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# “School banding”

## Principals’ perspectives of teacher professional development in the school-based management context

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore how principals’ leadership approaches to teacher professional development arise from school banding and may impact upon teacher professional capital and student achievement.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The case study is situated within the context of school-based management, comprising reflective accounts of nine school principals selected by stratified sampling from a sample of 56 Hong Kong schools to represent Bands One, Two, and Three schools. The reflective accounts were triangulated with observations of teachers and analysis of school websites.

**Findings** – First, under school-based management, principals remain obliged to recognize the power of state-defined examinations in determining the schools’ future priorities. Second, the exercise of school autonomy in response to this obligation varies, depending upon the competitive advantage schools have in the school banding system. Ideally, effective school-based management is dependent upon the principal’s capacity to facilitate good instructional practices. However, principals need to adjust their leadership practices to school contextual demands. Third, adaptations to contexts result in the varied developments of teacher capacities in schools, corresponding with the types of principal leadership adopted.

**Originality/value** – While statistical studies have identified attributes of exemplary principal leadership, few studies have examined the qualitative reasons for the exemplification of these attributes, and the influence of the school context in shaping these attributes. Departing from assumptions that leadership attributes are intrinsic to individuals, this paper considers how principals contextualize leadership in teacher professional development to the schools’ student academic achievement.

**Keywords** East Asia/Hong Kong, Teacher professional development, Principal leadership, School-based management, Student achievement/school banding

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

In its ideal form, school-based management refers to the empowerment of principals with autonomy over fiscal control, curriculum, and professional development (Agasisti *et al.*, 2013). In reality, school-based management takes on a variety of interpretations. Inspired by the decentralized education model of the USA, East Asian education systems are recent adopters of school-based management (Hawkins, 2000; Muta, 2000). State agencies were inspired by economic rationales to decentralize schools for the enhancement of their labor forces. Under the leadership of “developmental states,” autonomy is cautiously assigned with the aim of stimulating economic growth, while ensuring centralized control is not curtailed (Lee, 2017). Within this context, the majority of East Asian school-based management is characterized by fiscal decentralization, which prevails over the extremely limited school influence over curriculum matters, such as in China (Hawkins, 2000). In Japan, Muta (2000) reports school influence over the curriculum is restricted to approximately 10 percent. Through the comparison of decentralization efforts in Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea, Ho (2006) concludes that Hong Kong schools enjoy significant school autonomy. Within this

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centralized-decentralized East Asian educational context, sustainable school autonomy will depend on the principal's ability to contextualize school-based management reforms. This ability is crucial to effective school improvement, as the agreement of both school leaders and teachers is needed for reforms to impact student learning (Cheung and Wong, 2011). One of the key domains through which this agreement can be forged is through principal instructional leadership of teacher professional development. While schools have much less influence over curriculum matters, principals are given more flexibility over teacher professional development. This paper aims to examine the variety of leadership approaches to teacher professional development in this era of school-based management in the Hong Kong education context.

### *School-based management in Hong Kong*

As the locale where principals assert stronger autonomy relative to their peers in the regional East Asian education systems, Hong Kong makes an excellent site for this study. School-based management reform was a centralized initiative by the Education Bureau (EDB) that commenced shortly after Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of China. Under school-based management, principals are empowered to redefine teacher professional development to suit their school's needs for curriculum and instructional change. Two decades after the implementation of school-based management, Hong Kong principals stand for an organized network that has proven to be significantly more empowered than their regional peers. However, the prevailing literature tends to focus on fiscal, rather than curriculum autonomy. Lee *et al.* (2011) affirm that "cultural adaptations" to global reforms have been "slow and incremental" (p. 827). The retention of educational norms of assessing performance with examination-driven benchmarks remains firmly established in East Asia, and Hong Kong is no exception (Yuen *et al.*, 2012). This preoccupation with examinations has ensured the alignment of school leaders with the EDB on curriculum, instruction, and assessment matters. Nevertheless, the potential for schools to gain greater control over teaching and learning is made available with school-based management, and teacher professional development is one of the more promising instruments to be employed by principals to support school improvement. If improved student achievement demonstrates effective school-based management, then a school's competitive advantage is determined by how principals exercise leadership in the development of teachers' capacity to achieve this goal.

### *Instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and the growth of teacher leadership*

Since the implementation of school-based management, principal leadership has broadened in its influence over a variety of domains. As the focus of this paper is on teacher professional development, the instructional and transformational aspects of principal leadership stand out. While these leadership approaches are complementary, and overlap in practice, clarification is needed of their conceptual premises to effectively explore how leadership decisions about teacher professional development arise from, and are consequential to, student achievement. This paper adopts Robinson's (2008) emphasis on the distinction between transformational and instructional leadership attributes. The emphasis is informed by findings that instructional leadership has a greater influence on student achievement than transformational leadership. As student achievement is considered in this paper as the mediating factor of principal leadership approaches, it is necessary to distinguish between instructional and transformational leadership.

