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**UNDERSTANDING CHINESE PRINCIPALS'
PERCEPTIONS OF THE FINNISH TRAINING
PROGRAM: AN EVALUATION REPORT**

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Understanding Chinese principals' perceptions of the Finnish training program: An evaluation report

Abstract

This CEREC working paper is based on the summary of my master thesis *The Relevance of Cross-Cultural Leadership Training: A case study of a Finnish training program for Chinese school principals* (Xing, published in March 2013, University of Jyväskylä) that studies the value of cross-cultural leadership training and features of effective leadership training programs from the perspective of trainees who participated in the leadership training program held at the University of Tampere (UTA) in October 2011. Amongst the twenty-one trainees participated in training program, interview were conducted with six Shanghai principals. Content analysis was carried out to give meaning to data by adapting interpretative approach. This research serves an evaluation report about the training program implementation in practice.

The results suggested two aspects of training outcomes. These aspects were categorized into positive outcome and negative outcome. The positive aspects suggested usefulness of leadership training, especially for developing effective leadership, wider understanding the nature of education educational leadership practices in better handling the contradiction issues of organizational conflicts and government's role in educational enhancement. The negative aspects were found out to be lack of practical on the job training, such as limited field trips and visits to schools, diversified needs of the trainees, in competences and incapability of lecture delivering in terms of leadership from some trainers, and importantly the major issues were related with language barriers. Nonetheless, issues such as differences in cultural contexts, and educational systems do not work in the cross-cultural training. The analysis and discussions featuring the elements of the effective leadership training programs included systematic structure, targeted and personalized content, collaboration between theory and practice, adequate length and time, interactive

learning, and “*having reflection*” from the perspectives of trainees with practical implication of leadership training and actions for professional development.

In conclusion, a cross-cultural training program has enabled the positive role in expanding Chinese principals’ leadership practices and professional development. The finding also suggested that when importing Western educational ideas to non-Western countries, the training program providers need to incorporate with the contextual cross-cultural differences that further enable the learners or trainers to adapt to the relevant training context

Key words: cross-cultural leadership training, leadership practices, professional development

Introduction

Principal leadership is widely considered as one of the most important factors that contribute to school improvement and student achievement. Leithwood and Jantzi, (2006, p. 206) claim that a principal’s competency is the key element in successful implementation of educational reforms in schools. Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2008, p. 28) concludes that, “school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning and almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices”. Leithwood et al. (2008) highlight that while effective leadership makes a significant difference, leadership practices tend to be generic and universal.

Over the past two decades, principal leadership has become even more significant due to the increasing complexity of principals’ roles and responsibilities around the world (Billot, 2003, p. 38). In addition to this, Hallinger (2004, pp. 67-71) argues that traditionally, principals in most educational systems throughout the world were expected to carry out commands from the educational authority and fulfill their administrative responsibilities within their schools. Today, in the era of educational reform, principals’ roles have gradually changed from school manager to

school leader. Principals nowadays are expected to lead change in schools to sustain school improvement and students' learning achievement (Billot, 2003, pp. 45-46). This generates the argument that whether or not important to bring professional development in school by the training they receive from leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore: what will a cross-cultural leadership training program bring for improving principals' leadership practices and professional development?

There is an increasing interest in training school principals nationwide in China. In 2011, the Ministry of Education, China (MOE) launched the nationwide Project for *Dispatching 10,000 Backbone Teachers of Primary and Secondary Schools Overseas Training (TAP) (2011-2015)* (MOE, 2011). Against this background, MOE contracted the first Finnish training program with UTA for twenty-one Chinese principals of upper secondary schools in October 2011. Nevertheless, studies on the evaluations of cross-cultural leadership training programs are insufficient. In spite of the massive volume of formal leadership training that takes place globally, there is relatively limited research to assess formal leadership training effectiveness (Yukl, 2006, p. 413). Most of the current studies have been carried out in a national context focusing on formal educational leadership training, and only a few studies have systematically examined participants' conceptions and experience of Western modes of teaching and learning in the context of a cross-cultural training program. More research should focus on the link between leadership training and leadership practices in order to better understand the characteristics of leadership training that most strongly support quality leadership practices (Fuller, Young & Baker, 2011, p. 208).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore Chinese school principals' perceptions on implying the Finnish training program in their own school work activities and professional communities. In other words, it aims to explore participants' perceptions of the Finnish training program in relation to their leadership practices and professional development. It is investigated through the following research questions:

1. What were the effects of the Finnish leadership training program in terms of implementation and practical orientation for leadership practices and professional development of Chinese principals?
2. What were the important features that contributed to leadership practices and professional development of Chinese principals?

