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Abstract

This paper aims to identify leadership roles for quality in early childhood programmes in the local settings of a sample of Hong Kong preschools. Two schools were selected for the study, both of which were rated as excellent in the quality assurance inspections of a local education authority. Effective leadership was explored from the multiple perspectives of various school stakeholders including school governors, principals, teachers, members of support staff and parents. The qualitative interviews were used for data collection. The interview data indicated that the teachers, members of support staff and parents quite often viewed themselves as followers and were dependent on a single leader, the head. As perceived by the school stakeholders, the principals tended to take up three major roles: role model, school manager, and mentor for curriculum and pedagogy. Characteristics of the associated patterns of the three leadership roles were similar to those of moral, managerial and instructional leadership documented in the Western literature. The implications of the study for promoting moral leadership and developing teacher leadership are discussed.

1. Introduction

For the past decade education reform has been underway in Hong Kong. The local government is actively pursuing policies to improve the quality of education through efforts to decentralize education, raise standards, and increase accountability and professionalism (Education Commission, 2000). All preschools are private, either profit-making or non-profit-making. Most rely on fees for their funding. In other words, most preschools are market-driven. Despite this, the preschool sector has also embarked on the current movement of education reform. With the parents calling for a quality preschool service, the local government have become increasingly concerned with the development of early childhood education. To improve the quality of the preschool service, policy initiatives on upgrading teacher qualifications, implementing a quality assurance framework and harmonising pre-primary education services were introduced in the past decade. In addition, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR has announced in his *Policy Address* that fee assistance will be provided in the form of an education voucher for parents of children aged three to six years old and enrolling in kindergartens, starting from the 2007-08 school year (Hong Kong Government, 2006: 16). The education voucher policy promotes school choice as a means of increasing competition among local preschools. All the new policy initiatives previously mentioned have posed new challenges for preschool principals. The issue of effective leadership is at the centre of current debates.

This article begins with an overview of the changing concepts and models of leadership within the context of school development. Next, the article will briefly introduce the background of the study, followed by a section on research method in order to contextualize the findings related to the characteristics of effective leadership perceived by various stakeholders of the two case study schools. Finally, the implications of the study for promoting moral leadership and developing teacher leadership are discussed.

2. Conceptualizing School leadership

Effective leadership is an area that has been widely explored from various perspectives due to its close link with school development (Sanders, 2006; Earley & Weindling, 2005; Blase & Blase 1998) The terms 'leadership' and 'management' are sometimes used interchangeably because these activities are often carried out in schools by the same people and at the same time. A distinction has been drawn between the two concepts. West-Burnham (1997) suggests that leadership concerns vision, strategy, creating direction and transformation of the organization, whereas management concerns effective implementation of the vision, operational matters, ensuring the organization is run effectively and efficiently to achieve its goals. Burnes (1996: 152) suggests that the roles of leader include the roles of manager and often, *vice versa*. Leaders and managers overlap considerably and the difference between them is largely a matter of management style. A convergent management style is focused on stability and predictability and an ability to optimize resources to implement policy, whereas a divergent style is focused on creating new visions rather than accepting the status quo.

Over the last half century, there has been an increased attention to the concept of leadership as a field of academic inquiry. Immegart (1988: 273) observed 'much remains to be done in the mapping of the leadership domain, in identifying dimensions and variables critical to the

phenomenon and in developing viable conceptualizations and constructs to guide research'. In his review of the research literature on school leadership, he suggests four broad strands of leadership inquiry: leadership traits, leadership behaviours, leadership styles and situational leadership. Leadership traits research identifies the personal attributes that are associated with leaders. Leadership behaviours research examines specific observable actions of the leader rather than personality traits. Leadership styles research constitutes action dispositions of the leader that can be measured and compared. Situational leadership research involves understandings of leadership and its interaction with the environment. Recently, Leithwood and Duke (1999) provide a synthesis of the contemporary leadership literature. They propose a six-fold classification of leadership concepts, namely instructional, transformational, moral, participative, managerial/strategic, and contingency/styles. These two scholars (Leithwood & Duke, 1999: 65) argue that these theoretical models lay too much emphasis on the roles and functions carried out by an individual person designated as 'leader'.

