

Educational leadership on the Chinese mainland: A case study of two secondary schools in Beijing

Manhong Lai*

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Lijia Wang and Wei Shen

East China Normal University

Abstract

In recent years, the main concern of the Chinese Ministry of Education has been the quality of education. Principals are expected to play a key role in guiding the developmental direction of their schools, in guaranteeing the implementation of curriculum reform and in facilitating school-based teacher development. The aim of the study referred to in this article was to investigate the characteristics of principals' educational leadership through a case study of two secondary schools in Beijing. The study employed a qualitative research method to investigate educational leadership in two secondary schools in Beijing. The observations of our study indicate a strong tendency for principals to implement the traditional top-down instructional type of leadership promoted by the District Education Bureau. At one of our sample schools, the principal employed a paternalistic leadership style, and teachers at both schools emphasized the paternalistic role of the principal, including in engaging in various aspects of their personal lives. At our second sample school, the principal was attempting to delegate certain levels of authority and responsibility to ordinary teachers. However, we found that her efforts were being hindered by middle managers.

Keywords: educational leadership; China; secondary school; instructional leadership; middle managers

Introduction

In recent years, the quality of education has been the major concern of the Ministry of Education on the Chinese mainland. Curriculum reform has so far been perceived to be one of the most effective ways of improving education quality. The focus of this reform is on facilitating the all-round development of students by nurturing innovation, enhancing independent learning ability, and encouraging the school to develop a school-based curriculum in addition to the compulsory national curriculum (MOE, 2001). Principals are expected to play a key role in guiding the developmental direction of their schools, in guaranteeing the implementation of curriculum reform, and in facilitating school-based teacher development. The aim of the study described here was to investigate the characteristics of principals' educational leadership through a case study of two secondary schools in Beijing.

* Corresponding author – Email: mhlai@cuhk.edu.hk

©Copyright 2017 Lai, Wang and Shen. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Our research was guided by three major questions:

1. How are the major developmental directions for the school set?
2. How do teachers perceive educational leadership and their relationship with the principals at the two schools?
3. How do the principal, middle managers and teachers participate in the process of implementing a new school initiative?

A principal's efforts to lead his or her school in the direction of development are affected by several factors: the amount of autonomy he or she has in setting the predominant developmental direction for the school; how teachers perceive the principal–teacher relationship; and how middle managers help to implement the principal's initiatives. The three research questions help to reflect the educational leadership of the respective principals by investigating different aspects of work in a school. By adopting a qualitative research approach, we were able to obtain an in-depth understanding of how principals, middle managers and teachers perceive the role of educational leadership in guiding and implementing new school initiatives with the aim of improving the quality of education.

Major issues in educational leadership and principal–teacher relationships

Educational leadership helps to establish a clear and consistent school vision (Sammons *et al.*, 1995), and is essential for enhancing teaching quality and facilitating school improvement (Harris, 1999). Many studies on school development have investigated how the major directions for this development are set. In the 1980s, instructional leadership was generally defined as the management of curriculum and instruction by the principal. Instructional leadership involves the principal directly supervising, controlling and monitoring classroom teaching and curriculum design (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Smith and Andrews, 1989). However, it was found that this type of leadership resulted in school reforms being imposed from the top down. Change imposed in this way without an adequate implementation strategy inevitably encounters strong opposition (Harris, 2004). By the 1990s, scholars were advocating 'transformational leadership', in which discussion takes place between the school principal and ordinary teachers on how to develop a school's aims and vision (Bass and Avolio, 1993). Hulpia and Devos's 2010 study found that as a result of the involvement of teachers in school direction-setting there was a lively school vision, known and accepted by the school team. The main feature of schools that were seen to have high potential was their collective aim to achieve common goals. Participative decision-making was used in areas over which the teachers had influence, the school's administration was open to such influence and there was a normative acceptance of these opportunities among the teachers.

