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Dancing in Fetters? Chinese Principals' Perceptions of the Effects of Finnish Training Programs

Abstract Although there is an increased interest in overseas training for educational leaders in China, little is known about the value of such programs. This qualitative case study explores Chinese school principals' perceptions of leadership practices and professional development after undertaking a Finnish training program. The article also explores difficulties related to different educational contexts when an attempt is made at applying the Finnish education experience to China. Famed for its excellent education, Finland is currently actively involved in exporting its education by providing such training programs to the whole world. Data was collected by semi-structured interviews with six Shanghai principals. The results showed a certain level of satisfaction but also needs for improvement. It thus appears that such an overseas training program can play a positive but limited role in expanding Chinese principals' leadership practices and professional development.

Keywords intercultural leadership training, leadership practices, professional development, educational cross-cultural differences, Finnish education

Introduction

Principal leadership is considered a key contributor to school improvement, student achievement and interaction with the wider community. Principals' competencies are essential in successfully implementing educational change and

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reforms in schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006, p. 206). As such, having examined international literature on successful school leadership, Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) argue that “school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning and almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices” (p. 28).

Over the past two decades, principal leadership has become even more significant due to the increasing complexity of principals’ roles, positions, and responsibilities around the world, especially in relation to the idea of accountability (Billot, 2003, p. 38; Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003). Furthermore, Hallinger (2004) argues that traditionally, principals in most educational systems around the world were expected to carry out commands from the educational authority and fulfil their administrative responsibilities within their schools (pp. 67–71). Today, in the era of multifaceted educational reforms, principals’ roles have gradually changed from school manager to school leader (Harris, 2013). Principals are thus expected to lead change in schools to sustain school improvement and students’ learning achievement (Billot, 2003, pp. 45–46). This generates the question of whether or not it is important to offer professional development in school by providing principals with further training and long-term professional development. The purpose of this study is to explore one “alternative” and specific leadership training which the authors refer to as *overseas leadership training*. Can such training contribute to principals’ leadership practices and professional development?

Previous studies regarding the effect of intercultural leadership education training programs have been conducted in different contexts, such as in Australia, Canada and Finland. For example, Wang (2006, July) examined 20 “Chinese educational leaders’ self-perceived practice after” taking “an Australian offshore program from 2002 to 2003” in Zhejiang province, China (p. 380). Her findings show that local contexts must be taken into consideration when accommodating Australian educational ideas for Chinese leaders. Yang and Brayman (2010) investigated 40 Chinese principals’ perceptions and interpretations regarding the role of principals and leadership development after attending a three-week training program in Canada in 2011 (pp. 240–244). They found that participants’ understandings of administration and leadership were not as systematic and coherent as planned by the training organizers, and gender imbalance was apparent. The study conducted by Jin-Muranen, Cai, and Hölttä (2012, August)

highlighted another phenomenon: “Chinese principals were generally in favor of getting in touch with their counterparts in Finland as much as possible” while the training offered by the Finnish organizers made little use of local colleagues (p. 3).

The aim of this study is to explore Chinese school principals’ perceptions of the possible effects and benefits of a Finnish training program in their own schools. Following the development of its country branding strategies of the early 2010s, Finland is now currently investing in exporting features of its education system (Schatz & Dervin, 2012, November). For this purpose several companies were set up in the last two years to help reach world audiences and provide training for different kinds of populations (from teachers to decision-makers). In this article the authors are interested in one example of such an initiative involving six general upper secondary school principals from Shanghai, China who participated in a training program at the University of Tampere (UTA) in Southern Finland in October 2011. The authors examine the principals’ perceptions of the Finnish training program in relation to their leadership practices and professional development, the extent to which they managed to implement knowledge and skills learnt during the Finnish training program, as well as the difficulties they faced when attempting to apply their Finnish education experience in China. The qualitative case study is guided by the following research questions:

- How useful is the Finnish training program to Chinese principals?
- What seems to prevent Chinese principals from applying the skills and knowledge learnt in Finland to their local educational context?

Through answering these questions, the effects of this training program are evaluated from the participants’ perspective.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Leadership practices and professional development are two key terms in this research. The authors are presenting in this section the interrelations between these two terms in order to create tools for analyzing how the Chinese principals perceived the training they received in Finland. It is important to note here that it was impossible for the authors to check how much of the following was introduced in the Finnish training program. The Finnish training institution did

not provide detailed information about its contents which was deemed confidential education export knowledge. The section starts with a review of “ideal” leadership practices as developed in recent literature, which one would expect the Chinese principals to reflect on further after the training. It is followed by a section on the needs for continuous professional development in educational leadership.

A Framework of Leadership Practices

Based on six previous studies on leadership practices from the Hong Kong of China, the UK, and the USA (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p. 221; Cotton, 2003, pp. 67–72; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003, p. 4; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, pp. 42–43; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, & Harris, 2006, pp. 34–43; Walker & Ko, 2011, p. 372; Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 29), we synthesize and develop a framework named “four principles of successful leadership practices.” Although the framework is acontextual—in the sense that we propose that it can be applied in different countries—we believe that current global discussions on education leadership are well represented here. The framework includes the following principles: 1) setting directions, 2) developing people, 3) redesigning the organization, and 4) managing the instructional program.

