of related schools. Both coordinators took part in school development. Both the school principals had substantial experience of working as teachers and had received training at degree level and had more than five years of experience in headship. Both schools had a stable team of teaching staff who had been serving for at least three years. Eight teachers out of the 10 involved in the interviews had one year of certificate training or equivalent while two were three-year higher diploma holders. Members of the support staff of the two schools had served for a long period of time ranging from five to 20 years. Only one of the interviewees had been in their current post for less than one year. A total of 17 parents were interviewed in this study. Fourteen parents out of the 17 involved in the interviews had received secondary education and the educational attainment of the other three was at the tertiary level. Six parents from each case study school had a family income above the median monthly domestic household income (Census and Statistics Department, 2006) ranging from HK$20,000 to HK$40,000 per month or above. Table 1 in the Appendices provides further details of the background of the schools and the profile of the participants.

The stakeholders in this study were defined as the individuals with a vested interest in their preschool's programme quality. The children were not chosen as participants because they

tend to focus more on immediate interactions with their classroom teachers and peers rather than on the operation of programmes at the school level. The stakeholders in the study included school governors, principals, teaching staff, support staff and parents. In each case study school, the coordinator (i.e. school governor appointed by the parent body), principal, 1 senior teacher (if any), 1 class teacher of each cohort, 1 subject or special education teacher (if any) and half of the support staff were interviewed. Two parent groups were selected for interview. One was those parents whose children were in the class of 5-6 year-olds and the other was those parents whose children had completed the preschool programme and were in the first year of primary education. The children of these parents had been/were going through the whole schooling process. These parents had a sound understanding of the operation of the school and its recent changes. Three to five parents were involved in each focus group interview. The composition of participants was listed in Table 2 in the Appendices.

Data Collection

Interview. Interviewing was the major method of data collection in this study. Patton (2002) identifies three types of interview: the informal conservational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview. They vary in the format and structure of questioning. The general interview guide approach was used in this study. The rationale is that this type of interview is more systematic than the conversational interview and less restrictive than the standardized open-ended one.

The interviews for the school governors, school principals, teachers and support staff were conducted on an individual basis. Since these school actors work closely together on a daily basis, one-to-one interviews allow them to express their views openly and protect their confidentiality. The interviews for parents were conducted in focus groups of four to five people.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher in this study. All participants were interviewed for one session, and interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length. The interviews were audio-taped. Each of the interviews was fully transcribed.

Interview protocol. The interview protocol for this study included the following: (a) Briefly describe one or two recent changes for curriculum improvement in your school; (b) Who has played a leading role to manage and lead the changes and how? (c) If you have taken part in the process of change, what did you do? (d) What strategies have been used in the process of curriculum change and how? (e) What were the main difficulties and obstacles that your school faced in the process of curriculum change? (f) What factors if any were helpful to your school? This protocol was used as a guiding framework for developing the interview schedules for various school stakeholders in the study.

Survey. Questionnaires were designed to obtain the basic personal information about the informants and the background of the school. The information included: (a) school setting (e.g. name of school, school type, number of pupils enrolled in the school, number of teachers, qualifications of teachers, etc.), (b) informant's background (e.g. age range, level of educational attainment, professional qualification, years of field experience, length of service, post, etc.), and (c) family background (e.g. number of children attending the case study school, family income, etc.).

Data Analysis

Coding data. The qualitative approach to data analysis in this study was mainly adapted from the Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic model, at the same time making reference to Strauss and Corbin's methods for open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Attride-Stirling's thematic model was used because it systematically depicts the procedures for analyzing textual materials.

The reason for making reference to Strauss and Corbin's methods is to facilitate the discovery of new concepts and relationships in the raw data and organising these into a theoretical explanatory scheme. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package, was used for data coding. The software allows the researcher to organize and manage the interview data systematically. To begin with the data analysis, codes were applied to the text to dissect it into segments. Categories and themes subsequently emerged from the data sets of interview transcripts.