Instructional leadership refers to taking the personal responsibility to lead in curriculum and instructional improvement (Lancer, 2015). In relation to teacher professional development, a further examination of the literature suggests that the participation of teachers in the leadership domain is critical for successful instructional leadership.

Collaborative leadership between school leaders and teachers is necessary for schools to anticipate and implement change (Hallinger and Heck, 2010). With distributed leadership, teachers experience the need for school improvement first hand (Spillane, 2012), rather than as disconnected instructions “from above” (Harris and Muijs, 2004). In relation to teaching and learning, Marks and Printy (2003) refer to this paradigm shift as “shared instructional leadership” (p. 371), where principals and teachers collaborate to improve student learning.

Studies in Hong Kong support the argument for more democratic forms of instructional leadership. While “facilitating” forms of mentoring teacher instructional practices have positive impacts on student achievement, the reverse is true of “direct” supervision of teaching instruction (Lee *et al.*, 2012). Principals exert a significant impact on student achievement, but their influence is indirect, and mediated by, teacher job satisfaction (Hallinger and Lu, 2014). Further research illuminates the existing gaps between school-based management, instructional leadership, and collaborative cultures in Hong Kong schools. Despite the emergence of empowered school principals, teachers continue to be challenged by the numerous reforms that have taken place since the introduction of school-based management (Cheng *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, Cheng and Szeto (2016) observe a rare minority of principals who have sought to expand access to professional autonomy by empowering teacher leadership.

Transformational leadership refers to principals playing an active role in facilitating positive school cultures to create conducive learning environments for students (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000). Although transformational leadership does not operate independently of instructional leadership in most instances, positive school cultures have important, but indirect, impacts on instructional practices (Robinson, 2008). For example, while raising teacher and student self-esteem and confidence in teaching and learning will help create supportive classroom environments, these efforts do not directly relate to teaching and learning.

Extending the insights found in the literature review, this paper explores how differences in instructional and transformational leadership may manifest in the form of principals’ leadership approaches to teacher professional development. To do this, this paper refers to: instructional leadership as principal approaches that directly target the instructional practices of teachers; and transformational leadership as principal approaches to building positive school climates that indirectly support the professional development of teacher instructional practices. Departing from assumptions that leadership attributes are intrinsic to individuals, the purpose of raising this conceptual distinction is to demonstrate how principals exercise agency in contextualizing leadership to the professional development needs of their teachers. This conceptual lens facilitates the examination of why only a minority of teachers have been empowered by teacher leadership, while the majority of the teachers remain challenged in implementing reforms, and some schools have experienced only modest improvements in student achievement. School banding, or differences in students’ achievements between schools, is considered in this paper as the mediating factor.

### *School banding*

Two standardized enrollment examinations are administered by the EDB, and determines the prestige of secondary schools: Pre-Secondary One Hong Kong Attainment Test (PS1HKAT), and Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). Secondary students take the HKDSE at Form Six, which determines their chances of enrollment in tertiary education, and the academic performance of the secondary schools. However, secondary school banding is shaped by the PS1HKAT.

Students who have graduated from Hong Kong primary schools are classified into three bands according to their performance in the school internal examinations, moderated by the PS1HKAT. Students with top results will be sorted into Band One, the weakest performers will be sorted into Band Three, and those in between will be sorted into Band Two. The banding results determine students’ chances of enrollment into their desired secondary school.

As a consequence of this, unintended prestige has been acquired by some secondary schools, while negative implications have emerged for others. Based on the intake of primary school students from the respective achievement bands, secondary schools are by association referred to as Band One, Two, or Three schools. Although students have been observed to struggle with critical thinking in Hong Kong (Yuen *et al.*, 2012), constructivist pedagogies were observed to be effective in promoting critical thinking for Band One students (Kwan and Wong, 2014). Conversely, Band Three schools appear to be overrepresented by ethnic minority students and students with Special Education Needs (SEN), which adds to their challenges in teaching and learning (Cheung *et al.*, 2015; Poon and Lin, 2015). Furthermore, McNerney *et al.* (2015) found teacher attrition rates are inversely related to school banding. Therefore, in this paper, school banding offers the context for examining the implications of the types of leadership approaches adopted by principals when planning for teacher professional development.