Principle 1: Setting Directions

This practice includes three categories. *Vision* is the first step towards being a successful principal. Successful leaders have a clear vision and dream of what could be done before starting any project; they have a strong belief in those dreams (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, pp. 17–18). They are also confident in their capacities to make extraordinary things happen (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 56; Kouzes & Posner, 2012, pp. 17–18). While visions can be motivating, action usually requires some cooperation on the short-term goals to be achieved in order to move towards accomplishing the vision (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 35). The principal’s expression of *high performance expectations* for students is a part of the vision that guides high performance schools and is a crucial component on its own (Cotton, 2003, p. 11; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 6).

Principle 2: Developing People

This practice involves four specific aspects. Firstly, successful principals provide *individualized support/consideration*. Setting up a work structure that rewards and recognizes teachers is an important part of the principal's role in creating a positive learning climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p. 224). Secondly, successful principals give *emotional understanding and support*. They demonstrate an awareness of the personal lives of teachers and staff through being informed about important personal issues, being aware of personal needs, acknowledging significant events, and maintaining personal relationships (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 59). Thirdly, effective principals offer *intellectual stimulation*. They provide varied professional development activities for teachers to improve their skills and secure the necessary resources, such as financial, human, time, material, and facilities resources (Cotton, 2003, pp. 70–71; Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 42–45; Walker & Ko, 2011, pp. 372–373). Fourthly, *modeling* is one important element of successful principals. Both Hallinger (2003, p. 332) and Waters et al. (2003, p. 10) claim the contribution to leader effects of sustaining high visibility around the school, a visibility associated with high quality interactions with both staff and students. Effective principals maintain high visibility in the school environment and make themselves available to teachers, students, and others in the school community and beyond (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p. 223; Cotton, 2003, pp. 68–72; Marzano et al., 2005, p. 61).

Principle 3: Redesigning the Organization

The core practice consists of three areas. *Building a collaborative culture* is essential to becoming successful principals. They make a point of recognizing achievement and improvement on the part of students and staff (Cotton, 2003, pp. 70–72; Marzano et al., 2005, p. 44; Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 24). Besides, effective principals *structure the organization to facilitate work*. Practices associated with such initiatives include creating common planning times for teachers and establishing team and group structures for problem solving (Hadfield, 2003, p. 117). Restructuring also includes distributing leadership for selected tasks and providing opportunities for staff to be involved in decision-making about issues that affect them and for which their knowledge is

important (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 7; Marzano et al., 2005, p. 69). Further, *external communication and connection* is significant to become successful principals. Principals establish links between the school and the local, national and global communities so that school communities can make contributions to the broader society and its development (Walker & Ko, 2011, p. 373).

Principle 4: Managing the Instructional Program

This practice includes four aspects. Even though *staffing* is not mentioned in the other five studies, it has proved to be a fundamental function of leaders involved in school improvement. Effective principals also *provide instructional support*. This set of practices, encompassed in Hallinger's (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p. 222; Hallinger, 2003, p. 332) model on "supervising and evaluating instruction," "coordinating the curriculum," Cotton's (2003) model on "safe and orderly school environment" (pp. 67–68), Waters et al.'s (2003) research on principal leadership responsibilities such as "the extent to which the principal establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines..., provides materials necessary for job [and is] directly involved in design and implementation of curriculum, instruction and assessment practices" (p. 4). Moreover, *monitoring* is a crucial element in becoming successful principals. This set of practices is labelled "monitoring student progress" in Hallinger's (2003, p. 332) model. Finally, effective principals *buffer staff from distractions to their core work*. They protect teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus (Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 48–49).

The Need for Professional Development in Education Leadership

The previous section proposed four principles for leadership practices in education. A sizable amount of research supports the argument that principals need continuous professional development to support their efforts toward school improvement and to renew their commitment to sustaining positive learning communities (e.g., Sorenson, 2005, p. 63). In this article, professional development means "processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students" (Guskey, 2000, p. 16). This definition implies that staff development consists of a broad range of processes, products

and contents that contribute to the learning of educators. Guskey (2000) also considers that professional development is a process that is intentional, ongoing and systemic (p. 16).

According to the same scholar (Guskey, 2000, pp. 56–58), there are three ways of evaluating the impact of professional development on trainees: planning, formative, and summative evaluation. Planning evaluation occurs ahead of a program or activity, even though certain phases may be continual and ongoing. It helps decision-makers to know whether efforts are commanded in the right direction and are likely to produce the desired outcomes. Formative evaluation takes place during the program or activity. The aim is to offer those responsible for the program continuing information on whether things are going as planned and if the expected progress is being made. Summative evaluation is conducted after a program or activity is completed. It aims to provide program developers and decision-makers with judgments on the program's overall performance. This article contributes to the summative evaluation of the leadership training program that was offered by a Finnish university for the principals from Shanghai.