This study contributes to the field of educational leadership and management in the cross-cultural context. It builds upon the available body of knowledge relating to the effect of training on principals' leadership practices and professional development. It focuses on a cross-cultural training program with its unique characteristics and challenges. Therefore, the research provides a basis for the improvement of similar educational leadership training programs. The study is significant because it explores insight views from the trainees on the implication of training on leadership from cross-cultural leadership training program received in foreign country.

Research Methodology

The research is a qualitative case study. Yin (2003, p. 14) states that case study involves an all-inclusive method, covering the design logic, data collection techniques, and specific approaches for data analysis. One aim is to generate comprehensive descriptions of a phenomenon, to acquire possible explanations of it, or to assess the phenomenon (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003, p. 439). Stake (1995, p. 136) claims that qualitative case study is an invaluable opportunity for the researcher to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of the researcher's styles, to engage the best of inquirer's interpretive powers, and to make a support for those things the investigator values.

A semi-structured interview technique was used to explore participants' responses. I interviewed six Shanghai principals out of twenty-one participants, who took the same leadership training program at UTA in October 2011. There were two female and four male principals respectively. The purpose was to gather information from participants through listening to their stories, feelings, intentions and thoughts

(Lichtman, 2006, p. 117). To protect the confidentiality of the participants, I used aliases (Principal A, B, C, D, E and F) instead of the participants' names and schools where they worked. The neutral gender (he/she) was also used to report the findings. I applied conventional content analysis in my study, in which coding categories are derived directly from the text data with a view to describing the phenomenon under study. Pre-existing theories and categories are avoided, and the focus is on allowing the categories to emerge from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279).

In the citation the (...) marking meant that the citation is preceded by a phrase expressed by the interviewee. Brackets [] referred to a part of the citation that has been clarified in details. The languages in the citations were modified slightly by omitting some colloquial expressions and repetitive connecting words. Also, it should be noted that the Finnish training was a part of big training project *Outstanding Principals Training Program in the Yangtze River Delta (Shanghai, Zhejiang and Jiangsu) (YRD Training)* in China. Therefore, Chinese principals offered many comparative perspectives when they answered the interview questions.

Literature review

Leadership practices and professional development are two key terms of this research. In this section, due to the word limitations, I am not going to open up the detailed points. Instead, I summarize the main literatures related to these terms very briefly.

Leadership practices

Based on six previous researches on leadership practices (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p. 221; Cotton, 2003, pp. 67-72; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003, p.4; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005, pp. 42-43; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins & Harris, 2006, pp. 34-43; Walker & Ko, 2011, p. 372; Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 29), I synthesize and develop a theoretical framework named "four broad categories of

successful leadership practices". This includes setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program

Setting directions. Successful leaders have a clear vision and dream of what could be done before starting any project; they have a strong belief in those dreams (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, pp. 17-18), and are confident in their capacities to make extraordinary things happen (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 56). While visions can be motivating, action usually requires some cooperation on short-term goals to be achieved in order to move toward accomplishing the vision (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 35). The principal's expression of high performance expectations for students is a part of the vision that guides high performance schools and is a crucial component on its own (Cotton, 2003, p. 11; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 6).

Developing people. Setting up a work structure that rewards teachers is an important part of the principal's role in creating a positive learning climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p. 224). Successful principals demonstrate an awareness of the personal lives of teachers and staff through being informed about important personal issues, being aware of personal needs, acknowledging significant events, and maintaining personal relationships (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 59). They provide varied professional development activities for teachers to improve their skills and secure the necessary resources, such as financial, human, time, materials, and facilities resources (Cotton, 2003, pp. 70-71). Hallinger (2003, p. 332) and Waters et al. (2003, p. 10) claim the contribution to leader effects of sustaining high visibility around the school, a visibility associated with high quality interactions with both staff and students.

