

AN OVERVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP RESEARCH IN THE EAST ASIA REGION

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Introduction

While the majority of research in the field of educational leadership and management draws from Euro-centric work and developments, there is a growing awareness among researchers that other societies are now offering insightful glimpses of leadership in non-Western educational, social, and political contexts. Walker (2015) suggests this is very much the case when making inter-country comparisons: “Successful leadership in the vertically aligned cultural systems that typify East Asian societies, when viewed more deeply, can look very different to leadership as observed in many Western settings” (p. 303).

This overview of educational leadership research topics across selected East Asian countries will provide comparisons of research directions undertaken in different regions. It will first consider research activity in Hong Kong and Singapore, those being the two countries with the greatest volume of research literature in educational leadership. Then follows a review of topic trends in countries with a smaller body of research, such as China, Thailand, Korea and Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia, together with a cross-country comparison of topics studied. The overview concludes by considering implications for future research, which focuses on the need to unveil “hidden literatures” of educational leadership within indigenous languages and for researchers to advance a case for a collective inter-country focus on research agendas of mutual benefit.

Major Research Areas

Hong Kong

In the field of educational leadership, Hong Kong has been little different to other global education systems, where it has experienced “a pervasive and influential transformation that has incorporated major changes in leadership development” (Harris, Jones, Adams, Perera, & Sharma, 2014, p. 865). As in other jurisdictions, Hong Kong’s school leaders have had to move beyond reactive stances to become more proactive and strategic in their approaches to continuous improvement (Pang & Pisapia, 2012). This situation has come about because of similar universal governance trends away from centralised decision-making to devolved responsibility and greater autonomy for school operations.

These reforms associated with devolution have had an influential effect on research into educational leadership and management in Hong Kong. Hallinger, Lee, and Szeto (2013) undertook a “topographical analysis” of the scholarly literature in East Asia with the aim of identifying leadership topics published in a core set of eight educational leadership and management journals between 1995 and 2012. Their review of research revealed that scholarship had been “directed towards conceptualizing, describing, and analysing not only leadership practices, but also their antecedents and effects” (p. 265). The authors identified major topics arising from four major areas of research study:

1. Understanding how the cultural and organisational contexts of the educational system in Hong Kong had influenced the enactment of school leadership. In this regard, they defined a cultural context as relating to the impact of Hong Kong Chinese culture on attributes and behaviours associated with school leadership practice (e.g. Dimmock & Walker, 2005). This was the category with the most significant number of studies.
2. Conceptualising and describing how leadership is enacted by leaders who assume different leadership positions in the school system. The range of target subjects included principals (e.g. Walker & Ko, 2011); deputy principals (e.g. Kwan, 2009); middle leaders, such as department heads and curriculum leaders; and teacher leaders (e.g. Ho & Tikly, 2012).
3. Linking leadership effects to school change and improvement. This second-most studied topic was a direct reflection of educational reforms, resulting in a concentration on the role and contribution of leadership in the process of organisational change (e.g. Ng, 2011). In addition, related research studies explored the role of leadership in developing an organisation’s capacity (e.g. Cheng, 2012) and overall school improvement (e.g. Hallinger & Heck, 2011).
4. Studying the impact of the domain of human resources, which was largely in response to policy changes within Hong Kong’s school system. Research investigations on this theme included studies on school leader preparation and the selection of school leaders (e.g. Kwan, 2011, 2012).

In relation to the theme of school leadership preparation, Walker, Bryant, and Lee (2013) maintained that, until 1999, “leadership preparation in Hong Kong followed no clear and coherent pathway” (p. 413). Subsequently, a Hong Kong framework for principalship was developed, taking its starting point from a range of international research. Its adaptation to the Hong Kong context resulted in the identification of four leadership domains: strategic leadership; instructional leadership; organisational leadership; and community leadership. It is interesting to note that six core programme areas arising from these domains “are further delineated by a structure of values, knowledge, skills and attributes that guide leadership development programmes for aspiring principals . . . newly appointed principals and serving principals” (p. 414). This parallels the knowledge base and dispositions that inform the Kiwi Leadership Framework for Principals in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Finally, the influence of the universal literature of educational leadership is also seen in Hong Kong research studies devoted to a current research theme of school

