Principals’ Instructional Leadership: Fostering Teacher Professional Development

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Abstract—Instructional leadership evolves over three decades and still gain popularity as an effective leadership model affecting teaching and learning. However, most research is derived from Anglo-American settings. Empirical studies on the relationship between instructional leadership and teacher professional development in China are limited. This article aimed to investigate principals’ instructional leadership practices for improving teacher professional development in the context of reform in China. Data was attained from interviews of ten primary school principals in Shenzhen. The key instructional leadership practices were identified and derived from the accounts of principals: supervising teachers, mentoring, shaping cross-grade-level collaboration, and developing research-led teaching activities. The findings provided evidences of relevant instructional leadership practices linked with teacher professional development that contributed to student learning. Responding to the changes in educational environment, principals were expected to foster communication and collaboration among teachers both inside and outside schools. The roles of principals in managing instructional matters associated with teacher professional development tended to be more dynamic and versatile.

Keywords—Chinese Educational Reform; Collaboration; Instructional Leadership; Teacher Professional Development.

Abbreviations—SB, SJ, SC, SF, SG, SE (The Participating Principals in the Study); Community of Practice (COP).

I. INTRODUCTION

The central challenge facing many schools principals is improving student achievement emerging from this hyper-accountability period [Knapp et al., 2003; Normore & Brooks, 2012]. Outcome-based educational reform suggests the evaluation of student achievement as the success of leadership [Elmore, 2000; Reardon, 2011]. Instructional leadership has proved to have greater impacts on student outcomes [Robinson et al., 2008]. Instructional leadership typically “create positive environments where all students learn” [O’Donnell & White, 2005] by focusing on teachers’ a series of activities in leading learning [Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999]. With respect to the higher expectation of student learning, teacher quality and their effective pedagogy are defined as essential elements that maximize student participation and learning [Colbert et al., 2008; Mills et al., 2009; Dixon & Senior, 2011]. This allows principals to rethink how they can better equip teachers with capacity to forester student knowledge acquisition in the classroom.

Principal develop teacher professional learning for fostering collaborative learning across teachers at all level in school [Silins et al., 2000; Leithwood et al., 2010]. The term professional development refers to the activities for engaging teacher in capacity building such as observation, sharing, coaching, school-level meeting, and training workshop [Stock & Duncan, 2010]. Along with the emerging challenges of teaching in school, principals have to develop higher-level effective activities of teacher professional development. In this sense, focusing instruction management is the core business of principals as instructional leaders but principals must challenge the process of promoting staff learning as “Knowledge is about the capacity to do something” [Senge, 2000]. The review of literature indicates discussion about how principals could exert a more positive influence on teacher quality in terms of the changing school environment.

The challenges of accountability context are also facing with Chinese principal embedded in the changes of policy context [Mok & Welch, 2003; Lee & Pang, 2011]. One of contextual factors about curriculum reform aiming to improve teaching quality is associated with the capacity for
school leadership [Leithwood, 2001]. Emphasis of leadership has been placed on strategies related to instruction improvement and highlighted teacher development and building learning-organizations [Wang, 2009; Liu, 2010]. However, the empirical research related to Chinese instructional leadership is still limited and the bulk of the Chinese literature on principal is prescriptive and builds around personal commentaries rather than hard data [Walker, Hu & Qian, 2012]. Thus, research into understanding the instructional leadership linked with teacher professional development will provide in-depth meaning of ‘Chinese’ instructional leadership within contextual influence.

II. INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Western literature offer conceptual lenses about the nature, components and consequences for instructional leadership, among which several studies suggest the indirect effects of leadership on student learning [Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Robinson et al., 2009]. Several claims have been made for supporting the impact of instructional leadership on teaching and learning. A claim is that instructional leadership is evident as the primary source of educational expertise when principals facilitate high-quality instruction of teachers [Marks & Printy, 2003]. Hallinger’s (2003) claim suggests that instructional leadership is a “directive and top-down approach” to lead “first-order changes” in school instruction. As such, indirect effect of instructional leadership on student achievement mediated through teacher collaboration and capacity was significant [Miller et al., 2010; Ovando & Cassey, 2010]. Lane (1991) claims that instructional leadership is devised to nurture learning community for facilitating teacher learning. Promoting supervision of teachers, one of important leadership approaches, is clearly associated with the improvement of teacher attitudes toward professional development and instruction [Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Frase & Sorensen, 2002; Youngs & King, 2002].

