Leadership Preparation in China:

Participant Perspectives

Introduction

School leadership is the second most influential factor for student outcomes (behind only classroom teaching) (Leithwood et al. 2006; Robinson, 2007), which leads to the question of whether 'a good principal equals a good school' (Bush, 1998), or to what extent school principals could influence school development and student outcomes (Harris, 2002; Harris et al. 2002; Lortie, 2009). A growing body of international research, including in China, shows that the principal's job is demanding and requires specialised knowledge and skills. This indicates that principals need to be trained to address school leadership challenges (Robinson. et al., 2008), particularly for those who are new to principalship (Kelly and Saunders 2010; MacBeath 2011). In certain developed countries and areas, including Hong Kong (Ng and Szeto, 2016; Ng, 2013), Singapore (Bush and Chew, 1999), Scotland (Crawford and Cowie, 2012), and the US (Hopkins et al., 1994), leadership preparation is a requirement for new principals. Research from these countries shows that leadership preparation is necessary for new leaders and their schools, and that these preparation programmes contribute to new principals' socialisation, professionalisation and contextualisation for the position (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Orphanos and Orr, 2013; Orr, 2011; Orr and Orphanos, 2011).

Political background

China, as the world's most populated country, faces the challenge of economic development.   Its educational policymakers realise that China must raise the level of general education if it is to achieve its goals of economic and social development (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Meanwhile, there is a widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student performance, and in raising the quality of general education, internationally and domestically (Bush, 2013; Feng, 2003). This is reflected in a growing emphasis on training for the nation's principals. Since 1989, principal preparation training programmes have been compulsory. From 1998, these led to a 'certificate for principalship', which was regarded as the 'stepping-stone' for headship (MOE[1], 1999).

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From 2002, the concept of principal professionalisation has developed in mainland China (Chu and Yang, 2002; Wang, 2006), when Chu and his colleagues first defined the principal's job as a specific vocation, which requires specialised professional knowledge and skills. This concept was further developed and promoted, with the publication of the 'National Standards and Qualifications for Headship' (MOE, 2013). This article draws on research on how current preparation training programmes facilitate the professional growth of new and aspiring high school principals for their current or future positions.

Geographical background

China has long been a hierarchical society, which shapes what principal development should look like and how it is enacted. Under the macro-guidance of the Ministry of Education, principal development is coordinated and managed through four administrative divisions: national, provincial, municipal and county (MOE, 1999). Accordingly, there are four types of compulsory programmes provided for teacher and leadership training in China, sponsored by these four different levels. The

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[1] MOE: Ministry of Education

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research reported in this paper focuses on the compulsory national level training programme for new and aspiring principals at high school level in one Chinese province, funded by the national government, and implemented by local educational faculties, leading to a 'certificate for principalship'. The policies and regulation stipulate that holders of this certificate are eligible to become principals.

<u>Research focus</u>

Formal leadership preparation programmes can be traced back to 60 years ago in the US (Bridges, 1977; Silver, 1987). However, in most parts of the world, the initiation of systems of formal preparation and development for school principals is a more recent phenomenon (Bush, 2008; Huber, 2004). This is also true of China, as noted above.

The research reported in this paper explored the original purposes of the preparation programme, and the extent to which these purposes have been fulfilled. Based on this, four research questions were developed:

1. What are the purposes of the programme and to what extent have they been achieved?

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2. What is the content of the curriculum offered for the leadership preparation programme, and how was this perceived by participants?

3. What delivery methods were offered during the leadership preparation programme, and how were they perceived by participants?

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4. How, and to what extent, did the leadership preparation programme contribute to participants' professional growth?

Literature Review

<u>Leadership preparation</u>

Leadership preparation refers to a pre-service activity, which focuses on initial preparation for aspiring principals. Bush (2008) described leadership preparation as a moral obligation, which allows professionals to move from classroom teaching to school leadership. Thus, the process of developing principals involves not only completing professional training but also engaging in personal transformation (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Crow and Glascock, 1995).