Redesigning the organization. Effective principals make a point of recognizing achievement and improvement on the part of students and staff (Cotton, 2003, pp. 70-72). Practices associated with such initiatives include creating common planning times for teachers and establishing team and group structures for problem solving (Hadfield, 2003, p. 117). Principals establish links between the school and the local,

national and global communities so that school communities can make contributions to the broader society and its development. (Walker & Ko, 2011, p. 373.)

Managing the instructional program. Effective principals provide instructional support, encompassed in Hallinger's (Hallinger, 2003, p. 332) model on "supervising and evaluating instruction", "coordinating the curriculum", Cotton's (2003, pp. 67-68) model on "safe and orderly school environment", and Waters' et al. (2003, p. 4) research on "establishes set of standard operating procedures and routines". The practices of monitoring is labelled "monitoring student progress" in Hallinger's (2003, p. 332) model. Finally, effective principals protect teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus (Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 48-49).

Professional development

Based on previous studies (Bush & Chew, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Fenwick & Pierce, 2002; Peterson, 2002; Guskey, 2003; Davis et al., 2005; Levine, 2005; Hannum & Martineau, 2008; Dyer & Renn, 2010; Orr & Orphanos, 2011), I integrate and develop "ten features of effective professional development programs". This contains clear mission and purpose, coherent curriculum, field-based internships, problem-based learning, cohort groups, mentors, collaboration between university programs and school districts, ongoing and career-staged, adequate length and time, and knowledgeable faculty.

According to Guskey (2000, pp. 56-58), there are three types of evaluation for program: *planning*, *formative*, and *summative* evaluation. *Planning evaluation* occurs ahead of a program or activity, even though certain phases may be continual and ongoing. It helps decision makers to know whether efforts are commanded in the right direction and are likely to produce the desired outcomes. *Formative evaluation* takes place in the process of the program or activity. The aim is to offer those responsible for the program continuing information on whether things are going as planned and if expected progress is being made. *Summative evaluation* is conducted

after completing a program or activity. It aims to provide program developers and decision makers with judgments on the program's overall performance.

It should be noted that the four leadership practices and professional development support each other. By utilizing these practices, principals will enhance their own professional development. Through effective professional development programs, principals will become more successful in leadership practices.

Results and discussions

This section presents and discusses the data collected after the training program. Two emergent themes are identified from the analysis: (a) value of the Finnish training program contribute to Chinese principals' leadership practices and professional development, and (b) features of effective leadership training programs contribute to Chinese principals' leadership practices and professional development. The theoretical framework for the study has been taken into consideration when writing the discussions.

Value of the Finnish training program contribute to Chinese principals' leadership practices and professional development

In this phase, principals were asked how they considered the value and transferability of the Finnish training program. In other words, how participants evaluated the training program, how they had been able to use training aspects to overcome challenges and implement appropriate leadership practices, and how the training program brought to their professional knowledge, skills and attitudes. Principals reported positive and negative aspects of the training program.

Positive aspects of the training program

The most striking result to emerge from the data was about *more effective leadership*, including curriculum leadership, strategic leadership, humanistic leadership, and effective networking. It should be noted that these terms were not

directly covered in my literatures. However, they were mentioned when principals gave the answers to interview questions.

Among the six respondents, five principals reported that the school-based curricula in Finland were highly rich, selective and flexible. They were impressed that Finnish schools had very detailed guidelines to explain how the curricula were designed and implemented. The Finnish examples gave them insights that well-designed curricula could make a difference to students' learning. More importantly, they learnt some skills to make real curriculum improvement happening in their own schools.

Now we are trying to open more extended and research courses that are in line with students' demands, as well as the school's philosophy. (...) I give all the available resources to support these improvements. For instance, I recruit part-time teachers to teach these courses. (Principal C)

The result confirms that successful school leaders provide adequate and consistent resources to support collaborative work (Connolly & James, 2006, pp. 72-79; Walker & Ko, 2011, p. 373). It also coincides with the challenge of developing curriculum leadership and expectations that majority principals had for the Finnish training programs.

