

Leadership Preparation in China: Providers' Perspectives

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Abstract

In China, accreditation training programme has been a compulsory programme for all the aspiring and new principals, which is also a part of National Training Plan. Under such hierarchical system, leadership preparation in China is supported, implemented, evaluated, and also, constrained by different levels of administrative organisations and various professional providers. The purpose of the study was to understand the role definition and task allocation of different levels of administrations and providers, as well as how they work as a whole for leadership preparation. The study features a qualitative design that combined data from policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews of people who directly involved in this procedure. Data collected in qualitative strand were coded and analysed thematically through discourse analysis. We identified a completed, but disintegrated system for leadership preparation. The results provided important practice and policy implications. We suggest the

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collaboration and appropriate supervision among different providers and develop a systematic mechanism for principal preparation and development.

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Introduction

Evidence from school-improvement literature, from 1980s to the present day, discloses that school principals play a crucial role in enhancing and sustaining student achievement by promoting high-quality teaching in schools (Hendriks & Steen, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008), which is 'second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction' (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This evidence leads to a question about how to develop school leaders, and how to facilitate principals' professional learning (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Gronn, 2003). Numerous studies on new principalship have revealed that the transition from teaching to principalship is a daunting process (Kilinc & Gumus, 2020; Swen, 2019; A. Walker & Qian, 2006; Webber, Cowie, & Crawford, 2008), described by Daresh and Male (2000) as a 'culture shock' (J. Daresh & Male, 2000). There is a broad international consensus that the capacity of those who aspire to become principals needs to be systematically developed (T Bush, 2011; Cheung & Walker, 2006; Cowie & Crawford, 2007).

China is also aware that it is necessary to improve the quality of principal leadership, to raise the quality of general education. There is increasing political recognition of principal development and preparation, with a growing number of policies and regulations.

However, empirical research on leadership preparation is limited. This paper explores the leadership preparation process for high school principalship in China, through a multi-level analysis, including policy makers, DoE officials, programme organisers and lecturers, in what is a pluralist process.

Literature Review

Much international research shows how systematic leadership preparation could help new and aspiring principals with their first post (Kelly & Saunders, 2010; MacBeath, 2011), and this evidence leads some education systems to address the need to develop school leaders (Zhang & Brundrett, 2010). Empirical evidence demonstrates that leadership preparation programmes can stimulate changes in aspiring principals' educational orientation, perspectives, attitudes and skills (Matthews & Crow, 2003), all of which are essential to effective leadership practice.

Leadership Preparation and Accreditation

The turbulence of the school leader's world is created by constantly changing external impositions, and the need to respond to continuous internal demands, leading to multiple accountabilities (Erich et al., 2015). Leadership preparation refers to a pre-service activity, which focuses on initial preparation for aspiring principals. Initial principal preparation varies considerably across countries. Some programmes are well-established, for example in Singapore (Ng, 2008), Hong Kong (Ng & Szeto, 2016), England (T Bush, 2013) and the US (Fanoos & He, 2020; Fryer, 2011; Lazaridou, 2017), while others are more recent, such as those in Canada (A. D. Walker, Bryant, & Lee, 2013), Germany (Klein & Schanenberg, 2020) and South Africa (Gurmu, 2020; Okoko, 2020; Okoko, Scott, & Scott, 2015).



Bush (2008) made a strong call for principal preparation describing leadership preparation as a 'moral obligation'. 'Requiring individuals to lead schools, which are often multimillion-dollar businesses, manage staff and care for children, without specific preparation, may be seen as foolish, even reckless, as well as being manifestly unfair for the new incumbent' (Ibid, p. 30). The process of developing principals involves not only completing professional training but also engaging in personal transformation (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; G. M Crow & Glascock, 1995). However, it is not easy for teachers to change their career identity (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). New principals struggle to relinquish the comfort and confidence of a known role, such as being a teacher, and feel insecure in a new, unknown, role as a school leader (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Spillane & Lee, 2013; Tahir, Thakib, Hamzah, Mohd Said, & B., 2017). Principals also feel overwhelmed with issues such as isolation and loneliness (Miklos, 2009; Tahir et al., 2017), transition into their new occupations (Spillane & Lee, 2013), cultural inheritance and legacy of the previous leader (Liang, 2011) and other school managerial issues, i.e. school budget, multiple tasks, ineffective staff, burden paper work (Garcia Garduno, Slater, & Lopez-Gorosava, 2011; Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008). All these pressures lead to requests for formal preparation programmes for new principals (Slater et al., 2018).

Leadership Preparation as a Systematic Process

Several researchers indicate that systematic preparation, rather than inadvertent experience, is more likely to produce effective leaders (Avolio, 2005; T Bush, 2008; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; M. Young, Crow, & Murphy, 2009) . Some scholars also identify the features of exemplary preparation programs,

including well defined theories, coherent curriculum, active learning strategies, quality internship, knowledgeable faculty, social and professional support, standards-based evaluation and rigorous recruitment (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, & Orr., 2009; Weinstein & Hernandez, 2016).

These studies illustrate that the process of leadership preparation is systematic and interrelated and requires the participation of various individuals and organisations. Policy documents are defined as 'a statement of intent' (Forrester & Garratt, 2016). Yuan (2018) indicates that Chinese educational policies should be categorized into formulation, implementation and evaluation stages, to make the policy process systematic, interrelated and orderly (Yuan, 2018). Globally, researchers found that systematic and administrative-oriented preparation could bring positive changes to new principals' preparation, socialisation and professionalisation ((T Bush & Chew, 1999; Lazaridou, 2017; Plsek & Wilson, 2001; Weinstein & Hernandez, 2016).