In many Western societies, the idea of distributed leadership is now attracting a sharply rising degree of interest. Spillane and his colleagues (2004: 11) suggest that the new form of distributed leadership is distinct from that of positional leaders. Distributed leadership is built on the concepts of shared values, norms of collaboration and a sense of collective responsibility. This leadership model is grounded in the interaction of people and contexts in school environments and is best understood as a practice distributed over leaders, followers and their situation. The concept of distributed leadership is also acknowledged by Harris and Day (2003: 96). They identify successful leadership from their study, and state that it involves distributing leadership and building the community of the school through developing and involving various school stakeholders. The orthodoxy of a singular form of leadership has been challenged and replaced by a plural form of leadership.

In addition to the discussion on singular and plural leadership, the current trend of globalization has set up a new focus for deliberation in the field of educational leadership. It has assumed increased significance with current attention being directed towards the impact of globalization on the development of leadership from a cross-cultural perspective. Adopting a cultural approach to leadership, Wong (2001: 318) explores the influences of Confucianism on moral obligation and the practice of leadership. He attempts to connect an emergent theme of moral leadership in Western schools to a longer tradition in Chinese Culture. His argument on the construct of moral leadership has a strong grounding in the value system of intellect traditions of China. He recommends that efforts should be made to explore ways to prepare potential leaders for demonstrating these values and ethical considerations.

To sum up this section, I quote a few lines about the nature of leadership models from the chapter on professional development in education written by Guskey and Huberman (1995: 2). They explain that 'different models of leadership have their own theoretical assumptions and are informed by different bodies of research. These models reflect different perspectives or worldviews and different prescriptions for improvement'.

3. Background of the Study

Much of the existing literature discusses the quality of leadership in processes related to school effectiveness and improvement (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001; Foskett & Lumby, 2003). As relatively little is known about leadership and management in the local field of early childhood education, the policy and practice of preschool education is largely based on the research and literature on primary and secondary education or follows the trends in many Western developed countries. However, as Bottery (1992: 58) argues, ‘the practice of leadership and management is context-bound, and is mediated by the beliefs, values and aspirations of the leaders and the led’. It is therefore problematic to assume that policy and practice relating to local preschool education should be drawn from the knowledge base of different educational sectors and other contexts. To enrich the area of research into effective leadership in local preschools, the research reported in this article is part of a study that aims to investigate the effective leadership practice for quality programmes from the perspectives held by various school stakeholders in two preschools in Hong Kong. Specifically, one of the research objectives set out in this study is to outline how various school stakeholders perceive the leadership roles for quality programmes.

4. Research Method

4.1 Data Sources

The study adopted a qualitative research strategy with in-depth case studies of two local preschools. The selection of cases was based on whether that particular school was rated as excellent in the quality assurance inspection of the Education Bureau, a local education authority. The Education Bureau (formally Education and Manpower Bureau) published the first edition of *Performance Indicators* in 2000 for monitoring the service quality of the pre-primary sector. All local preschools are subject to inspection starting in 2002. School performance is graded at four levels: unsatisfactory, acceptable, good, and excellent. Both preschools selected in this study were rated excellent in the quality assurance inspection.

The stakeholders¹ in this study are defined as the individuals with a vested interest in school operation. The sample of participants included a broad range of stakeholders in the school. They were the coordinator (i.e. acting as school governor), principal, senior teacher, class teacher, subject or special education teacher, support staff and parents whose children were in the class of 5-6 year olds and whose children had just graduated. These parents probably had a relatively good understanding of the school management and its recent changes. The number of participants in each parent group ranged from four to five. The composition of participants was as listed in the table below:

Table 1. Composition of participants.

	School A	School B
School Governor	1 person	1 person
Principal	1 person	1 person

¹ As the main objective of the larger study is to understand the effective leadership practice for quality programme, the children were not chosen as participants because they tend to be more attentive to immediate interactions with their classroom teachers and peers rather than to the operation of programmes at the school level.