There is a view that systematic preparation, rather than inadvertent experience, is more likely to produce effective leaders (Avolio, 2005; Bush, 2008). Empirical evidence demonstrates that leadership preparation programmes can stimulate changes in aspiring principals' educational orientation, perspectives, attitudes and skills (Matthew and Crow, 2003), all of which are essential to effective leadership practice. For example, Cowie and Crawford's (2007) study of Scotland's new principals demonstrates that the influence of leadership preparation does not directly link to specific skills or knowledge, but, more importantly, to a process that helps to establish new leaders' identity as a school principal. Similarly, Reeves and Forde (2004: 9) found that, through the preparation process, Scottish principals develop their new identity as the 'head', which provides them with 'a means of entry into a particular social status'. Thus, socialisation into a new community of practice is another goal of pre-service preparation.

Davis et al (2005) argue that leadership preparation programmes can contribute significantly to candidates' readiness and ability to lead, with rigorous recruitment,

research-based content, curricular coherence, field-based internships, problem-based learning strategies, mentoring, and university-district partnerships. There is also evidence of positive linkages between programme features and principals' leadership performance (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Orphanos and Orr, 2013; Orr and Orphanos, 2011). This body of research suggests that it is imperative for the professional development of principals to be prioritised as skilful principals contribute crucially to the overall effectiveness of the school (Daresh, 2004).

<u>Content and delivery</u>

International perspectives

The debate on the nature of leadership preparation relates to conceptions of the principal's role, and it also influences the design and content of such programmes (Bush, 2013). The US Institute of Educational Leadership (2000) defines three important roles for principals in the 21st century, as instructional leaders, community leaders, and visionary leaders. Bush and Jackson's (2002) review of the content of international principal development programmes shows considerable similarities across contexts.   The main foci of such programmes are instructional leadership (Houchens and Cabrera, 2014), managerial and community skills (Davies, 2003; Cowie and Crawford, 2007) and visionary capability (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2008).

There is no single way in which management and leadership development creates leadership capacity (Burgoyne et al., 2004: 3) but there is increasing recognition of the limitations of traditional content-led principal preparation, such as lectures and reports. In Singapore, there has been a shift in the national programme for school principals from 'curriculum content' to 'delivery approaches' (Chong et al., 2003). Similarly, a British study on new headship transition shows that, when compared

with formal training, mentoring and coaching opportunities provided by former professional relationships have a significant influence in shaping new heads' thinking (Kelly and Saunders, 2010). These examples indicate a widespread shift in the emphasis of leadership development, from content to process, from 'what to teach' to 'how to deliver' (Bush, 2010).

Leadership preparation in China

The content of leadership preparation programmes in China is essentially top-down and highly controlled through regulations from the MOE, including prescribed topics of training, a stipulated number of hours of training for each topic, and lists of recommended textbooks and training manuals (MOE, 1999, 2010, 2017). This has resulted in a strong emphasis on regulations, legal knowledge, and Party education, with only a limited focus on curriculum leadership, teacher professional development, school-community relationships and the application of information technology (Su et al., 2000 and Zhu, 2010). Wang (2014) argues that programme content is often perceived as irrelevant and poorly connected to the tasks of school leadership.

In respect of delivery, most leader development programmes in China are built around lecturing and textbook learning (Walker and Qian, 2012). Formal lecturing is used overwhelmingly, although often in concert with visits to well-known, high-performing schools (Wu, 2013). However, latterly, some scholars have stressed the importance of context-based leadership practice and have begun to look for new approaches to boost new principals' leadership growth (Yang, 2005; Wang, 2006).

While lectures and case studies continue to predominate in training programmes for Chinese principals (Walker, Chen, and Qian 2008; Zheng, Walker, and Chen 2013; Zhu 2009), principals report that their preparation is often irrelevant to their work

roles (Feng 2003; Huang et al. 2011; Walker, Hallinger, and Qian 2007; Yan and Ehrich 2009; Zhu 2010). In response, scholars have proposed alternative strategies to improve the quality of principal training in China (Li and Feng 2001; Wang 2008; Wang, 2007). Proposed innovations include school-based training (Feng 2003), 'shadowing school' learning, skills-based training (Fang and Chen 2009), and problem-based learning (Feng 2003; Zhao 2005).