Principal E commented that the training opened his/her eyes by understanding how the citizenship education was conducted in Finnish schools.

We were very interested in the citizenship education in Finland and took some pictures from textbooks. Afterwards, I translated them from Finnish to Chinese via Google translation and used them as discussion materials. Everyone was so excited to learn how citizenship education was conducted in Finland generally. We do not have this course in Chinese schools, but it is definitely needed in the future. (Principal E)

The results partly reflect previous research that instructional principals actively coordinate school curricular objectives which are closely united with the content taught in classes and with achievement tests (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, p. 222),

and involve in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction and assessment practices (Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 54-55).

Principals A and F claimed that the training program expanded their visions and horizons. They became more future-oriented in their leadership practices. The training helped them understand the big picture of schools. They were able to stand on higher levels to look at a specific school issue afterwards. This result suggests that the study that training on the theme of strategic planning not only equipping school leaders with knowledge and skills needed to succeed in challenging circumstances (Alava, 2007, p. 45), but also help them to be future-oriented so as to make adjustments in time to suit the circumstances at hand, therefore overcoming turbulent challenges which confront them every day (Gamage, 2003, pp. 8-9). It also consists with the view that successful principals set directions (vision and goal) for their schools (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, pp. 17-18; Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 35), effective training programs have clear mission and purpose that focus on issues linked to learning and learners (Guskey, 2000, pp.36-37), and correlates with the expectations that four principals had for the Finnish training programs

Conversely, Principal E reported the issue of strategic planning could not be answered and it did not exist in Finnish schools. He/she was answered by several Finnish principals, *"no, we do not have school strategic planning. Why do we have to think about this issue?"* One possible explanation for these contradictory results may be due to the different contexts they were referring. The former result may suggest the situation when participants talk about the training courses in the university. The latter result may indicate the situation when participants visit Finnish schools.

Principal F commented that he/she was able to implement humanistic leadership in his/her school. *"I learnt to pay more attention to individual needs at my school and try to support these needs within available resources."* He/she added that principals must take overseas training programs if they sought to achieve the goals of student-oriented and humanistic leadership. The result confirms that effective

principals develop people by providing individualized support and consideration (Leithwood et al., 2006, p. 22), by creating a positive school climate that supports teaching and learning, (Hallinger, 2003, pp. 332-333), and cares for students (Cotton, 2003, pp. 68-69).

Principal C utilized effective networking to enhance students' overall development after training. For example, his/her school cooperated more with one university in many areas, such as conducting small joint research projects, organizing students' association activities, giving career lectures, recruiting teachers, and co-designing curricula of extended courses. Compared with few years ago, the school now had more extended courses for students to choose. Through such collaborations, the university and the school both learnt many good things from each other.

Previously, universities and secondary schools were separated and blaming each other. (...) Now my school has the real collaboration and cooperation with one university. We are trying to help each other and grow together. The university is considering what they can do for the school, and vice versa. (Principal C)

The findings suggest that successful leadership practices encourage willingness to compromise among collaborators, foster open and smooth communication among collaborators, and link school with external communities (Walker & Ko, 2011, p. 373).

Four principals reported that they were able to *better tackle the contradiction between ideal and reality* afterwards, which were the biggest challenges they faced. The ideal was students' overall development (both academic and non-academic outcomes of students) whereas the reality was the upward testing system (*gaokao*[1](#)). For example, Principal B attached more importance to foster students' abilities of learning, practicing and cooperation. He/she started to improve students' overall development steadily on the condition of ensuring good score. He/she used a metaphor to describe the situation of Chinese principals in quality-oriented education vividly.

Now I should change it a bit and work towards quality-oriented education. It cannot be done overnight. I plan to have small improvement each year and several steps forward in several years. (...) Chinese principals are "dancing in fetters" [trying to move about while arms and legs are bound]. We need to work towards quality-oriented education, but do have a heavy burden. (Principal B)

The result agrees the findings that Chinese principals confront the challenge of balancing their education ideals and accountability realities (Chu & Cravens, 2010, p. 10). It also correlates with Principal B's view that that effective leadership training programs think what principals think would like to think, which will be presented later.

