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Striving for a way out from a rock and a hard place: Vice-principals' development in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand the dilemmas facing Hong Kong vice-principals in discharging their roles and to further explore their engagement in informal mentoring as a coping mechanism in the absence of a structured professional development program.

Design/methodology/approach – The qualitative study was conducted in the form of in-depth face-to-face, loosely structured individual interviews with ten informants from a variety of personal and school backgrounds, contributing to a set of data that unveiled the basic themes.

Findings – Three dilemmas facing Hong Kong vice-principals were identified: juggling administrative work with teaching, standing by management or siding with peer teachers, and forced innovation vs omnipresent conservatism. The findings also suggested that the informants tended toward external resources intentionally with a view to gaining emotional support as well as professional stimulation. They also engaged in informal mentoring, which took the form of observing principals' behaviors, joining support groups organized by school governing bodies, and enrolling in academic programs offered by universities and/or professional bodies, as a way to resolve the dilemmas.

Research limitations/implications – Informal mentoring has been identified as an effective approach for Hong Kong vice-principals to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to overcome workplace challenges and the feelings of loneliness experienced upon changing their role. The findings point to the importance of formalizing mentoring in vice-principal development programs.

Originality/value – This study is the first of its kind to explore the impact of informal mentoring on vice-principals in Hong Kong where both dual-career track systems and a structured mentoring programs are missing.

Keywords Hong Kong, Informal mentoring, Single-career track, Vice-principal development, Dilemmas, Vice-principals

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Vice-principals are labeled as "forgotten leaders" (Cranston *et al.*, 2004), suggesting that they have been under-represented in the literature. Although the contribution of school leadership to effective schools has been confirmed in the literature, there appears to be a paucity of research on the roles played by vice-principals. The impact of mentoring has recently emerged as one of the approaches to understanding vice-principals' professional development, but the majority of the discussions are based primarily on the North American and the UK school systems. Given the specific cultural and structural context of Hong Kong schools, the existing literature may not have direct applicability to the local situation, albeit informative and inspirational.

In Hong Kong, wherein the teaching profession lacks a dual-career track system, the appointment of a vice-principal can be associated with an abrupt change in the prevailing hierarchical school structure, since the incumbent is selected conventionally through

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internal promotion rather than open recruitment. In the face of a change in their relationships with colleagues, newly appointed vice-principals often find themselves having to not only psychologically prepare themselves for the emotional distress, but they also have to be ready to undertake new administrative duties. Even experienced vice-principals are concerned about being the "man in the middle" and often feel isolated in schools, belonging neither to the "ruler" nor the "ruled." Furthermore, the high emphasis on power distance in Hong Kong schools hinders vice-principals in seeking help from peer teachers within their schools. Rather, they tend toward learning from and reflecting on external peers' experiences in the hope of bettering themselves for the position.

The following sections attempt to briefly synthesize the literature and discuss its relevance to the Hong Kong context.

A review of the related literature

Career advancement in the teaching profession is often discussed against the backdrop of a "dual-career track" system in which teachers have the options of either following an administrative track or a teaching track (e.g. Armstrong, 2014; Oleszewski *et al.*, 2012). Individuals who are interested in the administrative track can progress through the ranks of head of department, vice-principal, principal, and then school superintendent, by enrolling in leadership preparation programs offered by universities and/or the government. Those who are more inclined to follow the teaching track can progress through the ranks of senior teacher, lead teacher, and thereafter principal master teacher by developing their pedagogical skills as well as strengthening their professional capacity in subject knowledge. In other words, the dual-track system allows teachers to advance in their careers without giving up teaching responsibilities. Because the two tracks essentially call for different sets of knowledge, skills and value disposition in the incumbent as far as job responsibilities, duties and requirements are concerned, those who aspire to embark on the administrative track tend to be more prepared to take on new challenges and adapt to their new roles.

