What does principal leadership look like in early childhood settings? A profile from contemporary China

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China was the world’s leading economy from the early 1500s until the early 1800s (Maddison, 2001, 2007). Then, although the country experienced catastrophes, it advanced amidst turbulence in the next two centuries. From 1978 to 2015, China’s gross domestic product (GDP) has grew into the second largest in the world.

However, in terms of GDP (PPP) per capita, China was ranked the 87th in the world, which only reached over 13 thousand dollars (IMF, 2015).

Huge gaps inside China, in terms of development levels.
One China, Five Worlds (2010-2015)
China's future

China GDP in 2020 by Province (Projected): A Union of Second-Tier Developed + Top-Tier Developing Countries

Source: HSBC, CEIC, IMF, CIA
• Since 2010, the Chinese central government issued a universal preschool policy and the State Council initiated Three-Year-Action-Plan to speed up the development. The GER has reached 75% in 2016.

• A huge demand for quantity and quality of teacher workforce.
Gross enrolment ratio, pre-primary, both sexes (%)
The aging population in China is growing rapidly and by the middle of this century will peak. At the end of 2012, the proportion of the population aged 60 and over in China stood at 14.3 per cent, and was already higher than the world average of 11 per cent. However, by 2050, this proportion is expected to rise to 34 per cent. The absolute size of the aged population is estimated to increase from 194 million in 2012 to 487 million in 2050 (UNFPA, 2014).

Almost one quarter of children live in poverty and over 60 million rural left-behind children are at risk (NBS, 2014).

Every child counts and early childhood matters.
Population Pyramids of China in 2015 and 2050
• Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)

• State Council’s Opinions on Current Development of Pre-primary Education

• Nationally children in pre-primary institutions reached 40.5071 million in 2014, and the gross enrolment rate (GER) of pre-primary education has increased from 35 percent in 2000 to 75 percent in 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2015-7-30).

• However, in terms of universal pre-primary education with enough qualified kindergarten teachers, it is still one of the most challenging problems for the government.
• Early childhood education, or pre-primary education (ISCED 0), refers to early childhood programmes that have an intentional education component. ISCED level 0 programmes target children below the age of entry into primary education (ISCED level 1). These programmes aim to develop cognitive, physical and socio-emotional skills necessary for participation in school and society (OECD, EU & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015).

• In mainland China, the term “kindergarten” typically refers to full-day programs for Children at 3 to 5 years old. These programs usually provide child care and help children prepare for formal schooling. In rural areas there are some one-year pre-primary classrooms in elementary schools serving children in the year prior to first grade.
GER in Preprimary Education,
2000-2013
1. Introduction
Introduction

1. increasing attention on the spread and quality of ECE in China

- In 2010, Chinese government issued the *Outlines of China’s National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020*.

- From 2010 to 2014, the first and second stage of the “Three-Year Action Plan of ECE” were implemented in succession.

- Since 2011, the Chinese government has implemented the "National Training Program for kindergarten Teachers" at the national level, which not only involves kindergarten teachers, but also kindergarten principals. From 2011 to 2015, a total of 905,000 kindergarten teachers and principals were trained through the "National Training Program".
Introduction

2. Education reform makes management of school and kindergarten more important than ever before (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008).

- The OECD has conducted a long-term and systematic study of effective leadership of school leaders. Many OECD member countries have established national principals’ leadership frameworks or principals’ professional development standards to define the core elements of leadership (OECD, 2008; Michelle Young, 2013).

- Since 21st century, ECE of China has been experiencing thorough reform from macro-system (government policy) to microsystem (kindergarten management system). It is necessary for the principal to play a more important role with their professionalism than before.

- In recent years, the study of kindergarten principals’ leadership has also been given more and more attention in China.
3. As the pioneer of ECE reform, Zhenjiang has important influence on ECE development in China

- Zhenjiang has achieved significantly and set the model for ECE system reform in China. In 2014, the net enrolment ratio of kindergarten was as high as 99% in Zhenjiang, which was above the average net enrolment ratio of developed countries in OECD. Teacher-child ratio and the ratio of ECE budget in Zhenjiang were much greater than the national average.

- This study, which aims to investigate the leadership of kindergarten principal in Zhenjiang, is exploring the principal leadership in early childhood settings in the most developed area of ECE in China.
2. Research Design
Research Questions

- What is the principal leadership in early childhood settings? What does it consist of?
- What are the features of leadership practices in terms of different personal and organizational levels?
- What are the main predictors of effective leadership practices of kindergarten principal?
Sampling

The questionnaires were distributed via internet or WeChat

- 85 via WeChat, 507 from internet (592 in total)

Deleting ineffective data

582 samples (98.3% effective data rate)
Research Instrument

Based on research about principal leadership and effective leadership practices of OECD, and the 21 responsibilities of the successful principal described in *School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results* (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), this study modified the “Kindergarten Principal's Leadership Practice Scale”, with consideration of the leadership practices of kindergarten principals in China.

