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## Re-examining principal learning and leadership in times of complexity

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## Re-examining Principal Learning and Leadership in Times of Complexity

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**Abstract** • This study examines varying conceptions of principal learning using Hong Kong as the context of study. Through interviews with 15 principals, it examines the effectiveness of professional learning in addressing the contemporary and complex challenges of the principalship. Findings highlight the importance of mentorship, continuous and varied learning opportunities, and on-the-job experiences, while noting gaps in aligning professional learning programs with the realities of leadership practices and evolving demands on schools and their leaders. Implications for principal preparation internationally are considered.

**Schlagworte/Keywords** • principal learning, school leadership, school improvement

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## Introduction

School leadership remains a key factor in education quality and successful student outcomes across systems (UNESCO, 2024; Leithwood et al., 2020). Schools already face complex demands in supporting varied student learning needs, wellbeing challenges, and complex and shifting social dynamics, all of which are compounded by shifting constitutional and social infrastructure in many societies, and shared global challenges of climate and health emergencies, conflict, and technological advancement (Campbell, 2020). Given this, the demands on the role of school leaders, particularly principals, are ever increasing in both expectation and complexity, and with that, questions arise as to how best principals can be prepared for and supported in their roles. Drawing upon data collected from a larger study on principals' life histories in relation to education reform in Hong Kong, this paper examines the question:

*(RQ): How is principal learning conceptualized within the Hong Kong education system, and how do serving principals perceive the effectiveness of their professional learning in addressing the challenges and realities of the principalship?*

## Dynamic Changes in the Education System and Principals' Roles

With the rise of neo-liberal and new public management models in the governance of public services such as education, there have been increased demands and forms of accountability for schools and their leaders (Savage, 2021; Gurr, 2024). The 2024 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2024) noted that expectations of leaders at school and system levels have been changing, also shaped by social preferences and beliefs on education. As a result, leadership in schools is becoming increasingly challenging as they are expected to deliver an expanding set of results, and the selection, preparation, and development of school leaders are often not designed well enough to ensure good conditions for effective school leadership (UNESCO, 2024). Principal preparation programs (PPPs) that are in place in many systems often emphasise elements such as instructional leadership, standards-based curricula, and field-based forms of internships; ele-

ments believed to be crucial for developing effective school leaders. These programs often incorporate active instructional strategies focused on application of learning, rigorous recruitment processes, and strong partnerships with schools and districts to address the complex challenges of the principalship, such as improving teaching practices and student performance (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

## The Principalship and Principal Preparation in Hong Kong

Understanding effectiveness and influence of PPPs is also mediated by socio-cultural context. In Hong Kong, this is characterized by high power-distance and a hierarchical structure, which poses additional challenges to principal professional learning at the aspiring, newly appointed, and serving stages of principalship. This culture often limits teachers' involvement in school decision-making and innovation, which can complicate the leadership of school improvement efforts, and the implementation of educational reforms (Wong & Liu, 2018). Principal preparation in Hong Kong is a structured and comprehensive process overseen by the Education Bureau (EDB), which ensures alignment with professional standards for principals (COTAP, 2015). Aspiring principals must attain the Certification for Principalship (CFP) and complete the Preparation for Principalship (PfP) course, covering strategic direction, policy environment, learning, teaching, curriculum, staff and resources management, and quality assurance. This two-year process culminates in a needs analysis, successful completion of the PfP course, and a professional development portfolio (Education Bureau, 2020). Only teachers with at least five years of experience, and a recognised teaching qualification are eligible to enrol, and complete this alongside their substantive role. Newly appointed principals undergo a designated program and engage in continuing professional development (CPD) activities relevant to their personal and school needs, while serving principals must undertake CPD activities for about 50 hours per year, totalling a minimum of 150 hours in a three-year cycle (Education Bureau, 2024).

Principal preparation in Hong Kong also involves substantial involvement from experienced principals, opportunities for reflection and sharing (Ng & Szeto, 2016; Walker & Dimmock, 2006), but following

limited but existing evaluative work on these programmes could benefit from more flexible training structures and connection to existing skills and knowledge of participating leaders (Ng & Szeto, 2016).