Context: Leadership Preparation in China

China has long been a hierarchical society, and this shapes principal development and how it is enacted. Under the macro-guidance of the Ministry of Education, principal development is coordinated and managed through four administrative levels, national, provincial, municipal and county (MOE, 2017). The research reported in this paper focuses on the compulsory national level training programme for new and aspiring principal preparation at high school level in China, which is funded by the national government and implemented by provincial education faculties. As a rapidly developing, and highly centralized, country, China has emphasised principal development, at both political and practical



levels, and most of the principal training opportunities are formed through formal professional programmes and implemented systematically by different levels of government and by other organisations.

The preparatory programme, for both aspiring and new principals, is guaranteed by the national government, politically and financially, with official policy documents to ensure its implementation. The formal preparation process in China is directly connected to the accreditation process, as all the new principals are expected to be posted with a 'certificate for principalship', which is allocated after preparation programmes (SEC, 1989). Under the broad spectrum of leadership preparation, local departments and programme providers are requested to provide specific lectures and activities to facilitate the professionalisation of new and aspiring principals. However, provision largely depends on local education professionals and other resources. This raises the issue of how central government can guarantee the quality of preparatory programmes in different places, and also how it can evaluate the effectiveness of these programmes.

Leadership development in China has been criticized for its overwhelming reliance on knowledge-based learning, focused on the acquisition of knowledge and skills. A typical principal training programme in China comprises formal lectures and sessions, including professors sharing management theories, and high-performing practitioners sharing practical strategies for action based on their experience (A. D Walker, Chen, & Qian, 2008; Zheng, Walker, & Chen, 2013). This body of research draws on perspectives from programme participants, but there has been little attention to the views of programme providers, in terms of how provision is

organized and framed, to facilitate the preparation and socialisation of new and aspiring principals. This research addresses this gap by exploring how preparation programmes in China have been formed and the respective roles and obligations of these provider groups.

Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study was qualitative in nature, interpretivist in orientation, with an emphasis on seeking providers' perspectives on their roles and obligations in leadership preparation through discourse analysis. Interpretivism entails gaining access to people's understanding of their situations, including their accounts of their own actions or behaviour, and generating understanding on that basis, which requires more reflection and inquiry (Brannen, 2005). This paper reports how diverse providers contribute to leadership preparation programmes for high school principals in China.

A case study approach was selected for this research, as it allowed the researchers to employ multiple methods to enable in-depth access to the leadership preparation programme as understood by the providers of the programme, linked to the wider context (Yin, 2003). Cohen et al (2007) note that case study allows the researcher to take account of the political and ideological contexts of the study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The present research was conducted within the general background of Chinese society, which is top-down, centralized, and deeply influenced by Confucian ideologies. Leadership preparation in China is strongly impacted by such issues in the case study province.



Research Methods

Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis refers to a form of qualitative analysis that requires the researcher to locate, interpret, analyze and draw conclusions about the evidence presented (Morrison, 2002). Documents provide access to the underlying sophisticated world of organisations (Bryman, 2004). The sources scrutinized for this study were mainly primary sources, including official policy documents, government reports, and institutional documents. The researchers found 56 documents (including policies, regulations and guidance) relating to teacher and principal development. Fine grained analysis refined the process, and ten documents directly related to principalship preparation and leadership accreditation were selected for analysis (see table 1).

Table 1.

Policy Documents from 2010 to 2020 Included in the Analysis

| Type | Publication of policy documents | Time |
|---|--|------|
| Expectations for principalship: macro policies on education | Standards and qualifications for principalship in China | 2013 |
| | Further Strengthening the Vitality for School Governance for Primary and Secondary Schools | 2020 |
| Delivery and operations: micro policies on principal development | Guidance on further strengthening training for primary and secondary school principals | 2013 |
| | Developing mechanisms for principal development in rural areas | 2013 |
| | National training programmes for primary and secondary principals | 2014 |
| | National training plan for nursery, primary and secondary teachers | 2015 |
| | Managing in-service training through credits for teachers' professional development | 2016 |
| Personnel policies | Guidance on three-phase training for school principals | 2017 |
| | Personnel management for public administration | 2015 |
| | Personnel management for primary and secondary school principals (provisional) | 2017 |

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the various providers, policy makers, programme organisers, government officials and lecturers. Interview guides were customised by provider group. The interview guides were developed based on the literature review, policy analysis, and programme design. Common issues explored across groups include how providers understand and define principalship in China, how they shape the orientation of leadership preparation, how they prepared for programme delivery, and whether and how they communicate and negotiate with other providers during the process. Specific issues related to their roles and obligations during the process. For example, for administrative officials (DoE), questions were related to how they shape the talent pool of principal candidates, the process of principalship accreditation and standards, and qualifications for principal management and recruitment. For programme designers and coordinators, issues related to how they design and shaped the learning process for new and aspiring principals, and how they select and evaluate professional providers.

Sampling Profile

Maxwell (1997) defined purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which 'particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices' (Maxwell, 1997) (p. 87). In this study, participants were selected via judgmental sampling techniques as they were able to provide important information that could not be obtained from other choices (Maxwell, 1996). The selection of participants, based on their positions and roles during the process, included one national level policy maker, two provincial



level (DoE) officials, two programme organisers, and three programme lecturers (see table 2). The researchers handpicked the cases to be included in the sample, based on their specific responsibilities during the preparation process, including programme allocation, design, delivery and evaluation. The researchers invited all providers central to the planning and delivery of the preparation process to participate and they all agreed to do so. This enabled the collection of substantial data and also facilitated respondent triangulation.

Table 2.