Principals as leaders of instructional designers for teaching and learning have to “enable others to act” by improve professionalism of instructors [Kouzes & Posner, 2007]. The changing school environment constructs the more dynamics view of the principals as instructional leader [Nettles & Herrington, 2007]. Neumerski (2012) suggests that knowledge about instructional leadership has to be expanded across the wider sphere of national-cultural boundaries. Therefore, it is important to explore the contextualized instructional leadership linked to the improvement of teacher capacity.

III. REFORM CONTEXT IN CHINA

The transformation of the basic education and curriculum development require higher expectation and standard for the quality of teaching [Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Liu & Fang, 2009]. Under the banner of quality education, the state stressed a revolutionary change in curriculum which aims to improve students’ all round learning by changing teachers’ approaches to instruction student learning processes [MoE, 2001]. The curriculum reform has resulted in a series of conceptual and practical innovations on classroom teaching at the school level [Ryan et al., 2009]. Traditional teacher development activities are embedded in the system of teaching and research in Chinese education. The normal activities of teaching and research comprise: opening classrooms for observation, preparing curricular content together and organizing mentor program for young teachers [Hu, 2005]. The shifts in teaching and learning require new kinds of teachers and new forms of teacher professional development.

In order to ‘free up’ curriculum innovation and relevance, the government has introduced three-level curriculum management. Schools are granted more autonomy to develop school-based curriculum. Principals and teachers are involved in the development of school based curriculum with a focus of student self-directed learning, creativity and cooperative learning [Guan & Meng, 2007]. Concern is given to teacher professional development as teachers are critical in achieving desired curriculum reform outcomes by improving effective approaches to teaching [Paine & Fang, 2006; York-Barr & Duke, 2004]. The current eminent change in relation to instructional matters results in the rising expectation and challenges for schools principals’ work and duties. For instance, principals are confronted with the problem of how the concepts and practices originated from western countries could be suited to the Chinese tradition instruction design [Yin et al., 2013].

As such, the review of the reform context in China shows changes in curriculum and teaching, e.g. the change to student-center knowledge acquisition, teaching methods for classroom innovation, and new forms of teacher professional development. Principals have been granted more autonomy in terms of developing school-based curriculum, experimenting with classroom innovations and designing suitable teacher development programs for their own schools. This calls for a study to understand the current state of Chinese principals in the enactment of instructional leadership for facilitating teacher professional learning.

IV. INTERVIEWS FOR INSIGHTS

The study aimed to explore principals’ practice associated with instructional leadership for fostering teacher professional development. Semi-structure interviews were used as the main data collection method in this study. Interviews help researcher gain access to the contexts framing people’s beliefs and to understand what they mean [Seidman, 1998].

4.1. Data Collection

The researcher conducted interviews with 10 principals from primary schools in Shenzhen to elicit their understanding of how they perform instructional leadership to improve...
professional development of teachers in response to curriculum reform. In terms of the context to each principal, data was collected in terms of the nature of their work lives, their experiences, goals and values, the practices that they use for teacher professional development. Data from documents used in this study provided a holistic picture of Chinese educational reforms. The secondary materials would be retrieved from official records, government websites, school documents, newspapers, minutes and field notes from school visits.

The study selected Shenzhen city as a specific research site for the following reason: Shenzhen as an economically advanced cities in southern China, provides well-developed educational environment for the implementation of school-based curriculum. Principals from this city may have more autonomy and opportunities to foster their leadership for improving teaching and learning. In addition, as one of educational experimental zones, schools in Shenzhen are undergoing rapid development in the trials of classroom innovation. The opportunities and resources for teacher professional development are adequate compared with other cities.