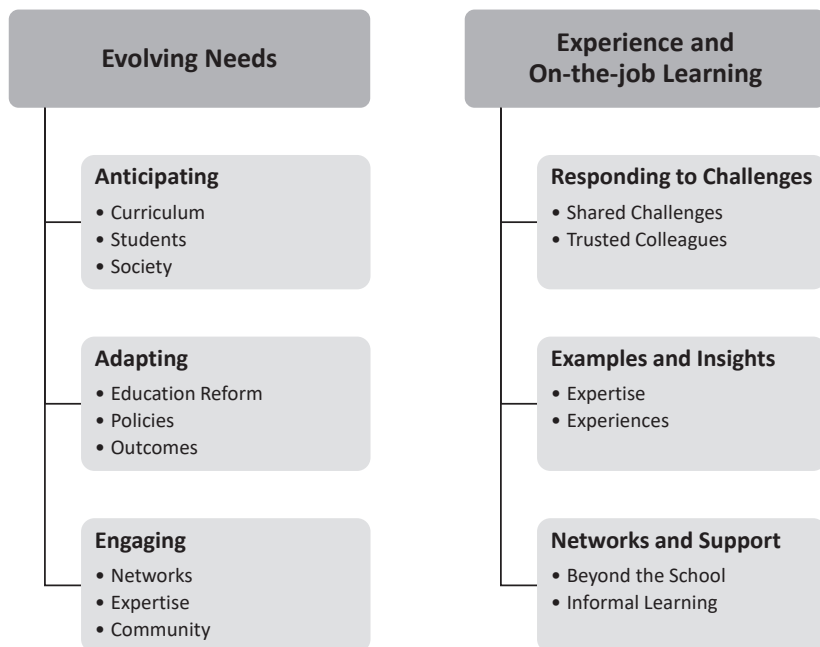
## Methods

With this in mind, this paper draws upon data from a larger study examining how school principals describe their career histories in relation to educational reform, using life history and narrative methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals from government-funded primary and secondary schools across Hong Kong in the year 2024–2025, recruited through purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling strategies (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Each participant took part in one interview lasting 60–90 minutes, focusing on their professional histories, leadership approaches, high, low and turning points in their career, and positive, negative and current reform memories. Participants had varied experiences, ranging from newly appointed principals to those with extensive careers in multiple schools, including roles as teachers, vice-principals, and principals. The diversity in their backgrounds provided a comprehensive view of principal learning and leadership within the Hong Kong education system.

Data from the interviews were analysed iteratively, including the development of reflective notes and identifying overarching themes. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking and reflexivity were utilised, including sharing draft findings with participants to confirm accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

The findings from this study provide a nuanced understanding of the nature of principals learning, how it is conceptualized in the Hong Kong context, and how serving principals perceive its efficacy in preparing them for the realities of the principalship. Two key themes are presented, reflecting the evolving needs of school leadership and the importance of on-the-job experiences, represented in Fig. 1 and elaborated on below.



**Fig. 1** Navigating the Principalship: Learning and Realities

## Evolving Needs

Principals highlighted the dynamic nature of educational policies and the necessity for schools to stay ahead of these changes. Principals articulated their capacity for anticipating needs or changes ahead, adapting to externally imposed policies, and engaging with other stakeholders in and across their communities in order to respond to shifting needs and changes at a school and system level. For instance, one principal noted that,

“For my team, they know that what the Education Bureau (EDB) proposed, we had already done five years earlier. [...] So, for us, none of these policies were new. We had already predicted and implemented them.”  
(Principal 2)

This principal articulates outcomes of keeping abreast of societal and educational changes and how this can support the anticipation of future challenges. Without articulating the specific learning that equipped them for this, this principal was articulating attributes rem-

inherent of theories of adaptive leadership and sense-making, with a focus on learning (Earley, 2016).

Another principal noted that the nature of this anticipation, adaptation, and engagement in relation to evolving needs of students and communities changed throughout their career. They noted that,

“Recently, the biggest change is related to the development part. I spent over 15-16 years catering to learning diversity inside the school, working on curriculum differentiation and diversifying the learning experience for students. [...] This is a big turning point for me. I now spend more time working with outside stakeholders.” (Principal 1)

For this principal, as they developed in their role, they reflected that their engagement with a broader group of community partners that could play a role in supporting the learning of students and work of the school, came to dominate their work more than what had previously been about more micro-specific matters within the school. This shift over time also indicates a recognition of the varied expertise needed to support leadership of change in response to evolving needs, and the role of networks within and across the school community in identifying and utilising that expertise (Wang, 2018; Echavez et al., 2023). The importance of networks and individuals within and beyond the school community was also identified as being an important factor in the relevance of the professional learning principals engaged in to support their work (Stone & Stone, 2024).