principal effectiveness linked to improving student learning outcomes. Here, Walker, Lee, and Bryant (2014) reviewed research on the links between Hong Kong principals and student achievement and identified three significant factors. First, a small number of empirical studies outlined the importance of effective leader communication in Hong Kong schools. For example, the authors located a study by Chui, Sharpe, and McCormick (1996) which found that principal-teacher communication was enhanced by developing a shared vision for the school. Second, the research topics of quality assurance and accountability of principals for their educational outputs have been well canvassed in the international literature (Day *et al.*, 2009). In the educational context of Hong Kong, the same external accountabilities came to the fore as a result of devolved responsibility for school governance. A third research focus came in the form of resource management and how principals used resources to support the learning goals of the school. Global school-based management practices were reflected in Hong Kong schools being given more autonomy in resource allocation, raising concern in some quarters about potential conflict in the ways schools distributed their scarce resources (Cheng & Chan, 2000).

Singapore

In 2015, a review of empirical studies on school leadership practice in Singapore was published (Ng, Nguyen, Wong, & Choy, 2015). A total of 37 research studies were selected for the review, which aimed to present an overview of the leadership qualities, styles, and roles of Singapore's principals. The researchers identified 16 mainly quantitative studies during the period 1984-1999 which focused on generic leadership qualities and styles, the role of principals in mentoring other leaders, and the impact principals have on improving student learning. In the period 2000-2013, research interest centred on 21 mainly qualitative studies that explored leadership behaviour and the role of principals in student development.

The Singapore findings tended to reflect personal skills which were similar to those of leaders in other organisations. For example, they revealed commonly shared traits, with leaders being “empathetic” and “open-minded”; cognitive skills, such as “personal mastery” and “self-reflection”; motivational skills, such as “inspiring” and “trustworthy”; and social skills, such as “a good listener” and “willing to trust” (Yu, 2009; Zhang, Lin, & Fao, 2012, cited in Ng *et al.*, 2015, p. 518).

Factors affecting principal leadership correlated with two existing areas in the international literature: personal and contextual factors. In the personal domain, influential factors were predominantly based around early life experiences, such as family upbringing, religion, work experience, which, in turn, shaped principals' value systems. Chew, Stott, and Boon (2003) also identified contributory human elements in the form of teachers, other principals, and friends, while Retna (2011) examined the impact of personal factors on principals' success through vision, personal growth, and the process of self-reflection.

Research studies also reported the impact of contextual factors on the leadership styles of Singapore's principals. For example, Stott and Low (2000) identified an increasingly “masculine-oriented” culture among a sample of school principals, in which “principals tend to display more ‘assertiveness’ and ‘competitiveness’ rather

than to adopt 'feminine' traits such as care and compassion" (cited in Ng *et al.*, 2015, p. 521). Similarly, Sharpe and Gopinathan's (2000) study revealed a cultural element influencing leadership styles of principals. However, Ng *et al.* also noted some gaps in the exploration of context-specific factors: local community influences were not examined in studies since 1984, and there appeared to be little research conducted on the impact of organisational factors on principal leadership.

The third area of research focused on the impact principals have on their schools and on student development. A number of studies addressed the role of principals in bringing about teacher commitment (e.g. Cheong, 1986), where principals were aware of including teachers in school-wide decision-making and in change management within the school. However, a study by Lim (2006) showed a reluctance on the part of principals to delegate, for fear of being seen to abdicate their duties and responsibilities. In addition, studies highlighted the role of principals in promoting the professional development of teachers, whereby teachers were encouraged to become pedagogical leaders while still adhering to the school's overall vision and goals (Ng *et al.*, 2015; Chew & Andrews, 2010).

In terms of student development, research studies pointed to the indirect influence of principals on learning through the teaching behaviour and practices of their staff (Koh, Steers, & Terborg, 1995). In the area of students with learning needs, Ong and Dimmock (2013) found that Singapore's principals used various strategies, including working within Ministry of Education guidelines and adapting these guidelines to match the needs of individual students, all of which was underpinned by a pervasive ethic of care, to ensure there was no discrimination against "academically weaker" students.

Like Hong Kong, Singapore maintained a focus of research attention on school leader preparation. Harris *et al.* (2014) believed that one of the most significant aspects of Singapore's education system was its investment in leadership development across all levels, from teacher leaders to heads of department to principals. Under the state's policy initiative "Teach Less, Learn More" (TLLM), Walker *et al.* (2013) wrote that the role of school leaders "has been redefined to stress the development of creative and innovative transformational leaders, and instructional leaders capable of creating and implementing innovative programmes for diverse learners" (p. 413). This leadership pathway parallels international directions in its push for transformational and creative school leadership processes in an increasingly diverse environment.