In this article, the proposed four principles of leadership practices and professional development support each other. By utilizing successful leadership practices, principals may enhance their own professional development. Through effective professional development, principals may become more successful in leadership practices. However, the authors hypothesize at this stage that the four principles cannot be fully applied to the principals' context, Shanghai, China because of certain societal, cultural, and educational specificities.

Methodology

Research Context

The research is a qualitative case study that concentrates on a Finnish training program for a total of 21 Chinese school principals who attended the same training program at the UTA. These principals came from six provinces and municipalities in China, and nine of them were from Shanghai. We chose six Shanghai participants out of 21 as our data. The Shanghai principals were chosen as they represent the majority of trainees in this group compared to other participants from other provinces and municipalities.

The Chinese Education Research and Exchange Center (CEREC)¹ at the UTA provided training for a delegation of 21 Chinese upper secondary school principals, described as “outstanding,” during a three-week period. This is the first time that China’s Ministry of Education contracted a Finnish university to provide training to upper secondary school principals. CEREC not only coordinates education cooperation and exchange between Finland and China, but also with other Nordic countries. As mentioned, these principals come from six provinces and municipalities in China. The group was selected by the Ministry of Education’s *National Training Center for Secondary School Principals*. The training program designed for the principal delegation covered a wide range of activities, including lectures, on-site learning at Finnish upper secondary schools and vocational schools, discussions with the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Board of Education, and the City of Tampere (UTA, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, it was impossible for the authors to gain access to the detailed contents and methods of the training program from the Finnish training provider, as they were regarded as business secrets. However, the authors managed to find out some information from the trainer’s website, such as the training length, organizers, and activities. It is also worthwhile mentioning that the six participants attended a domestic Chinese training program, of which overseas training in Finland was part. These overseas training programs usually lasted 21 days.

Data Collection

The research instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview questions were formulated in three phases: pre-training phase, training phase, and post-training phase. The pre-training phase included the selections of the participants, challenges, expectations, and reasons for choosing Finland. The training phase involved principals’ evaluations of the training program and features of effective training programs. The post-training phase contained comparisons of overseas and domestic training programs, and aspirations for the future training programs. It should be noted that the focus of this article is the training phase; elements from the pre-training phase and

¹ <http://www.uta.fi/jkk/cerec/index.html>

post-training phases are meant to assist the reader to better understand the logic of our study. As such, the pre-training phase serves as background information to help answer the research questions, and the post-training phase is not understood as the effects of the training in this article. Instead, it is understood as comparisons between domestic training and overseas training, as well as the principals' aspirations for future training programs.

From late May to early June 2012, one of the authors conducted interviews with six Shanghai principals (Xing, 2013).

The six participants are referred to by the letters A, B, C, D, E, and F.

Table 1 shows the profiles of the schools and principals. They were all city schools. Three of them shared the same features: All large-scale in terms of teaching staff teachers and middle sized as far as student groups are concerned. Another two was middle sized (teachers and students) while the last one was small (teachers and students). Regarding the principals' profiles, four were male and two were female. All the participants were in the 40–49 age group except one who was in the 30–39 age group. All of them had undergone teacher education at the same university, Shanghai Normal University, graduating with a Bachelor's degree. They had also gone through various in-service teacher training at teacher training institutions in the district and the municipality. Furthermore, they had experiences in one or all of the positions of school leadership (assistant principal, vice principal), and spent considerable time in

Table 1 Profiles of Schools and Principals

School Profiles		Principal Profiles				
No. of teachers	No. of students	Gender	Age range	Years as a teacher	Years as a principal	Highest degree
131–170	851–1,300	male	40–49	9–12	7–10	BA
131–170	851–1,300	male	40–49	13–16	3–6	BA
50–90	400–8,50	female	30–39	13–16	3–6	BA
91–130	851–1,300	male	40–49	13–16	7–10	BA
91–130	851–1,300	male	40–49	13–16	3–6	BA
131–170	851–1,300	female	40–49	13–16	7–10	BA

Note: The size range of teachers is 40: small-sized (50–90), mid-sized (91–130), large-sized (131–170). The size range of student groups is 450: small-sized (400–850), mid-sized (851–1300). The age range is nine: young principal (30–39), middle-aged principal (40–49). The teacher career range is three: experienced teachers (9–12), selected teachers (13–16). The principal career range is three: mid-level principals (3–6), experienced principals (7–10).

these positions before becoming principals. Their years in the teaching profession ranged from nine to 16 years, with a median of 14 and a half years. In summary, the principals in the study had been in the education profession for quite a long time and had substantial experience.