A review of the literature on vice-principal development reveals three dominant emphases: improving professional competency to discharge new administrative responsibilities; establishing professional learning networks; and enhancing their abilities in managing and leading a school. It has been suggested that mentoring, albeit lacking a universal definition (Crow, 2012), is an effective avenue that helps novice vice-principals in discharging their roles (Tripses and Searby, 2008). Searby and Brondyk (2016) maintain that the complexity arising from mentoring, in terms of its purposes and formats, as well as the roles of various parties involved, affects the development of a substantial definition of the term. Zachary (2012) regards mentoring as a learning partnership between a mentor and a mentee, in which the mentor serves as a coach to provide job-related knowledge and guidance, as a counselor to offer emotional support, as a guardian caring for the mentees' well-being, and/or a networker bridging the mentee to professional networks and resources (Clutterbuck, 1998). In return, the mentee aims to satisfy pragmatic needs by addressing crucial and immediate problems, effective needs by working within change and meeting with strategic challenges, and/or sustainable needs by expanding capacities with a view to shape the future (Stead, 2005).

Improving professional competency

The majority of discussions on preparing teachers to take on new administrative roles are of a professional orientation with an accentuated focus on equipping incumbents

with the requisite knowledge and skills for their administrative responsibilities (Crow and Matthews, 1998). It is generally considered that vice-principals are eager to gain exposure and experiences in various dimensions through attending courses, shadowing and mentoring experienced principals, as well as networking with colleagues. Marshall and Hooley (2006) maintain that both mentoring and university programs are important ways of enhancing a vice-principal's professional competency. Retelle (2010) echoes that vice-principals who hold a positive relationship with their mentors tend to be better prepared for the roles.

Establishing professional learning networks

An underlying practice arising from the dual-career track system is that teachers tend to leave their original school after promotion to vice-principal to work in a new school. Now being a newcomer, the novice vice-principal not only has to be knowledgeable and skillful enough to undertake new administrative responsibilities, but also be able to integrate himself/herself into the school leadership team of the new school, hoping for a smooth adjustment to the new role (Ashford *et al.*, 2007). The affective challenges encountered by newly appointed vice-principals during the period of adjustment are labeled "structural loneliness" in the literature (Armstrong, 2009; Crow and Matthews, 1998; Marshall, 1985). These feelings of loneliness will gradually diminish as the vice-principals progressively socialize within their schools (Mertz, 2006). Drawing on the findings of an empirical study on US vice-principals, Gurley and Anast-May (2016) conclude that structured mentoring programs can increase the "opportunities for collaboration to reduce isolation […] and for networking with peers and mentors" (p. 191).

Excelling in managing and leading schools

Given that the position of vice-principals is the lowest rank in the administrative track, it is understandable that the incumbents are often tasked with implementing school policies devised by the school principals, not having been involved in the formulation of such policies. Traditionally, vice-principals are considered as "caretakers" (Koru, 1993) and "daily operations managers" (Porter, 1996) with ill-defined job descriptions (Harvey, 1994; Marshall, 1992) and their roles and responsibilities are normally assigned at the discretion of the principal (Marshall and Mitchell, 1991). In the early literature, the roles of a vice-principal were associated primarily with student discipline and attendance and were deemed to have little influence on the overall leadership of schools (e.g. Bates and Shank, 1983; Black, 1980; Reeds and Conners, 1982; Smith, 1987). To ramp up their leadership capacity, vice-principals are advised to sensitively select their areas of responsibility (Marshall and Hooley, 2006). It has been confirmed in Núñez and *et al.* (2016) report on Chilean vice-principals that mentoring, in the form of a dialogic communication whereby the mentor and the mentee reflect on school practice, talk through situations, and resolve conflicts, is one of the best ways to facilitate reflective learning.

The above discussions on vice-principals are built on the premises that there is a dual-career track and that a structured mentoring program is in place. Based on a set of Hong Kong data, this study aims to expand and extend the literature to school systems whereby promotion takes place along a single-career track. An overview of the Hong Kong context is given below.

The Hong Kong context

Hong Kong is located at the south-eastern tip of China and covers a total area of only 1,103 km. It has a population of about 6.8 million (now 7.2 million), with approximately

98 percent being ethnic Chinese (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2010). The Education Bureau (EDB), headed by the Secretary for Education, is the government department in charge of education; it was known as the Education Department in the colonial days and thereafter the Education and Manpower Bureau during the early post-colonial era.

As a former British colony, contemporary Hong Kong offers a unique blend of ingrained Chinese values mixed with western cultures. Despite the existing cultural blend, the majority of its inhabitants share a Confucian cultural heritage and socialize accordingly (Fang, 2000).