Many studies have investigated the significance of the teacher–principal relationship in ensuring the successful implementation of shared school visions. Barnett and McCormick (2004) state that building relationships with teachers is of central importance, and that it encourages teachers to contribute their abilities, skills and efforts towards achieving shared purposes. A principal is demonstrating concern for the individual when she/he approaches each teacher individually with an attitude of respect and fairness; is accessible to teachers; supports, encourages and acknowledges individual efforts; and provides direction and guidance based on individual development (Barnett and McCormick 2004). Hulpia and Devos (2010) found that in high-potential schools school leaders interacted with the teachers on an individual and personal basis to provide job-related support and encouraged teachers to develop themselves professionally. Teachers who found their work personally meaningful and who reported having

a significant amount of autonomy and substantial influence over their work environments had higher levels of interpersonal trust in their principals (Moye *et al.*, 2005). Interpersonal trust has a strong connection with teacher empowerment. Spreitzer (1995) defined empowerment as the degree to which an individual desires or feels able to influence his/her work role and context. When teachers feel empowered in their positions, they are more likely to have positive relationships with their principals (Moye *et al.*, 2005).

Recently, scholars have been actively discussing the development of the distributed style of leadership. Several studies have demonstrated the importance of distributing leadership in schooling decisions (Robinson *et al.*, 2008; Elmore, 2002). Distributed leadership refers to the distribution of leadership practices among leaders, followers and their situations, and incorporates the activities of multiple groups of individuals (Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership is more concerned with leadership practice than with the leaders themselves, or with their roles, functions, routines and structures. Leadership practice is seen as a product of the interactions between school leaders, followers and their situations, rather than as a product of the leader's knowledge and skill (Spillane, 2005). According to Gronn (2002), distributed leadership consists of concertive action, spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations and institutionalized practices. 'Concertive action' refers to the emergent interpersonal synergies that solidify as part of the development of close working relations among colleagues. 'Spontaneous collaboration' refers to the leaders' practices being spread over the social and situational contexts of the school. The tasks involved may vary in scale, complexity and scope. An 'intuitive working relationship' refers to the intuitive mutual understanding that emerges over time as two or more members develop close working relations. Shared roles develop when members choose to capitalize on their opportunities to rely on one another. 'Institutionalized practices' refers to ad hoc committees working as the mechanisms for pooling distributed capacity into a formal structure of governance.

Educational leadership is closely related to context (Hallinger, 2003) and may not mean the same thing in different societal cultures (Dimmock and Walker, 2008). However, here we do not attempt to establish any cause-and-effect relationship between educational leadership and local culture (Pye, 2000), nor do we attempt to find a cultural explanation for our findings and thus run the risk of over-generalization. In other words, we shall simply attempt to demonstrate how particular aspects of local culture may be affecting educational leadership in the two sample schools. How educational practitioners exercise leadership in different contexts remains one of the most contentious issues in educational leadership. In this article, we set the above discussion in the specific context of the Chinese mainland in an attempt to investigate the characteristics of educational leadership in China.

Educational reform and the roles of principals in schools on the Chinese mainland

In the 1990s, the focus of education reform on the Chinese mainland was on improving the quality of education. This reform advocated a move away from examination-oriented education, and the development of student learning habits, attitudes and abilities (CCP, 1999). As part of the above reform of education quality, the Ministry of Education promulgated an 'Outline of curriculum reform in basic education (trial)' (MOE, 2001), which substantially affected teaching and learning across the nation. The curriculum reform emphasized student-centred learning, encouraged student participation and introduced a new activity approach to learning. The new curriculum reform required school organizations to change from hierarchical structures into flat professional communities, and there was a call for a new form of educational leadership. In 2012,

the Ministry of Education published the 'Professional standards for school principals in basic education (trial)', which clearly indicated that principals should ensure the implementation of the national curriculum guidelines, go into the classroom and give direct instruction on teaching, and promote school-based teacher development. Beijing generally adopted the national policies for principals' professional development.