In addition, Principal F gained a deeper understanding of students' overall development. He/she gave the example of sports specialized students in both countries. In Finland, students were equally good in sports and academic study. In China, those students were quite good in sports but very poor in academic study. Consequently universities had to admit them for low academic score. He/she claimed that *"Chinese way of educating students is a bit biased."*

Principals A, C and F and commented that the training enabled them to have *broader understanding the nature of education*. Principal A expressed the view that the training program promoted his/her ideals of education and educational philosophy. After the training he/she appreciated the remarkable achievements of Chinese education with a large population more. As he/she said, *"I do not look down on our education after training overseas. Instead, I appreciated more our extraordinary accomplishments. As the largest population in the world, it must not be easy for China to achieve the basic education for all."* Principal C claimed that *"education should be intensively cultivated and slowly nurtured"* afterwards. Principal F stated *"I must take care of my school so that parents feel public schools better than private ones."* The results support Davis et al.'s (2005, p. 9) view that adults learn best when they are exposed to conditions demanding the application of taught skills, knowledge, and problem-solving strategies within realistic situations, and when guided by critical self-reflection.

Principals B and E reported they were able to straightway promote education cultures of respect, trust and cooperation among teachers and students in their own schools. They were impressed that trust was everywhere in Finland. It was the same in the area of education. The society trusted schools, principals trusted teachers and students, and vice versa.

Distrust is a big problem in China now. I tell teachers that regardless of social atmosphere, we must have a pure land inside the school and educate students to have integrity. (...) More importantly, I show trust to teachers and students by giving example. (...). If the principal says one thing and does another, he/she will definitely lose integrity. So I feel it is the Finnish education culture that we can apply directly into my school. (Principal E)

This result is consistent with the claim that effective principals contribute to productive collaboration in their schools by cultivating mutual respect and trust among those involved in collaborative activity (Connolly & James, 2006, pp. 72-79), and by serving the needs of others instead of their own (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 22). It also supports the view that teachers are trusted to do their best as true professionals of education in Finland (Väljärvi et al. 2007, p. 49).

The majority of principals attended the training program agreed that the training helped them gain *increased understanding the role of government in education*. For instance, three respondents were impressed by the collaboration between general and vocational upper secondary schools in Finland. They reported the Finnish government built the two-track system to ensure general and vocational upper secondary schools were open access to each other. There were very few obstacles between two school systems. Students could freely choose courses in both schools and get two diplomas if they want.

I was surprised to see female students learning painting, carpentry, and wallpaper paste in Finnish vocational schools. Students were quite happy. It is so different from us. In China, we have a very big discrimination to vocational education. Vocational schools are usually the last choice for students who are poor in academic performance

and cannot study in general upper secondary schools. Most graduates want to be civil servants. (Principal D)

Principals A, B and D were impressed that all teachers had master degrees in Finland. Teaching was a prestigious profession and many young students aspired to be teachers. Principal B was surprised that teachers in vocational upper secondary schools also held master degree, which was very rare in China. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the Chinese government to break the system obstacles, build such cooperation and collaboration, and increase teachers' qualifications. The results reflect previous research that has been done in the field. For example, Välijärvi et al. (2007, pp. 48-49) found that the profession of teacher was regarded as one of the most important professions in the Finnish society, and all Finnish teachers had to complete a master's degree to start their teaching careers.

Principal F mentioned the issue of students' sports accident insurance. He/she said that Finnish principals and teachers were very free to open any kind of physical education classes as the Finnish government would cover students' sports accident insurance. The Finnish government also built hospital schools for those who were sick for long time. However, Chinese principals and teachers were reluctant to open physical education classes. They sacrificed their private time to make up missing lessons for those students who were sick at home. The reason was such insurance was not covered by the Chinese government, not to mention hospital schools. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the Chinese government to buy students' sports accident insurance at least to ease principals and teachers' worries.