Methodology and Methods

Punch (2009:3) defines methodology as 'the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes'. Mixed methods research is defined as a broad type of research in which elements or approaches from quantitative and qualitative research are combined or mixed in a research study (Creswell, 2003). This study adopted a sequential mixed methods approach, with different stages (see below).

<u>Research stages</u>

This was a sequential mixed-methods study, study, which comprised four stages. These were participants' spontaneous reflections, participants' interviews, providers' perspectives and mini-case studies within school contexts. This paper presents and discusses data from the first two stages, participants' reflections and perspectives on the preparation programme.

Stage 1: participants' spontaneous reflections

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The researcher took the preparation training programme as the starting point, and the first stage focused on the spontaneous evaluations of programme participants, as noted above. At this stage, probability sampling was applied, as all 58 participants who participated in the preparation programmes were invited to complete a questionnaire survey. 46 respondents completed background information and single-choice questions (79.3%), 31 of them gave meaningful answers to the Likert-scale questions (53.4%), and 34 of them answered the open-ended questions (58.6%). These questionnaire sections focused on different aspects of the preparation process, and were analysed separately.

The questionnaire was structured to include dichotomous questions (relating to gender, age, occupation, years in post, educational background, etc.), multiple-choice questions (closed questions about given statements), and rating scales (closed questions about attitudes, perceptions and views). The authors added an open-ended question to collect additional perspectives on the preparation programme. The sequence demonstrates a move from objective facts to relatively subjective attitudes and opinions.

Stage 2: participants' perspectives

The survey was followed by individual semi-structured interviews, with a sub-sample of the survey principals, based on volunteer and purposive sampling. The researcher selected the interview sample purposively, by balancing age, gender, school location, and principals' current positions (including both vice principals and current principals). The final sample was nine principals (coded from P1 to P9), 25% of the principal volunteers, with varied backgrounds (see table. 1). The interviews were conducted two to four weeks after the programme, mostly in the principals' own schools. This period allowed participants to reflect on what they had learned from the programme, and on the learning process, and to assess whether and how they

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had been able to transfer the knowledge and skills from the programme to their job, linked to research question 4.

Code No.	School SES	School Performance[2]	Gender	Position/Years
P1	Rural-County	High performing	Male	Principal/3
P2	Urban-Capital	High performing	Female	Vice-P
P3	Rural	Low performing	Male	Principal/1
P4	Rural-County	Low performing	Female	Vice-P
P5	Rural-County	Low performing	Female	Principal/1
P6	Rural	Low performing	Male	Principal/1
P7	Urban	High performing	Male	Vice-P
P8	Urban-Capital	Low performing	Female	Principal/2
P9	Urban-Capital	High performing	Male	Principal/1

Table. 1 Backgrounds of Principals

Data collection and analysis

The sampling strategy allowed the authors to explore the issue at multiple levels (Creswell, 2003), so that the survey data, interview data, and documentary analysis were collected separately, but the analysis and interpretation were combined to 'seek convergence among the results' (Cresswell, 2003: 222). The survey results were analysed using SPSS and the interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo. Content analysis, using open coding, was performed for descriptive data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Data coding was influenced by the research questions, the literature and emergent survey findings. Data analysis was conducted using an

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[2] School Performance is defined by two factors: 1. School performance when compared with other schools in the same districts; 2. Performance of College Entrance Examinations of 2016.

iterative process that identified common themes and triangulated multiple data sources (Huberman and Miles, 2002). Through ongoing comparative analysis of the data with the emerging categories, relationships between the categories were identified.

Findings

This training programme was a part of a national principal development system, which was sponsored by the Ministry of Education, under the management of the local education authority (at provincial level) and supported by local universities. The sub-sections below address the aims, content and delivery of the programme.

A~~The a~~ims of the preparation programme

The first aim of the preparation programme was to introduce the 'principal position' to new and aspirant leaders (MOE, 2013). According to the policy, successful completion of the preparation programme leads to 'a certificate for principalship' (SEC, 1989), meaning that they are officially ready for the position. Thus, the training programme was also regarded as an 'entitlement' for the position. The second aim was to improve principals' school leadership performance, as noted by participants, particularly those from less developed areas of the province. These principals wanted learning and communicating opportunities with high performing school leaders and professional experts (P5). They were hoping to find some practical strategies to solve their school issues (P1 and P4).