### *Professional capital*

The concept of professional capital is employed to make sense of the principals' leadership approaches to teacher professional development. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) refers to professional capital as the key capacities required of teachers for school improvement: human capital, social capital, and decisional capital. Human capital refers to the knowledge and expertise of teachers and students that determines a school's capacity to achieve its values and visions. The academic ability of students enrolled in the school is an example. Social capital refers to relationships that facilitate the accumulation of human capital, such as teacher collaboration with principals to ensure high standards in instructional practices are upheld in the school. Decisional capital refers the reflective implementation of human and social capital for school improvement. An example is the customizing of instructional practices to the academic banding of students. As professional capital varies between school bandings, principals' leadership approaches may vary in terms of: teacher professional development and student learning (human capital); the types of collaborative strategies sought in teacher professional development (social capital); and the strategic areas of improvement needed in future planning for teacher professional development (decisional capital).

In addition to the growth of instructional practice, transformational leadership is needed to inspire teacher commitment to holistic approaches to student development. While teachers' emotional capacities to care for the socioemotional development of students is also an aspect of professional capital, a fine-grained distinction is needed to highlight the importance of the affective dimension in teaching. For instance, Louis and Murphy (2017) pay special attention to the development of "care," as a principal's capacity to develop a caring school environment is critical for organizational learning, especially for schools with low income students. The importance of emotion resurfaces in Hong Kong in Chen's (2016) study of teachers' emotional repertoires shaping their commitment to student learning. Corresponding to the conceptual distinctions between instructional and transformational leadership, this paper extends the conceptualization of professional capital by highlighting the distinction of emotional capital. By emotional capital, this paper refers to the teachers' affective commitment (e.g. self-esteem and confidence) to transforming teaching and learning by inspiring their students' love for learning through caring cultures. The critical distinction of emotional capital from professional capital is the indeterminacy, yet essentiality, of this asset for school improvement. Although an emotionally rich culture does not directly impact upon student achievement, the successful implementation of good instructional practices is contingent upon teacher commitment to these practices (Cheung and Wong, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2012).

*The present study*

This paper examines principals' leadership approaches to teacher professional development within the system of school-based management in Hong Kong. Principals' interpretive views are considered in the context of school banding, which serves to mediate leadership strategies for school improvement. As teacher professional capital is the focus, this paper pays specific attention to instructional and transformational leadership strategies. The purpose of this study is to draw out theoretical, social, and practical implications of school-based management in East Asian education systems.

Statistical studies have identified attributes of exemplary principal leadership in teacher professional development (e.g. Blase and Blase, 2000; Liu *et al.*, 2016). However, few studies have explored the explanations of these attributes interpretively from the principals' own perspectives and the influence of the school context in shaping these attributes. This paper adopts a case study approach to elicit principals' perspectives of their leadership in teacher professional development.

A case study approach offers a reconstruction of interpretive principal accounts, guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. What is the purpose of teacher professional development, and how do principals exercise leadership to achieve this purpose?
- RQ2. How do the varied contexts faced by teachers in Bands One, Two, and Three schools shape principals' approaches to teacher professional development?
- RQ3. What are the key areas of improvement needed to the current teacher development initiatives in these schools, and how do they reflect the effects of the school-based management initiative?

**Methodology**

While the data are principal-centered, an interpretive analysis considers how the prevailing student achievement of the schools (school banding) shapes principals' decisions on what is deemed appropriate professional development for their teachers. Departing from assumptions that leadership attributes are intrinsic to individuals, this paper considers how principals contextualize instructional leadership to the professional development needs of their teachers.

*Sampling*

School principals are the opinion leaders of this study, offering insights into the prevailing leadership approaches to teacher professional development since the establishment of school-based management. Their views were examined for the reception of EDB policies as they are the leading managers that implement education initiatives in Hong Kong schools. As they reflected upon the purpose, approach, and key areas of improvement of teacher professional development in their schools, they gave insights into the interactions between middle leaders (e.g. vice-principals, reform coordinators, subject heads, etc.), teachers and the student profiles of the schools they were managing. By identifying and comparing the leadership approaches to teacher professional development, this paper aims to reveal the conditions that result in varying implications of school-based management for Bands One, Two, and Three schools. The principals will be broadly referred to by school banding to ensure the confidentiality of the schools and the principals.

The population studied comprises secondary school principals, as school associations with student banding apply predominantly to secondary schools in Hong Kong. There are about 500 secondary schools in Hong Kong. Majority of these schools (72 percent) are government-funded subsidized secondary schools. Government-funded subsidized

secondary schools share similar estimates of demographical characteristics in terms of number of classes in each level (four), class size (30), student population (700), number of teachers (50), school funding (an even distribution is targeted based on annual budget allocation to education), and the size and appearance of school compounds. In terms of student demographical profiles, however, Band Three schools tend to have a higher representation of SEN, ethnic minority students, students coming from low socioeconomic status family backgrounds.