The present result indicating that a lack of students' sports accident insurance is the main reason that the principals are reluctant to open the physical education class is, however, somewhat unexpected. Previous studies (Yao & Jin, 2005, p. 177) have indicated that the physical education class was not the interest of school principals due to many exams and homework. Therefore, the result of the present thesis adds to previous research by showing that a deeper reason hinders principals to freely take actions for the students' wellbeing in China.

Negative aspects of the training program

Despite all the positive sentiments expressed by a number of principals about how the Finnish training program had influenced on their leadership practices and professional development, there were participants who gave critical feedback of the training program. For example, Principal A stated, *“the Finnish training program cannot be regarded as a very professional principal training. It was primarily meant to expand principals’ version and learn more about Finnish education system.”*

Principal D claimed the Finnish training program was nothing new and pretty the same as domestic training program. As he/she stated, *“they both include lectures and school visits.”* One possible explanation for this result may be because the participant compared the format between the Finnish training and domestic training programs.

My understanding of Finnish education can only stay at this level. It is impossible to gain deeper understanding in such a training mode. (Principal D)

Principals B, C, D and E reported that *school visits time was too tight*. They did not have sufficient time to discuss some planned issues with Finnish peers.

The most regretful thing was so little time to visit Finnish schools, especially upper secondary schools. We spent most time discussing issues with professors and education officials in the university. (Principal E)

This result is partly in line with the challenge rose by Hölttä, Pekkola and Cai (2009, p. 38) regarding harmony and compromises between Chinese flexible working habit and Finnish rigid working traditions when organizing a training program for Chinese. It suggests that more collaboration between university programs and school systems are needed to promote the consistency of intensive leadership training programs (Dyer & Renn, 2010, p. 195).

Principal C commented that there were *too many different needs to make everyone satisfied*. As he/she said, *“some wanted to learn school culture while others wanted to learn faculty development.”* On one hand, it implies that the training

programs will be inefficient if not taking the trainees different needs into consideration. On the other, it suggests that professional development program requires adequate length and time to enhance principals' learning (Peterson, 2002, pp. 216-230).

Principal E stated some of their questions could not be answered because the trainers were not practitioners. As practitioners, they wanted to clarify how Finnish peers practiced specific issues in Finnish schools. However, he/she said, "*professors and education officials are experts in their fields, but they do not know the specific practices in Finnish schools. They cannot give us clear answers.*" This result supports the view that effective training programs require a knowledgeable faculty (Xing, 2013, p. 55), as well as indicates that the training organizer did not choose the appropriate trainers according to trainees' needs.

Principals B, E and F mentioned *language issues*. They agreed that the English was barrier for some activities. They said most participants had minimal English skills, and the program relied mainly on translation from English to Chinese.

It took Chinese experts 1-2 hours to explain the issues while a whole day for Finnish experts to clarify the same issues. Sometimes we spent half an hour making clear of basic concepts due to language barriers. It was a waste of time.
(Principal B)

This result is in accordance with Hudson and Andy's (2006, p. 8) study that intensive overseas training program for Chinese requires language translations due to insufficient English skills of participants.

Besides English, Finnish language was reported as another barrier for communication even though some of the participants understood English well.

Every participant took a booklet about school curricula that explained how the curricula were organized and implemented in Finnish schools. However, we did not understand in that they were written in Finnish. (Principal E)

This result implies that Chinese principals are keen on learning Finnish school curricula, but the Finnish language has become a main barrier for them to learn more.

Finally, Principals D and E said they had enjoyed attending the program and learnt quite a lot. However, they were unable to put what they learnt into practice due to many national, institutional, and cultural constraints. They concluded that it was a well-designed and functional system in Finland, but it would be difficult to work in China.

It is a matter of national contexts and systems. We cannot copy it. We cannot use it either here [in China] even we copy it from Finland. (Principal D)

Principal E gave the reasons why it was difficult to apply Finnish lessons into Chinese context.

Many things do not work in China. We do not have such systems [equality, two-track system, etc.] in China. (Principal E)

The comments highlight the crucial factors (culture and local context) when applying one education system into another. It confirms the view that local contexts and cultures must be taken into consideration when accommodating Western educational ideas for Chinese leaders (Wang, 2006, p. 380). This finding is interesting because Chinese principals claim differences in national and cultural contexts; education and school systems would not work in cross-cultural training programs. This result particularly helps Finnish training providers to identify what they cannot offer to Chinese principals. It also indicates that a well-functioned educational system could not work alone without the coherence and coordination of other supporting systems.