Sampling Strategy

| Samples (no.) | Duration | Features |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Policy maker (1) | 20 minutes | One professor from a normal university, who was involved in the design of <i>the Standards and Qualification for Principalship in China</i> . (P-M) |
| Government officials (2) | Approx. 60 minutes each | One official in charge of the management of principals (O-M) and one in charge of the professional development of principals and teachers (O-T). |
| Programme Designer (1) | 75 minutes | One official who framed the whole training programme, including content and delivery methods, and also invited most of the lecturers (P-D). |
| Programme Coordinator (1) | 30 minutes | One official who was in charge of contacting the principal participants, and helping the participants to register, and also worked as an assistant for programme lecturers (P-C). |
| Lecturers (3) | 15-20 minutes, each | Three programme lecturers from different backgrounds – one university professor (L-U), one experienced practitioner (L-P) and one trainer from commercial organisation (L-C). |

The length of the interviews varied, due to the nature of their contributions, and also the time allocated by participants. Interviews with local government participants and programme organisers took

between 60 and 75 minutes while those with the national policy maker and lecturers lasted for between 20 and 30 minutes.

Data Collection

Policy documents were collected from the government's official website and some interviewees, for example the programme designer and government officials, also suggested documents with direct relevance to the study. Interviews took place in participants' workplaces, which were audio-recorded with the permission of seven of the eight participants, and this further enhanced the descriptive validity of qualitative data (Maxwell, 1996). One participant declined to be recorded and the researcher made near-contemporaneous notes of the interview. The audio records were transferred into *Word* documents through the APP, called '*xunfei yuyin*', a digital translator to transform audio records into written language, which largely ensured the accuracy and confidentiality of the data.

The researchers contacted the chief designer of the program to articulate the aims of the study and to seek permission to conduct the research. Permission was granted to observe the three-week training program, and to conduct other aspects of the research, including interviews with the programme designer, programme coordinator and the government official. All the participants gave their voluntary consent. Ethical approval was granted by the researchers' university, and by the local authorities responsible for the program. Participants provided voluntary informed consent.

Data Analysis

Discourse analysis, 'to designate the conjunction of power and knowledge' (Kenway, 1999: 128), allowed the researchers to embed the qualitative data in particular social, political and culture contexts,



and also to explore the relationships among social organisations, roles, situations and power (Kress, 1985). First, the researchers applied discourse analysis for policy documents, not only focusing on their texts or textuality, but also on the 'conditions of possibilities' (McHoul, 1984), to see how these policies could be fulfilled. Discourse analysis on policy documents allowed the researchers to examine how political process and policymaking could shape the social power relations among different organisations and individuals. Discourse analysis was also applied for interview transcripts. Through discourse analysis, interviewees are defined as members of communities, groups or organisations, and speak, write or understand from a specific social position (Van Dijk, 1993). This allowed the authors to explore how leadership preparation was interpreted and delivered, providing a holistic and integrative perspective (Nisbet & Watt, 1984), and also to probe the interrelationships among multi-level providers.

Data analysis was conducted through a basic coding system. According to Fielding (2002), coding is fundamental to qualitative data analysis, and Miles and Huberman (1994) point out that pattern coding allows researchers to break down large interview data into smaller analytical units based on similar themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding of qualitative data through NVivo was carried out by creating a set of nodes. This process involves putting tags or labels against large or small pieces of data, in order to attach meaning to them and to index them for future use (Watling, James, & Briggs, 2012). For this research, the labels originating from initial coding patterns were arranged in hierarchies to indicate levels of association between the coding concepts identified. Free-standing codes were then applied for emerging themes. Then, the researcher conceptualized elements and developed meaningful categories

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through open and axial coding, categories were established. Examples of free-standing codes include role identification, job descriptions, interrelationships and effectiveness of the programme.

Authenticity and Validity

Unlike quantitative studies, the validity of qualitative study is not a commodity which could be justified with techniques, instead, it is more like integrity, character and quality, which connect to the purpose and circumstances of the study, and also need to be justified through the interpretation of the data (Brinberg and Mcgrath, 1985; Maxwell, 1992). The authenticity of the data in this study were enhanced through methodological triangulation (T Bush, 2012), through comparisons among different data sets, including policy analysis and interview transcripts among multiple sample groups, comparing contrasting sources of information to ascertain their accuracy (Bryman, 2004; T Bush, 2012; Flick, 2009). For this study, we included several providers and data sets to provide breadth of coverage, representativeness and in-depth inquisition of key issues, as well as throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing stages of the study (Creswell, 2012).

According to Maxwell (1992), there are various forms of validity, including descriptive, interpretive and, evaluative validity, generalisation and theoretical validity. In the field study, audio records and digital translation were applied to reinforce descriptive validity. The interpretive validity of the study is addressed through well-defined research questions, interview processes, and the juxtaposing of data sets. We also conducted purposive sampling to ensure the representativeness of the data (Stake, 2005).



Research Focus

Meadow's book on systems (2012) mentioned three basic factors for a systematic thinking framework, elements, coherence and orientations. This study, conducted through a systematic thinking paradigm, examined how multi-level providers construct inferences and acknowledgement for the leadership preparation process in China, which fits the nature of the topic and also situates to the contexts of Chinese society. Three research questions relate to this issue:

1. How multi-level policy documents shaped the orientations and configurations of leadership preparation in China?
2. What are the roles and obligations of multi-level providers during the leadership preparation process?
3. How multi-level providers coordinate and negotiate with each other systematically during the leadership preparation process?

Findings

The findings are structured to address the research questions.

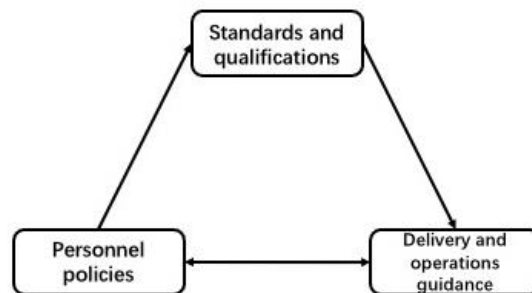
Research question 1: How multi-level policy documents shaped the orientations and configurations of leadership preparation in China?