Research in Other Countries

China

In their review of research on school principal leadership in mainland China from 1998-2013, Walker and Qian (2015) sought to assess key findings from international publications on that topic together with conclusions about that country's knowledge base. They identified 39 journal papers and 18 book chapters written in English about school principalship in China. Their major findings centred on three general themes. First, research focused on the contextual understandings of principalship. The emerging

trend was that “school principals have often found themselves struggling with the contradictions, tensions and ambiguities between traditional cultural expectations and the requirements of recent reform initiatives” (Walker & Qian, 2015, p. 480). The authors cite Bush and Qiang (2002), who argued that four kinds of culture had impacted on Chinese school principals: traditional, socialist, enterprise, and patriarchal cultures. A second area of attention focused on indigenous practices of school principals. Examples included the enhanced sensitivity of Chinese principals to relationships with education officials and their promotion of students’ examination results. The latter course of action compelled principals to adopt a core focus on learning and on teacher collegiality. Third, a knowledge base is emerging about the professional development of principals and how principals might manage change at the policy level. The authors note particular challenges arising from “the uneven distribution of resources and development opportunities caused by China’s vast geographical and economic diversity and the hierarchal nature of Chinese society (e.g. Wu and Ehrich, 2009; Chu and Xiu, 2012)” (Walker & Qian, 2015, p. 482).

The role of the state in setting and monitoring policy has remained a consistent influence. Local governments, for example, select school principals and evaluate principals’ performance mainly through students’ examination results (Gu, 2011; Yin, Lee, & Wang, 2014). Despite continued claims by researchers that the leadership practices of principals are shaped by culture, Walker and Qian (2015) advise caution in the face of such claims. They advocate that, while it is important to understand leadership differences across cultures and countries, “it is equally important to identify the common passions, aspirations, leadership qualities and strategies that were shared by successful leaders both nationally and internationally” (p. 483).

Thailand

A new National Education Act (NEA) was passed in Thailand in 1999. The ramifications of this law resulted in new educational goals and reforms in schools, particularly in relation to pedagogical practice and school-based management systems (Kaewdang, 2001). Two major research studies later followed to gauge the impact of such reforms on school principals. The first study described the profile of principal instructional leadership in Thailand, drawing on data from a representative sample of 1,195 principals across the country in 2008 (Hallinger & Lee, 2013). The second research investigation explored the extent to which changes had taken place in the instructional leadership practices of principals since the adoption of the NEA in 1999 (Hallinger & Lee, 2014).¹

Findings from these studies on the national profile of instructional leadership suggested that Thai principals were only moderately engaged in the role. They appeared to give “significantly greater emphasis to activities that *define a school mission* and *promote a positive school learning climate* than those involved in *managing the instructional programme*” (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013, p. 410). As a result of findings

1 It should be noted that, prior to the advent of the NEA in 1999, there were no equivalent translations in the Thai language for the terms “instructional leadership” and “leadership for learning” (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013).

that showed little change in the leadership behaviour of Thai principals, the researchers raised questions about the capacity of principals to follow through on the educational reforms and about policy-driven efforts to change the mind-set of Thai principals:

Our data suggest that principals have been slow to don the garb of instructional leaders. Indeed, the “genetic code” of Thai principals as “government officials” emerged as a significant factor in understanding change, or lack of change, in the principals’ role behaviour during the reform era. This has shaped their role orientation to an extent that has maintained the centrality of managerial and political systems, even in the face of centrally directed reforms that call for more active instructional leadership (Bunyamani, 2003). (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013, p. 414)

Indonesia

School reforms in Indonesia gained momentum with the passing of the National Education System Law in 2003. One significant outcome was the autonomy granted to local government bodies to oversee the management of primary and secondary schools (Sofa, Fitzgerald, & Jawas, 2012). It is against this backdrop of reform that educational leadership research has taken place. For example, Hariri, Monypenny, and Prideaux (2012) investigated the decision-making styles of school principals in this self-managing environment. They found that independently derived styles could help improve facets of job satisfaction for individual teachers. In addition, research by Sumintono, Sheyoputri, Jiang, Misbach, and Jumintono (2015) revealed challenges facing principal preparation programmes; little is known from the empirical literature about being a principal in Indonesia.