Researchers have revealed that principals in China spend most of their time organizing lesson observations at the school and district levels, observing lessons and giving directions as to how teaching might be improved (Chen, 2011). It has also been found that teachers expect their principals to have an in-depth knowledge of the subjects they teach. Substantial teaching experience and mature views on teaching are the most significant factors in enhancing a principal's influence in a school (Zheng and Shi, 2010). Walker *et al.* (2012) found that the three major areas of concern for principals were financial responsibility and the acquisition of resources; academic outcomes and university entrance; and *guanxi* and upward connections (*guanxi* is a central concept in China which refers to a network of contacts that an individual can call upon when something needs to be done, and through which he or she can exert influence on behalf of another). Although principals paid lip service to the importance of teacher participation, they had little trust in teachers' ability to participate meaningfully in school management. Research has suggested that principals have a preference for a paternalistic leadership style (Chen *et al.*, 2002) that involves top-down decision-making (Wang, 2007). However, Moyles and Liu (1998) found that the collective authority of the teachers exerted through the subject panel (*jiaoyanzu*) provided a counterbalance to the power of the principal. Bush and Qiang (2000) suggested that there may be tension between the collegial and bureaucratic aspects of school management.

Research method

In the study described here, we employed a qualitative research approach. We conducted fieldwork at two secondary schools, School R and School W, in Beijing, China. These schools are examples of 'ordinary' schools, both facing a decline in school image and student admissions. In China, ordinary schools receive fewer resources than exemplary schools. Through a rigid assessment by the District Education Bureau regularly, a handful of schools can attain classification instead as exemplary schools: once thus categorized, a school has the priority to select the best students and receives much more funding from the local government. Thus, studying the experiences of ordinary schools helps to paint a picture of educational leadership at schools with fewer resources and a strong need to improve the school image. The selection of the sample schools was based on purposive sampling, which enabled us to collect data related directly to our research questions.

In 2015, sample School R had a total of 200 teachers and staff members and over 2,200 students. Established in the 1930s, the school has had a chequered history. However, School R was considered to be of the second tier in its district at the time we conducted the fieldwork. It mainly admitted students with only average educational attainment, owing to the school's low status and limited resources. The principal mainly employed a paternalistic leadership style. She was hoping to develop School R into a school with good teachers, good teaching and good students.

Our other sample school, School W, is a secondary school established about fifty years ago. It admits mainly students with below-average educational attainment. In 2015, it had 136 teachers and staff members and over 600 students. Although School W had previously enjoyed a good reputation, its reputation had declined over the preceding ten years following a rapid succession of new principals. In 2006, School W merged with an exemplary school in Beijing and became a

branch of the exemplary school. However, the merger did not bring with it any extra resources or increases in teachers' salaries. After the merger, a new principal arrived, and immediately introduced several new initiatives. This new principal was comparatively open-minded and eager to delegate responsibility and authority to colleagues and bring about a transformation of the school. Three years before our fieldwork began, this principal had developed three major school initiatives: 'effective collaborative teaching preparation', 'effective classroom teaching', and a tutor system. The teachers at School W perceived that their school's image and student recruitment had improved noticeably under the current principal's leadership.

During our fieldwork we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 informants. The informants included principals, vice-principals, middle managers, subject panel heads, form leaders and ordinary class teachers. The selection criteria were based on the subjects taught, administrative duties and length of service. Among the informants, some were involved in administrative work for their academic unit or subject panel, some were form leaders who led teachers in the same form to find ways of improving their strategies in dealing with students, and others were ordinary teachers. The selection of informants includes teachers with experience totalling less than five years, five to ten, and more than ten years. All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, and verbatim transcripts were made for later analysis.

Findings

Direction setting: Traditional instructional leadership taken as a given

First, both principals expressed pride at having observed many lessons and given teaching instruction directly after lesson observation. The principal of School R was a typical principal who placed strong emphasis on teaching quality. Her leadership style was similar to that of most school principals in China. She was extremely proud of the fact that she had observed over one hundred lessons during the semester in which we conducted the fieldwork. As she pointed out, there is a quota for this required by the District Education Bureau. The Party secretary at School R also stated that:

to quote the official language, 'teaching quality is the lifeline of a school' ... if you can't even grasp this, there's no need to mention other aspects ... The attention paid to teaching quality on the mainland ... has never subsided, even for a moment ... This [focus] is a major tendency, a dominant atmosphere. Therefore, you must pay attention to it.