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 (Special Education)	1 teacher (English)
Support staff	Clerical Staff/ Housekeeper	4 workers	3 workers
	Class D (5-6 year olds)	5 parents	4 parents
	Graduation Class (6-7 year olds)	3 parents ²	5 parents
Sub-total		11 interviews	11 interviews
Total	22 Interviews		

Source: The content of the table is extracted from Ho (2008: 226).

4.2 Context of Case Study Schools

To analyze contextual conditions of the case study schools, the background of the schools and the profile of the participants are described in the following table:

Table 2. Context of case study schools.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The two schools in this study were run by non-profit organizations: one was a social service agency and the other was a religious organization. • The schools were operated together with a number of sibling schools by their own parent organization and were overseen by an experienced coordinator who was serving as a school governor. • The organizational structures of both case study schools were simple. The staff composition includes a school principal, a senior teacher (only in School A), a small team of teaching staff and a few number of support staff. • Both of the school governors had substantial field experience of working as front-line teachers and school principals. They played an active role in school management and development. • Both of the school principals had substantial experience of working as front-line teachers and had received training at degree level which was higher than the requirement for professional registration. They had more than five years of experience in headship.

² Since a parent was absent for interview due to personal reason, the number of participants in the parent group of graduation class of School A was 3.

- 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.
- 8 teachers out of 10 involved in the interviews had one-year full-time training while two were higher diploma holders.
- Most of the parents involved in the interviews had received secondary education and those who were working were non-professionals. 12 parents out of 17 in total 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.

Source: The content of the table is summarized from Ho (2008: 226-227).

4.3 Data collection and analysis

Qualitative interviewing was the primary source of data collection in this study and field notes of the interviews were used as supplementary information in the process of analysis. The interviews for staff of the two case study schools were conducted on an individual basis and those for the parents were held in a small group of three to five people. The participants were interviewed for one session, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. Each of the interviews was fully transcribed. Attride-Stirling's thematic model (2001) was used to conduct the data analysis. The data coding was aided by NVivo, computer software for qualitative analysis. Codes were applied to the text to dissect it into segments. Categories and themes subsequently emerged from the data sets of interview transcripts.

The interview data showed that the exercise of school leadership was largely centralized in the principal. The teachers, parents and members of support staff quite often viewed themselves as followers in the leadership process. Consequently, their perceptions of school leadership were largely grounded in the school principal's behaviour and functions, and sometimes in those of the school governor.

5. Findings

Based on the descriptions given by the school principals and various stakeholders, the data was clustered around the characteristics of effective leadership into the patterns associated with three leadership roles. They are 'role model', 'school manager', and 'mentor for curriculum and pedagogy'. Strictly speaking, role and behaviour are two distinct measures in leadership research (Immegart, 1988) (see Section 2). Role is defined as prescribed or expected behaviour associated with a particular position or status in a group or organization whereas behaviour is defined as the observable response a person makes to any situation. To a certain extent, the former refers to one's conception and the latter refers to perception. In relation to the epistemological position, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the meanings of one's conception and perception of a social phenomenon. As Runes states (2006: 230), 'The vehicle of perception consists of actually given sense qualities supplemented by imaginatively supplied qualities which on the basis of earlier experience are ascribed to the perceived object.' For the purpose of this article, I will discuss the characteristics of effective leadership in broad terms as there was no clear-cut boundary between the leadership roles conceived and the leadership behaviour perceived by the

school stakeholders in this study. Each of the three roles is elaborated in turn with interview excerpts below.

5.1 Role Model

Huang (1997) argues that the Chinese culture and values have been quite consistent over the long run, despite some change over time. The culture is dominated by ethical humanism, and placed great value on people and their activities. It is quite common for school leaders to consider their social obligations in their practices (Wong, 2001) (see Section 2). In line with Wong's argument on moral leadership in Chinese cultural contexts, the interview data indicated that the school principals themselves and the other stakeholders regarded possessing high ethical standards and upholding professional values to be important attributes of effective leadership.