Data Analysis

The authors utilized conventional content analysis in the present study. Coding categories are derived directly from the data with a view to describing the phenomena under scrutiny (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, pp. 1277–1279). This method is useful for a study that has limited existing theory on a phenomenon. Relevant theoretical notions and previous research findings are integrated in the discussion part of the study. It aims to contribute to an area of research interest through comparing and contrasting the findings with prevalent theory. As a process, conventional content analysis includes the following stages: reading all the data repeatedly, deriving codes, making notes of first impressions and labelling the codes, sorting the codes into categories and sub-categories, and developing definitions for each code, sub-category, and category (p. 1279). The strength of this approach is to gather direct information from informants without forcing predetermined categories or theoretical views. Therefore, knowledge is constructed through participants' distinctive perceptions and grounded in the data (pp. 1279–1280). In August 2012, one of the authors transcribed and translated the data from Chinese to English.

The translation of the interview from Chinese has been modified slightly by omitting some colloquial expressions and repetitive connecting words. The data of pre-training and post-training phases was partly used to discuss the results whenever relevant to the research questions.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the data collected after the training program. Principals were asked how they considered the value and transferability of the Finnish training program. In other words, the authors are interested in how the participants evaluated the training program; if and how they had been able to use training aspects to overcome challenges and implement appropriate leadership

practices afterwards; if and how the training program added to their professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes; and what kind of specificities of the Chinese educational context potentially prevented them from applying the skills and knowledge learnt in Finland. From what the principals expressed during the interviews, it emerges that the results are moderate. In the following section, three aspects of the training outcomes are presented: satisfaction, needs for improvement in the training program and educational cross-cultural differences.

Satisfaction with the Training Program

Implementing a Different Form of Leadership

The most striking result to emerge from the data was about *more effective leadership*, including curriculum leadership, strategic leadership, humanistic leadership, and networking. It should be noted that these terms were not directly covered in the literature. However, they were mentioned when principals gave their answers to interview questions.

Five principals reported that the school-based curricula in Finland were highly rich, selective, and flexible. They were impressed that Finnish schools had very detailed guidelines to explain how the curricula should be designed and implemented. The Finnish examples gave them the insight that well-designed curricula could make a difference to students' learning. More importantly, they learnt some skills to make real curriculum improvements happen in their own schools. These views are shared by Principals A and C in the following quotes:

We can make our school-based curricula more diversified in that schools do have some autonomy in China. From this view, Finnish experience gives me lots of inspiration. We start to consider how to make curricula richer and more selective so that students have more options to choose from. (Principal A)

Now we are trying to open more extended and research courses that are in line with students' demands, as well as the school's philosophy.... I give all the available resources to support these improvements. For instance, I recruit part-time teachers to teach these courses. (Principal C)

Principal C confirms that successful school leaders provide adequate and consistent resources to support collaborative work (Connolly & James, 2006,

pp. 72–79; Walker & Ko, 2011, p. 373). It also coincides with the challenge of developing curriculum leadership and expectations that the majority of principals had for the Finnish training program.

Principals A and F claimed that the training program expanded their vision and horizons, especially in relation to future-oriented leadership practices. The training helped them understand the “bigger picture” of schools. Afterwards, they were able to stand on a higher level to look at specific school issues. This result confirms that training on the theme of strategic planning not only equips school leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in challenging circumstances (Alava, 2008, p. 45), but also helps them to be future-oriented so as to make adjustments in time to suit the circumstances at hand, therefore overcoming turbulent challenges which confront them every day (Gamage, 2005, see principle 3). It also coincides with the view that successful principals set directions (vision and goals) for their schools (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, pp. 17–18; Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 35; see principle 1), and the expectations that four principals had for the Finnish training programs.

Principal F commented that he/she was able to implement humanistic leadership in his/her school. “I learnt to pay more attention to individual needs at my school and try to support these needs within available resources.” He/she added that principals must take intercultural training programs if they seek to achieve the goals of student-oriented and humanistic leadership. The result confirms that effective principals develop people by providing individualized support and consideration (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 22), by creating a positive school climate that supports teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2003, pp. 332–333), and cares for students (Cotton, 2003, pp. 68–69; see principle 2).

Principal C utilized more effective networking to enhance students’ overall development after the training. For example, his/her school cooperated more with one university in many areas, such as conducting small joint research projects, organizing students’ association activities, giving career lectures, recruiting teachers, and co-designing curricula of extended courses. Compared with a few years earlier, the school now had more extended courses for students to choose from. Through such collaborations, the university and the school both learnt many good things from each other:

Previously, universities and secondary schools were separated and blaming each other....

Now my school has the real collaboration and cooperation with one university. We are trying to help each other and grow together. The university is considering what they can do for the school, and vice versa. (Principal C)

The data is in accordance with Walter and Ko's (2011) study showing that successful leadership practices encourage willingness to compromise among collaborators, foster open and smooth communication among collaborators, and link the school with external communities (p. 373).

Rethinking Chinese Education?

In relation to school subjects, Principal E commented that the training opened his/her eyes on understanding how citizenship education was conducted in Finnish schools:

We were very interested in citizenship education in Finland and took some pictures from textbooks. Afterwards, I translated them from Finnish to Chinese via Google translation and used them as discussion materials when we had summary discussions in Shanghai. Every participant was so excited to learn how citizenship education was conducted in Finland generally. We do not have this course in Chinese schools, but it is definitely needed in the future. (Principal E)

The results partly reflect previous research that instructional principals actively coordinate school curricular objectives which are closely united with the content taught in classes and with achievement tests (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p.222), and involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 54–55; see principle 4).