## Experience and On-the-job Learning

The nature of the learning that these leaders were choosing to engage in was not only about formal or credentialed programmes. Many of the principals also articulated the importance of varied experiences and opportunities for on-the-job learning that supported them when facing different challenges or changes. Principals at later stages of their career recounted instances where they applied their accumulated knowledge and skills to transform struggling schools, improve student performance, and enhance enrolment, all of which remain contemporary issues in Hong Kong schools. Additionally, participation in professional organisations was noted as providing opportunities for learning and contributing to the professional development of peers,



which was perceived to further enrich their own leadership capabilities. One principal noted that,

“When I joined, the school was in a very challenging state. [...] financial issues, curriculum problems, and low enrolment. I conducted extensive research and applied everything I had learned from my previous roles to address these challenges. In just three years, the school saw a significant transformation. Student performance improved dramatically, and enrolment soared.” (Principal 7)

This illustrates the range of learning this principal believed was necessary to understand and respond to challenges, the importance of research and knowledge, the application of this, and the variety of means through which they engage in this learning (Boren et al., 2017). Related to this was also the importance of learning from and with others, and sharing knowledge and expertise that these individuals have contributed as part of their own development, and what they perceived as their contribution to the profession. Such as,

“I was invited to join the [principal association] [...] as a Council member. To me, it seemed like a chance for learning, so I joined to see how I could contribute and also to learn from others who had been working there for some time. And through that experience, I saw something different. It wasn’t just about learning how to manage a school and take care of day-to-day matters, but about promoting professional development for principals. It was about making principalship more professional, helping principals become better at what they do.” (Principal 3)

Highlighted by this principal was the importance of professional learning and interactions with peers and how this also supported broader strategic thinking, planning, and development of how the principalship was perceived and practiced (Sahlin, 2025; Johnson et al., 2021).

## Discussion and Implications

Principal learning within the Hong Kong education system is conceptualized through a structured and comprehensive process overseen by the EDB, emphasizing principals’ capacity for developing strategic direction, negotiating the policy environment, and implementing school-based management. Serving principals add further nuance to this conceptualisation; perceiving their professional learning as partially effective in addressing the challenges and realities of the prin-

principalship, highlighting the further importance of mentorship, continuous professional learning opportunities beyond the aspiring and newly appointed stage, and varied learning opportunities through on-the-job experiences. However, they also note gaps in aligning professional learning programs with real-life leadership practices and the evolving demands of their roles, and the varied opportunities they seek out or engage in in order to address this gap.

Contemporary issues such as policy overload, shifting policy priorities, student wellbeing concerns, teacher turnover, and a declining birth rate leading to threats of school closures significantly crowd the role of the principal (Campbell, 2023; Niesche et al., 2023). These challenges have profound implications for the scope and possibilities for school improvement and change. Principals often find themselves preoccupied with bureaucratic loads and administrative requirements, which hinder their ability to connect self-evaluation and development work with student learning and outcomes (Education Bureau, 2023). Considering the role and prominence of the voices of principals in the evaluation and design of a range of professional learning for aspiring, newly appointed, and serving principals will be important in the future development and success of such learning, particularly in relation to achieving systemic goals, as well as broader concerns of school improvement and quality education (Reid, 2021).

## Conclusion

Where systems enjoy structured and comprehensive processes of principal professional learning, insight remains necessary as to how this relates to the practical realities of the role, and processes of self-evaluation, school improvement activity, and a focus on the continued enhancement of student learning and outcomes (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Grissom et al., 2019). To address these challenges, it is crucial to reflect on how the voices of principals and other school leaders are centred in how we understand, evaluate, plan for, and enable such professional learning in diverse systems. In doing so, new insights and opportunities may be possible to make sense of the complexity of the demands facing principals, their schools, and our systems more broadly, and how we can actively engage with this to better serve our students and communities.

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