The school's external environment

Educational planning in Hong Kong is in many ways similar to the processes that occur in other small-sized countries (for a succinct discussion of education systems in small-sized countries, see Bray and Packer, 1993) in that they both lack a regional, municipal and provincial level of governance. Schools in Hong Kong are required to register with the EDB and are subject to its supervision thereafter. All schools, with the exception of a few government schools, are governed and operated by their respective school sponsoring bodies (SSBs). The SSBs are set up by non-profit-making organizations; some are run by commercial associations in the name of charity. They operate on different scales; most of them run one to two schools whereas the largest SSB of all, the Catholic diocese, has been contributing to over 100 schools in Hong Kong.

In parallel with the return of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China, a series of reform initiatives has been introduced; reforms range from curriculum design to school governance and management, from university admission to teacher training, and from establishing accountability to initiating privatization. The progress of the Education Reform has picked up speed considerably as of late and the enforcement of the various initiatives has created tensions among school leaders. It should be noted that the vice-principals who participated in our current study have all been subject to this decolonization process.

The school's internal environment

The literature on Hong Kong's school context places great emphasis on the region's traditional cultural disposition, particularly on the impact of Asian values and Confucian ethics in the realm of education (Lee, 1996; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992; Watkins and Biggs, 1996). Most studies, if not all, are built on the cultural conception put forward by Geert Hofstede in his study on Hong Kong dwellers, having compared and contrasted them with inhabitants in 52 cities/countries on five dimensions, namely "power distance," "individualism," "masculinity," "uncertainty avoidance" and "Confucian dynamism"[1] (Hofstede, 2001).

The majority of studies on Hong Kong school management deem Hong Kong schools high on "power distance" and "Confucian dynamism" but low on "individualism." Confucianism values hierarchy whereby all human relationships revolve around a set of defined roles and obligations, constituting so-called moral orders. It should be noted that "hierarchy" in Confucianism is not formalized in the form of contracts, but exists in the form of informal mores and folkways instead. Nevertheless, contemporary scholars tend to interpret modern organizational hierarchical structure (and of course school organization is one of them) as the "hierarchy" stipulated in the Confucian doctrine (Leung, 1996). Following this line of thinking, Dimmock and Walker (2005a, b) argue that educators in Hong Kong view the

hierarchical organizational structure as the moral order, literally accept the consequential power distance, and act accordingly.

On the one hand, teachers of lower ranks (both in terms of hierarchy and seniority) pay immediate respect to those of a higher rank and consequently refrain from asserting their views in public settings such as staff meetings. Criticism of policies is thought to be impolite and face-losing for the persons implementing them, thereby causing friction between colleagues. On the other hand, principals avoid embarrassing and shaming teachers in public, knowing that this would make them "lose face" and harm relationships. Both principals and teachers avoid direct confrontation and try to preserve harmony in the workplace, at least at a surface level (Kwan and Walker, 2008). It is believed that deferring to principals and accepting any decision made by the principal is a kind of virtue. The vice-principals are tasked with the responsibilities to solve human resources conflict, thus being seen as buffers between the principal and teaching staff (Kwan, 2009). As they try to please both the principal and the colleagues at the same time, they find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

The study

The aim of this exploratory qualitative study is to identify the dilemmas facing Hong Kong vice-principals; it also attempts to understand the informal mentoring avenues sought by Hong Kong vice-principals as a coping mechanism in the absence of a structured professional development program by drawing on Searby *et al.* (Searby, 2010; Tripses and Searby, 2008) assertion that a mentoring mindset should be adopted for improving the effectiveness of mentoring. A qualitative research study was considered appropriate to capture the rich experiences and thick descriptions of mentees toward mentoring (Kram and Ragins, 2007). Although we are mindful of the limitations in generalizing qualitative findings, we believe that it is a feasible way to understand the multifaceted thinking and behavior of informants from various backgrounds. Specifically, we attempted to understand:

(1) the dilemmas encountered by Hong Kong's vice-principals as a result of being "the man in the middle," caught between the school management and peer teachers; and

(2) their engagement in informal mentoring as a way out of the dilemmas.

The informants were comprised of ten vice-principals, five males and five females, with tenure of office ranging from novice to 20 years and an equal representation from the primary and the secondary sectors. In Hong Kong, a secondary schools typically hold 900 students and primary schools hold 750. Generally, the number of female teachers far exceeds that of male teachers in primary education and hence there are fewer male vice-principals. In the secondary sector, there are more male vice-principals than female. In both primary and secondary education, the student populations consist mostly of Chinese at more than 90 percent. Most of the teachers are Chinese, with a few foreigners teaching mainly English as a subject. As a result, all of the participants selected for this study are Chinese.