In a more global comparison, Raihani’s (2008) study draws on the research protocols of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) in providing an insight into school leadership practices in Indonesia, particularly in Muslim schools. Three public secondary schools in Yogyakarta were selected, in which principals demonstrated successful school leadership over a period of time. Findings replicated universal considerations, such as promoting a shared vision, building personal and professional capabilities, and the impact of each principal’s beliefs and values.

Malaysia

A major step was taken in Malaysia in 1994 with the establishment of the Malaysian Educative Leadership Project (MELP). This step was in response to a need to develop a practical theory of educational leadership “considered appropriate in the Malaysian context of rapid economic and social development, national unity and Islamic revivalism” (Bajunid *et al.*, 1996, p. 21). The research project resulted in the development of an instrument, the Malaysian Educative Leadership Questionnaire (MELQ), for use in school communities, particularly for improving the quality of teaching and learning.

In concert with this preliminary work, Bajunid (1996) explored the building of an indigenous corpus of knowledge in educational management in Malaysia. Among the major concepts in popular use were consultation (*musyawarah*), collaboration

(*gotong royang*), excellence (*el falah*), personal refinements (*adab*), and accountability (*amanah*) (Bajunid, 1996, p. 53). Topical points of interest included the role of values in educational administration and the knowledge and indigenous corpus behind the training of educational administrators. Similarly, in a generic leadership study of 512 managers from three ethnic groups, Selvarajah and Meyer's (2008) findings suggest that Malaysian managers "maintain distinctive leadership behaviour along ethnic lines and a Malaysian leadership identity is still in its infant stage" (p. 693).

In a more recent overview of school leadership research, Jones *et al.* (2015) highlight some of the challenges Malaysian principals face, particularly in regard to new expectations of accountability. Research data showed that, in a list of five major leadership practices, principals ranked highest the construct "enable others to act," thereby emphasising the influence a leader has in empowering others through distributed responsibilities.

Korea and Vietnam

While Hong Kong and Singapore have the greatest number of research studies on educational leadership, sporadic studies occur in other East Asia regions. For example, the arrival of educational reforms in Korea has sharply focused attention on change processes together with the attitude of teachers and principals to undertaking the management of school change. This impetus for change has been apparent in Korea's vocational schools, which have faced serious challenges in the form of out-of-date curricula and declining student enrolments. In order to meet such challenges, there has been a desire on the part of teachers to be heavily involved in the reform process (Rojewski & Park, 2005). However, teachers were unable to contribute as actively as they would have liked on account of hierarchical approaches to enacting the reforms.

Accordingly, a research study by Park and Jeong (2013) examined the relationship between principal leadership and teacher resistance to school reforms. At the end of 2010, data were derived from 967 teachers and 32 principals in Korean vocational high schools as they underwent government-driven reforms. The researchers found that, in schools where principals demonstrated leadership initiative, teachers' emotional and behavioural resistance decreased. This finding suggested that principal leadership could eliminate some psychological barriers, one of the major obstacles, to change in schools: "In short, our findings may serve as some evidence supporting that a principal can serve as the change agent to alter school members' attitude and behaviours toward change when implementing school reforms, especially driven by external interveners" (Park & Jeong, 2013, p. 47).

Similarly, in Vietnam, Hallinger, Walker, and Trung (2015) found that the "practice of educational leadership remains largely 'invisible' to the international community of scholars" (p. 445). They reviewed international and local papers from Vietnam and located parallel findings, whereby the practice of school leadership was influenced by organisational, political, and socio-cultural forces impacting on the Vietnamese educational context. While there were examples of research studies conducted on school leadership practice (e.g. Pham, 2011), there was an emphasis on identifying contextual influences on principal leadership. Such influences were generally seen

to be in political lines of authority, where there was a greater focus on transmitting political and cultural values than on knowledge and skills (Tran, 2009). As a result, data suggested that principals directed their leadership efforts more towards managerial and political roles than their instructional role.

A Summary of Cross-country Research Topics

In a comprehensive review of research on educational leadership and management in Asia from 1995 to 2012, Hallinger and Chen (2015) presented a classification by volume of research topics studied in the field. This review covered the broad geographic regions of West Asia, South Asia, and East Asia. The results of their systematic review of the research literature are outlined in Table 1:

Table 1. Volume of publications by topic, 1995-2012. Source: Hallinger & Chen (2015).