Many of the school stakeholders had a consistent view of the importance of the role modelling demonstrated by the school principals. The following examples indicate what the school principals required of themselves and their staff, and also what was expected by others to achieve a high ethical standard.

A principal is the role model in the school. For example, I ask my colleagues not to take leave in September [at the beginning of the school term]. I will not do that, even though I need to handle my family matters during that period of time.
(Principal A)

Principal B also emphasized the importance of professional image and conduct. The following are the two descriptions made by Governor B and Teacher I respectively on how firm Principal B was to maintain the professional image and she also required herself to be a role model in that aspect.

Our school is very traditional and conservative. Teachers are not allowed to dye their hair or to wear low-cut tops and dresses. Principal B is very firm on staff discipline. The teachers have to follow the rules. (Governor B)

Teachers are required to dress properly and decently. Principal B is our role model. She and Governor B are the key persons of our school. They are our role models in every aspect. (Teacher I)

In addition, the school principals were expected to have a strong commitment to higher professional values. As mentioned by Governor B, Principal B tried her best to uphold professional values against unreasonable parents.

Principal B explains patiently to the parents who make complaints about the school. She will not be dominated by the parents. She tries to uphold the professional values and beliefs. This is the way to gain respect from others.
(Governor B)

Teacher J also mentioned that she would expect the school principal could uphold the professional values of child centeredness. She said the school management had its own standpoint. Even though some parents complained that the workload for the children was insufficient, the school still insisted upon its homework policy.

One member of support staff said Principal A would give her an opportunity to improve her work. The only thing that she should keep in mind was to avoid repeating the same mistake again. The following interview excerpt is an example of how the principal demonstrated ethical humanism in her leadership practice.

In fact, Principal A is very 'democratic'. When she finds something wrong, she directly pinpoints the problem to us. Then, we will have to pay special attention to that. (Staff A)

5.2 School Manager

The structure of a preschool is very simple in general. Except for a small number of large preschools, the normal staff composition includes a school principal, a team of teaching staff and a small number of support staff. Some schools may have a post of senior teacher and some do not. Unlike primary and secondary schools, there is usually no middle management, such as a vice principal and subject panels, in the preschool settings. As described in Section 4.2, the structures of both case study schools were simple and did not have middle management. Therefore, the school principals in this study had often to play the role of school manager. This finding is consistent with Burnes' argument (1996) on the overlapping roles of school leader and manager (see Section 2). As was frequently mentioned by the school stakeholders, the principals made great efforts in the area of school operation including management of resources, giving directions and guidance on daily operation, allocating duties and workload, maintaining staff discipline, facilitating staff relationships, and staff supervision.

Regarding the management of resources, both principals made an effort to maximize the use of internal resources and solicit external support for school improvement. School B was located in private premises. Management of physical resources was a priority for Principal B in the day-to-day operation of the school. Principal B explained in detail how she tried to make full use of the physical space in the school.

Physical space is the major constraint to our school. I have to make thoughtful plans on the use of space. For example, I carefully schedule the timetable for each class so as to make full use of every single space in the school. (Principal B)

From the parents' perspective, Principal A could make good use of parental resources to support the school and teaching activities. As mentioned by Parent B, Principal A was familiar with the background of each parent and therefore could mobilize parents to contribute in school activities. For example, she invited one parent who had good proficiency in Putonghua to teach the subject. She also invited parents to be volunteers to organise the school graduation ceremony.

Giving guidance to staff on daily operations was another major task that the school principals had to do every day. They sometimes had to make “direct interventions” to ensure the smooth running of the schools. This reflected that the school principals were the down-to-earth people and also the dependency of their subordinates.

When there are any problems in daily operation, I will investigate the reason behind it. I remember that one day all the parents and children were stuck at the lift lobby at dismissal time. I found that the teacher did not know how to manage the flow of traffic. So, I asked the teacher should release those in a hurry to catch the school bus first and then let those being picked up by parents go later on... Since I have to take care of the safety of the children, I carefully make plans on time management and routines. (Principal B)

Some members of teaching staff also indicated that the principal could be very firm in staff supervision and staff discipline. Principal A said she directly pinpointed to her staff when they made mistakes in carrying out duties and responsibilities.