(Party secretary, School R)

In the existing political system in mainland China, the Party secretary is the top seat of authority in various institutions. However, as secondary schools have been implementing the 'principal responsible system' in recent years, the principal usually has greater decision-making authority on academic issues, while the Party secretary is mainly responsible for the political development of teachers and students. For decision-making on key school issues, there is usually a 'Party-Administration Coalition', which is jointly organized by the principal and Party secretary and forms the core decision-making unit. The School R principal found that offering concrete, specific feedback after lesson observation made teachers more willing to follow her directives for making improvements at the school. She also insisted on attending the district-level 'open lesson' rehearsals held at the school and gave concrete advice on improving teaching at the rehearsals. Observing open lessons (a kind of district-level public lecture given by teachers and organized by a teaching researcher) is required by the District Education Bureau; these lessons offer guidelines on classroom instruction based on the national curriculum reform programme. By emphasizing teaching quality at staff meetings and in feedback to teachers following lesson

observations, the principal of School R thought that she had successfully delivered her ideas on school improvement.

The principal of School W also attached importance to lesson observation. She stated that she had observed over eighty lessons during her first semester working at the school. In her evaluations, she paid attention to how the subject panel, which was made up of teachers who taught the same subject, prepared the lessons, how teachers set the learning purpose of each lesson, how teachers implemented the lessons, whether teachers achieved the set learning purposes, and how students reacted to their teacher's instructions. What she observed led her to conclude that the teaching at her school was not effective enough. The principals at both the sample schools placed a great deal of emphasis on their role in directly instructing teachers.

As another improvement measure, School R ran a 'basic teaching skills' competition and had succeeded in persuading most of its teachers to participate. The Party secretary expressed pride that over eighty teachers had participated in the competition, which emphasized adherence to the national curriculum reform's directives on encouraging student participation. The competition's evaluation form was based on the 'open lesson' evaluation form, an original document designed by the District Education Bureau. After participating in the competition, the teachers reflected that they clearly understood the types of behaviour and content they should focus on in their lessons, including the required style of linguistic expression, best practices for teacher performance, speed of delivery when speaking to the class, and writing on the blackboard. The 'open lesson' provided a clear model of the standards required by the curriculum reform programme.

Separately, School W initiated school-improvement projects on effective collaborative lesson preparation and effective lessons. The first of these laid out clear requirements concerning the appropriate venues for collaboration, the assignment of a key responsible teacher who would prepare materials for others, the setting of teaching purposes, the standardization of procedures and the setting of assignments for students. The principal hoped that teachers would engage in authentic collaborative lesson preparation at set times and not just get together loosely for a chat over tea. Middle managers were required to sit in on collaborative lesson preparations and check whether the teachers followed the required procedures during the preparation.

Thus, although the two school principals adopted different approaches towards dealing with the requirements of the national curriculum reform and the District Education Bureau, both of them saw improving teaching quality as the priority in school improvement.

Educational leadership and the relationships between teachers and principals

The principal of School R employed a paternalistic leadership style. For her, the aim of school development was to produce 'famous', award-winning teachers at the district level. The principal used every staff meeting to deliver her ideas on school improvement. She described her leadership style clearly:

I think about what our school development should be. I then develop an atmosphere to make our teachers agree and commit to it ... My character is rather straightforward ... I like to carry things out vigorously and speedily ... sometimes I am too stubborn and insist on doing something according to my own will, even things that may be wrong ... At least I take a clear stand ... That allows me to set a steady trend (for school development) ... You should let them [teachers] get accustomed to your [leadership] ... When making decisions, you can't listen too much to colleagues' opinions. You don't have time. You also don't have [enough] energy. You have to make your own judgements.

(Principal, School R)

The principal thus decided on the developmental direction of the school, and the teachers had to follow her directives.

The principal of School W was known as a caring leader who emphasized visibility, discussion with colleagues and genuine participation. When working on a new initiative, she would prepare a rough draft and then let the middle managers refine it. This helped give colleagues the impression that she was a hard worker who would bring about meaningful changes at the school. She would usually discuss major issues with an executive committee made up of 12 middle managers. The vice-principal strongly appreciated her leadership style, especially her willingness to discuss matters with middle managers and her emphasis on visibility. The vice-principal considered that:

She is young, energetic, bold and resolute in action ... In China, decisions are often made by a top leader (renzhi) ... If you're unlucky, you have a principal who carries out decisions rather arbitrarily ... [In the school] right now we have a democratic atmosphere.