Reliability and validity check. Trustworthiness is an important objective for qualitative researchers to achieve by which they can contribute to an acceptable level of authenticity to reflect the multi-dimensional and socially constructed reality (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Triangulation, member checks and peer examination are the strategies adopted in this study for ensuring its trustworthiness in terms of reliability and validity.

The original research plan was to use a combination of interviews and documentary analysis for the triangulation of sources of data. However, the schools only provided their mission statement, programme pamphlets, timetables and newsletters. The researcher had no access to school reports, internal circulars, records and minutes of meetings. This limited the possible use of triangulation from sources of data in this study. Under these circumstances, the responses given by each participant were carefully scrutinized and cross-references made among the responses to see whether there were any internal inconsistencies in the responses.

To obtain the member checks, the coded interview transcripts were sent back to the participants for their comments. If there was significant disagreement with the result, the participants were contacted again for further clarification. In general, the participants agreed to the researcher's interpretations. This might indicate either that the participants did not want to

challenge the judgments made by the researcher, or that the researcher was able to maintain

 sufficient neutrality.

Since the researcher worked alone on this study, she had no co-investigator to make a

peer examination. Therefore, the views of two experts were sought to ensure the plausibility of

this study. Both of the external experts have Ph.D. degrees and have substantial experience in

conducting qualitative research. They were invited to give comments on the coding scheme and

the interpretation of textual analysis. Overall, they agreed that the researcher's analysis was

reasonable and plausible.

<div align="center">Results</div>

The findings of this study suggest that there were a number of factors influencing

leadership practice in the process of curriculum change. The diverse challenges facing

preschools include the quality assurance policy, pressure from interfacing with primary

education, keen competition among preschools in the local field, and increased demands for

accountability.

Impact of Quality Assurance Policy

As shown in the following examples, the policy had subtly influenced the design of the

curriculum and pedagogy in the case study schools. Governor B had to rethink the direction of

curriculum development after the quality assurance inspection by the Education Bureau. She

stated, "The inspectors told us that our programme was comprehensive. However, if we want to

further improve, we have to reconsider adopting a portfolio assessment approach for

documenting the children's learning and development." This was echoed by the teachers of

School B. Teacher F said, "The inspectors advised our school to hire expatriate teachers to teach

English. However, it was difficult for those teachers to mix with the local staff." Moreover,

Teacher J stated, "Our school intended to adopt the mixed-age group approach to enhance peer learning. However, this idea was not supported by the inspectors". From the teachers' perspectives, the policy imposed some constraints on their autonomy in curriculum and pedagogical decision-making.

In contrast with this, the management of School A turned the impact of educational policy into a driving force for curriculum change. Governor A said the quality assurance policy promoted the ideology of child centeredness. This broadened "the scope of the horizons" of the teachers and provided some pressure for the school to make further improvements. School B also benefitted from the quality assurance inspection. A rapid decrease in birth-rate after 1997 led to keen competition among local preschools. Teacher G said that, "As our school was graded excellent in the exercise, the QAI report helped us build up the school reputation to attract parents". The increasing control of the local education authority in the form of the quality assurance policy had both positive and negative impacts on the operation of schools and their development.

Pressure from Interfacing with Primary Education

As consistently stated by the majority of the participants, the "backwash" effect of primary education was the most significant factor influencing the in-school processes. Parent D said, "Some parents worry that the curriculum presently used is 'too simple' and that their children may have difficulties in the first year of primary studies". The case study schools tried to find a good balance between the value of "learning through play" and the pressure of academic learning imposed on young children. Parent C had an interesting description of how School B made both ends meet strategically. The school helped the children review the lessons. The teachers did not just ask them to remember the answers but also the corresponding questions.

They could also effectively motivate the children to do the exercises through play. This would

help the children to be familiar with the format of tests and examinations in the primary studies.

Keen Competition in the Local Field

Under the pressure of decreasing student enrolment, preschools in the local field have had

to sharpen their competitive edge. The schools in this study were no exception. Principal A said

that the curriculum innovation of adopting the "Space Approach" was the edge to attract parents.