I usually give time for my staff to correct their mistakes. However, if there is no improvement, I will help them find out the problem. If it is something very important, I will tell him/her the possible consequences. For example, if the staff cannot meet a deadline, I will help prioritize the task for him/her. If the staff intends to do so, I will be very firm to force him/her to meet the deadline. (Principal A)

Apart from these instances, it seemed that the school principals understood that the staff relationships were a promoting factor for staff collaboration and teamwork. They would try their best to facilitate the relationships among staff. That would probably explain the reason why the staff turnover rate of both schools was very low as mentioned in the context of case study schools (see Table 2). Teacher F said the expatriate teachers were not familiar with the class routines and the teaching approach. Principal B asked her and other teachers to help those teachers and make them feel included. The school principals would also discourage any gossip in the schools. Principal A said she would not get involved in any personal conflicts between staff. She usually gave space for them to resolve the conflict by themselves. This was the way to avoid micro-politics.

In mentioning the process of school improvement, workload was always the concern of the staff members. The school governors and principals paid special attention to finding a balance between the additional workload created by the new changes and the well-being of staff members.

Practically speaking, the workload of the teachers cannot be reduced but I will try my best to streamline their daily work. For example, I reschedule all meetings in the same week. This allows the teachers more time for preparation. And the arrangement is easier for them to take leave for attending a training course or handling personal matters if they need to do so. I also help prioritize the work for

them in order to reduce the burden. All my staff are satisfied with the present arrangement. (Principal A)

The teachers understood it was inevitable that the workload became heavier in the process of school improvement. They appreciated that the school management made efforts to relieve them of the burden.

Since the workload of class teachers is very heavy, Principal B asks the subject teachers to give them assistance. For example, they help out by filing the class documents. In addition, Principal B tries to figure out a more effective way to organize the children's portfolios. She knows that we are hard-working and she wants to relieve us of the burden. (Teacher F)

5.3 Mentor for Curriculum and Pedagogy

In addition to playing the part of role model and school manager in the schools, the principals were also the mentor for curriculum and pedagogy. As listed in Table 2, most teachers had obtained their professional qualification of a one-year basic certificate and some of them had a higher diploma while the principals had received their training at degree level or higher. Naturally, the gap between the levels of professional qualification created a role demand on the school principals to act as a mentor for the teachers. They expected themselves/were expected to possess the vision to bring in new ideas and create new initiatives. They made ample preparation for school improvement by collecting the necessary information, making professional exchanges with other schools, and connecting with the external environment for the necessary expertise and knowledge. To help install the new changes, the school principals worked closely with their teachers on designing the curriculum, planning lessons, doing class demonstrations, and giving feedback on teaching practice.

I spend time on helping my teachers to improve their practices. Sometimes, I apply what I learnt from the university in my school. When the teachers do not know how to practice the new skills, I will do class observation or class demonstration for them. I think this is the best way to give them support and help to improve their skills. (Principal A)

In the first month of the new term, I ask the teachers of the K1 Class to make observations on the language development of the newly admitted children. They keep records of individual children who may have special problems. Then, I will do a follow-up to see if we can provide individual support for these children in the school or if we need to make a referral to other professional for support in the field, such as speech therapy. (Principal B)

The teachers also expected the school principals to give guidance on curriculum design and provide feedback on the quality of teaching practice. Teacher B appreciated the efforts made by Principal A in this regard.

Our school principal gave us her opinions on developing the framework of learning portfolio used in the assessment. Taking this into consideration, we then decided to assess four aspects of the children's learning and development. When adopting this new approach, we needed to observe children's behaviour in the process of learning. However, we found that it was difficult to conduct regular observations in our daily practice. Regarding this, we consulted Principal A again. She gave us some useful suggestions on this matter. (Teacher B)

Apart from the above, they sought advice from the school principals on their daily practices. The following excerpt highlights this fact.