There were four constructs in the scale: (1) cultural leadership, (2) curriculum and pedagogy leadership, (3) team leadership, and (4) strategic decision-making leadership.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural leadership</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.895</td>
<td>Kindergarten principal leads teachers and staff to construct kindergarten culture, including setting the kindergarten’s development goal and common visions, ideals and beliefs, common values and regulations, and the like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and pedagogy leadership</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.922</td>
<td>Kindergarten principal provides professional guidance in planning, implementing, supervising and evaluating kindergarten programmes and teaching activities. Kindergarten principal can provide effective assessment on curriculum and pedagogy. At the same time, kindergarten principal offers education resources and professional development opportunities for teachers, to lead and promote teachers’ professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team leadership</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.891</td>
<td>Kindergarten principal communicates and coordinates with children, parents and staff, stimulates staff’s enthusiasm, and promotes teamwork among staff. These include listening to staff’s voice, paying attention to staff’s living conditions, allowing staff to speak out own opinions, and establishing harmonious social network.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic decision-making leadership</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.884</td>
<td>Kindergarten principal is capable to make overall, long-term, and strategic decisions, and is able to set reform goals for the kindergarten’s sustainable development with consideration of kindergarten’s current situation, and related policies and regulations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten Principal’s Leadership Practice Scale</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>.969</td>
<td>This scale investigate how kindergarten principal implements leadership practices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Research Results
1. What is the principal leadership in early childhood settings?

In this study, considering the features of kindergarten principal, the principal leadership in early childhood settings is defined as kindergarten principals’ ability to affect teachers, children, parents and related stakeholders in certain condition, leading and stimulating them to construct and achieve common visions.
2. Leadership practices of kindergarten principals in Zhenjiang

- Five point Likert scale: <3.0 (bad performance); 3.0 - 3.75 (general performance); >4.25 (good performance).
- After descriptive analysis of the 582 kindergarten principals, the value of leadership was 4.11. It indicated that the participants tended to self-evaluate as high performance, with leadership roles in all scales.
- There were differences between each construct of leadership, with values from high to low as: team leadership > cultural leadership > strategic decision-making leadership > curriculum and pedagogy leadership.
Research Results

3. Three types of kindergarten principal: mediocre principal, ordinary principal, and excellent principal

- **Excellent principal (31.27%)**: had high values (above 4.25) in every scale, indicating their excellent capability in leading the cultural construct, curriculum and pedagogy construct, and team construct of kindergarten, as well as in planning and decision-making on kindergarten development and reform. It also revealed their excellent performance in leadership practices.

- **Ordinary principal (50%)**: had values between 3.75 and 4.25 in each construct, indicating that they had good performance in each aspect of leadership practices, without being prominent in specific construct. Their level of leadership capability was between the capability levels of excellent principal and mediocre principal.

- **Mediocre principal (18.73%)**: had values between 3.0 and 3.75 in each scale, indicating mediocre ability in leadership practices. In comparison to the other two types of principals, mediocre principals had lower level of leadership ability.
The Background Characteristics of Excellent directors

- Age: <30, 30-40, >40
- Work experience: <3, 3-8, >8
- Education level: technical college and below, undergraduate and above
- Subject background: non-pedagogy background, pedagogy background
- Honorary title: non-backbone teacher, backbone teacher
- Teacher qualification: no kindergarten teacher qualification, kindergarten teacher qualification
- Kindergarten level: no rating kindergarten, city/district level kindergarten, provincial kindergarten, private kindergarten, public kindergarten
4. Regression analysis of different types of kindergarten principals

- Only “bachelor’s degree and above” (p=.011<.05) and “professional background” (p=.001<.01) entered the model, indicating that principals’ types could be influenced by principals’ educational levels and professional background.

- Compared to principals with educational level of college or below, principals with bachelor’s degree and above had 1.66 times more possibility to have at least one higher level leadership types (coefficient=.507, OR=1.66). Compare to non-education majored principals, principals with professional background had 2.385 times more possibility to have at least one higher level leadership types (coefficient=.869, OR=2.385). In other words, principals with high educational level or professional background were more likely to become excellent principal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>S.E</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree and above</td>
<td>0.507</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>1.660</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional background</td>
<td>0.869</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>2.385</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>1.013</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qualification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City/District level kindergarten</td>
<td>0.125</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>1.133</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate and above</td>
<td>0.157</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>1.170</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public kindergarten</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.939</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>0.746</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LR Chi square=20.85  P=0.002
4. Discussion
1. The profile of kindergarten principals: Most with professional background, mainly mature principal.