4.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and inductive in the qualitative research. Constant comparative method across the process “is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding” [Tesch, 1990]. Row data is attained from the transcript of qualitative interview, field notes, observations and comments. Data was under the analysis process purposed by Corbin & Strauss’s (1998) three phrase coding: open, axial, and selective. Categories attained from coding were characterized by the abstraction for reflecting the focus on principal instructional leadership. Once the data finish analyzing, the findings were validated and ensured the good fit between data and interpretation.

V. FINDINGS

The next section will detail the accounts about how principals practice instruction leadership to enhance teacher professional development derived from the data.

5.1. Mentoring

Due to greater concern on teaching quality in relation to curriculum reform, principals paid much attention to mentoring program which was adopted as one of the vital ways of on-the-job teacher development based on school context in China. Principals believed that young teachers could benefit from mentoring program because there remained many successful examples of mentoring program for developing beginning teachers’ professional knowledge and expertise. The well-defined mentoring program is called “blue project” which has been launched for some years based on the school’s own setting.

The term “blue project” has been frequently mentioned by the principals in their interviews. This notion comes from a Chinese idiom which indicates blue is extracted from the indigo plant but is bluer than the latter. It means pupil excels teacher. To adapt the requirements of improving classroom innovation of new curriculum reform, Education Bureau of Guangdong (2011) accelerate the implementation of blue project across schools in the province. The current policy results in principals taking more active roles in mentoring process of young teachers in terms of their school realities. The heated concerns on the linkage of mentoring program and teaching quality have changed principal instructional leadership. The voices of principals reflected their thoughts in response to the higher demands of educational environments. Principal SB said that “New teachers can be seen as the vehicle that leads to new ways of teaching in our school. Though the impact of principal leadership on student achievement is indirect, I think. Principals influence the school atmosphere of teacher development.”

There were many interpretations of mentoring during the process principals played various roles in fostering professional of beginning teachers. The roles of principals were such as recourse providers, advisors, role models and instructors. Despite a large amount of time spending on dealing with school administrative works, principals tended to engage in more direct support of teacher professional learning. They considered the leadership in instruction issues and coaching was more participative so some of them acted as direct coach of the teaching team for building the school culture of teacher coaching. Especially when seniors were not willing to mentor young teachers, principals have to act as a role model to lead the follower. Principal SJ reflected:

The implementation of mentoring reflects the supportive atmosphere of collaboration and teamwork. If you act as a model, the teachers will follow you. For example, I once coached a young teacher who would participate in the contest of Chinese teaching and innovation. No matter how I prepared lessons with her for many times, she could not understand. Finally I demonstrated a class by myself, and then she realized the class could be like that and she got it. It is very important an experienced leader who provide supports for the growth of teachers (SJ).

The context of new curriculum reform focused on the quality of teaching and the transformation of classroom practice. School principals considered it was a big challenge for teachers to conduct student-centered learning activities as the core pedagogy. It was also a need to find valuable ways to support teachers to acquire particular professional knowledge and expertise in response to the shifting curriculum scheme. As principal SC said: “we were all new learners when we were faced with curriculum reform.” Mentoring not only provided a threat-free way to induct beginning teachers into the teaching profession but also allowed principals to engage in overall curriculum and the teaching in the school context. As such, the work of mentoring ensured instructional
leadership in ways that principals promote teacher development for the improvement of teaching.

5.2. Supervision

Supervision was another interpersonal process in which principals gave feedbacks to teachers resulting in communication and interaction about curricular and pedagogical design. Principals acknowledged the importance of collective efforts in supervisory procedure and delegated the supervisory roles to subject leaders and academic officers. Principals supported the instruction improvement by organizing teaching sharing session based on collective classroom observation. Collaboration between principals and teachers contributed to variety and individual initiative in instructional delivery which was a vital part of supervisory process. Principal SF introduced lesson demonstration rehearsal as a traditional evaluative way of teaching and teaching research in terms of specific teaching strategies:

Collective classroom observation for each subject is scheduled regularly each week. A teacher representative demonstrates a lesson and the other teachers would observe together and discuss afterward. The teacher would demonstrate the same lesson for another class of students based on the peer’s comments. Apart from within-subject class, we also organize across-subject class observation. It is a good opportunity to develop teachers’ instructional capacity through collective learning and sharing (SF).