Four principals reported that they were able to *better tackle the contradiction between ideal and reality* afterwards, which were the biggest challenges they faced. The ideal was students' overall development (both academic and non-academic outcomes of students) whereas the reality was the upward testing system (*gaokao*²). For example, Principal B attached more importance to foster students' abilities of learning, practicing, and cooperation. He/she started to

² *Gaokao* refers to the national college entrance examination in China. It is a test that colleges and universities use to select their students in China and thus it is the one opportunity a Chinese student has to get into college or university.

improve students' overall development steadily on the condition of ensuring good scores after the Finnish training. He/she used a metaphor to describe the dilemma of Chinese principals in quality-oriented education vividly.

Now I should change it a bit and work towards quality-oriented education. It cannot be done overnight. I plan to have small improvement each year and several steps forward in several years.... Chinese principals are "*dancing in fetters*" [trying to move about while arms and legs are bound]. We need to work towards quality-oriented education, but do have a heavy burden. (Principal B)

In addition, Principal F gained a deeper understanding of students' overall development. He/she gave the example of sports specialized students in both countries. In Finland, students were equally good in sports and academic study. In China, those students who were quite good in sports tended to be very poor in academic study. Consequently universities had to admit them with low academic scores. He/she claimed that "Chinese way of educating students is a bit biased."

Principals A, C, and F commented that the training enabled them to have a "broader understanding of the nature of education." Principal A expressed the view that the training program promoted his/her ideals of education and educational philosophy. After the training he/she appreciated the remarkable achievements of Chinese education with its huge population more. As he/she said,

I do not look down on our education after training overseas. Instead, I became more appreciative of our extraordinary accomplishments in education. As the largest population in the world, it must not be easy for China to achieve the basic education for all. (Principal A)

Principal C claimed that "education should be intensively cultivated and slowly nurtured" afterwards. Principal F stated "I must take care of my school so that parents feel public schools better than private ones."

Principals B and E reported they were able to promote the ideas of respect, trust and cooperation among teachers and students in their own schools after the visit. They were impressed that trust was everywhere in Finland. It was the same in the area of education. The society was presented to them as trusting schools, principals trusted teachers and students, and vice versa.

Distrust is a big problem in China now. I tell teachers that regardless of social atmosphere, we must have a pure land inside the school and educate students to have integrity.... More importantly, I show trust to teachers and students by setting an example.... If the principal says one thing and does another, he/she will definitely lose integrity. So I feel it is the Finnish education culture that we can apply directly into my school. (Principal E)

This result is consistent with the claim that effective principals contribute to productive collaboration in their schools by cultivating mutual respect and trust among those involved in collaborative activity (Connolly & James, 2006, pp. 72–79), and by serving the needs of others instead of their own (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 22; see principle 2). It also supports the view that teachers are trusted to do their best as true professionals of education in Finland (Väljärvi et al. 2007, p. 49).

Reflecting on the Role of Decision-Makers

The majority of interviewees agreed that the training helped them gain “increased understanding of the role of government in education.” For instance, three respondents were impressed that the Finnish government built a two-track system to ensure general and vocational upper secondary schools were openly accessible to each other. There were very few obstacles between the two school systems. Students could freely choose courses in both schools and get two diplomas if they wanted.

I was surprised to see female students learning painting, carpentry, and wallpaper pasting in Finnish vocational schools. Students were quite happy. It is so different from us. In China, we have a very big discrimination against vocational education. Vocational schools are usually the last choice for students who are poor in academic performance and cannot study in general upper secondary schools. Most graduates want to be civil servants. (Principal D)

Principals A, B, and D were impressed that all teachers had Master’s degrees in Finland. Teaching is said to be a prestigious profession in this country and many young students aspire to be teachers. Principal B was surprised that teachers in vocational upper secondary schools also held Master’s degrees, which is very rare in China. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the Chinese

government to remove obstacles in the system, build cooperation and collaboration, and increase teachers' qualifications. The results reflect previous research that has been done in the field. For example, Välijärvi et al. (2007, pp. 48–49) found that the profession of teacher was regarded as one of the most important professions in Finnish society, and all Finnish teachers had to complete a Master's degree before starting their teaching careers.

Principal F mentioned the issue of students' sports accident insurance. He/she said that Finnish principals and teachers were very free to open any kind of physical education classes as the Finnish government would cover students' sports accident insurance. The Finnish government also built hospital schools for those who were sick for long time. However, Chinese principals and teachers were reluctant to start physical education classes. They sacrificed their private time to make up missing lessons for those students who were sick at home. The reason was that such insurance was not covered by the Chinese government, not to mention hospital schools. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the Chinese government to buy students' sports accident insurance at least to ease principals' and teachers' worries.