School B made great efforts promoting their school. One member of support staff in School B

said that Principal B had a lot of "innovative ideas" for student recruitment. Teacher F had a

similar observation. She stated, "For programme promotion, our school introduced a number of

measures, such as using a new English curriculum, conducting more moral activities, installing a

plasma TV at the school entrance and putting up advertisements in public transport."

Increased Demands for Accountability

In addition to the external competition in the educational market, the schools had to face

increased demands for accountability. Both Principal A and Principal B said that if the parents

were not satisfied with the service provided by the school, they could withdraw their children

from the programme and move them to other schools at any time they chose. The case study

schools were also often caught between the diverse demands of the parents. Some parents were

convinced of the correlation between early and later development periods and saw children as a

potential resource to be nurtured, while others might still perceive the preschool service as a

preparation for primary school. The schools had to spend a lot of time and effort to communicate

with parents individually. Principal A described her experience of working with those parents:

> If the parents are pushing their children too hard [to learn and to write a lot of vocabulary
>
> at home], I will explain the underlying reason to them individually. I will also invite those

parents who share our views to persuade them. This strategy works very well in our situation.

Principal B mentioned that the parents had become more demanding in recent years. She was "trained" to be very skilful in handling the "unreasonable" parents. Similarly, in view of the increased demand for accountability, Principal A held regular monthly meetings with parents to report on the children's learning progress and to collect their opinions on the quality of teaching. The findings showed that the two schools had to do their best to formulate strategies to work between professional values and parental preferences.

While facing diverse challenges in the process of improvement, the schools gained internal and external support from multiple sources: their own parent organization, sibling schools, school governors, their teaching team and parents.

Support of the Parent Organization and School Governors

The two case study schools were operated by non-profit making organizations with a number of sibling schools and were overseen by experienced coordinators. Obviously, these factors helped to support leadership in the process of curriculum change. In particular, Organization A provided adequate financial support for its preschools. Governor A said the following:

> Our organization has a long history of social service in Hong Kong. It is quite easy for us to solicit donations from the public for school development projects. Besides, the resources can be effectively used and shared among the schools. This is very cost effective.

Governor B stated that the school board gave her autonomy in budgeting. She could use the revenue generated from school fees to purchase the necessary teaching resources and

materials. More importantly, the management of both schools appreciated that their parent organizations gave them intangible support in upholding the core value of child-centeredness under the pressure of keen competition in the market.

In addition, the school governors were involved in curriculum implementation by giving their advice to the teachers. For example, some teachers reported that Governor A, together with the school principal, made classroom observations to monitor the implementation of the new curriculum. She gave advice on the classroom setup and the materials used. Similarly, Governor B said that she made an effort to participate in the process of implementation of innovation by preparing the framework of the portfolio assessment system for the teachers.

Collaboration with Sibling Schools

The two schools in this study worked very closely with their sibling schools. Collaboration took the form of joint effort on curriculum development, professional exchange on pedagogical design, and redeployment of manpower resources. These forms of collaboration were mentioned by the majority of the teachers of both schools. This type of collegiality was important for the strengthening of professional competence of the teaching teams of the schools. Many teachers in the interviews valued the collaboration with sibling schools. For example, Teacher A said, "We discuss with the teachers from the sibling schools on the implementation of the new curriculum approach. We learn from their experiences, and that helps us consolidate and review our teaching practice."

Internal Support from Teachers and Parents

Internal support from the teachers was part of the synergy involved in building up the competitive advantages of the case study schools. There was no staff turnover in either school in recent years. In the interviews, the teachers frequently used the term "teamwork" to describe the

mutual support given to one another. For example, Teacher D said, "When I encounter any difficulties in handling the children's behavioural and learning problems, I can gain advice from my colleagues. When I have problems in answering the enquiry of parents, Principal A and other teachers are willing to offer me help."

In addition to the mutual support of the teaching teams, the parents were an important asset for the schools in the process of improvement. The schools involved the parents in various aspects of their work, such as conducting special activities for children, supporting children's learning at home, and providing assistance to reduce the teachers' workload. For example, Principal A planned to invite a parent to provide assistance on teaching Putonghua, which is the official spoken language used in mainland China. In another instance, Principal B invited the parents of the graduation class to share with other parents the experience of their children in the first year of primary studies so as to give proof of the school's effectiveness.