As a professional teaching expert, the supervision and evaluation of instruction is considered as a critical function of principals in China. From the perspectives of principals, supervising and monitoring is a best way to manage what occur in classroom to ensure quality of teaching. To maintain regular communication and supervision with teachers, principals undertook frequently classroom visits as a chief evaluative action. For example, Principal SG introduce he usually use the way of walk-through classroom to observe teachers’ practice and mark down the notes. In sum, supervision was considered as primary key task of principals in their daily routines. Responding to the requirements of quality assurance, principals concerned about a more constructive and scientific evaluative process of instruction.

5.3. Cross-Grade-Level Collaboration

The system of teaching research has been rooted in Chinese education since 1950s and aims to involve teachers in undertaking subject-based research for classroom teaching [Hu, 2005]. It is a comprehensive model that consists of multiple functions: administration, research and teacher professional development. The routine activities of school-based teaching research can be summarized into three categories: preparing lessons and observing classroom; regular subject-based meeting and discussion; school-level and district level teaching research project.

The system of teaching research resulted in school-level administrative organization that involves teachers in relevant positions of the research group. In this organization, principals play indirect roles in leading teaching research and delegate power to middle leaders for managing the research groups as introduced by principal SC. It was shown that teachers who are affiliated in multiple groups are led by subject leaders, head of grade group, and head of research group. In this sense, apart from the organization structure of administrative teams, the structure of academic affairs presented another kind of horizontal and vertical relational web. Principals were responsible for dealing with the multiple working relationship and working tasks for shaping collaborative process.

Responding to the increased efforts on bringing innovation into classroom as required by curriculum agenda, principals redesigned school structure to bring teachers together in closer proximity for discussion and collaboration. For example, principals in a few Shenzhen school built up so-called outstanding teacher office beyond administrative functions. A short-list experienced leading teachers were selected to hold the informal office of teaching and research affairs. The informal learning structure allowed teachers to plan instructional activities together and to discuss according classroom observation several times each month. The regular and on-going meeting and sharing indicated cross-subject and cross-grade collaboration among teachers. Principal SE introduced the outstanding teacher office led by eleven endorsed teachers who are arranged to have instruction demonstration for other teachers each semester:

The eleven teachers who are excellent in learning-center teaching mainly come from the subject group of Chinese, math and English. Apart from demonstrating classes, another chief job of them is to lead and guide teaching research on the issues of classroom innovation. In addition, they are expected to coach young teachers. Each outstanding teachers mentor two or three apprentice teachers (SE).

Along with the focus of integrated learning and interdisciplinary learning, the development of professional learning required cross-grade communication for teachers in different discipline areas. The traditional school structure such as subject groups and grade groups had to be changed so that teachers could adopt a more productive and dynamic way of collaboration. Principals were expected to provide opportunities to engage teachers to work into relevant groups of professional learning. Thus, authority associated with instructional leadership was attributed by principals who were able to provide platforms for fostering capacity development of staff. The influence of traditional administrative school system might decrease when principal utilized flexible modes of communication and coordination across staff members. Principals expected that the engagement of teachers in a restructured school setting could gradually generate positive learning culture and collaborative processes.

5.4. Research-led Teaching Activities

Within the changing requirements of curriculum reform, school-based teaching research was expected to find an
effective way of educational practice renovation and knowledge reconstruction. In 2003, Ministry of Education further announced the tasks of teaching research system that transfer the works of teaching research from district-level authority to school. Considering each school was unique, school had its own situation for testing a variety of educational policies. Principals showed their views on the activities of teaching and research related to the whole education environment and its own school setting. SE said:

Research-led teaching activities lead to the sustainable development of school. This process might be slow but routine. Teachers who are involved the group would learn and discuss the strategy of teaching, evaluation of students, and report writing. We can see that teachers gradually feel confident and encouraged in the process of group learning (SE).