Teacher distribution patterns between schools in terms of remuneration and education credentials are comparable. Teachers in Hong Kong are subject to standardized salary and ranking, and no bonuses or other monetary incentives are offered in alignment with the civil servants' remuneration guidelines. Almost the entire teacher cohort are certified to teach (97 percent) and have at least a bachelor's degree (99 percent), with a segment of non-graduate teachers that is shrinking in numbers over the years (Education Bureau, 2017). However, some distinctions in teacher demographics differentiate Band Three schools from their peers. Band Three schools tend comprise a higher proportion of beginning teachers, and have higher attrition rates as teachers seek career opportunities in higher banding schools when they gain teaching experience.

Schools were selected by stratified sampling to study a maximum variation of in-depth cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The sampling frame comprised secondary school principals, who were encouraged to reflect upon the practical issues they experienced as school-based managers implementing curriculum reform through continuous teacher professional development. The principals had been informed of the intention to publish the outcomes of their reflections in academic journals. This sampling frame comprises the whole Hong Kong secondary school population as: all Hong Kong secondary school principals were invited to participate in this study; and a balanced representation of 56 schools from Bands One ( $n = 16$ ), Two ( $n = 21$ ), and Three ( $n = 19$ ) responded to this invitation. Out of this sampling frame, nine Hong Kong secondary schools were selected from a representation of school bandings (three schools each from Bands One, Two, and Three) to compile a stratified random sample of all Hong Kong secondary schools. These schools represent multi-site case studies for identifying interconnected themes between cases based on school banding (Simons, 2015).

All nine schools in this sample are government-funded subsidized secondary schools. The nine schools share similar demographical profiles with other government-funded subsidized secondary schools that prevail in the Hong Kong educational landscape. Within the sample, the schools share the common profile of being located near low-cost public housing estates, attracting students from the neighborhood, who mostly come from lower middle to lower socioeconomic status family backgrounds.

### *Data collection*

The principals were invited to reflect upon their leadership efforts in teacher professional development. Guiding questions were provided in the data collection form, where they were to write their responses. The principals were given the choice to selectively respond to those questions based on their personal preferences. The set of questions was posed to the principals in Chinese, the prevailing working language among Hong Kong secondary schools. Examples of questions in the form include: "In your opinion, what is the purpose of teacher professional development, and what existing strategies are adopted in your school (please name examples)?" "Based on the current capacities of your teachers, what areas of improvement would you think are needed?" and "Are policy recommendations a part of the consideration in your planning of teacher professional development?" As the direct translation of the principals' comments from Chinese to English limits the effective articulation of the analysis, the findings are reworded. Where possible, phrases will be presented in quotation marks to give authenticity to the views articulated by the principals.



Supplementary data sources allowed the triangulation of the principals' perspectives with those of the teachers and the school. Where accessible, observations were conducted of the schools' teachers engaged in networked professional development. Insights were drawn from the teachers' sharing with other schools of their inquiry projects' relevance to policy initiatives, student learning, and the teachers' own professional curiosity. School websites also provided supplementary information on the school improvement efforts of each of the schools involved in this study.

### *Analysis*

A grounded theory approach was adopted to analyze the data. The responses were first classified with open coding, and the principals' views converged according to the school banding associations. A segmented analysis, where principals' approaches to professional development were differentiated by school banding followed, to explore the axial codes in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Through axial coding, interrelationships between school bandings were coded in terms of the factors contributing to effective curriculum reform (Cheung and Wong, 2011; "collaboration," "professional development," and "consensus"). Axial coding helped identify the maximum variation of strategies adopted by the principals for teacher professional development among Bands One, Two, and Three schools.

Thematic coding was then performed to identify the implications of banding on the schools' professional capital. Based on the comparison of similarities and differences between and within school bandings, theoretical insights were grounded in data to: highlight the underlying power relationships (Charmaz, 2005) that characterize school-based management in Hong Kong secondary schools; and build the theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2009) of emotional capital that extends the theory of professional capital. This theoretical extension lends insight into the differentiated opportunities for accumulating professional capital due to the change strategies adopted by schools of different bandings.

### **Findings**

Principals' views and approaches to teacher professional development converged under three themes. First, with school-based management, principals have the autonomy to exercise choices in developing the professional capital of the school. However, school principals remain obliged to recognize the power of state-defined examinations in determining the future destiny of not just schools, but also students. Second, the exercise of school autonomy in response to this obligation varies, depending upon the existing professional capital schools have in gaining an upper hand in the school banding system. Ideally, effective school-based management is dependent upon the principal's capacity to facilitate good instructional practices. However, principals are also obliged to adjust leadership practices to school contextual demands. Third, adaptations to contexts results in the varied developments of professional capital in schools, corresponding with the types of principal leadership adopted.