(Vice-principal, School R)

The teachers also described in detail how the principal worked with them, to the point of even going on a jog with students and teachers. Many teachers were touched by the principal's temperament, language style and sincerity at work.

Second, whereas the principal of School R focused on mobilizing her teachers to compete for awards as a means for school improvement, at School W the principal instead emphasized the importance of communicating with teachers towards this end. The principal of School R had established a platform for the development of young teachers and was keen to mobilize teachers through staff meetings. She believed that encouraging more of her teachers to win awards at the district level was bound to attract more good students, and that if they did not do something like this their school could be merged with another, better school. At the staff meeting, a teacher of politics recalled: 'the principal told us that this [competing for teaching awards] was necessary ... Otherwise we might become obsolete ... This is related to our living ... We'll definitely pay attention.'

In School W, the head of the Chinese language panel reflected that the principal, besides launching new school initiatives and motivating her teachers, was particularly strong on communicating with colleagues: 'She is sincere ... very sincere about reducing the distance between her and the teachers ... If you admire the leader you won't mess her about. Then you will do good work for her. It's not just me – lots of teachers think this.' Another Chinese teacher mentioned that 'she is humanistic ... and very considerate of colleagues. This means she enjoys the support of the ordinary teachers ... She often chats with us informally and is keen to learn more about our personal lives ... She and the teachers form one harmonious whole.'

Teachers at both schools emphasized the fact that their leaders' concern for their family lives was a core element of principal leadership in China. The principal of School R made it clear that she would do everything she could to help if a teacher encountered personal problems. As an example, she mentioned a teacher who wanted her child to be accepted at an exemplary junior high school. The principal said that she had made great efforts to help in this case, so that word would spread among the teachers about how she helped her colleagues. She considered that 'you must take the matter [of helping with teachers' family issues] very seriously. You should care about them [and their family lives]. Then they will agree to [what] you [want to do]'. At School W, many teachers mentioned having chats with the principal on family issues. One teacher of Chinese shared the following information with us:

Our principal pays particular attention to the frontline workers [the teachers]. She gets close to you. Sometimes when we're going through hard times, she [expresses] concern. She often asks whether our health is okay or if our families have had any [financial] burdens recently ... I think

her show of concern is just as important as a salary increase. It warms my heart [when she asks about my family life].

(Teacher of Chinese, School W)

The teachers here referred repeatedly to their personal chats with the principal and spoke of how touched they felt by her concern for their personal lives.

Participation of middle leaders and teachers in school decision-making

At School R, there was a clear decision-making hierarchy connecting the principal, vice-principal, subject panel heads and ordinary teachers. According to the vice-principal at School R, the principal decided the direction of school improvement, with the vice-principal being responsible for the details and implementation of the initiatives. The principal stated that:

The vice-principal often says ... 'you are the principal. What you say is the decision. Even if I have a [different] opinion, I will keep it [to myself] ... You don't need to worry about how hard it is for me to implement your ideas. I shall implement them for you.

(Principal, School R)

The subject panel heads' major responsibility was to inform teachers of the school's requirements and supervise the teachers' implementation of the directives from the top.

The principal of School W was comparatively liberal and hoped to delegate a certain amount of authority and particular responsibilities to the ordinary teachers. First, school W's students were mainly from a less advantaged socio-economic background and had below-average educational attainment. In order to handle the students' educational and behavioural problems more effectively, the principal had initiated a tutor system, in which one form teacher and three to four subject teachers served as one-to-one tutors for a group of four or five problem students. The principal thought that the details of the tutor system should be refined by the frontline teachers. She pointed out that:

[Frontline] teachers discovered these changes by themselves ... The teachers adjusted the implementation [criteria] of the programme. I think it is much better than when I [first set the criteria]. The principal and the head of student affairs [can only think about] the ideal situation, since we don't work on the frontline. If you impose certain models on them [teachers], it won't be successful ... [The] more effective [way] is to allow the teachers to adjust [the programme criteria and procedures].