> 'I came here with purposes and questions, with the hope that I could find the answers in these high performing schools, or through the assistance of the experts'. (P4)

> 'I was looking forward to group mentoring. As a boarding school, we share certain

similarities with the model school, and I hoped that I could get more ideas and tips on school logistics management and student management.' (P5)

The elements of the programme

The whole preparation programme lasted for half a year and included a variety of training approaches and assessments. This programme was comprehensive in terms of curricula, programme providers and delivery methods, following national policies on principal training programmes. The training booklet clearly introduced the structure and content of the whole programme. Table 2 summarises the inputs, outputs and assessment of the programme.

Inputs	On-campus training (three weeks)	Formal lectures Context-based learning: school visits; 'shadowing school' Group mentoring: 10-11 people with one mentor
	Online course: three months	
Assessments	Attendance rate: online and on-campus Essay: 3000 words Presentation: 10-15 minutes	
Outputs	Certificate for Headship	

Table. 2 The elements of the programme

Table 2 shows that these various training elements comprised different proportions of the programme, were delivered by people from different backgrounds, and included different types of knowledge, with varied foci and characteristics. The rest of this section presents data about the effectiveness of these training elements, drawing on the perceptions of participants.

Content

Bush and Jackson (2002) show that different countries prescribe a similar leadership curriculum, including communication strategies, human resource management, technology, and instructional strategies. The perspectives of the participants on China's leadership preparation programme are presented and discussed below.

Perceived importance of programme content

Based on the national documents on new principal training, there are four compulsory courses included in principal certification, namely *legal and legislative regulations, basic theory of education, school management skills, and instructional leadership capacity.* The data presented in table 3, and discussed below, is from the Likert scale questions from the survey, focusing on principals' perceived importance of the content, where the maximum score is 5.0. New principals and principal candidates assessed the importance of all these domains, with an average mean rating of over 4.00. The domains with scores above 4.4 were *school management skills and instructional leadership capacity,* showing that these principals perceived these two areas of knowledge to be very important. The ranking of *legal and legislation regulations* was also very positive*,* with a mean of 4.11*.* The lowest ranking was for *basic educational theory with* 3.5116*.* No domain was rated less than 3.5, indicating that all these courses were regarded as important in preparing for leadership practice (see table 3).

	n	M	SD
Instructional leadership capacity	43	4.4419	0.54782
School management skills	43	4.4419	0.62877

Legal and legislation regulation	43	4.1116	1.13499
Basic educational theory	43	3.5116	1.22226

Table. 3 Perceived importance of knowledge and skills

Delivery methods

According to Bush and Jackson (2002), different countries prescribe a similar headship curriculum, but the delivery approaches are quite dissimilar.   The Chinese programme design includes different types of delivery, to provide a comprehensive training experience for new and prospective leaders, including content-based learning, context-based learning, mentoring, peer learning, and online courses. However, these approaches were not accorded the same importance. Table 4 provides an overview of the delivery methods, in terms of the time allocation for each approach, and the preferences of the participants. The final column shows the gap between the time allocated for each delivery method and participant preferences.

	Proportion	Preferences	Gap
Lecture	41.2%	7%	-34.2%
Shadowing school	29.4%	33%	3.6%
School visit	14.7%	18%	3.3%
Mentor	5.9%	16%	10.1%
Peer learning	5.9%	24%	19.1%
Others	2.9%	2%	-0.9%

Table. 4 Proportion, preferences and gaps among delivery approaches

Lecture-based delivery

Formal lecture-based learning took up the biggest proportion of training time (41.2%), while receiving the least favourable responses from participants (7%). The main criticism of this approach is that leadership happens in context, therefore it should be learned in respect of the particular setting and needs of each school (Hess and Kelly, 2007, Kelly and Saunders 2010; Mertkan, 2011). Four of the interviewed principals argued that it takes time to digest, absorb and transferorm the knowledge given through lectures (P1, P4, P5 and P9).