Features of effective leadership training programs contribute to Chinese principals' leadership practices and professional development

In this phase principals were enquired to identify the features of effective principal training programs based on their training experiences in China and abroad, and how these features contributed to their leadership practices and professional development.

Three principals declared that effective principal training programs *could not be done overnight*. It took time to make training programs successful, which should be accumulated in practice step by step. In their opinions, there was no such perfect training model that fits everyone. What they understood, the effective leadership training programs were just an ideal. This result supports Fenwick and Pierce's (2002, p. 4) view that effective professional development takes time.

It is a luxury and unrealistic that principal's ability improves immediately after taking a training program. In my opinion, an effective principal training program has two dimensions. From the narrow scale it can be one program; from the broad scale it can be a long-term program. (Principal A)

This finding is partly in accordance with Peterson's (2002, pp. 216-230) claim that engaging all-day and multiple-session meetings over the whole year is a more fruitful method than the form of one-shot workshops. However, they have different focuses. The former result may suggest that both types of training can be effective. The later claim, on the other hand, may imply that a longer time of studying will make the training program more coherent and effective.

Is there any perfect training model existing? Effective training program requires continuously exploring and engaging from trainers and trainees. We can always give some advice to make it better. (Principal D)

The result indicates that an effective training program is a collectivist process which requires opinions and efforts from both trainers and trainees is, however, somewhat unexpected. The present study does not have the explanations for this result. It will serve as a direction for future research.

In addition, Principal A mentioned that an effective training program should be *systematic*. It included two aspects. First, the overall training program design should be *comprehensive*. It ought to cover theory and practice concerning the principal as a leader, manager and educator. It appears that previous studies have not been able to address this issue. Therefore, this finding adds to our understanding of the components of an effective leadership training program by seeing the role of principal from three perspectives. Second, the training should be *career-staged*. This meant training programs would need to address the demands of different career stages of the diverse principals, and arrange specialized training programs for them accordingly.

The training I am taking at the National Training Center for Secondary School Principals is quite good. It is very systematic and available for principals at different career stages. The highest level is advanced research training [educator training]. Selected principals were asked to summarize their leadership thoughts and education philosophies. (Principal A)

The result supports the recommendation by Fenwick and Pierce (2002, p. 4) that effective professional development should be career-staged, with specialized training for aspiring, new, and experienced principals. It also partly confirms that effective professional development is an ongoing activity intertwined into every principal's professional life (Guskey, 2000, p. 38), connects various learning opportunities and occurs over time (Hannum & Martineau, 2008, p. 10).

Four respondents reported that effective training ought to have *targeted and personalized content*. Two of them said that a training program should enhance practical ability and address practical training. They agreed that training on practical skills was more useful to help them solve school problems, and having specific school cases would make training programs more effective. For instance, Principal F claimed that "*it needs to be down-to-earth, and teach principals how to do things.*" The other two considered that effective leadership training programs should have a comprehensive understanding of principals' needs. For example, Principal B stated,

“effective leadership training programs think what principals would like to think.” Principal C said, *“it would be more effective if the training program is more personalized, be able to match principals’ demands and realize principals’ ideas and needs.”*

In addition, Principal D claimed effective leadership training programs should be able to assist the principal to *learn theoretical knowledge and draw the practice of schooling*. He/she defined an effective training program as a *“practical application of theory and theoretical application of practice”*. The practical application of theory meant theory supported practice through training. He/she felt it was essential to have theory if principals desired to do things in a fine level. The theoretical application of practice referred to applying what principals had learnt into school practice.