The policy documents show that the leadership preparation process in China is divided into phases: namely, qualifications and standards, the delivery process and personnel management. To examine the orientation and significance of the process, we begin with an overview of the broader context of policies and regulations related to leadership development in China over the last ten years (from 2010 to 2020), including both national and state documents. The

expectations and standards for principal leadership provide the foundation for programme implementation and accreditation review. Further, these three aspects are interrelated, and form the administrative system for leadership preparation and accreditation conjointly (see Figure. 1).

Figure 1.

The System for Political Documents



Comprehensive Policy Formation

As a state-financed programme in a centralised system, the central government impacts on the preparation programme through the publication of various policies and regulations on principal preparation and accreditation. Since 2010, principal training has become a part of the national training plan (MOE, 2010). The documents can be classified into three categories: standards and qualifications for principalship, guidance for leadership development and accreditation, and principals’ selection and recruitment (see table 3).



Table 3.

Policy Analysis between 2010 to 2020

| Type | Publication of policy documents | Time | Key points related to principalship |
|--|---|------|---|
| Expectations for principalship: macro policies on education | Standards and qualifications for principalship in China | 2013 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Basic concepts for professional principalship in China; 2. Professional capacities and requirements for principal leadership in China; 3. The Standards applicable for principal training, development and management; |
| | Further Strengthening the Vitality for School Governance for Primary and Secondary Schools in China | 2020 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shifting the role of principals from professional leaders to transformational leaders; 2. Stressing the shared responsibilities for education quality among different entities within the school community and among the social contexts |
| Delivery and operations: micro policies on principal development | Guidance on further strengthening training for primary and secondary school principals | 2013 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Raising the quality for leadership training; 2. Reinforcing the coverage and effectiveness of leadership development; 3. Providing training programmes to meet the dynamic demands of principals; 4. Applying innovative approaches to stimulate active learning of principals; 5. Optimizing leadership development system, to formalize the training and development for principals; 6. Energizing principals' motivation for work; 7. Improving the professional capacity of training providers through regular training; 8. Reinforcing the significance of programme evaluation, to ensure the quality of the programme; |
| | Developing mechanism for principal development in rural area | 2013 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A political inclination on rural principals, particularly for underprivileged areas and districts; 2. Specific content and delivery approaches for principal training; 3. Specific DoE responsibilities for selection criteria and the process for providing organisations, constitution of lecturers and evaluation of the quality of programmes; |
| | National training programmes for primary and secondary principals | 2014 | <p>More specific principal training programmes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Principal training plan for rural and underprivileged areas; 2. Principal training plan for principals from special education schools; |

| | | | |
|---|--|------|---|
| | | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Principal training plan for high-performing school principals; 4. Training programmes for professional providers. |
| | Supporting plans for rural teachers (from 2015-2020) | 2014 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Optimize the overall quality of rural teachers; 2. Improving the wellbeing and living status of rural teachers; 3. Providing more training opportunities for rural teachers. |
| | National training plan for nursery, primary and secondary teachers | 2015 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continuous support for principal training under the national training plan; 2. Principals' responsibility for school-based curriculum; |
| | Managing in-service training through learning credits | 2016 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Managing in-service training programmes through learning credits; 2. Encouraging personalised training plans for teachers and principals; 3. Connecting professional training to principals' evaluation and assessment; |
| | Guidance on three-phase training for school principals | 2017 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Selecting qualified programme providing organisations; 2. Establishing professional teams for principal training, including lecturers, demo schools and mentors; 3. Thematic training for principals; 4. Three-phase training: in-campus training (5 days) – shadowing principal (7 days) – back to work practice (50 days) |
| Personnel policies for principal management | Personnel management for public administrations | 2015 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Principles 2. Criteria and qualifications for principal positions; 3. Selection process; 4. Tenure and tenure targets; 5. Professional development and rewards. 6. Supervision and control; |
| | Personnel management for primary and secondary school principals (provisional) | 2017 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Principles 2. Criteria and qualifications for principal positions; 3. Selection process; 4. Tenure and tenure targets; 5. Professional development and rewards. 6. Supervision and control; |

The principals' preparation programme is compulsory, for new and aspiring principals, funded by the national financial department, while national policies and regulations provide strict guidelines on its implementation. Overall, the Ministry of Education has provided a complete political system to support leadership preparation, from



principal standards to programme implementation and evaluation, from educational cadre development to new principal recruitment, and training and guidelines for professional providers. However, these national policies only provide a broad outline of knowledge content, which does not guarantee the details and quality of each preparation programme in different provinces (MOE, 2017).

Roles and Obligations Shaped by Policies

There are four levels involved in teacher and leadership training in China, as defined by the policy documents (MOE, 2017), sponsored at national, provincial, municipal and county levels (see table 4).

Table 4.

Roles and Obligations of Different Administrative Levels

| <i>Administrative level</i> | <i>Roles and obligations for leadership preparation</i> |
|---|--|
| National level -- Ministry of Education | Political guidance: publishing national level policies, and guiding the implementation of preparation programs; Financial support: allocating funding (National Training Plan) |
| Provincial level -- Department for Education | Administrative level: selecting, recruiting, managing and evaluating principals; Preparation procedure: selecting, recruiting, supervising and evaluating the providing organisation; Allocation of funding |
| Municipal level -- Local Educational Authority | Professional support: local university and colleges; Financial support: funds for running the school (partly); Programme organisers: design, deliver and assist the implementation of the preparation programme, which is predominately supported by local universities, colleges or educational faculties. |
| District Level -- District Education Board | Selection and nomination of program candidates; SES (social and economic status) background of the school; |

Orientation: Struggle between Professionalisation and Administration

Although the policy documents are comprehensive, there is a contradiction between professionalisation and administration. Although there has been a strong trend towards professionalisation for principals' career development since 2013 (MOE, 2013a), there is still an inclination towards administrative-oriented recruitment of new leaders (MOE, 2015, 2017). The development strategy is not consistent with the selection system, as the development of professional leaders co-exists with selecting administrative cadre. The policy maker, who participated in the making of *the Standard and Qualification of Principalship in China*, also claimed that the practical value of the *Standard* was very limited, as it was not intended for practical application, but rather for administrative action.