#### *Schools have choices, as well as obligations*

A deeper inquiry into school-based management revealed the influence state agencies continue to exercise over schools. State-defined examinations continue to define curriculum decisions under the school-based management system. All principals in this study are cognizant of the influence of the HKDSE in determining school competitive advantage. Admittedly, obsessing over the HKDSE examinations reinforces "rote and examination drilling nature of school education" in Hong Kong (Yuen *et al.*, 2012, p. 712). However, as student performance in the HKDSE examinations brings publicity regarding the schools' capacity to support student academic achievement, being responsive to the HKDSE

requirements has a definitive impact upon the enrollment rates of schools. With the examination content determined by the EDB, school autonomy will be exercised to align professional capital with the examination focus.

Therefore, instructional leadership of professional development converged on the interest of equipping teachers with the expertise to analyze school “DSE results.” With knowledge of how student learning can be improved, schools are in a better position to plan for targeted professional development that can support appropriate student development. The principals in this study were attuned to “policy reforms.” “Self-directed learning,” “special education needs (SEN),” “e-learning” and “science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM),” were selectively implemented based on their students’ learning capacity. Correspondingly, the support of teachers was sought through their professional development by encouraging “collaborative” strategies such as “lesson observation,” “mentoring” and “reflective practice.” Although strategic plans for professional development may not be restricted to improving student academic achievement, these decisions were nonetheless informed by assessments of school needs as indicated by their HKDSE results. The leadership strategies shared by the principals in this study illustrate how standardized examinations form the nexus that ensures the alignment between state agencies and schools. However, differentiated access to school autonomy arises from school banding, and consequently impacts upon student achievement in the HKDSE.

#### *Stratified contexts, varied leadership attributes*

The differences in the professional capital available to improve instructional strategies between school bandings coincided with the three factors that mediate curriculum reform across Hong Kong schools (Cheung and Wong, 2011): building a culture of collaboration among teachers (social capital); teacher professional development (human capital); and teacher agreement to implement reform initiatives disseminated by the EDB (decisional capital).

Principals in Band Three schools struggled to find the “entry point,” citing the challenges of “teachers’ workload,” “learner diversity,” and “misfit” between proposed policy initiatives and school context. When “time affords,” professional development had to “start small,” aiming to help teachers with the immediate demands of “classroom management” and “restoring student confidence” with “whatever means available.” One principal emphasized the “need to consider this is a Band Three school,” as EDB initiatives are “designed for the middle majority.” Another principal reinforced the view that policy initiatives needed to be carefully implemented “to ensure they support the learning needs of our students, and not result in backlash.”

In challenging teaching environments, having colleagues that lend mutual support is a promising means to find coherence in the face of “fleeting educational trends.” Principals in Band Three schools recurrently emphasized the importance of “strengthening the synergies between middle leaders and teachers.” However, collaborative cultures had not developed, despite the high value accorded by the principals to this practice. Weak synergies appear to be entrenched in issues of “confidence.” One principal surmised that, “Teachers’ confidence in their professional capacity to implement instructional reforms needs to be (first) developed.” To secure teacher agreement to put aside urgent issues of classroom management, principals first needed to secure teacher confidence that professional development initiatives were indeed relevant for student development. Teachers might remain skeptical about the effectiveness of instructional theories without first addressing similar “confidence” issues of their students. Therefore, principals prioritized transformational leadership approaches to teacher professional development, as the foundations of professional confidence need to be built before the growth of professional capacity can take place.

Band Two school principals in this study were the most proactive in working with the EDB to implement instructional reforms. Principals actively observed the recommendations and resources provided, such as the “EDB three-year plan.” The principals elaborated on the importance of teacher professional development as an essential component of this “plan.” Principals were proactive in leading a whole-school approach to annual strategic planning and review, and adopted professional development based on the areas that were strategic for school development in the next years. For example, one school principal had organized teachers into learning communities, paying attention to EDB recommendations of how teacher capacity could be strengthened to cater to SEN students.

Teachers were generally receptive to the increased need to work together. Despite the increased workload, collaborative cultures have helped improve instructional practice, such as when teachers co-plan teaching based on evidence of student learning. In one school, examples of initiatives introduced to encourage learning communities included the use of lesson observation, HKDSE results, and student academic and non-academic participation data to develop instructional strategies. However, the middle leaders expressed their preference for conventional professional development workshops, in contrast to the beginning teachers, who may benefit more from learning communities through mentoring by experienced teachers. Taking into consideration the feedback of the teachers, this principal emphasized the importance of implementing professional development with a light touch to ensure deep learning, while keeping EDB initiatives in mind. In another school, the principal and vice-principal, with the support of the subject heads, performed direct instructional supervision, seeing this as their personal responsibility to audit instructional quality.