The present result indicates that a lack of students' sports accident insurance is the main reason why the principals are reluctant to start physical education classes. However, this is somewhat unexpected. Previous studies (Yao & Jin, 2005, p. 177) have indicated that physical education lessons were not the interest of school principals due to many exams and homework. Therefore, the result of the present article adds to previous research by showing that there is a deeper reason behind principals not freely taking on initiatives for students' wellbeing in China.

Improving the Training Program

Despite the myriad of positive sentiments expressed by a number of principals about how the Finnish training program had influenced their leadership practices and professional development, there were participants who gave critical feedback of the training program. The potential improvements below relate both to the trainers and the trainees.

Limited School Visits

One of the major criticisms addressed by the principals was the fact that “school

visits time was too tight.” Four principals felt that they did not have sufficient time to discuss some planned issues with Finnish peers. “The most regretful thing was so little time to visit Finnish schools, especially upper secondary schools. We spent most time discussing with professors and education officials in the university” (Principal E).

This result is partly in line with a challenge noted by Hölttä, Pekkola, and Cai (2009, p. 38): How to harmonize and compromise between the Chinese and Finnish needs and requirements when organizing a joint training program? We feel that collaboration between university programs and school systems is needed to promote the consistency of intensive overseas leadership training programs (Dyer & Renn, 2010, p. 195).

Diversified Needs of the Trainees

Principal C commented that there were “too many different needs to make everyone satisfied.” As he/she said, “some wanted to learn school culture, some wanted to learn curriculum, while others wanted to learn faculty development.” Therefore, it was very difficult to meet everyone’s needs within only three weeks. This finding has two implications. On the one hand, it implies that the training programs will be inefficient if they do not take trainees’ different needs into consideration. On the other hand, it suggests that professional development programs require adequate length and time to enhance principals’ learning (Peterson, 2002, pp. 216–230).

Dissatisfaction with the Training Format and Content

Three principals felt dissatisfied with the training format and content. For example, Principal A stated, “the Finnish training program cannot be regarded as a very professional principal training. It was primarily meant to expand principals’ vision and learn more about the Finnish education system.” Principal D claimed that the Finnish training program contained nothing new and was very similar to Chinese training programs. As he/she stated, “they both include lectures and school visits.” One possible explanation for this argument may be that the participant only compared the Finnish training with domestic training programs. “My understanding of Finnish education can only stay at this level. It is impossible to gain deeper understanding in such a training mode” (Principal D).

Principal E reported some of their questions could not be answered because the trainers were not practitioners. As practitioners, Chinese principals wanted to clarify how Finnish peers practiced specific issues in Finnish schools. However, he/she said, “professors and education officials are experts in their fields, but they do not know the specific practices in Finnish schools. They cannot give us clear answers.” This result supports the view that effective training programs require a knowledgeable faculty (Xing, 2013), and indicates that the training organizer did not choose trainers appropriate to trainees’ needs.

Language Barriers

Principals B, E, and F mentioned language issues. They agreed that the English and Finnish languages were barriers for some activities. They said most participants had minimal English skills, and the program relied mainly on interpretation from English to Chinese.

It took Chinese experts one to two hours to explain the issues while a whole day for Finnish experts to clarify the same issues. Sometimes we spent half an hour making clear of basic concepts due to language barriers. It was a waste of time. (Principal B)

Principal B’s opinion is in accordance with the result showing that intensive overseas training program for Chinese participants requires language interpretation due to their insufficient English skills (Hudson & Yeh, 2006, November, p. 8).

Besides English, the Finnish language was reported as another barrier for communication even though some of the participants understood English well. “Every participant took a booklet about school curricula that explained how the curricula were organized and implemented in Finnish schools. However, we did not understand as they were written in Finnish” (Principal E).

This result implies that Chinese principals are keen on learning about Finnish school curricula, but the Finnish language has become a main barrier for them to learn more.

Educational Cross-Cultural Differences: Incompatible Aspects between China and Finland?

During their training, the principals noted many similarities between their role,

institutions and curricular issues and those of their Finnish counterparts. Yet participants also mentioned peculiar aspects of the Finnish training program which were irrelevant for the principals. They reported that many of their questions could not be answered by the Finnish trainers as the issues at hand were of no concern in Finland. The main reasons lay in the following differences.

National and Cultural Contexts

The main differences in terms of national and cultural contexts reported by the principals are social and class differences. Most participants reported that Finnish society was more equal in terms of gender, salary, and occupation than Chinese society. As Principal E stated, “there is no high or low to being an academician or a carpenter in Finland.” Thus everyone could choose the career he/she liked. “In Finland, the social and class differences are very small. In China, these differences are very big and hierarchy is quite obvious” (Principal C). “The design of Finnish education system is great. Justice has a good connection with its social system. The other supporting systems are well engaged in the society. This is much related to concepts of society and people” (Principal E).