'At very first, we noticed that these western countries, such as UK, US and Singapore, all have published their qualifications and standards for their headship, which triggered us to think of developing one for Chinese principalship as well. This is a strategy where we imitate or get closer to these developed areas, rather than thinking of the professionalisation of our principals. Thus, this set of standards has not been incorporated or equipped with any other strategies or action plans. I don't think it has any practical meaning.' (Policy Maker)

'The principles of the Standards were more like copy, paste and refinement of other western qualifications on school leadership, which illustrated a weak connection to the reality of Chinese principals, and also poor practical value for the preparation process.' (University Professor)

The ten policies closely related to principalship include only limited attention to leadership preparation. Differences between teacher training and principal training, and between preparatory training and other principal training, are blurred, as some



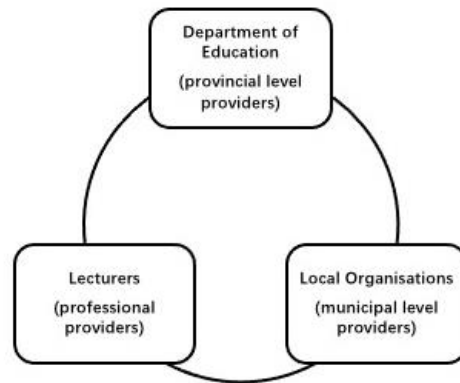
preparation documents relate to other policies, and are not clearly focused on the features of new headship preparation (MOE, 2010, 2013b, 2015). The programme designer adds that, although multiple policy documents shaped the implementation of leadership preparation, '*Supporting Plans for Rural Teachers (2015-2020)*' (MOE, 2014) was the most influential one, and was originally designed for teachers in rural and under-privileged areas. Leadership preparation in the sample province fits this policy as it is located in a less-developed area, and the principals are still part of the teacher team (programme designer).

Research question 2: What are the roles and obligations of multi-level providers during the leadership preparation process?

The responsibilities and division of work were well-articulated and clearly illustrated by national documents and government administration. The new principals' preparation process was supported by administrative and professional providers, but in different ways. Administrative providers are the national and provincial educational departments, while professional providers include lecturers, mentors and professional organisations and faculties. The programme provider, an institute linked to the local university, fulfilled both roles. It is an administrative provider, authorised as a '*cadre training centre*' by the government, as well as a professional provider, linked to the local normal university (see figure 2). The discussion below relates to how, and to what extent, different providers fulfilled their obligations during the process.

Figure 2.

System of Multi-level Providers



Passive Role of the Provincial Educational Department

The DoE shouldered most responsibilities for leadership preparation, including selection, supervision, support and evaluation of the programme, as well as the accreditation and recruitment of the new heads. However, most of these tasks were fulfilled at a modest level. According to the officials from the DoE, their expectations of the preparatory programme were low (Official for Principal Management: O-M), and it was not their main focus compared with other leadership programmes (Official for Principal Training: O-T).

Unclear provider selection

Organisations needed to apply to be able to contribute to the programme. In the sample province, the opportunities were open only to faculties or training centres attached to universities, or organisations under the supervision of the DoE (P-D, L-U and O-T). However, the bidding process was confidential, without clear criteria, and the organisations only needed to submit their proposed training



plans. 'We hardly know why we get the project, or why we failed' (P-D).

'It only takes few minutes for the review committee to decide the qualification of each bid book, without any bidders' present, so that the whole process was reckless and speedy.' (P-D)

The choice of organisations also lacked consistency, in terms of programme providers, content, curricula and delivery methods. First, the programme-providing organisations for new principal preparation and training were different from year to year, picked by the DoE, based on their bid books (P-D and L-U). As a result, the content and delivery methods for new and aspiring principals differ from year to year. Second, there was no consistency between principal preparation programmes and other principal development programmes, as their providers were different and unconnected. Sometimes, the same topics, or the same lectures, were taught in both the preparation programme and the development programme, as the lecturer was invited for both programmes (L-U and L-C).

Limited professional support and programme evaluation

The policy provides an overall system to guide the implementation of the preparation programme, as well as defining the roles of the DoE, but the DoE fulfilled its obligations inadequately. At the political level, the documents stressed the importance of a pre-survey before the programme started, and a post-investigation after the programme (MOE, 2013b). The aims of the pre-survey were to provide valuable information for programme design, in terms of principals' background, learning preferences and knowledge construction. However, at the DoE level, the preparatory programme was underestimated, which made them detached from implementation after the bidding process, and there was no follow-

up support (P-D). The programme designer indicated they had never received any pre-service advice or data.

The policy document emphasized the significance of programme evaluation and supervision and stated that 'the DoE should establish a mechanism to investigate and evaluate the effectiveness of the training programme' (MOE, 2014). The policy further suggested that the evaluation should include experts' evaluation, participants' feedback, and an evaluation of the implementation and funding allocation of the process (MOE, 2014). The results of the evaluation would apply to the rewards and penalties of the programme providing organisation, and more importantly, to future programme improvement. In this study, the programme was evaluated by the DoE, in the form of a chart which comprises numbers and dichotomous answers (yes or no) (see appendix 1). However, the government's supervision and evaluation of programme implementation was too simple to be constructive. The inspection focused on facts and numbers only, in terms of the completion of the programme, rather than the effectiveness of the process, and did not provide any practical or detailed information for programme improvement and modification.