In the following sections, the process of curriculum change experienced by the case study schools is reported. This process includes sub-themes on initiating the innovations, restructuring the school system, implementing strategies for change, and maintaining close communication with parents.

Initiating the innovations

Evidence gathered in this study indicated that the school governors of the case study schools were the key figures in initiating the change. In working closely with the school principals, they led the curriculum innovation by using the strategy of vision building. The words "persuasion" or "lobbying" can be used to describe the way that the school governors built up the common goal. Teacher C described "the process of consultation" in the individual interview:

As far as I know, the new idea was initiated by Governor A. We were informed of the

curriculum change by Principal A. They held meetings with us for consultation. Then,

Principal A solicited our opinions on the process of implementation and the potential

difficulties we might encounter in teaching practices. After that, we launched the new

change in class together.

The experience described by the teacher revealed that, by and large, the nature of change

initiated by the school management was still top-down. The school management used so-called

"consultation" for building up the common goal. In fact, the nature of the consultation itself was

a type of briefing session. The governor and principal gave space for staff to discuss the

implementation of change rather than the direction of change. In general, that top-down approach

to management was accepted by the staff members of the two schools. The reason might be that

the school management gave some autonomy to the teachers in implementing the daily operation

of change.

Restructuring School System

Team teaching arrangements, regular planning meetings, and problem-solving sessions

were used by the case study schools in the change process, as many of the teachers explained in

the interviews. Both schools were restructured in a certain way, similar to the measures identified

by Coppieters (2005). Comparatively, the change in formal school structure initiated by School

A was more fundamental than the change in School B. School A initiated changes in the basic

organizational structures and roles. Teacher C explained the roles and functions of a team leader

as an example of these changes in organizational structure and roles:

The team leaders of sibling schools have a monthly meeting to discuss the learning

theme…Then, the team leader shares the information with the class teachers in our

working meetings. After reaching a consensus, we do the lesson planning together for preparation of teaching.

Generally speaking, the teachers of School A suggested that they were more involved in curriculum coordination and had a better understanding of other people's work within the school and the operation of sibling schools as well. This kind of collaboration involved a shift from independence to interdependence (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005). Either strategically or spontaneously, the teachers worked together to tackle the complicated education problems imposed on them by external forces.

Implementing Strategies for Change

Development of school growth plans, defining priorities for action, periodic review and revision of goals and priorities, and well-designed processes for the implementation of specific initiatives were the strategies often used by schools in the management of change (Coppieters (2005, 136). The interview data revealed that the case study schools adopted these strategies but with a couple of differences. The differences were continuous professional development and support from outside experts from the local higher education institutions. As both of the teaching teams were composed of teachers who only had professional qualifications at sub-degree level, the schools had to use the above strategies for professional enrichment. In addition to these, as the participants explained, School A applied for government funding as an additional resource to hire experts from a university to provide consultancy in the process of making a radical change to the curriculum and pedagogy. This type of "second-order" change seeks to alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together, including both the formal and informal structures and roles (Wallace & Pocklington, 2002).

On the other hand, Principal B reported that overseas visits were arranged and outside experts were invited to conduct seminars and workshops to enrich the knowledge base of the teachers and enhance their teaching skills and technique. The change basically focused only on the "know-how" aspect of the new assessment system, without disturbing the organizational structures and roles. This type of "single-order" change aimed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing practice (Wallace & Pocklington, 2002).

Moreover, both of the school principals also claimed that they laid emphasis on capacity building of the front-line teachers. This concept refers to enabling others to exercise leadership at all levels in the organization by creating structures as the means to nourish learning and achievement (Harris & Lambert, 2003). The claims made by the two principals had different connotations. School A focused more on strengthening the leading role of the teachers while School B emphasized the enhancement of the professional competence of teachers in order to carry out their responsibilities more effectively. The comments given by Teacher B of School A and Principal B respectively provide evidence of this difference in emphasis. Teacher B stated, "I find that we teachers are more mature and self-responsible. We don't need to rely too much on Principal A now. We are serious about making preparations for staff meetings. We become more independent in our work." Principal B said, "Regarding the professional growth of the teachers, I assign the less experienced to work with the parents who have a lower level of educational attainment. I think the teachers feel more confident."