The author also found that the selection of the lecturers was problematic and did not meet the needs of the participants. In responses to the open question, there were eight negative comments about 'theory-based' learning, with participants saying that it was 'unnecessary' and 'helpless' (P7). Most complained that there was 'too much time for theory-based learning during the programme' (P1).

Peer learning

In contrast, peer learning, which was given little time by programme providers (5.9%), showed a very positive impact (24%). This peer learning opportunity was valued by the participants and was an enduring feature of their leadership learning. Several principals commented that they kept in touch with their classmates in various ways. These 'after-programme' peer activities included visits to other principals' schools, collective discussion of new policies, documents and regulations, asking for help when encountering problems, and having lunch or dinner together to sustain their relationships.

Context-based learning

Two types of context-based learning -- shadowing school (33%) and school visits (18%) - received positive feedback from the principals. This growing awareness of

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contextual learning leads to greater understanding of the value of organisational socialisation (Crow, 2005). In the author's research, these two approaches allowed principals to understand, observe and explore different aspects of a high performing school, including the school management system, educational vision, student management, student activities, instructional routine, classroom teaching, lesson preparation, and the operation of different administrative departments.

However, there were more cautious responses from some participants. Two urban high school principals (P7 and P9) felt inspired, but they did not know how to apply their learning in practice. Four principals from rural high schools felt discouraged, as they witnessed huge differences in basic facilities, material resources, teachers' attitudes, and student abilities, compared to their own schools. Expressing a preference for one learning approach does not necessarily equate to effectiveness, which varied from person to person based on their levels of understanding, and on their own school contexts.

Mentoring

Group mentoring, which only lasted for half a day during the programme (5.9%), was also liked by some principals (16%). However, there were limitations in time and approach. In group mentoring, each mentor had to deal with 10-11 mentees, which left them only a few minutes to answer their questions. Some principals were expecting to learn from these mentors, most of whom were principals of top performing high schools, but their communications were perceived to be short and superficial. Despite these limitations, some principals still regarded this learning opportunity as inspiring and insightful, as it focused on the practical issues that they encountered in their schools. It also provided them with an opportunity to build connections with these high performing schools, which could be further developed in the future.

<u>Programme providers</u>

As noted above, lecture-based learning was not favoured by participants.　There were 15 lecture-based sessions, provided by university professors, practitioners, professional trainers, government officials, and staff from the organising faculty. Table 5 shows participants' preferred providers, the proportion of time allocated to each programme provider, and the 'gap' between time allocation and participant preferences.

Lecturers	preferences	proportion	gap
University professors	6%	46.7%	-40.7%
Experienced practitioners	79%	26.7%	52.3%
Professional trainers	12%	6.7%	5.7%
Government officials	0%	6.7%	-6.7%
Others	3%	13.3%	-10.3%

Table. 5 Participants' preferences, time allocation and 'gaps' for providers

Practitioners, high school principals and teachers, were overwhelmingly preferred, with 79% support, but with only a little more than a quarter (26.7%) of lecture time. Some principals (e.g. P2, P4 and P6) spoke highly of the effectiveness of the lectures delivered by these practitioners, as they showed how to be a leader and also how to develop their schools. However, some principals (e.g. P4 and P7) also argued that their experiences could not be replicated in their own schools due to differences in school and political contexts.

The feedback for professional trainers from commercial organisations was mixed. Some principals were impressed by their excellent lecturing skills, and sense of humour, while others some argued that the professional trainers barely customized their lectures for new principals' leadership.

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University professors provided almost half (46.7%) of the lectures but they received poor support from the participants (6%), who described their lectures as 'boring' (P9), 'too remote from practice' (P5) or 'has nothing to do with their current work' (P6). Some participants also made critical comments about professors and experts, in terms of their curriculum content and teaching ability. One described the lecturer as someone who 'has a 'professor' position but does not know how to teach at all' (p43) or someone who 'feels good about him/herself, actually, their lessons were boring' (p29). Some respondents advised that 'pure theory-based lectures provided by 'big name' experts should be deleted' (p6), as these made the training programme 'lack practical meaning' (p15, p42) and are 'less effective' (p43).