The result is supported by previous research results that an intrinsic part of the Finnish pedagogical philosophy is the principle of equity, on which Finnish education policy has been largely premised (Väljjarvi et al., 2007, p. 38). The Chinese way of thinking is often described as being hierarchical compared to Finnish thinking (Hölttä et al., 2009, p. 38). In reality, these ideas are myths as gender, social, and class differences do exist in Finland too and are increasingly affecting Finns because of the economic crises of the last years and the weight of neo-liberalism on Finnish society (Schatz & Dervin, 2012, November). During the training program, the mantra of pure equity and equality in the “Finnish miracle education” was professed by the trainers.

Educational Systems

The principals mentioned three main areas of educational systemic differences between China and Finland. The first mentioned was “the matriculation examination.” In Finland, students can choose different times to take the exam during the year. If students do not perform well, they can re-take the exam and

select the best results. In China, the similar term is *gaokao* (see Footnote 2), which takes once a year in most places. Most participants felt such arrangements only provided students one opportunity to choose higher education institutions. We do argue that the difference in population size has a big role to play here. The same arrangements could also take place in China if the country had a smaller population.

The second difference was the evaluation of schools. According to most participants, there were not many evaluations of schools in Finland. In China, there were lots of evaluations with the single most important one being the upper secondary school *gaokao*. They explained that the entire society, parents and superintendents, continue to judge schools in terms of their students' performance in the *gaokao*. "The evaluation of schools emphasizes *gaokao* results too much [in China]. Schools must show good results in enrolment rates for the *gaokao* and undergraduate level admission, otherwise it is meaningless how good they are in other fields" (Principal D). "There was no such inspection in Finnish schools whereas there are so many inspections here [in China] that I cannot handle" (Principal D).

The third difference is school curriculum. One principal said the curriculum selection was very flexible in Finland. Students could choose extended courses across grade and boundary. In China the school curriculum was rigid. Students in Grade 10 could only choose courses in their own grade, the same worked with students in Grade 11.

Principals' Roles and Tasks

Principal E mentioned that issues such as faculty development and school alumni did not exist in Finnish schools. Chinese principals have to figure out how to improve teachers' quality all the time for two reasons. Firstly, most participants reported that faculty development was one of the most challenging tasks. It included teachers' qualification, professional dedication, staff capacity building, and teacher appraisal. Secondly, Principals A and E explained that most Chinese principals did not have the autonomy to recruit teachers. Such decisions were usually made by local department of education. "The most two envious and impressive things we have for Finnish peers are teachers' qualification and professional commitment.... They are the two biggest headaches for Chinese

principals” (Principal A). “The Chinese principals have great abilities. The teachers given to us are at different levels and we have to learn how to train them to become qualified and efficient teachers continuously. It is a very challenging task.... This issue does not exist in Finland” (Principal E).

Regarding school alumni, Finnish principals could not understand the Chinese peers’ question, “We do not know what the graduates do afterwards. Why do we have to think about school alumni? It is students’ own business.” According to their opinions, Finnish principals do not appear to pay attention to these issues. Conversely, Chinese principals were very clear about these figures and celebrities, such as the number of graduates who became academics and studied at university.

Teachers’ Competences

As mentioned earlier, teachers’ capacities were uneven in Chinese schools. Some were high while others were low. Principal E pointed out that some people were not suited to the teaching occupation and should not be selected to become teachers. They were good at some areas but unsuitable to be teachers. They became teachers due to certain historical reasons.

In 2000 there was a huge lack of teachers due to upper secondary school expansion in China. The government had to recruit some unqualified teachers to make up this shortage.... When I was a student teacher candidate, there was still an interview to select what kinds of people were suited to become teachers. Nowadays there is no such interview.... This is not an issue in Finland. (Principal E)

The result identifies gaps in the Chinese government’s approach to planning and executing teacher training before the year 2000. It also indicates that qualified teachers have to be trained and selected in a scientific and systematic way rather than just take those who are good at certain areas.

Students’ Learning

Four participants reported that Chinese students’ enjoyment and happiness in learning was lower than that of Finnish students in general. As Principal D stated, “In contrast to Finnish students, Chinese students are not enjoying their school

life.” Some students in China were forced to study at school even if they did not like it. They had to study for exams, but not for their own interest. On the contrary, Finnish students chose the courses they were interested in.

Finally, the conclusion made by Principals D and E was very illustrative. They said they had enjoyed attending the program and learnt quite a lot. However, they were unable to put all that they had learnt into practice due to many national, institutional, and cultural constraints. “It is a matter of national contexts and systems. We cannot copy it. We cannot use it either here [in China] even we copy it from Finland” (Principal D). “Many things do not work in China. We do not have such systems [equality, two-track system, etc.] in China” (Principal E).

The comments highlight the importance of locality when exporting and applying one education system to another. This also confirms the view that local contexts must be taken into consideration when accommodating e.g., Australian educational ideas for Chinese leaders (Wang, 2006, p. 380). This finding is interesting because Chinese principals claim differences in national and cultural contexts; education and school systems would not work in intercultural training programs. This result particularly helps Finnish training providers to identify what they cannot offer to Chinese principals. It also indicates that a well-functioning educational system such as the Finnish one cannot work without the coherence and coordination of other supporting systems.