Topic	No. of articles
Leadership in K-12 Schools	68 (14.2%)
Change, School Effects and Improvement	60 (12.6%)
Cultural Contexts	51 (10.7%)
Leadership in Higher Education	45 (9.4%)
Organizational Behavior (OB Variables and Climate/Culture)	40 (8.4%)
Governance (e.g. SBM and Decentralization)	36 (7.5%)
Human Resource Development	30 (6.3%)
Curriculum and Teaching	23 (4.8%)
Principals	21 (4.4%)
Vice Principals and Middle Leadership	17 (3.6%)
Values, Ethics and Social Justice	12 (2.5%)
ICT	12 (2.5%)
Decision Making	11 (2.3%)
Theory	8 (1.7%)
Emotions (includes Motivation, Satisfaction and Conflict)	8 (1.7%)
Parents and Community	7 (1.5%)
Economics of Education	6 (1.3%)
Marketing (Marketing, PR and Marketing)	6 (1.3%)
Gender	1 (0.2%)
Others	16 (3.3%)

The topics were classified into 20 categories as listed above. The volume of articles of the most common themes support this current overview of research findings regarding Leadership [in K-12 schools] (14%); Change, School Effects and Improvement (13%), and Cultural Contexts (11%). Topics attracting less attention included Gender, Marketing, and the Economics of Education. As referenced earlier in this sample of Asian countries, the distribution of knowledge production of educational leadership and management research was concentrated in two societies: Hong Kong and Singapore.

Implications for Future Research

The first implication from this overview of East Asia research arises from the disparity between countries with a well-developed body of knowledge in educational leadership and management and countries with a much smaller volume of research activity. For example, Hong Kong has produced an impressive body of research for international publication, while countries such as Japan and South Korea are not yet on the global landscape of research in the field. Hallinger and Chen (2015) point to an urgent need to review research in countries where there may well be a “hidden literature” in educational leadership and management:

In nations such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Turkey, India, China, Taiwan, Pakistan and Thailand, we have reason to believe that a substantial number of research papers have been written in indigenous languages. This assertion is supported by a recent review of research on the principalship in China by Walker *et al.* (2012). Their review uncovered a large Chinese language literature that is largely inaccessible to an international audience. We suggest that similar “hidden literatures” worthy of exploration may exist in other Asian countries. (p. 21)

A second implication can be seen in a move away from an individual country’s treatment of broad-based research themes to a prioritisation of educational leadership research agendas *across* countries. Such a collective focus on topics of mutual interest may contribute to greater depth and generalisability of research findings, which Hallinger and Chen describe as a “sustained focus on a set of issues by multiple scholars working in different contexts over time” (p. 23). Two current examples of this collective research approach are the International Successful School Principalship Project (25 countries since 2003) and the International School Leadership Development Network project (15 countries since 2011).² This cooperative, multi-scholar approach also has the benefit of building research capacity across countries.

However, it has to be acknowledged that there are obstacles to be overcome in such inter-regional and inter-country research projects. In the Asia region, Hallinger

2 The ISLDN project explores the concept of social justice and high-needs schools through a series of international case studies (Notman, 2015).

and Bryant (2013) see a major barrier in the political forces driving higher education in the region, in the form of economic competition and competition for world university rankings. In particular, they make the following argument:

We assert that the trend towards raising research performance in order to achieve higher university rankings may be counterproductive in this region of the world. Indeed, we regard knowledge production for the purpose of informing policy and practice as addressing more useful, meaningful, motivating, and important societal goals. (p. 631)

Conclusion

This overview of school leadership research in the East Asia region contributes to our growing understanding of the theory and practices of educational leadership, especially in transformational and distributive leadership, as they are enacted across different societies. Here, transformational leadership concepts focus on building leadership capability and on how best to utilise decision-making autonomy where that is being vested in school principals. The powerful impact of distributed leadership theory and practice is reinforced by research in East Asian countries where effective principals are using the collective talents of teachers in their schools.

It is also evident that, in a number of East Asian countries, research into educational leadership is at an embryonic stage of development. As such, “it cannot meet the needs of policy makers and practitioners. Furthermore, it appears to be making only limited contributions to scholarship more broadly. This conclusion was applicable across the entire region, with the possible exception of Hong Kong” (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013, p. 630). This, then, makes it all the more important to support universal calls from researchers in this field for a collective imperative, one that moves towards a collaborative setting of research agendas based on topics of mutual interest and around a range of educational environments that traverse different political and socio-cultural contexts.

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