Transferability

The main concern about the training programme was whether the principals could digest the knowledge and skills from the programme and apply them in their daily practice. Even the approaches with a high degree of preference among principals, such as context-based learning, did not lead to enhanced leadership practice. Few principals could make the transition without help or guidance 'in-context'.

The researcher explored how the preparation programme could impact on new principals' future leadership enactment and practice. Most (93.5%) of the principals claimed that the preparation programme would be helpful in respect of their leadership practice in schools, with a mean of 3.1613, with only two participants giving a negative response.

However, when the survey further asked the participants to comment on their readiness to lead, a significant minority (41.9%) felt that they were not prepared sufficiently for the position. Only one principal strongly agreed that s/he was totally ready for the position. Even the principals who had been in post for several years

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expressed a lack of confidence about their readiness for the position.

Real-world practice

Participants were asked to indicate whether and how the preparation programme contributes to different aspects of leadership practice; school organisation, instructional leadership, visionary leadership, leading teacher's professional growth and developing social networks (see table 6).

Leadership Practice	Mean	SD
Leading teachers' professional growth	3.2581	0.51431
Developing social networks	3.1935	0.60107
Constructing school organisation	3.1613	0.45437
Instructional leadership	3.0968	0.39622
Visionary leadership	3.0645	0.57361

Table. 6: Participants' perceptions about how the programme enhances leadership practice

Table 6 shows that the preparation programme was perceived to make a modest positive contribution to each aspect of the new principals' leadership practice, as all means are above 3 (with a maximum of 5.0). Leading teachers' professional growth (M=3.2581) received the most support while the lowest score was for visionary leadership (M=3.0645). There were certain differences among sub-groups, as discussed below.

An independent t test showed that principals from rural schools (n=9; M=3.2222) indicated a higher level of instructional leadership growth through the training programme than those from urban schools (n=22, M=3.0445). This may be linked to the greater challenges faced by rural principals in raising student performance, due to limited teacher resources and lower student quality (P4 and P3).

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As noted in table 6, the programme was perceived to have the lowest impact in terms of developing visionary leadership (M=3.0645). However, there were some significant differences according to gender and school background. Male principals, and those from urban areas, perceived higher gains in setting school goals and vision (see tTables 7 and 8).

Gender	n	M	SD
Male	22	3.1818	0.58849
Female	9	2.7778	0.44096

Table.7 Setting school goals and vision by gender

School Background	n	M	SD
Urban Schools	9	3.3333	0.50000
Rural Schools	22	2.9545	0.57547

Table.8 Setting school goals and vision by school background

Women principals appeared to be less ambitious than men about their personal career development, and may prefer to prioritise their family life, as noted by two female principals (P2 and P8). Male principals also seemed to have more courage and passion to make changes and to develop plans at their schools (see table 7). Two male principals stated that their career goals were not limited to school principalship, but also at targeting more influential government officials, which made them more eager for school development (P1 and P6).

Effectiveness of the programme

As noted earlier, the preparation programme has three main purposes; introducing the principal position, leadership performance growth, and providing a certificate for principalship. Figure. 1 shows participants' perceptions of programme effectiveness

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in relation to these three purposes.

Figure. 1: Participants' perceptions of how preparation purposes were achieved

Target One: Introducing the principal position

The preparation programme was perceived to have modestly succeeded in introducing the principalship position (61.2%). Some participants noted, in particular, the value of the programme in respect of overall design (P1), effectiveness of delivery methods (P9), networks established through the programme (P2, P3, P7, P8) and some impressive lectures (P6).

As noted earlier, the principals gave more emphasis to their gains through peer learning and experience sharing (P1, P2), and through the opportunity to meet other new and aspiring principals from all over the province (P3, P4).