Constrained Authority of the Principal Training Institution

The responsibilities of the lead body for programme implementation, the *cadre-training centre*, include an administrative role as implementor, a professional role as designer, and an assistant role as organiser. However, it has little scope when running the programme, which is largely constrained by the government and programme providers, in terms of programme bidding, use of funding, selection of programme providers, and curriculum content, according to the programme designer.



Under China's centralized system, both national policies and local regulations have a significant influence on the implementation of the training programme. These policies clarify the framework and content of the principal preparation programmes, including compulsory learning hours, time allocation, delivery methods and curriculum content, composition of programme providers, allocation of funding, and examination approaches (P-D and O-M), as also noted in MOE (2013a). The programme designer also mentioned that the centralised system constrained the customisation and personalisation of the preparation process, and impeded the professionalisation of the training process.

The availability of lecturers and other programme providers also made the programme designer and programme coordinator passive when implementing the programme. The curriculum content was based on the availability of experts, who usually lecture about their specialism. As the PD and L-U both mentioned, lecturers seldom customized their content to the needs of the programme. Similarly, the lecturers also mentioned that programme designers or coordinators seldom discussed the design or requirements of the programme with them before it began (L-U and L-C).

'Usually, they will directly ask you to give a lecture that you are familiar with. Every professor or lecturer will have one or some 'signature' topics that he/she has lectured on many times.' (L-U)

Without an effective pre-discussion of programme implementation, the programme coordinator had little authority on the content and curricula of the programme. The programme providers described the preparation training programme as 'sale in bulk' (PD), or just 'assorting the cold dishes together' (P-C). The current system made both groups passive. As programme organisers,

they had little authority over the selection of lecturers and approaches, funding allocation and budget management. As programme designer, they also had little control over curriculum content or the effectiveness of lecturing, as they could only frame the programme, while not influencing implementation details.

Low Levels of Customisation of Professional Providers

Professional providers mean those who provide professional inputs for the programme. These comprise lecturers, demonstration schools for situated learning, and mentors. There are three main types of lecturers, university professors, practitioners, and professional trainers from the commercial organisations. The policies and regulations specify the proportion of the curriculum, and the budget, for each category of provider. As the programme coordinator described the programme as 'assorting code dishes', the researchers further explored the extent to which these professional providers prepare their sessions to adjust to principals' real-world contexts. Most providers responded that they could only customize their lessons to a modest level. For example, the provider from the commercial organisation added one case related to school management in his lecture, while the other nine cases were all business examples.

These limitations made programme organisers passive when delivering the programme, as they could not control the quality and relevance of these lecturers, particularly those from other provinces. According to the programme designer, some local lecturers, particularly local practitioners, received compliments from participants. However, due to the policy constraints, the proportion and payment for each provider could not be modified according to

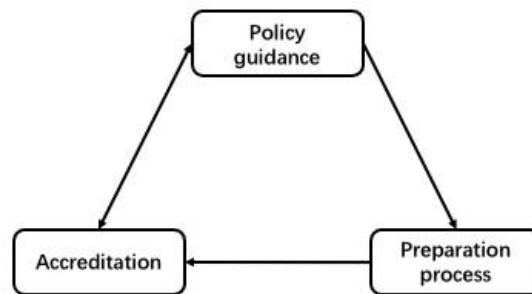
their performance or in response to principals' preferences, because the programme must be consistent with the policy principles (P-C).

Research question 3: How multi-level providers coordinate and negotiate with each other systematically during the leadership preparation process?

We noted earlier that multi-level organisations and individuals shaped their understanding for leadership preparation independently. Research question 3 focuses on comparing provider perspectives, in terms of how they negotiated and cooperated together in running the system of leadership preparation. Due to the nature of the administrative structure in China, this system is formed of three facets, which are policy guidance, the preparation process and accreditation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Preparation Process System



Inadequate Executions of Providers

Under the centralised system, policy documents, and regulations on leadership preparation and development, regulated the behaviour and obligations of the different providers. However, at the implementation stages, we found gaps, and contradictions, between the documents and practice. Most of the providers fulfilled their obligations in modest ways (see table 5), which impeded the expected outcomes of the preparation process.



Table 5.
Policy and Practice for Leadership Preparation

| Providers | Roles Defined by the Policy Documents | Levels of Accomplishment |
|---|---|--|
| Ministry of Education in China | Allocating funding – part of national training plan (MOE, 2015) | Generous funding to ensure the coverage and implementation of the programme; |
| | Numerous policies published and updated every year (MOE, 1999, 2010, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020) | Broad spectrum of policy documents related to the issue; |
| Provincial Department of Education | Selecting appropriate providing organisation (MOE, 2013b, 2015) | Unclear programme provider selection process; |
| | Pre-investigation requested to provide evidence and foundation for programme design (MOE, 2017a); | No pre-programme survey or investigation; |
| | Issuing 'Certificate for Principalship' (MOE, 1999) | Automatic pass (100% pass rate). |
| | Evaluation of the effectiveness of the programme, in terms of participants' satisfaction, and funding allocation (MOE, 2013b) Provide further feedback and advice on programme implementation and improvement (MOE, 2013a) | Little evaluation or supervision of programme implementation; |
| Cadre Training Centre | Selection, management and evaluation of the principals through policies (MOE, 2017b) | Administrative-oriented principal selection and recruitment; |
| | Transfer the standards and requirements in national documents into practice and construct high-quality programmes to facilitate principals' socialisation (MOE, 2013a). | Constrained authority for programme implementation; |
| | Supported by the LEA with information from pre-service survey and post-programme evaluation for programme design and improvement (MOE, 2013b); | Little professional support or guidance from the government; |
| | Self-evaluation (MOE, 2013b) | Occasional self-evaluation and improvement |
| Programme Providers | 'Training for programme providers' (MOE, 2017a) | Few specific training opportunities. |
| | Provide variety of programme providers, including university professors, and practitioners (MOE, 2013b, 2017a). | Variety types of programme provider |
| | Customise their courses to meet the practical needs of principals (MOE, 2013b, 2015). | Limited levels of customisation for the course. |
| | 'Training for programme providers' (MOE, 2017a) | Few specific training opportunities. |