(Principal, School W)

It was clear that the principal hoped the frontline teachers would become actively involved in planning the details and carrying out the programme.

Another distinction at School W was the key role played by the head of student affairs in designing the tutor system and in instructing the teachers involved in it. Although the principal made it clear that she wanted frontline teachers to be involved in the process, the ordinary teachers mentioned that in reality, when tutoring, they simply followed directives from the top. The head of student affairs agreed that she was the main person responsible for laying out a detailed design for the whole tutor system. Based on a one-page draft produced by the principal, she had designed a tutor handbook to guide and supervise the tutors. In their handbook, tutors were expected to write down notes on each student's issues, create a contract for improvement between the tutor and the student, monitor the students' monthly test results, write down the main issues arising from each tutoring session and keep a record of student punishments and awards and of the parents' opinions on their progress. The head of student affairs collected and carefully read through these detailed records, providing a page of feedback on each handbook.

In the two years since launching the tutor system, the head of student affairs had also made the transition from focusing on students with low educational attainment to focusing on students with problem behaviour. At the same time, she had also decided to form a tutor group, chaired by a form teacher and made up of other tutors, to help tutors work collaboratively. She did not usually instruct ordinary teachers directly because direct communication was reserved for serious issues. Instead, the form leaders (*nianji zuzhang*) distributed her messages and supervised the ordinary teachers' work.

The teachers themselves reported that when implementing the tutor system they simply followed the directives given by the head of student affairs and were not given any opportunity to participate in refining the system. Since the focus of the system had shifted to students with problem behaviour, one tutor group for each form was created to discuss ways to help these students. The teachers perceived that all the practices were designed and refined at the top, with information then being passed down by their form leaders. The tutor handbook was crucial for monitoring and supervising all aspects of the tutors' work at different stages of the programme. The form leaders reminded the tutors about their work and deadlines, emphasizing in particular the recording of details in accordance with the handbook requirements. Therefore, the teachers saw their tutoring work as being to adhere strictly to directives from the top. They had learned the practices of the tutor system from their form leaders, who were responsible mainly for delivering messages and ideas from the head of student affairs.

Conclusion

First, at both the schools that took part in the research there appeared to be a strong tendency to implement the traditional top-down instructional leadership style promoted by the District Education Bureau. Because of the assessment involved in securing an upgrade to exemplary school status, the required number of lesson observations and the strict scrutiny of officials and teaching research officers at the District Education Bureau, the principals of our two sample schools both believed that improving teaching quality was the top priority in school improvement. They both frequently observed classroom teaching, noting that the District Education Bureau had set clear requirements for classroom observation that each principal was required to fulfil. The District Education Bureau plays a key role in guiding the major direction of school improvement. The assessment for upgrading to exemplary school status attaches great importance to the quality of classroom teaching. The officers from the District Education Bureau constantly emphasized the importance of improving teaching quality, and they required principals to observe and guide classroom teaching directly – a style that can be perceived as traditional instructional leadership (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985). Teaching research officers from the District Education Bureau gave intensive instruction on classroom teaching and frequent teaching supervision, which gave strong signals that schools should set the maintenance of teaching quality as the priority in school development. Given the close monitoring by the District Education Bureau, it is no wonder that, as one Party secretary said, 'in this atmosphere, how could you not choose to pay the most attention to improving classroom teaching?'