> 'One of the flashpoints of this training programme is that it introduces some conceptions and skills in business management into principal training and school management. I think it is great, as it is one step further towards principal's professionalisation.' (P7)

However, several principals also described the programme as 'normal' (P8), or 'tasteless' (P6), as it was not significantly different from the various training programmes they had previously experienced. They also complained about the lecturers, who were perceived to lack influence, and inspiration (P1). Some suggested that certain curricula, such as *Virtuosity,* were irrelevant to their leadership practice, and that it was 'not necessary to listen' (P7).

Target Two: Leadership performance growth

The participants perceived very limited gains in respect of how the preparation programme contributed to their leadership growth (52.2%). It appears that the programme may benefit principals' knowledge construction as a professional principal, while hardly contributing to their leadership practice. Instead, some by-products of the programme seemed to contribute to their leadership enactment, such as assistance from the experts or experienced principals, supportive connections to the high performing high schools, and professional relationships with their peer principals.

Target Three: 'Certificate for Principalship'

The 'Certificate for Principalship' received unanimous support, with all participants (100%) securing the qualification. However, a 100% pass rate raises questions about the validity and reliability of the programme's assessment approaches, and about whether it judges effectively about if the participants are really qualified for the principal's position.   The data indicate that participants did not feel fully prepared for the role. In practice, principals could be appointed without the certificate, as 13 out of the 31 survey participants were appointed as principals before the preparation programme. As noted by two officials and one programme designer, the government disregards the certificates as a criterion when selecting and recruiting principals. It

seems that the significance of preparation training was limited at the administrative level, as well.

Discussion

Bush (2009: 377) regards leadership preparation programmes as an 'entitlement', addressing the moral obligation of the educational system to prepare their school leaders. This three-week in-campus training programme was a part of the whole leadership preparation process, which lasts for half a year. It is a compulsory programme, which was sponsored by the nation's financial department, and delivered by local normal universities.   The policies indicate that the preparation and development of new and aspiring principals is seen as a significant step for improving the quality of general education. While, as Bush (2011) explains that, there is wide agreement about the significance of preparation programmes, there is not a clear sense about how to apply them in practice. The data presented in this article lead to three overarching considerations. These are context-based learning, knowledge transfer from workshop to workplace, and the active role of principals in their own leadership learning.

Context-based learning

Elmore (2004) found a disconnection between what we know from research about what a successful leader looks like and does, and how to scale this up through leader development programmes. Overall, the present authors' research suggests that this is a well-designed and comprehensive programme, with helpful knowledge construction for new headship, with a variety of delivery approaches, led by different types of experts and practitioners. The overall perception of this programme was positive, as participants perceived that it contributed to their professional growth, made them feel more competitive for the position, and helped them to develop their networks.

However, the participants also described this programme as 'normal' or 'soso', as it did not reach their expectations, and had plenty of scope for improvement. This 'room for improvement' derives from the call for more context-oriented knowledge, context-experienced providers and context-based learning opportunities. The learning process was quite controversial, as the huge gaps between participants' preferences and programme composition indicates. Participants wanted practice-based learning opportunities which could help them to solve problems in schools, and they also liked practitioner lecturers, who could share their experiences with them. However, a very large proportion of the programme was based around lecture-based learning, with university-based lecturers, both of which were evaluated as 'ineffective' by the participants.

<u>From workshop to workplace</u>

The research participants were also concerned about how much they could transfer their learning to enhance their leadership practice. Most of them claimed that the impact of the programme was very limited. Xue and Wilson (2013) doubt the effectiveness of short-period school visits, which were seen as no substitute for the 'situated cognition' or 'legitimate peripheral participation' that would be possible through internships in successful schools. The present research also found that the preference for context-based learning did not directly result in improved leadership practice. Programme participants also called for more context-based learning, based on their own school contexts, rather than studying in high performing or 'famous schools'. This relates to the assumption that leadership happens in context, therefore learning should relate to the particular setting and needs of each school and to the characteristics of each school leader (Kelly and Saunders 2010; Mertkan, 2011).

Some participants suggested that, instead of learning what happened in those successful and high performing schools, they should like to address issues in their own schools. They hoped that the professional experts and successful practitioners could come to their schools to help them 'diagnose' school problems, and to assist them to set the direction and strategic plans for school development. In contrast to professional preparation training programmes, which are focused on inculcating a conception of the role for newcomers, context-based learning has a focus on making these newcomers effective organisational members. Principals also stressed the need for 'in-context' guidance to help them with their school-based leadership strategy.