The interviews, on a face-to-face individual basis, were all conducted in Cantonese (a Chinese dialect used in Hong Kong) by two trained interviewers. The interviews lasted about 60-90 minutes in general. Although a loosely structured format was used with a view to soliciting the diversified views, it was guided by two questions: first, what are your challenges in undertaking your responsibilities? and second, what are

your coping strategies? In compliance with the ethical requirement pertaining to conducting research interviews in Hong Kong, all informants were asked to sign a letter of agreement prior to the interview.

Findings and discussion

Three dilemmas emerged from the findings. Their relevance to the Hong Kong context does not rule out their applicability to other school systems, in our opinion.

The first dilemma: juggling administrative work with teaching

Given the value placed on loyalty and seniority in the Hong Kong school system, the position of vice-principal in Hong Kong is, by convention, filled by internal promotion from a subject panel head rather than through open recruitment. The newly appointed vice-principal is generally an expert in his/her specialized subject area with substantial classroom teaching experience. In view of the single-career track underpinning Hong Kong's school context, vice-principals have to take up extra administrative responsibilities, while also keeping up with teaching work, albeit with lessened hours.

The discussions on the dual-career track context suggest that teachers who aspire to become administrators are well aware of the dilemma that comes along with this role change and usually feel that they are ready to take on new challenges (Armstrong, 2014). Our findings indicated that such level of preparedness for the change of role was not common among Hong Kong vice-principals, who tended to become aware of the importance of teaching work relative to administrative tasks only after they had assumed the position.

Similar to Harvey's (1994) observations on the western Australian context, Hong Kong vice-principals generally feel that their "responsibility for both teaching and administration creates dilemmas" (p. 35), since both are never-ending endeavors that drain their time and energy. As observed by Harvey (1994), administrative tasks demand immediate responses from the vice-principals, and some vice-principals have a hard time adjusting to the rigidly scheduled timetables. As a result, classroom teaching often has to give way to urgent administrative duties. This situation can be further exacerbated by the incumbent's lack of knowledge and skills in handling emergent and unanticipated matters that vice-principals face.

The first dilemma affects the job satisfaction of vice-principals in Hong Kong in two ways. Given the extra workload, some vice-principals find it difficult to maintain the same level of enthusiasm and devotion to their teaching work and thus carry with them a burden of guilt, as illustrated by this quote:

> I am frustrated by the fact that I have to give up the things that I am good at (teaching) and to learn to do new things. I feel guilty as I cannot spend enough time to prepare for my teaching. I love my students, but I really have difficulties squeezing time to talk to them after school. At times, I wish that I had never been promoted (Secondary, female).

The dilemma of balancing teaching and administration is also present in the area of performance appraisal. Teachers are appraised on the basis of their delivery skills, thus rendering pedagogy a core element of appraisal. As far as the practice in Hong Kong schools is concerned, teaching assessment, in the form of classroom observation by a school management team, takes place once a year at the most. The school environment is described in classical educational administration literature as being loose, with disconnected bureaucratic rules and instructional activities (e.g. Meyer and Scott, 1983; Weick, 1976), therefore teaching assessment involves, at best, general heuristics that

allow varying degrees of flexibility instead of operational protocols with precision and certainty (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Teaching assessment is regarded more as a ritual rather than an effective tool in Hong Kong schools where all parties refrain from voicing critical comments on a person's performance in order to uphold a harmonious working environment.

While teaching is an activity contained within the classroom without immediate assessable outcomes, administration involves dealing overtly and frequently with many school stakeholders, rendering its process and effects observable by outsiders. In discussing managerial skills, Katz (1955) differentiated three sets of skills in his seminal work, namely technical skills (pedagogy in educational setting), human relation skills and conceptual skills (strategic thinking). The change of role from teaching to administration calls forth the need for vice-principals to equip themselves with conceptual and human relation skills rather than technical skills. When adapting to the new position, the vice-principals realize the need to deal with their peer teachers in addition to their students. Their decisions regarding personnel matters make them vulnerable to criticisms, as their actions and/or non-actions in response to such matters are more publicly visible than when they were teachers. When asked about their performance pertaining to administrative tasks, the vice-principal informants in our study reported feeling inadequate about their ability to respond to the concerns of their colleagues. This sense of inferiority, i.e. the feeling of lacking a set of human and conceptual skills, was reflected even in longer serving vice-principals. They reported feeling less than competent in assuming leadership skills, as is illustrated by the following two quotes:

> Leading a school is actually very complicated. I don't use my position to ask my colleagues to comply with my decisions; but it turns out that I am perceived by many of my colleagues as being ineffectual. I don't usually deliberate over my decisions. I reckon that I am not visionary. There is nothing wrong with being a simple person, I guess. For one thing, I don't get upset easily. Sometimes, though, I am unaware of the need to protect myself and secure my position, or to make a proposal work for others. But now I am learning how to use my power to achieve what ought to be done. I have a long way to go and I am still learning (Secondary, male).

> I wonder if I am suitable to be a school leader, as I don't think I can be as social, if not hypocritical, as my principal. I remember one time my principal was praising another principal whom I also know in a conference. This principal was devious ever since he was a Head Teacher and had sneaked his way to the principal position. I can't imagine myself praising someone whom I do not appreciate deep-down, but I learn that sometimes you just have to be a fence rider when dealing with people like that (Primary, male).

The second dilemma: standing by the management or siding with peer teachers?

The prevailing context of Hong Kong schools, in which harmony is highly valued and the vice-principal is usually internally promoted from the teacher cohort, imposes on vice-principals a second dilemma: whether a vice-principal should stand up for the teachers' side or for the principal-led administrative counterpart? Teaching is generally conceived as a profession premised on Larson's (1977) seminal conception of professionalism whereby there is a body of knowledge and techniques which professionals apply in their work, and a distinctive ethical encompassment with a high degree of autonomy. Embedded in the values of this professional orientation is teachers' resistance to external interference in their work, especially from school management. However, after taking up an administrative role, vice-principals find they are confronted with a conflict arising from the disparity between the two roles. This particular conflict has intensified in the wake of the Education Reform.

In this context, vice-principals undergo an identity crisis wherein they feel compelled to sacrifice their long-established social network in the interests of putting forward "hard-line" policies as an administrator. The situation in Hong Kong is somewhat different from that suggested in the existing literature. The following quotes from our informants capture the divide between the administrator and teacher roles:

> Sometimes I defer approaching or joining a group of teachers who are having a great time together, knowing that I might disturb them. I usually eat by myself at lunch, although sometimes I try to mingle with my teacher colleagues. As we chat and laugh together, I tell myself to disregard the distance between them and myself (Primary, female).

> Working between my principal and my fellow teachers, I find myself under pressure because I find it difficult to please both my principal and my fellow colleagues. More often than not, I am asked to implement controversial strategies with which I don't agree. Sometimes, I have to make some cosmetic changes to the ideas that my principal asks me to implement with a view to seeking the cooperation of teachers (Secondary, male).

Echoing the term of "structural loneliness" coined by Armstrong (2009) to describe the feeling of vice-principals when settling in their new schools, we assert that a sense of "alienating loneliness" is commonly found among Hong Kong vice-principals which lingers throughout their tenure. As far as our findings reveal, the sense of loneliness and isolation is also found among long-tenured vice-principals and can be attributed, at least in part, to the school culture in Hong Kong. Hong Kong teachers often choose to keep management at a distance and to maintain a minimum level of contact and interactions for various reasons, such as to avoid being seen as apple-polishing or to stay collectively with peers (Kwan, 2011).

The third dilemma: forced innovation vs omnipresent conservatism

The past 20 years have seen numerous waves of reforms in Hong Kong's education system during which the actual enactment of the new policies in schools has rested on the vice-principal. As their role in guiding and implementing new policies became prominent in the wake of the Education Reform, vice-principals were often expected to be innovative. As members of the management team, vice-principals are expected to play a key role in helping the school respond to educational reforms – reforms which would literally infringe upon the school's routines. As members of the teaching team, however, they are inclined to maintain stability or harmonious relationships with their teaching counterparts. Accordingly, a vice-principals are often torn between being innovative and custodial.