Maintaining Close Communication with Parents

In the process of implementing the changes, the case study schools shared similar experiences. They maintained close communication with the parents on the learning of their children. Strategically, the schools provided information about curriculum change through

parent's meeting and collected the views of parents through opinion surveys. The schools explained the underlying rationale of change to the parents. The principals undertook thorough follow-up actions with those parents who might resist the changes and were concerned about the process. The schools also made efforts to provide evidence of the children's learning to the parents to prove the effectiveness of the new curriculum. Governor A said the following:

> Some parents might still suspect the effectiveness of the new change at the very beginning…When the parents found their children knew how to write sentences, read newspapers and were self-motivated to learn, they would understand and recognize the objectives of the new change.

> This was echoed by a parent. Parents B said, "In the process of implementation, the school management was willing to listen to us. Principal A collected our feedback and opinions for further improvement. When necessary, she took follow-up actions with us individually instead of muddling through."

Summary

The overall aim of this study has been to investigate leadership practice and related factors influencing the process of change from the perspectives of various school stakeholders. The factors challenging leadership practice in the change process were the quality assurance policy, pressure from interfacing with primary education, keen competition among preschools in the local field, and increased demands for accountability. While facing these challenges, both schools gained multilevel support from their own parent organization, school governor, sibling schools, their teaching team and parents.

The two schools shared some similar experiences while other aspects of change were different. Both of them laid emphasis on maintaining close communication with parents. This

might be due to the fact that the parents are the service buyers. They adopted a different

approach in the management of change. School A sought a radical change in curriculum

innovation through partnership with external consultants. This strategy changed both the formal

and informal structure of the school. Consequently, the teachers became more aware of their

leading role in front-line practice through capacity building. In contrast with this, School B

tended to follow the logic of a quick-fix approach that would get the teachers to change in certain

specified ways with their knowledge enriched by outside experts from the local higher education

institutions, and then put their new capabilities into practice. The latter approach basically

involved no disturbance to the formal structure of the school system. In general, though the two

schools adopted different approaches to curriculum innovation, the exercise of school leadership

in both schools was still largely in a centralized form.

Discussion

The principals of the two case study school had higher qualifications than their teaching

staff. Comparatively, the gap in professional qualifications of staff in School B was bigger than

that in School A. In other words, the teachers of School B, who had a lower level of professional

qualifications, might not have been adequately prepared for making a radical change to the

curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, Governor B had obtained her training at diploma level

more than twenty years ago. These were probably the reasons why the management of School B

only made a "single-order" type of change in the quality process. That type of quick-fix approach

to change involved no disturbance to the formal roles and functions of staff members in the

school setting. It involved utilizing the fastest solution to keep the problem from recurring in the

near future but did not necessarily eliminate the problem in the long run. In contrast with this,

School A initiated a "second-order" type of change in curriculum innovations. That approach

involved delegation of power and authority to teachers in decision-making. It tackled the source of the problem in a more profound manner.

Recently, the proposition of "third age" improvement has been proposed by Hopkins and Reynolds (2001, 459). This new improvement paradigm is characterized by focusing on learning in classrooms and concentrating on building capacity for improvement. Hopkins and Reynolds argued that understanding the capacity for sustained improvement is an area where leadership studies should focus. Morrison (2002) also argues that the self-organizing schools of the future will require an increasing consciousness of the importance of capacity building. The two case study schools have already engaged in the process of building up the capacity of the teachers by encouraging continuous professional development (CPD). The literature on CPD shows that one of the most effective strategies to close the gap between practice and student learning is to engage teachers in understanding their pedagogical context and deepen their knowledge about how students learn. This would lead to greater possibilities of producing change in the classroom context (Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Hewson, & Mundry, 2003).