We are under the leadership of Principal B. When having the staff meeting, she can pinpoint our blind spots in our daily practice. She has received more professional training than us. I find that it is good to share her expertise and experience. (Teacher F)

All teachers in the two case study schools had obtained one year of full-time training and had substantial teaching experience. Supposedly, these teachers who were professionally trained could practice at a competent level. However, this was not exactly the real situation in the two schools. The school principals sometimes had to coach the teachers on their daily practice. The following quotes provide two perfect examples of this.

We have to submit the lesson plans and evaluation reports to Principal A for comments. She gives us a lot of support on teaching. When I have any difficulties in handling the children with emotional problems, I will seek help from her. (Teacher E)

When Principal B finds that some teachers speak to the children in a rude manner, she will tell me. Then, I [as senior teacher] have to remind those teachers of this. Or, when Principal B observes that some teachers cannot use the appropriate teaching methods, she will also tell me. As I mentioned earlier, I have to remind those teachers of this. (Teacher I)

To sum up, the school principals in this study tended to take up three major roles: role model, school manager, and mentor for curriculum and pedagogy. With reference to a synthesis of the contemporary leadership models proposed by Leithwood and Duke (1999) (see Section 2), the characteristics of leadership practice in the two case study schools perceived by various school stakeholders were similar to those of moral, managerial and instructional leadership. To a certain extent, the leadership exercised by the school principals also possessed some characteristics of transformational style. This refers to the focus of leadership on the higher levels of commitment and the capacities of organization members. In contrast with this, the features of contingency leadership were not significantly reflected in the interview data. Since the two schools were under the umbrella of a medium to large organization, it was very likely that the parent organization had already handled the challenges of wide variations in the community and societal contexts. The school management was not so much required to respond to those

problem-solving circumstances. In addition, in terms of power and authority, the leadership was centralized in the school management. This meant that there was very limited scope given by the school management to the teachers, support staff and parents to participate in decision-making. The leadership practice in the two schools is in a centralized form which is different from the Western notion of distributed leadership documented in the literature.

6. Implications of the Study

Drawn from evidence from a study on multiple perspectives of school stakeholders on effective leadership, this article has revealed that teachers, support staff and parents generally viewed themselves as followers and the exercise of school leadership was largely centralized in the principal herself. There was general agreement about the roles of effective leadership perceived by the participants involving in the interviews. They thought that the role model, the school manager, and the mentor for curriculum and pedagogy were the important roles for a school principal to play within the school context. Based on these findings, I will discuss the implications of the study linking to one focal point: the demand for promoting moral leadership.

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, all local preschools in Hong Kong are private and most rely on fees for their funding. In other words, the field of early childhood education is privately run. The form and structure of preschooling has been strongly shaped by market forces. The education voucher policy promotes school choice as a means of increasing competition among local preschools (Ho, 2008). Under these circumstances, preschools have to put much more efforts into sharpening their competitive edge to attract parents in the education marketplace. Consequently, parents have indirect but strong influential power on school decision-making. The case studies mentioned previously have generated insights into the importance of moral leadership for programme quality. It is an enormous challenge for principals in the preschool marketplace to act as moral leader to maintain a good balance between professional values and parental preferences while ensuring that the provision of care and education is truly relevant and of a high quality. Recently, it has been proposed that moral leadership should be grounded in the valuation process that captures the full range of human actions, in addition to showing the relationship with social ethics. “It focuses attention on a re-examination of the values of the profession, organization, community and society” (Begley and Zaretsky, 2004: 640). In my view, the valuation process as a notion for leadership preparation in the local field should be strongly advocated. This process could impart the basic tenets and values to practicing and future principals, and allow them to become more self-knowledgeable and self-reflective about the relationships between their thoughts, practices, attitudes and values. With reference to the broader environmental context, school principals can reflect on the appropriateness of their own actions in relation to the potentially competing or incompatible values in the community and society. Whether it is taught as a subject or is integrated with other subjects, this component should be further strengthened in the existing pre-service and in-service programmes for professional development. Although it cannot serve as a guarantee to ensure that leadership practice is grounded in the moral core of professional values, the practicing and future principals at least will be more self-critical of their own choices when they are at the cross-roads of the market forces and moral functions of leadership.

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