Given the convention that the position of vice-principal is filled by an internal candidate rather than through open recruitment, the promotion of a teacher to the vice-principal position often brings about an abrupt change in the school hierarchy. In a culture where unwritten rules place the right to speak on seniority, vice-principals find it difficult to implement educational reforms. For example, when teachers get upset by new policies, they tend to complain to the school principal, who would then talk to the vice-principal in charge of implementing the particular policies. It is not surprising that our vice-principal informants expressed their feeling of having been stabbed in the back (being told on) by fellow colleagues. They also reported that the support of their principals could alleviate their tension. This observation is implicit in the following quote:

> I don't see a lot of people going at me in recent years, although I haven't had a lot of cases referred to me by the principal. I wouldn't say I am the best. I work with the Head Teacher of Curriculum and we share the job, meaning that I don't have to shoulder all the responsibilities.

> When I was the Head Teacher (Subject Head), I was one of the pioneers and had to shoulder everything. Now that we are splitting the work, I feel like people would take note of who is responsible for what and would account to the person in charge if anything goes wrong. This way nobody would be pointing fingers at one particular person for all the mistakes. Besides, I find my school to be fairly harmonious and hasn't had a lot of finger-pointing incidents (Secondary, female).

Apparently, Dimmock and Walker's (2005a, b) assertion that teachers working in the Hong Kong high-power distance school context often refrain from openly asserting their views at board meetings. Rather they resolve to channel these opinions to their immediate supervisors and at the most, they can only be applicable to routine operations. This high-power distance relevancy can be questioned in situations in which a school has to undergo a major overhaul to create the school infrastructure conducive for implementing changes. Our findings reveal that teachers would turn to the principal as the final arbiter, bypassing the immediate supervisors, if they considered the vice-principals as interrupting their lives and leading the school to nowhere.

Guidelines provided for vice-principals who are responsible for implementing teaching policies are, more often than not, vague and lacking in specific instructions. Not knowing where or how to start, the vice-principals often find themselves fumbling, speculating and potentially imposing their own views on the policy. Vice-principals have the responsibility to interpret the guidelines assigned through a top-down approach. As a result, they take pride in elaborating the policies and deem themselves to be part of, or even contributory to them if they succeed. However, they will lose their confidence if they fail.

Facing dilemmas: vice-principals' responses

Our informants reported a high degree of dependence on informal support sought from external sources in resolving their dilemmas in the absence of structured development programs. In the Hong Kong high-power distance school context, teachers are only expected to seek help from their seniors/supervisors if they are seen as incompetent and/or unwilling to take up responsibilities. This value orientation affects the preparedness of a vice-principal to turn to peer teachers within schools for assistance.

Trust and support from the principals as mentors was highly valued by the informants. In general, our informants reported that the best way to learn the ropes was to observe the behaviors of their principals. Unfortunately, learning through observations without concrete and constructive guidance from the principals was not as fruitful as being able to experiment with various practices and get feedback directly. Two informants commented:

> My principal is a good mentor. He usually holds pre-meeting and post-meeting sharing with me. In the pre-meeting session, he discusses with me the meeting agendas and explains to me the rationales behind the arrangement of the agenda items. What I learn most is the reflection at the post-meeting session. He usually explains to me his strategies that he has been using in the meeting in dealing with opposing views (Secondary, female).

> I consider my principal a role model; he is a good thinker and an excellent salesman to talk teachers in to accept his ideas. Unfortunately, he does not explain to me nor discuss with me the various reasons underpinning his decisions. If he had done so, I could have a better understanding of the leadership strategies that would be most appropriate for my school. I can only observe his behaviors and merely guess his rationales in support of the decisions (Secondary, male).

In addition to taking the principal as a mentor, our informants often turn to external sources to acquire ways to overcome their dilemmas. Some vice-principals reported joining support groups organized by the SSB. It is of great importance that vice-principals feel empowered by the support of their SSB. Unfortunately, the SSB's support does not always have a positive impact on the vice-principal. One of the informants reported being asked by the SSB to build a website for the school. She was not knowledgeable in that area and reported frustration rather than empowerment:

> I have some communication problems with the SSB concerning newsletters and documents. There is also the issue regarding school introduction before the start of an academic year. Putting together a school introduction requires a lot of effort, ranging from editing, proof-reading and revising, to making banners and printing. I have not dealt with any of these tasks before, though they are all responsibilities of the vice-principal. Then comes the first day of school, whereupon I have to deal with the Education Bureau and help them out on surveying the number of local and newly-arrived students, for instance. I am new to all of these tasks and, given the digital era we are in, I am perplexed by the web-based delivery system on which we rely to deliver and share information (Secondary, female).