Little Connection to Principal Recruitment

At the government level, the O-M declared that the major task of the preparation programme was to introduce the principal position to the participants, which he described as 'something they should know and acquire'. Further, at the political level, after completing the programme, the successful participants are entitled to a 'certificate for principalship', which makes them eligible for principal positions, and is also the 'stepping-stone' for principalship (SEC, 1999). However, the pass rate for the certificate was too high (100%) to be valid (programme coordinator). Assessment was based only on the quality of principals' 3000-word essay and on their attendance. The university professor (L-U), one of the examiners, claimed that the quality of these essays was low, but he added that the principals were not trained on how to write a suitable essay during the programme.

There is also a weak link between the principal preparation training programme and the selection and recruitment of new principals (O-T), as 'party intention', and administrative appropriateness for the school organisation, have been the most influential factors when selecting the new leaders (O-M). The P-D admitted that his understanding of principalship had little impact on the recruitment of the principals, as he regarded the criteria for principal selection as: 'none of my business, so that I have not thought about it'. Meanwhile, O-M admitted that the certification for headship had little impact on the selection and recruitment for principal positions. In real-world selection, what they consider the most is whether the candidates could fulfill the Party's intentions and be appropriate for the construction of the school leadership team. In the rural districts, 'being posted without a licence' was quite common, and the principals were allowed to 'get on the bus first, and



then, buy the ticket' (O-M). This undermines the value of the certificate and of the preparation programme.

Discussion and Implications

Policy makers, professional associations, universities, and school leaders have a shared interest in preparing school leaders. According to Walker and Qian (2017), this shared interest should lead to substantial discussion to support the preparation and growth of successful school leaders. Within China's centralised system, the respective roles and responsibilities of these faculties and individuals were specific and clear, and the policy makers also encouraged the separate groups to cooperate. The substantial and continuing investment in principals' development is intended to guarantee the continuity of principal training in China, particularly for principals from under-privileged areas (Zheng et al., 2013).

Epistemological scholars further stressed that, when systematic thinking is applied to human activities, it 'is based on four basic ideas: emergence, hierarchy, communication and control as characteristics of the systems' (Checkland, 1999)(pp.318). The present authors' findings indicate two specific issues that constrained the implementation and the value of the preparatory programme in China: how to optimize the effectiveness of each provider, and how to encourage the separate groups to work together.

Emergent: Optimize the Effectiveness of Each Provider

The data indicate that, although the policy provided a complete and idealized picture of the roles, definitions and relationships of each provider, they only fulfilled their obligations at a modest level, particularly the DoE. The data further show the importance of

encouraging the autonomy of each provider during the process, as *'giving it more autonomy has the potential of raising its quality'* (MOE, 2020). In this study, the programme providing organisation fulfilled its role and obligations administratively, which constrained its activity and creativity when designing and implementing the programme. The role of the providing organisation was one of policy follower, rather than professional provider, without any modifications or adjustments, thus limiting the levels of professionalism in the preparatory process.

The study reviewed how quality leadership preparation could impact on principals' professional growth and leadership enactment, showing that high-quality leadership preparation is necessary for new and aspiring principals, as also acknowledged by Chinese researchers (Hui, 2016; Wang, 2020). It is important to stress the importance of lecturer quality, in order to ensure quality education for these principal participants. As noted above, programme curricula were described as *'sale by bulk'*, or *'assorted cold dishes'*, rather than responding to participant needs.

Hierarchy: Re-define the Role of Government (DoE)

Certain scholars (Ford, Lavigne, Fiegner, & Si, 2020; Knudson, Shambaugh, & O'Day, 2011) note the importance of *'district effectiveness'*, which highlights support from the *'central office'* that makes a difference to leadership performance, such as professional development, supervision and mentoring, and improved instructional coherence. The state plays various roles in shaping principal development across different domains, and there are different ways of looking at this. For example, Dale (1997) suggests that roles and subsequent influence may be determined by three governance activities: funding, regulation and provision while, in this



study, the system provided funding, but little has been done in the area of regulation and provision, particularly for programme implementation and evaluation (Dale, 1997).

McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) point out that high-performing districts differed from low-performing districts by the way they approached principal and school professional development (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Instead of simply being a provider, the district served more as a supportive resource for leaders in identifying, organising, and offering professional development opportunities. For this preparatory programme, the government appeared to disregard the purpose of principal preparation and had only a modest impact on programme implementation. They allocated programmes to different providers (public organisations), with no evaluation, supervision or follow-up support, after the bidding or application process, and there was no monitoring, or feedback, about these programmes. In centralized systems, the government usually acts as 'the powerful hand' to guarantee the stability and coherence of the preparation system, thus, it should set the 'tone' for preparation programmes, with increased 'professional control' over principal preparation.

Communication: Interconnections Between and Among Providers

As a centralised system, China has strong features of hierarchy and control, with little evidence of communication and emergence. In the authors' research, all these providers offered 'single' contributions, with limited relationships, which made the preparation process partial and disconnected (see figure 4). These providers did not reach agreement on the value or meaning of preparation training through dialogue or communications, as the data showed that their perceived significance and understanding for leadership preparation

in China were limited and varied. These disconnections impeded the value and impact of principal preparation in the sample province.

Figure 4.