Regarding the use of external support, it is proposed that a further generator of capacity may be networks of schools. Veugelers and Zijlstra (2002) consider collaboration of schools in networks to be an important means for not only disseminating good practice, but also overcoming the traditional isolation of schools. However, these strategies might not be feasible in the local field of early childhood education where preschools are in competition with each other for student recruitment. Competition is a barrier to their working closely together on curriculum innovation. Therefore, it is quite common for local preschools to seek support from outside experts from higher education institutions. Both schools in the study adopted this approach to curriculum innovation. These findings to a certain extent correspond to Hargreaves'

and Hopkins' (1994) argument on the strategic alignment of external support from a central agency and partnership with higher education institutions as the most important factors contributing to school success. The support provided by external agencies is important for the development of local preschools, given the fact that the professional qualifications of the teachers are minimal and basic.

In the process of change, one principal exhibited some attributes of distributed leadership by delegating tasks and responsibilities and role-sharing with her subordinates while the other displayed a relatively high degree of centralization of power and authority. As mentioned earlier, gap in professional qualifications of staff in School B was bigger than that in School A. Professional training of teachers in School B was minimal and basic. Whether they had enough competence to take up greater responsibility is questionable. This was probably the reason why Principal B tended to use more restrictive practices in the process of decision-making. However, in general, the exercise of school leadership in the two case study schools was still in a highly centralized form. The terms 'headship' and 'leadership' were quite often used as interchangeable concepts by the school stakeholders. The research findings on this point are quite consistent with the observations of Pun, Chin, and Lau (2000) that Chinese leadership and management are shaped by paternalistic approach and acceptance of hierarchy. The discourse of school leadership revealed in this study is different from the Western notion of shared or distributed leadership displayed in the various aspects of school management. In the two case study schools, the principals play a leading role in every aspect of school operation and were almost the sole source of inspiration for school improvement. Hopkins, Ainscow, and West (1994) describe this type of inspiration as dependent on a single individual's intellectual, emotional, and physical energy and imagination. They argue that this style of leadership severely constrains the school's future

development. In the circumstances of leading by singular leadership, the case study schools have

to deal with the challenges of sustainable development in the future.

Limitations and Implications

There are three limitations of the present study. First, interviewing was the major method

of data collection. This method cannot fully map the richness and complexity of interactions

between the leader and the led in the process of curriculum change. An important next step will

be to include videotaped observations of team meetings. Team meetings for instructional

purposes are the occasions most likely to reveal the evolving practices of leadership for school

improvement. Second, all participants were interviewed for one session only. In other words, the

study provides a snapshot of the change process at a single point in time. The data collected from

those interviews can hardly capture the developmental process of leadership in depth. Future

studies with a longitudinal element involving a series of data collection taken at the beginning,

middle and end of the school year are needed to unpack the leadership for school improvement in

the process of curriculum change. Third, the interview data were all reported by school

governors, principals, teaching staff, support staff and parents of the two case study schools.

These data represented the school stakeholders' perspectives on leadership for school

improvement and did not fully reflect how curriculum changes could be operationalized in

classroom contexts. An important next step will be to conduct classroom observations to collect

data on the implementation of curriculum changes.

A major goal of this study was to explore leadership practice for school improvement in

the process of curriculum change, at a time of increasing accountability. Case studies of the two

local preschools revealed that, although the approaches employed by the school principals were

different in terms of the nature of change, both of them relied on the use of external support from

universities in the process of school improvement. This reflects the fact that the preschool

teaching force is not fully developed in terms of professional competence and that external

support from universities is important to enhance the quality of service in preschools. In fact, as

the local government announced in the *2006-07 Policy Address*, development grants for

preschools have been provided to hire outside experts to give support on quality improvement.