Active roles of participants

Autonomous learning means that principals take the lead in their own learning and are also able to integrate it with their career aspirations. According to adult learning theory, adults prefer active and reflective learning environments and to utilize problem-solving approaches (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam, 2001). Although the programme offered several contributions to principals' professional growth and leadership enactment, the principals appeared to exhibit less confidence when enacting leadership in their own schools.   In contrast to the normative emphasis on active learning, the participants were quite passive during the whole process, as their preferences and requirements were disregarded, or diverged from what the programme provided.

Simkins, Close, and Smith (2009) suggest that, although leadership preparation experiences include formal courses and training programmes, it is the informal experiences, such as peer support, mentoring, or the early acquisition of leadership responsibilities, that significantly influenced participants.   Such interactions were also preferred by principals in the present study, making them feel inspired.   Social

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networks with peer principals, or their mentors, were treasured by most of the principals, as these networks allowed them to share and learn from each other, and also to link their schools together for further cooperation.

Peer learning, which was underestimated by programme providers, with limited time and space for participants, provided the most enduring and substantial relationships for the participants.   Active conversations among participants assisted a number of them ~~principals~~ to overcome their uncertainties when enacting leadership in their own schools.

Mentoring is strongly supported in the literature (e.g. (Aiken, 2002; Mathibe, 2007; Bloom et al., 2005), but it had limited impact in this programme. Some principals looked forward to getting to know the successful and experienced principals from high performing schools. ~~in this programme.~~ Unlike internships, however, the group mentors could not really provide any personal or substantial support for these new and aspiring principals.

Conclusion

Participants' ~~The~~ overall perceptions of ~~reflection towards~~ the programme were that it was only modestly effective.   ~~could be concluded as basic and average.~~ The programme strictly followed the focus ~~essence~~ and direction of ~~the~~ government policies, which specified the content and delivery quite precisely.   It was successful in that there was a ~~provided various approaches and diversity professional support for participants' growth, within~~ 100% pass rate for ~~of~~ the Certificate of Principalship. The participants Aexpressed ~~mong all these approaches and providers, principals demonstrated~~ a strong preference for ~~towards the~~ context-oriented learning, including ~~for example,~~ practitioner lecturers and the 'shadowing school' approach. There was an ~~Based on this, the authors further discovered the~~ imbalance between

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participants' preferences and programme delivery, which ~~was~~ relied too much on lecture-based learning and on university professors, who had little experience in school management and in leadership practice. This ~~And these~~ imbalance led to cautious a~~responses lso lead to principals' conservative responds~~ responses to the programme, such ~~–~~as 'soso' or 'basic', rather than 'excellent' or 'effective'.

The research also found limited transfer of their ~~Then, the study further investigated how these~~ knowledge and skills to ~~could be transferred to~~ principals' leadership enactment. Even the development ~~While, the results were negative, even, the~~ approaches perceived to be highly effective showed only a ~~with high preferences demonstrated a~~ limited impact on principals' real-world practice. Although principals generally provided ~~demonstrated a~~ positive feedback about their ~~on~~ knowledge growth, most ~~majority of them~~ demonstrated little ~~confidence and~~ readiness for the position. Both personal and contextual factors limited participants' ability ~~asked these participants~~ to reshape and redefine the ideologies and strategies that they ~~have~~ acquired from the programme, when applying them to their own school contexts. This suggests ~~Henceforward, the authors raised~~ that ~~the~~ context-based learning should not be limited ~~only be constrained~~ to the ~~those~~ high-performing model schools, but also to the~~se~~ participants' own contexts, in order to ~~within the~~ localise and customise ~~ation and effectuation of~~ their leadership enactment. Another implication is that ~~And this further referred that~~ ongoing ~~a follow-up and consistent~~ professional support should be provided, following ~~after~~ the preparatory programme~~s~~, to enhance ~~within substantial assistant to~~ the leadership enactment of these novice principals.

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