Interconnections Between and Among Different Providers

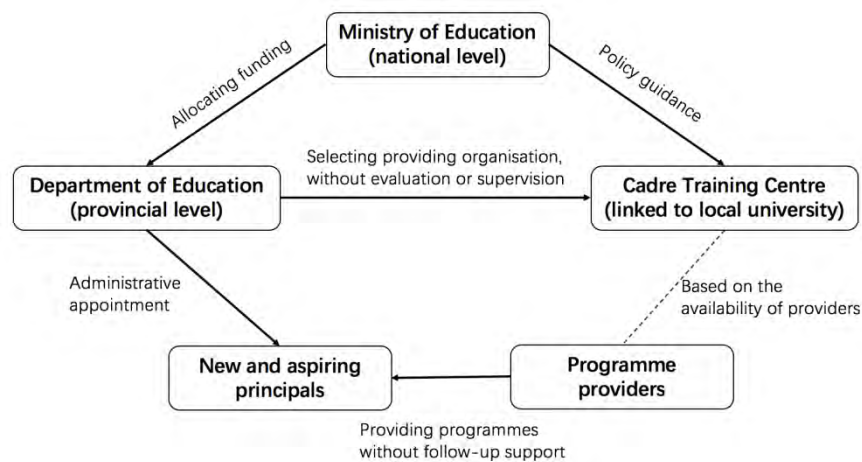


Figure 4 indicates that there were few connections between and among different administrators and programme providers. Ehrich and Hansford (1999), and Daresh (2004), reported that the low level of support provided by government officials, particularly in respect of resources, and the perceived benefits of mentoring, affected the training and professional development of school administrators (J. C. Daresh, 2004; Ehrich & Hansford, 1999). In the authors' research, education officials and the Ministry demonstrated very limited responsibility for the implementation of the programme. According to the programme designer, the government showed little interest in supporting or evaluating the programme. The government officials also declared that the leadership preparation programme was not



their main working focus (O-T), and they had very low expectations about the the programme (O-M).

Control: Reflection and Evaluation

Several international researchers have indicated the criteria for preparatory programme evaluation. For example, Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) stress that five inter-related factors impact on the outcomes of the preparation training programmes: purpose, framework, content, delivery, and operational features (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Young and Crow (2017), and Kirkpatrick (1998), stress that programme evaluation should be based on preparation experience and participants' satisfaction, related to changes in participants' knowledge, skills and dispositions, changes in school practices, changes in classroom conditions and improved student outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 1998; M. D. Young & Crow, 2016). Throughout the international literature on leadership preparation, the evaluation of programme outcomes has been significant to determine if specific preparation improvement strategies are effective in achieving the desired outcomes, which could contribute to further programme improvement and the validation of current practice (Black, Burrello, & Mann, 2017).

In China, there was limited programme evaluation and lack of critical thinking about the extent to which the preparation programme could facilitate the professional growth of new principals. The policy clearly states the significance of retrospective reflection about the preparation process, as it could provide robust evidence for subsequent preparation programmes, based on the evaluation results. The policy also encourages the LEA to reward those high-performing organisers, by offering further contracts, while discarding those which underperform. However, as mentioned

above, the current system of leadership preparation does not seem to encourage thinking about 'how to evaluate the work we have done?', and 'what we can do to make it better?'. Throughout the whole system, evaluation is very limited, and there is no compulsory self-evaluation or third-party evaluation.

Conclusion

This paper explores provider perspectives of leadership preparation in China, through a multi-level analysis, including policy makers, DoE officials, programme organisers and lecturers, through a systematic thinking framework. It also offers a broad picture of the issue, in terms of policy analysis, programme design, programme implementation, programme evaluation and principals' accreditation and selection. The research shows that these providers and programme dimensions were notionally connected, at political and administrative levels, but these connections were weak and loose at the level of implementation. Meadows (2012) mentioned three factors of systematic thinking, which were elements, coherence and orientation, and she further stressed that what really matters to a system is not the elements, but the coherence and interrelations among the elements (Meadows, 2012). As noted earlier, the process focused on administrative 'hierarchy and control', with little attention to professional 'emergence and communication'. The authors' findings stress the importance of reflection, supervision and cooperation for the programme, as well as the need for providers to have more dynamic and interconnected roles.

International literature demonstrates the great interest in leadership preparation and principal development, from both programme implementation perspectives and programme evaluation



perceptions (G. M. Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Dinham, Collarbone, Evans, & Mackay, 2013). As the largest developing and centralised country, new headship preparation in China has been poorly reported, with very few empirical studies, which makes this study significant in terms of contextual background. The nature of leadership preparation, and the contextual background, in China requires integrity and administrative thinking towards the design and delivery of the process. The systematic thinking framework stresses the motivation and obligation of multi-level providers, and also reinforces the need for negotiation and cooperation among them.

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Appendix 1: *The Administrative Evaluation Form*

| Prog. Code | Name of the programme | Pattern of the programme | Time | Place | Proportion of context-based learning |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| No. 17 | Preparatory training | On-campus training | 2015. x. xx - 2015. X.xx | Xx district | 40% |
| Participants information | Population | Attendance | Proportion of participants | Proportion of Graduates | Distinction Rate of graduates |
| | 110 | 106 | 96.4% | 96% | 15% |

| Levels of completion ¹ | Completion of the proposal | Completion of the curriculum | Experts fit the proposal ² | Outsourcing or not |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| | 65% | 88% | 85% | No |

| Documentation | Participants' diary | Participants' evaluation | Issues of Programme Report ³ |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| | Submitted | Submitted | 4 |
| Funding | Funding allocation | Funding usage | Proportion of usage |
| | 500,000 rmb | 320,000 rmb | 64% |
| Features | Any rewards or reports? | Any experience to share? | Remarks |
| | Once, reported by local newspaper | Yes, submitted | None |

¹ Levels of completion: to what extent, the providing organisation completed the programme as their proposal planned;

² To what extent the providing organisation employed the lecturers and experts according to the proposal planned.

³ Programme report: a self-reported bulletin to illustrate the implementation and delivery of the programme, which was completed by the providing organisation, and submitted to the government for inspection.