Considering the background of ECE development in Zhenjiang, it is reasonable that principals in this study had high leadership ability and mainly were excellent and ordinary principals. Moreover, the sampling of this study indicated principals’ advantages in the background information in this study. For example, in terms of principals’ ages and years of working experience, nearly 40% (n=224, 38.49%) of principals aged above 30 with more than 8 years of working experience. Therefore, there were a lot of mature principal with rich experiences in kindergarten management in this study. In terms of educational level and professional background, more than half principals (n=443, 76.12%) had bachelor’s degree and above, and most (n=515, 88.49%) principals had professional background in education. In terms of the professional titles, more than half principals (n=405, 69.59%) had different levels of professional titles, with 14.61% in first level or advanced level. In terms of honourable titles, 66.9% of the principals had the honourable title of outstanding teachers.

In summary, most participants in this study were mature kindergarten principals with good professional background and rich experience in kindergarten management. The feature of the background information is one of the important components worth considering in conclusion.
Discussion

2. The features of principal leadership in early childhood settings: strengths and weakness.

- There was weakness in the leadership practices of kindergarten principal: Weak in curriculum and pedagogy leadership

   Many studies have proposed that lack of time and energy is the biggest obstacle of principals’ practice in curriculum and pedagogy leadership (Fonsén, 2013). Although pedagogy leadership is the essence of ECE leaders, they have limited time for it due to too much competitiveness and expectation (Hujala & Heikka, 2007).

   Meanwhile, principals’ weakness in curriculum and pedagogy leadership is also related to their own role construction. Previous research shows that lack of professional knowledge and capability, and curriculum professionalism is also an important influencing factor on principals’ curriculum and pedagogy leadership (Chen, 2012).
The features of female leadership model was outstanding: Advantaged in team leadership.

Most studies show that female leaders have different leadership styles from male leaders with unique advantages (Eagly, 2007). As female leaders usually are more participated, more democratic, more tolerant, more sensitive and more attentive, they tend to adopt democratic and participatory leadership style with more focus on school’s vision, staff’s opinions, harmonious relationship, and the importance of teamwork (Oplatka, 2006). The features of female leaders enable them to be good at solving conflicts, and social communication. They would like to spend more time with teachers, students, parents and different stakeholders, building close relationship with them.

Social development of females makes them realise the importance of teamwork and other people’s fulfilment. Compare to males, females tend to have more typical altruistic behaviour (Gilligan, 1993). The social development of female and the role of traditional female jobs make females long for relationship, which is also reflected in female leaders’ excellent social skills.

Environments led by females are easier to make people emotional, which is also one of the reasons why female leaders in early education value the good relationship with staff (Wise, 2011).
Discussion

3. From mediocre to excellent: Way forward

- Compared to mediocre principals, excellent principals had significant background advantages: High educational level with professional background and teacher certificate

  Principals with professional background and high educational levels had more possibility in becoming excellent principals.

  Previous scholars think that apart from personalities, and leadership features and ideology, principal professionalism is an important influencing factors of principal leadership. Previous research in China also finds that principal leadership is significantly different on educational level and professional background. In terms of leadership and each construct, principals with bachelor’s degree and above and ECE background had higher values than principals graduating from college and below without ECE background.


Discussion

- **Excellent principals had advantages in resources; kindergarten level was both cause and fact**

  There were significant differences in kindergarten types and levels between excellent, ordinary, and mediocre principals. Principals with higher leadership had higher proportion from public and provincial kindergartens. Thus, kindergarten types and levels, such as public and provincial kindergartens, were the results of excellent principal’ background features.

  Comparing to private kindergarten principals, public kindergarten principals have unique advantages in financial resources, parents resources, teacher resources, and kindergarten structure. The public kindergarten environments benefit principal leadership practices, and provide important support for the principals to become excellent principals. With this supportive environment, it is easier for the kindergarten principals, especially principals from provincial kindergartens, to implement leader work, and to perform better leadership practices.
Discussion

4. What is missing from traditional role construction of kindergarten principal: They are also decision-makers.

Traditionally, the model of government and education in China was “big government-small society”. This led to school’s excessive dependence on government, and school principals became the executor of government decisions. Since the Reform and Open policy, Chinese government started turning the function of education down to school. It makes school principals have to face the change of role from traditional executor of government to strategic decision-maker.

The role of kindergarten principal had experienced the change from a simple administrator to an administrator, leader, and educator, with multi-tasks. In the future, with the high-speed development of ECE and competitiveness of the industry, kindergarten principals are facing professional transformation. The role of kindergarten principals is going to be professionalised. Kindergarten principals are not only educators, but also strategic decision-makers for the development of kindergarten.


Hujala, E. and Heikka, J. (2007). Distributed leadership in child-care. Paper presented at the 17th EECERA Annual Conference, Prague, Czech Republic,


References


Thank you for your attention