Principals of Band One schools saw professional development as strategic for building cultures of collaboration to improve teacher reflective practice. Proactive leadership was demonstrated by offering a coherent vision of which of the “educational trends” the school would adopt, in consultation with teachers regarding their professional development needs. In comparison to other school bandings, principals of Band One schools demonstrated the strongest autonomy from the EDB in defining how teacher professional development should be organized to support student achievement. Although the question of whether policy initiatives were considered was posed to this sample of Band One school principals, the selective inattention to this query was tacitly expressed in the absence of references to the EDB as the principals shared their reflections of their own leadership strategies.

Band One school principals appeared to be empowered to facilitate professional development with the most autonomy from “external accountability” considerations. In contrast, Band Two school principals who sought to uplift academic achievement seemed to pay greater attention to “EDB recommendations.” Due to the distinct characteristics of Band Three schools, transformational leadership was prioritized, in contrast to the stronger instructional leadership that prevailed among other school bandings. These differentiated leadership approaches may be said to be adaptive to student learning needs. However, differentiated leadership also reinforces the varied development of professional capital. Insight into how leadership styles initially informed by student banding become consequential to reinforcing school capacities can be derived from the long-term views adopted by the principals in what needs to be improved through teacher professional development.

#### *Forms of, and consequences for, school professional capital*

Optimism about student performance in the HKDSE examinations empowered the Band One school principals to explore how strong human capital can be further enhanced. Although employing similar professional development strategies as did schools from other bandings, the approach of instructional leadership differed for Band One principals, who could exercise a facilitating role by entrusting teachers with “shared instructional

leadership” (Marks and Printy, 2003). Teachers thus undertook instructional change as collaborative partners (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Lancer, 2015). As feedback was actively sought by the principals on how teachers can be better supported to pursue their interests with professional development, teacher leadership opportunities were made available to all teachers with or without formal leadership appointments. Given their autonomy, Band One school teachers created instructional breakthroughs while ensuring policy, student, and personal interests were satisfied.

Band One schools illustrate how effective facilitation of instructional leadership, as opposed to the less effective direct supervision of instruction, is contingent upon the human capital accumulated. A principal in one of the Band One schools of this study may ask their teachers if anyone is interested in taking up a project that responds to a new instructional need. Without having to worry about classroom management, interested teachers embrace the initiative and outperform. With strong professional capital, Band One schools have the competitive advantage of offering empowering forms of social capital to teachers. An example was the use of mentoring to collaboratively define “what is a good lesson?,” as described by a principal. This empowering culture offers affirmation in gearing up for the accumulation of decisional capital. A clear consensus was demonstrated among Band One principals on the importance of empowering teachers with the capacity to bridge gaps in theory and practice through reflective practice. The professional development strategies of Band One school principals provide insight into how nuances in instructional leadership influence student achievement. Having controlled for differences in student achievement between schools, Lee *et al.* (2012) demonstrated positive student achievement is brought about by facilitating instructional management approaches, and the reverse is demonstrated of close instructional supervision. Extending these findings, facilitating instructional leadership is both the cause and the effect of high student achievement. High student achievement is self-perpetuating, as it encourages the practice of facilitating instructional leadership, which in turn has a positive influence on student achievement.

Band Two schools relied upon external social and decisional capital to accelerate the accumulation of human capital, reflected in the strong policy responsiveness. To secure continued improvements in student academic performance, Band Two schools leverage policy networks to align their teachers with strategic forms of professional development. The use of direct instructional supervision serves its purpose of ensuring student academic performance is sustained, and hopefully will eventually surpass current banding benchmarks. However, as Lee *et al.* (2012) caution, the adoption of high external accountability approaches toward instructional leadership is unsustainable, as poor teacher morale will eventually affect student learning negatively. A Band Two principal expressed concern over the “unsustainable” professional development strategies in her/his school, as “teachers lack deep learning and are experiencing ‘policy overdrive’”. For Band Two school principals, who remained anxious as their schools strive toward sustaining student academic improvement through external support, conservative approaches may continue. Remembering the crisis of poor student learning a decade ago, one Band Two principal had taken a direct supervision approach to jolt students into becoming more proactive and disciplined through competition and cooperative learning. Another Band Two principal sought to sustain the boost to human capital rendered by external state support, but did so by shifting the reliance on external support to developing internal school capacities. S/he resolved to “not chase educational trends blindly.” The selection of meaningful instructional initiatives is essential for developing internal networks (social capital) to bring about reflective teacher practice (decisional capital).