Second, the teachers constantly emphasized the paternal role played by the principal in engaging with various aspects of their personal lives. The teachers at both schools generally accepted the hierarchical structure of authority, according to which the principal set the direction of development, middle managers refined the details, and subject panel heads and form leaders were responsible for transmitting the plans from the top and ensuring that they would be successfully implemented by the teachers. The subject panels (*jiaoyanzu*) could not, therefore, develop as a counterbalance to the power of the principal, as predicted by Moyles

and Liu (1998) and Bush and Qiang (2000). The leadership style of School R's principal is typical of traditional principals on the Chinese mainland. Under her paternalistic leadership, which is similar to that described in many Chinese studies (Walker *et al.*, 2012; Cheng *et al.*, 2002; Wang, 2007), the principal continually insisted upon her own judgement and believed that teachers should follow her directives. To obtain their agreement and support, she had eagerly involved herself in the teachers' personal lives, in particular helping their children get into good schools. At School W, although the principal employed a comparatively liberal leadership style, the teachers also emphasized the importance of her concern for their personal lives. At both the sample schools, the teachers highly appreciated their principal's interest in their own health and that of their family members, their family's financial situation and their children's schooling and careers. Within the above structure, teachers had firm expectations that the principal would express concern about various aspects of their personal lives.

Unlike the communication that takes place between teacher and principal in western societies, with its emphasis on teachers' professional development and empowerment (Barnett and McCormick, 2004; Moye *et al.*, 2005), this parental, caring mode was perceived by the teachers who took part in our study as one of the major characteristics of a good principal. The type of relationship that exists between school principal and teachers can be explained by two well-established concepts: *bao* (保), which means 'protection', and *bao* (報), which means 'reciprocation'. Both have been widely applied in the social context of traditional and contemporary Chinese societies (Yang, 1987).

Third, when launching a new school initiative, the principal of School R would set the directive and the middle managers would then follow the principal's directive to the letter, and lead the ordinary teachers in implementing the directive. Yet, even in schools with more liberal principals who want to put into practice a distributed type of leadership, middle managers and a paternalistic school culture can hinder the process. The principal of School W showed competency and a strong will to transform the school. However, because she was still the one who determined the major directions for school development, her style of leadership cannot be interpreted as transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2003). The school's middle managers highly appreciated her emphasis on visibility and the distribution of authority and responsibilities among the middle managers. The principal of School W hoped that ordinary teachers would participate in refining the implementation process of new school initiatives. Her expectation that teachers would contribute minor refinements in the project implementation process is somewhat similar to Harris's (2004) definition of distributed leadership, in which those not in formal leadership positions are given responsibility for certain developmental tasks. However, in the view of the ordinary teachers, in reality the detailed plans for new school initiatives came entirely from the top. Middle managers, not ordinary teachers, played the prominent role in designing the details of new school plans as well as in refining them during the implementation process. The case of School W shows that even when a principal has expressed a desire to delegate a certain amount of authority and particular responsibilities to ordinary teachers, middle managers can still employ a paternalistic style to control ordinary teachers' work. Ordinary teachers were seldom given the opportunity to participate in decision-making. Thus, as a result of the longstanding paternalistic culture that still exists in Chinese schools, the principal's willingness and efforts to put into practice some form of distributed leadership at School W were being blocked by the conservative work habits of the middle managers.

Notes on the contributors

Manhong Lai is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Research interests include educational leadership, teacher professionalism and teacher development.

Lijia Wang is a lecturer in the Department of Education at East China Normal University. Research interests include teacher professionalism and teacher development.

Wei Shen is an associate professor in the Institute of Comparative Education at East China Normal University. Research interests include educational leadership, teacher professionalism and teacher development.