The third widely used technique for coping with dilemmas is learning by attending workshops and enrolling in academic courses held by professional bodies and/or universities. The key is to build confidence and gain access to professional networks rather than acquire new knowledge. The vice-principals in our study, being expected to be the innovative agents in schools, reported feeling more confident when dealing with senior teachers after gaining an advanced academic qualification. Our findings also showed that teachers tended to respect the vice-principal more when they know that they had pursued further studies which, in turn, rendered the vice-principal more capable of winning their cooperation. One vice-principal noted the value of continuing education:

> I have never stopped studying since I have taken up the position of department head. I enjoy being able to stay away from my work and mingle with colleagues from other schools. Over the years, I have developed a good network and through which I could easily seek help and information (Secondary, male).

Implications for vice-principal development

Our findings showed that vice-principals in Hong Kong resorted more to external support than internal support in resolving their dilemmas. The reason is twofold. First, given the fact that Hong Kong vice-principals are middlemen situated between the top stratum (i.e. the school principal) and the frontline (i.e. teaching staffs), they are inevitably stuck between two ways of thinking: administrative and teaching. Their position is deemed awkward and, in terms of organizational structure, dogged by troubles. Second, the high-power distance value orientation renders any attempts by vice-principal to seek assistance from peer teachers within schools inappropriate. Given the traditional culture, individuals can only "turn upward" for support. With internal support ruled out, vice-principals have no alternative but turn to people and resources outside their schools for inspiration and innovation.

We believe that the single-career track system underpinning Hong Kong's school context, along with the Confucian values, hinders the region in establishing a formal mentor programs at the school-based level. We recognize the benefits that vice-principals can gain from informal mentoring, and we look forward to structuralizing this form of support.

Implications

There are implications from this study that pertain to several entities. One of the solutions for helping vice-principals be more prepared would be to build an inter-school mentoring program, whereby SSBs, universities and professional groups join hands to form a web of support for vice-principals.

EDB implications

The design of leadership development programs for vice-principals in Hong Kong by the government has been developed with a future-focussed orientation, and is centered on preparing them for a principalship. Assisting vice principals in dealing with their existing roles has been somewhat neglected. As this study reveals, our vice-principal informants feel that they are always trapped in the tension between management and teachers, finding it hard to strike a balance between being accountable to the principals for efficient implementation of changes pertaining to the school while simultaneously maintaining friendly relationships with teachers. Therefore, it is important that professional development programs be made available to them, with an essential component on mentoring.

SSBs

We believe mentoring and shadowing programs offered by the SSBs can serve an array of purposes, such as skill building, motivation shaping and cognitive adjustment among vice-principals. It is important that these mentoring programs help vice-principals to develop their own professional networks through which they can obtaining assistance whenever needed.

Professional associations

Professional groups such as the Hong Kong Association of Deputy Principals, albeit underdeveloped in comparison with their counterparts in other countries, could be a great platform for experienced vice-principals or principals to share their views on the role. Such sharing would be of great significance in the process of becoming a professional vice-principal.

University partnerships

In addition to offering academic programs that provide vice-principals with the generic management and leadership skills needed to assume the position, universities should play a more significant role in facilitating mentoring. Academics in universities, however, cannot offer individualized mentoring to vice principals without the collaboration of local agents such as individual schools, sponsoring bodies and professional groups. Therefore, it is advisable that universities form a hub to coordinate these local agents.

Conclusion

Based on a data set on vice-principals in Hong Kong, this study aimed to identify the dilemmas faced by the informants in discharging their role, taking into consideration the specific Hong Kong local cultural and structural school contexts. The findings point to three dilemmas posed to the informants: juggling administrative work with teaching, standing by the management or siding with peer teachers, and forced innovation vs omnipresent conservatism. The findings also revealed that engagement in informal mentoring was the most commonly used and effective strategy employed by our informants to alleviate the impact of the dilemmas. In the high-power distance school

context, vice-principals are only expected to "turn upward" to their principals for support and guidance; they have no alternatives but turn to external and informal sources for assistance if they cannot secure help within their school. This paper suggests that formalized mentoring should become an essential element of leadership preparation programs, with the collaboration of the SSBs, professional bodies and universities.

Note

1. The dimension of "Confucian dynamism" is only applicable to Asian cities/countries.

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