As a result, there has been a substantial increase of university involvement in upgrading the

quality of service of local preschools in recent years. The opportunities for this school-based

support will provide an avenue for preschool principals and teachers to build their capacity for

school improvement. The western literature on school-based support indicates that a variety of

school-university collaboration activities can relate to the operation of support services. For

example, those activities can include supervision and mentoring, teaching initiatives, research,

professional development, shared planning, and school enrichment (Merritt & Campbell, 1999;

Brady, 2000; Gonzales & Lambert, 2001). The trend of increased use of school-based support

raises an important question: What strategies of school-based support provided by universities

are effective in leading to meaningful change and enhancing the quality of education? To answer

this question, further research be needed in order to map the full picture of school-based support

in the field of early childhood education of Hong Kong, and to explore the relevance of western

school-based support theory in the local preschool context.

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Author Note

Table 1

Context of the case study schools

- The two schools in this study were run by non-profit organizations: School A by a social service agency and School B by a religious organization. School A was founded in the late 19th century. Its main objective was to care for the young and help those in need. It provided welfare, educational, cultural and recreational services. School B was founded by an American religious organization. The parent organization also operated a small number of preschools over the previous two decades.

- School A and School B were operated together with a number of sibling schools by their own parent organization and were overseen by an experienced coordinator who served as a school governor. School A had more than 10 sibling preschools and School B had fewer than 5.

- Both school governors had substantial field experience of working as front-line teachers and school principals. They took part in school development. Both of the school governors had received professional training. Governor A had obtained a bachelor degree in early childhood education and would attend the Master of Education programme in the near future. Governor B had received only diploma training in mainland China 20 years ago. Comparatively, Governor A had much higher professional qualifications than Governor B.

- Principal A and Principal B had been working in the field of early childhood education for over 10 and over 20 years respectively. Both of them had experience of working as a teacher. Principal A was promoted to the position and had occupied it for more than 6

years, and Principal B had occupied the position for more than 10 years. Both school

principals had more than 5 years of experience in headship. They had received training at

degree level which was higher than the registration requirement at the time of this study.

In addition, Principal B was attending the Master of Education programme.

- Before taking up the headship, both of the school principals were teachers. At that time,

they were under the immediate supervision of the school governors. Both of them had

long-term working relationships with the school governors for more than 10 years.

- The staff turnover rate of both schools was very low. All teaching staff had been serving

at least three years. All of them had substantial teaching experience. Eight teachers out of

ten involved in the interviews had one-year full-time training while two were higher

diploma holders. The school principals had higher qualifications than their teaching staff.

The profiles of professional training of the two schools were typical in that the overall

level of qualifications of preschool practitioners in the local field is low and there is a big

gap between the professional qualifications of school principals and front-line teachers.

Comparatively, the gap in professional qualifications of staff in School B was bigger than

in School A.

- Most of the parents involved in the interviews had received secondary education and

those who were working were non-professionals. Twelve parents out of seventeen in total

had a family income above the median monthly domestic household income of

HK$20,000 to HK$40,000 (Census and Statistics Department, 2006).

Note. Adapted from "Understanding Effective Leadership for Quality Early Childhood

Programmes in Hong Kong," by C.W. D. Ho, 2007, Unpublished doctoral dissertation,

University of Bristol, United Kingdom, p.94-114.

Table 2

Composition of Participants

Role of Participants	School A	School B
School Governor	1 person	1 person
Principal	1 person	1 person
Senior Teacher	NA	1 person
Teachers		
Class A (2-3 year-olds)	2 teachers	NA
Class B (3-4 year-olds)	2 teachers	4 teachers
Class C (4-5 year-olds)	2 teachers	3 teachers
Class D (5-6 year-olds)	2 teachers	3 teachers
Subject Teacher	1 teacher	1 teacher
	(Special Education)	(English)
Support Staff		
Clerical Staff/ Housekeeper	4 workers	3 workers
Parents of Students of Class D	5 parents	4 parents
Parents of Graduates (6-7 year-olds)	3 parents	5 parents
Total	11 interviews	11 interviews

Note. From "Understanding Effective Leadership for Quality Early Childhood Programmes in Hong Kong," by C.W. D. Ho, 2007, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Bristol, United Kingdom, p. 65.