References

- Barnett, K. and McCormick, J. (2004) 'Leadership and individual principal-teacher relationships in schools'. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40 (3), 406-34.
- Bass, B.M. and Avolio, B.J. (1993) 'Transformational leadership: A response to critiques'. In Chemers, M.M. and Ayman, R. (eds) *Leadership Theory and Research: Perspectives and directions*. San Diego: Academic Press, 49-80.
- Bush, T. and Qiang, H.Y. (2000) 'Leadership and culture in Chinese education'. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 20 (2), 58-67.
- Chen, F. (2011) 'Zhongxiaoxu xiaozhang jiaoxulidaoxingwei shijianchengdu diaocha yanjiu' [The investigation on the instructional leadership practice level of secondary and primary school principal]. *Shanghai Jiaoyu Keyan* [Shanghai Educational Research], 3, 34-6.
- Cheng, B.S., Huang, M.P. and Chou, L.F. (2002) 'Jiazhangshi lingdao jiqi xioneng: Huaren qiye tuandui de zhengju' [Paternalistic leadership and its effectiveness: Evidence from Chinese organizational teams]. *Huaren Xinli Xuebao* [Journal of Psychology in Chinese Societies], 3, 85-112.
- CCP (Chinese Communist Party) (1999) *Guanyu shenhua jiaoyu gaige xuenmian teijin shujijiaoyu de jue ding* [The decision on deepening education reform and promoting quality education].
- Dimmock, C. and Walker, A. (2008) *Educational Leadership: Culture and diversity*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Elmore, R.F. (2002) *Bridging the Gap between Standards and Achievement: The imperative for professional development in education*. Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute.
- Gronn, P. (2002) 'Distributed leadership'. In Leithwood, K. and Hallinger, P. (eds) *Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 653-96.
- Hallinger, P. (2003) 'School leadership development: Global challenges and opportunities'. In Hallinger, P. (ed.) *Reshaping the Landscape of School Leadership Development: A global perspective*. Lisse: Swets and Zeitlinger, 289-300.
- Hallinger, P. and Murphy, J. (1985) 'Assessing the instructional management behavior of principals'. *Elementary School Journal*, 86 (2), 217-47.
- Harris, A. (1999) *Teaching and Learning in the Effective School*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Harris, A. (2004) 'Distributed leadership and school improvement: Leading or misleading?'. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 32 (1), 11-24.
- Hulpia, H. and Devos, G. (2010) 'How distributed leadership can make a difference in teachers' organizational commitment? A qualitative study'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26 (3), 565-75.
- Ministry of Education (2001) *Jixu jiaoyu kecheng gaige gangyao (shi xing)* [Outline for curriculum reform in basic education (trial)].
- Ministry of Education (2012) *Yiwu jiaoyu xuexiao xiaojiang juanyebiaozun* [Professional standard of principals in basic education schools].
- Moye, M.J., Henkin, A.B. and Egley, R.J. (2005) 'Teacher-principal relationships: Exploring linkages between empowerment and interpersonal trust'. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43 (3), 260-77.
- Moyles, J. and Liu, H. (1998) 'Kindergarten education in China: Reflections on a qualitative comparison of management processes and perceptions'. *Compare*, 28 (2), 155-69.

- Pye, L.W. (2000) "'Asian values': From dynamos to dominoes?'. In Harrison, L.E. and Huntington, S.P. (eds) *Culture Matters: How values shape human progress*. New York: Basic Books, 244–55.
- Robinson, V.M.J., Lloyd, C.A. and Rowe, K.J. (2008) 'The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types'. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44 (5), 635–74.
- Sammons, P., Hillman, J. and Mortimore, P. (1995) *Key Characteristics of Effective Schools: A review of school effectiveness research*. London: International School Effectiveness and Improvement Centre, Institute of Education.
- Smith, W.F. and Andrews, R.L. (1989) *Instructional Leadership: How principals make a difference*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Spillane, J.P. (2005) 'Distributed leadership'. *The Educational Forum*, 69 (2), 143–50.
- Spillane, J.P. (2006) *Distributed Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J., Halverson, R. and Diamond, J. (2001) 'Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective'. Unpublished paper. Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University.
- Spreitzer, G.M. (1995) 'Psychological empowerment in the workplace: Dimensions, measurement, and validation'. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38 (5), 1442–65.
- Walker, A., Hu, R. and Qian, H. (2012) 'Principal leadership in China: An initial review'. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 23 (4), 369–99.
- Wang, T. (2007) 'Understanding Chinese educational leaders' conceptions in an international education context'. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 10 (1), 71–88.
- Yang, L.S. (1987) *Zhongguo wenhua zhong bao, bo, bao zhi yiyi* [The meaning of bao, bo and bao in Chinese culture]. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Zheng, T.S. and Shi, W. (2010) 'Jinjinghuyu shizhixiashi zhongxiaoxu xiaozhang zhunuehua shuiping diaocha bijia fanxi' [The comparative study on professional level of secondary and primary school principal in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Chongqing]. *Jiaoyu lilun yu Shijian* [Theory and Practice of Education], 30 (11), 17–23.