An extension of Hargreaves and Fullan’s concept of professional capital is needed to explain the situation of Band Three schools. Band Three schools had to first build “emotional capital” to restore the confidence of their students, whose self-esteem has been

undermined by the negative labeling of their learning abilities. This commitment often had to become a whole-school effort, engaging in emotional labor at a scale uncharacteristic of schools of other bandings, by “whatever the means,” as a Band Three school principal asserted. With an overrepresentation of demands imposed by student diversity, classroom management, and disciplinary issues, teachers forego professional development, as the forms of professional capital offered do not address their immediate teaching needs.

The professional development “tools” offered to mainstream schools by state agencies are valuable professional capital for Band Three schools. However, caution was exercised in adopting EDB initiatives to “avoid (the) backlash” of having to demonstrate school effectiveness according to standardized policy expectations. Without the strong alignment with external social and decisional capital offered by state agencies, Band Three principals had to be “selective” and “start small,” fearing the opportunity costs incurred when building professional capital. Time spent on accumulating professional capital also drains teachers’ time from building emotional capital. Therefore, the sacrificial self-denial of professional development due to “lack of time” among Band Three teachers could be the result of competing demands of professional capital and emotional capital.

It can be said that despite the wealth of decisional capital, Band Three teachers had to invest their attention in developing their students in domains that students of other bandings already possess (e.g. parental cultural capital). These experiences may be transformational for both teachers and students, but do not relate directly to the enrichment of instructional practices and student performance in the HKDSE examinations. As transformational leadership has been found to have less impact on student academic achievement than instructional leadership (Robinson, 2008), Band Three principals will need to explore how transformational leadership in fostering positive school climates might be translated into the human capital valued by teachers and students within the broader education context.

Although transformational leadership can support the development of robust emotional capital to restore students’ self-esteem and confidence in learning, rising above the academic benchmarks depends on the development of professional capital. The accumulation of human capital rests upon principals’ facilitation of effective shared instructional leadership. A principal “hopes teachers take the initiative to apply these insights and adopt self-directed learning, and interschool professional development (to improve their instructional practice).” In this, s/he articulates the importance of a whole-school approach in transforming the emotional capital they have accumulated into professional capital that can help support the more extrinsic domains of student academic performance.

## Discussion and conclusion

Overall, schools have benefited from the decentralization of school-based management. Although the school curriculum continues to be constrained by state-defined examinations, principals are now empowered to decide how school resources can be deployed to improve achievement outcomes. Band One school principals appeared to leverage school-based management most effectively, adopting facilitating and exploratory approaches to instructional leadership. This in turn enhances teacher commitment to/and student learning (Lee *et al.*, 2012). Band Two principals are the most policy-responsive, being obliged to ensure their schools meet externally imposed accountability standards. Where schools are able to accumulate professional capital while satisfying accountability benchmarks, teachers remain supportive of the instructional leadership of their principals. Among some of the Band Three schools, the establishment of middle leader positions and hiring of teaching assistants with the funding made available by the EDB reform initiatives has helped create career advancement opportunities and free up time for professional development.

Some schools are supposed in principle to benefit from school autonomy, but have first had to overcome barriers to effective school-based management. The accounts shared by the Band Three school principals offered insights into the source of teacher discontentment, disengagement, reform burnout, and lack of capacity to support the EDB reform initiatives observed by Cheung and Wong (2011). As reported by these principals, Band Three schools are most likely to experience an overrepresentation of “learner diversity” issues. The issue of “learner diversity” has obliged these schools to be cautious about funding sources imposing mainstream benchmarks that do not fit well with the needs of their students (Yuen *et al.*, 2012). Rather than the fear of negative appraisal, this “avoidance” of state support appears to be motivated by the need to prioritize emotional labor over professional capital. The predominant focus on transformational leadership among Band Three school principals may be the most appropriate response to contextualize professional development to the needs of these schools. However, although alternative leadership priorities are needed for the Band Three school context, an overinvestment on the transformational aspects of school improvement serves to divert resources away from the mainstream priorities of academic achievement. The dilemma of Band Three school principals offers an explanation for the prevailing findings on the weak relationship between transformational leadership and student achievement (Robinson, 2008). Within educational contexts where academic achievement takes on a disproportionate priority over other forms of student learning, leadership that focuses on the transformational and more holistic aspects of teaching and learning can be expected to perform less effectively. Conversely, instructional leadership, which works directly on influencing instructional practice, would perform better in improving academic achievement outcomes.

#### *Implications of the conceptualization of school-based management in East Asian contexts*

“School-based management” manifests both as a domain of ideals and a system of rewards in today’s educational contexts. Band One schools embody school-based management in terms of both ideal and tangible domains. Reassurance that strong foundations in academic achievement will absorb disruptions from instructional experimentation enables principals to accumulate professional capital in ways independent of state pressures for standardization.