The framework presented at the beginning of this article and the results of the study somewhat overlap. The framework was mainly reflected in the data by the first two results on satisfaction with the training program (implementing a different form of leadership and rethinking Chinese education), as well as the results on educational cross-cultural differences (principals’ roles and tasks, and teachers’ competences). It was not reflected by the result on satisfaction with the training program (reflecting the role of decision-makers), improving the training program, as well as educational cross-cultural differences (national and cultural contexts, educational systems, and students’ learning). As hypothesized at the beginning of the article, these results could not reflect the four principles due to certain societal, cultural and educational specificities.

Conclusions

This study has explored the impact of a Finnish training program on Chinese

principals' leadership practices and professional development. It is one of the first pioneering studies on Chinese principals' training in Finland. Research with this focus can be the first step towards enhancing our understanding of the effects of intercultural education training on Chinese principals. Based on the research results, the following conclusions can be drawn.

The results indicated two aspects in how the Chinese principals perceived the training program: satisfaction and need for improvement. The positive impacts included implementing a different form of leadership, rethinking Chinese education, and reflection on the role of decision-makers. The limitations comprised limited school visit time, the diversity of needs to be addressed, limited lecturing styles, and language barriers. Nevertheless, differences such as national and cultural contexts, educational and school systems, principals' roles and tasks, teachers' qualifications and dedication, and students' learning prevented Chinese principals from applying the Finnish experience to their work in China.

One could say that Chinese principals are "dancing in fetters." This means they are trying to move while their arms and legs are bound. This is a similar idea to the contradiction between ideal and reality. On the one hand, they need to work towards quality-oriented education, which enhances students' overall development. On the other hand, they have to provide visible and accountable results under the pressure of the *gaokao*. In this regard, intercultural leadership training may provide them some ways to escape this dilemma and overcome the challenges faced in their work.

The research results are important in three areas: theoretically, heuristically and practically (Tracy, 2010, p. 846). Theoretically, the authors designed a framework of "the four principles of successful leadership practices" for training effective school leaders. It identifies the areas of school leadership training that have a strong effect on leadership practices and professional development. Heuristically, the data analysis pinpointed weak sides of the training program for the Finnish training providers, and therefore, a need for further investigation and action. Practically, the results have identified the discrepancy between the Finnish training institutions and the Chinese principals' needs. Finnish training institutions can use these results to improve the program and curriculum (Martineau & Patterson, 2010, p. 281), and design more targeted training programs for prospective Chinese school leaders. This may also be applied to

training institutions in other countries that provide education exports. Further, the results might be of interest to policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in China and Finland.

This study contributes to the field of educational leadership and management from an intercultural perspective. It builds upon the available body of knowledge relating to the effect of training on principals' leadership practices and professional development. It focuses on an overseas training program with its unique characteristics and challenges. Therefore, the research provides a basis for the improvement of similar educational leadership training programs. The study is significant because it explores the insights and views of the trainees on the implications of training in leadership from an intercultural leadership training program received in a foreign country.

This study has three limitations. The most obvious shortfall lies in that it focused only on the city of Shanghai and excluded principals from other provinces and municipalities in China. Finnish trainers (university professors and lecturers), Chinese training organizers (education officials), and teachers (members of leadership teams) were not interviewed either. In fact, their participation would have provided the authors with more comprehensive data. Secondly, the study could have been smoother and more effective if the framework of leadership practices had been designed earlier and used in the training program. Thirdly, the study is only a summative evaluation of a training program. To some extent, it comes a bit late to be much help in the training program itself (Guskey, 2000, p. 60).

The study suggests the following directions for future research. Firstly, the leadership practices framework may be used to guide future training programs for school leaders in national or intercultural training contexts. The issues presented in the framework might be of interest in training providers when designing and implementing training programs for school leaders. Secondly, it will be useful for both partners to receive some pre-training in the counterpart's culture, education and school systems before the program commences. This is imperative for the Finnish training institutions as service providers. By doing so, the relevance of a training program could be maximized and mismatches could be avoided or reduced. Therefore, more comparative studies on Chinese and Finnish education need to be done in the future as a basis for training program design. Thirdly, it would be important to investigate the long-term influence of

this leadership training program upon participants. The researchers also offer suggestions to the Chinese policymakers to conduct a systematic evaluation of all these intercultural training programs while carrying out this nationwide project. According to Guskey (2000, p. 60), the evaluations should focus on planning and formative evaluation that helps redirect time, money, personnel, and other resources to more productive areas.

In conclusion, an intercultural training program can play a limited but positive role in enhancing Chinese principals' leadership practices and professional development. The study underlines the importance of critical reflection and adaptation on the part of practitioners, as well as cross-cultural educational differences when importing Finnish educational ideas to China. It helps overseas training institutions determine Chinese principals' needs. In the context of intercultural training, efforts must be made carefully to tailor program provision to adapt to the context and nature of the learners.

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