In terms of the changes generated in China’s education, some challenges were visible for school teaching. First, the new standard of curriculum prompted to engage student actively participate in learning process. Second, the rise of information technology allowed teachers to stimulate more active and effective classroom activities. The challenges suggested new instruction modes that facilitate intensive teacher-student interaction. Connected with this, school-based research for teaching responds to the shifts in instruction modes and learning process. Comparing with the traditional ways of research activities in school, current forms of teaching research have changed to be diverse and open. One of the approaches was to involve external educational experts in supervising teaching and conducting research project. Principal SC provided an example of research collaboration with tertiary education sector:

We have collaborated with a professor from Capital Normal University on a COP project about developing teacher development community. Fifteen senior and young teachers who were involved in this project team. I was the leader of this team. Our teachers benefited from the whole process. They were motivated and passionate for managing classroom. One of the project tasks was to explore how to conduct cooperative learning in the classroom and how to make students actively participate in group work. In the end, we could see the enhancement of student engagement in the classroom (SC).

The participating principals had greater tendency to invite external consultants for bringing with it different ideas and resources. More than half of interviewees showed their positive attitudes toward external supports for teaching research by providing some successful experimental examples. It was notable to see that a variety of forms of school-based teaching research has been created since the new direction on classroom instruction along with new technology was generated. In sum, the forms of teaching research activities embedded in current school’s situation according to interviewee’s information include:

- Group lesson preparation
- Classroom observation and comments
- Reflective dialogue in the group meeting
- Demonstration lesson activities
- School-level teaching contest
- District-level seminar and meeting of teaching research
- School-based research project
- External supervision of teaching

Principal took their multiple responsibilities for dealing with the affairs of the school teaching and research. The roles of principals were complex and ever-changing that they have priority on instruction supported which would best meet their instructional goals. Ten principals in this study were expected to wear various hats in the works of teaching and research, such as coach, adviser, evaluator, resource holder, manager, project leader. Due to the higher requirements of research on classroom innovation and external communication, principals were impeded in carrying out their duties. In this sense, the structure of teaching and research team were therefore changed in response to the shifting work components. In all, the roles of principals were dynamic, versatile and flexible.

VI. Discussion

The roles of principals become more complex as a result of the changing policy reform, increased accountability of schools for development, and growing emphasis on the effective pedagogy. Schooling in future can be a system derived from “new ways of thinking and interacting that enables deep, collective learning” [Senge, 2000]. It is suggested that principals develop instructional leadership for learning in order to maximize opportunities for teachers and students’ knowledge innovation. Considering application of instructional leadership varies across societies, the findings of the study suggest the key leadership practice which Chinese principals enact for improving teacher professional learning. The core instructional leadership practices including shaping cross-grade-level collaboration, mentoring and supervising teachers, and developing research-lead teaching activities. Along with the instructional practices for the complexity of the work, communication and collaboration is encouraged at all levels inside school and outside school. The finding also implies that external supporters could share their expertise on pedagogical practice during the procedures of teacher professional learning. The changes in teacher professional development require principals to think their roles and functions in facilitating effective and sustainable learning environment.

Instructional leadership practices found in this study is associated with the multiple contexts and personal factors. The study provides the examples of contextualizing the pattern of instruction leadership practices. The analysis discusses “what works” related to principals’ routines for school improvement in the current reform environment [Hallinger, 2011]. For instance, the instructional leadership function of research-led teaching activities is highly linked with the education system of China. Principals guide school-based collective research activities toward the improvement...
of instructional pedagogy. Similar with action research for research community in western societies, teachers work together on a research project and publish academic journals [Zhou & Liu, 2011]. Along with the contextual influence on the shifts of students’ holistic development, principals tended to implement new approaches on teachers’ learning activities by promoting cross-subject collaboration on teaching research. The implication is that principals should be commitment to lead teachers to improve their capacity through newly appropriate forms of learning activities. It is also suggested that leadership behaviors demonstrated in a specific culture should be conductive and applicable for the school setting.

As the accounts of principals, the leadership activities employed by principals indicate routine nature of school management for improvement agenda. Despite varied intents behind the leadership behaviors, the participating principals normally act in similar way consistent with the emphasis on developing school culture and effective leadership for learning [Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger, 2011]. The empirical evidences of principals’ leadership activities facilitating the ongoing development of teaching and learning provide practical implication for education practitioners. A further exploration of this study with more cases within different district and school contexts is essential.

References


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