Band Three schools exercised autonomy to make conscious choices in the emotional labor of restoring student self-esteem and confidence in learning. However, under the system of rewards, the accumulation of emotional capital produces intangible outcomes that evade quantification by examination and accountability benchmarks. With the pile-up of traditional educational practices and new reforms, disadvantaged schools tend to command weaker fiscal independence despite school-based management (Hawkins, 2000).

Band Two schools are the intermediary beneficiaries of school-based management. Under the system of rewards, fiscal independence can be sought by securing state funding through subscribing to its reform initiatives. As schools seek to acquire fiscal independence, they also gain access to state support to grow the professional capital of the school. In return, principals are to be accountable for the support they have secured. Where schools were able to benefit from the accumulation of professional capital, some principals may attempt to reinvest the resources acquired from the system of rewards to actualize school-based management ideals. To excel in school-based management in the domain of ideals, instructional leadership in Band Two schools needs to distinguish between facilitating instructional management and direct supervision of instruction. This may imply acquiring a fine-grained approach to utilizing state resources to accumulate professional capital, while taking a proactive stance at negotiating how accountability benchmarks may be met with the support of teachers and state agencies.

*Social implications*

In East Asian education systems, economic rationales tend to inform the adoption of school-based management. Lee (2017) refers to this economically informed engineering of future societies as “identity grafting.” Identity grafting refers to the gap between the domains of ideals and practice due to: the distinctive conditions experienced by the originators of reform ideals and those who imported the reform practices into the region; and the competing worldviews of the regional initiators of these reforms.

School-based management in East Asia was inspired by the US model of decentralized schools (Muta, 2000). In contrast to the US schools’ autonomy from regulatory control by local district governments, school-based management in Hong Kong was introduced to a previously centralized education system by state agencies. As labor production is the state objective for the decentralization of educational administration, flexibility and differentiation is encouraged with the retention of centralized state power.

The conditions that distinguish Hong Kong school-based management from its US counterpart can be defined by where the locus of power is concentrated. In Hong Kong, power is retained by the offices of the centralized agencies that define how school autonomy is to be exercised. Characteristic of most initiatives implemented in East Asian systems that have originated from Western educational movements, the gap between the domain of the ideals and the practice of school-based management is rooted within competing views about how much autonomy is to be delegated to schools. Schools are thus more amenable to being pragmatic about the values school-based management is supposed to uphold. When rewards compete with ideals regarding the empowering effects of school-based management, pragmatism tends to take precedence.

The conceptualization of school-based management as an outcome of identity grafting offers an explanation to the insufficient attention paid to the professional capital of schools in Hong Kong. In schools with weak professional capital, principals have poor leverage at initiating instructional leadership. This situation coincides with the plight of developing countries with weak economies and poor leverage of education to enhance national economic competitiveness. In schools where instructional leadership is exercised at the expense of transformational leadership, schools maintain a pragmatic view that interim compromises are the means to achieving school-based management ideals eventually (e.g. structuring for direct instructional supervision). This situation coincides with economically driven East Asian education systems.

As autonomy is implanted in East Asian educational landscapes by the state, school principals have limited power to overturn decisions for the retention of state-defined examination systems. Rewards-based school-based management thus enjoys strong legitimacy in East Asian education systems, resulting in instructional leadership being more valued than transformational leadership. The distinction between professional capital and emotional capital explains the weak valuation of teachers’ emotional labor in the face of high stakes examination systems. As an issue that education systems worldwide continue to grapple with, collaboration is needed between schools, state agencies, and other educational stakeholders to (re)define the conditions that will bring about the best learning outcomes for children.

*Practical implications*

The schools involved in this study are making full use of the autonomy available to them through school-based management to improve their teachers’ capacity to support students who are characterized by different ability bandings. The findings of this study have outlined some potential opportunities and pitfalls that principals may wish to consider in this endeavor. Having gained a foothold in the Hong Kong education landscape, principals may leverage school-based management systems to customize teacher professional

development for the enhancement of their schools' professional capital. More important than exemplary leadership, it may be imperative to focus on refining contextualized leadership practices. Within this school-based management context, where the state maintains its influence, policymakers may wish to exercise greater flexibility in the institution of accountability benchmarks. In this way, principals will be more open to receiving feedback on how contextualized leadership can be exercised, while minimizing the ramifications of perpetuating educational inequality.

### Limitations

Some research limitations ought to be considered for the conclusion of this paper. First, although sampling procedures were implemented to ensure a good representation of views, the sampling frame was limited to a small sample of principals. Second, as depth is prioritized over generalizability in qualitative case findings, this paper draws references to complementary quantitative survey studies that have been conducted in related research domains. Third, echoing Lee *et al.*'s (2012) concern about the "perceived sensitivity of public exposure of value-added data" (p. 601) in Hong Kong, data are presented as interwoven accounts, rather than being traced to specific principals and schools.

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### Further reading

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