There is no such absolute effective training program. It will be effective as long as it helps principals cultivate theoretical knowledge and practice of schooling [be able to employ something into school practice through training]. (Principal D)

The results of Principals D and F confirm that effective training programs emphasize on practical issues, and encourage effective problem-solving and reflection (Davis et al., 2005, pp. 9-10). This result of Principal F is very interesting because the principal uses a unique Chinese Yin and Yang philosophy to define effective leadership training programs. According to this principle, Yin and Yang exist within each other and interplay with each other to create a dynamic and paradoxical unity (Fang , 2012, p.34). It also agrees with Davis et al.’s (2005, pp. 9-10) opinion that PBL promotes the combination of theoretical and practical knowledge. The results of Principals B and C could not be found from my literatures. Therefore, it adds to the new knowledge that effective training programs should have sound understanding of principals’ needs to ensure the programs provided are relevant to the training aims.

Principal E said, *“unfortunately, many training programs I have taken do not know principals’ demands and are lacking in substance.”* This finding explains that principals are forced to figure out their ways through the early years of their career

due to a lack of practical training (Simieou, Decman, Grigsby & Schumacher, 2010, p. 2).

Three participants commented on *field-based internships* as they helped them learn how other school principals managed schools and solved real problems. They agreed that the YRD Training addressed this issue well and they drew many useful lessons from such internships.

The practical training phase (field-based internships) during the YRD training was very helpful. Principals were sent to different schools among three provinces and municipality. I did my practical training at four schools. Each one lasted two weeks. During this time, I fully immersed myself into the school and worked hand in hand with the school principal. I observed classrooms, talked with different teachers and students, attended school meetings. It was really a useful learning experience. (Principal D)

The present result fits the claim that most adults learn best when they are exposed to conditions demanding the application of taught skills, knowledge, and problem-solving strategies within realistic situations (Davis et al., 2005, p. 9), and strong internships provide candidates with intensive, extended developmental opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the watchful eye of an expert mentor (Orr & Orphanos, 2011, p. 22).

In addition, principals claimed that staying in one school for an *adequate length and time* would allow them to understand practical issues about school leadership, school administration and management, and the school plans and policy for curriculum formation. This finding is supported by the previous studies that effective professional development takes time (Fenwick & Pierce, 2002, p. 4), and principals need sufficient time to deepen their understanding of the professional development program, analyze students' work, and cultivate new approaches to instruction (Guskey, 2003, p. 749). It is also similar to Peterson's (2002, pp. 216-230) view that the longer experience of studying together will have a greater impact on learning and the development of professional networks among school leaders.

Four participants highlighted the *importance of interaction* during the training program. For instance, Principal A considered that interactions existed among trainers and trainees. As he/she stated, *“interactions help trainees understand the content of the lectures.”* He/she further underlined that experienced principals (*mentors*) were valuable training resources. Principals D and E emphasized that sharing and learning from other principals (*cohort groups*) by exchanging reflections was equally fundamental for an effective training program. It was great that interaction and discussion brought mutual inspiration.

The above findings vindicate the previous studies that mentors facilitate others to learn the knowledge, skills, behaviors and values of the leader’s role (Mulford, 2003, p. 38), and guide the learner in his/her search for strategies to figure out the problems, to increase self-confidence, and to build a broad range of leadership skills (Davis et al., 2005, p. 10). Also, cohort groups support each other to build group and individual knowledge, think creatively, and restructure problems from various viewpoints (Davis et al., 2005, p. 10), share views of what worked and what did not work in their own context, reference each other’s expertise, and encourage investigation and sustained improvement (Dyer & Renn, 2010, pp. 186-187), develop strong social and interpersonal relationships, increase contact with faculty members, and develop professional networks (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001, pp. 606-607).

Principal E defined an effective training program as *“having reflection”*. It meant getting thoughts and reflections through exchanging ideas with other principals during the training. By doing so, he/she was able to gain a better understanding of some phenomenon or find answers to some confusion. As he/she stated, *“the more reflections I have, the more effective the training program is.”* This reflection is partly consistent with Davis et al. (2005, pp. 9-10) on their claim that PBL is an effective way to develop students’ new attitudes and skills and practice their self-reflections.

You cannot just copy something from other schools due to different contexts. (...) I need more practical experience. Exchanging perceptions and ideas with other principals help me have reflections. (...) It is impossible to find all ready-made answers,

*but at least I can get some ideas to improve my previous leadership practices.
(Principal E)*

It should be noted, however, that effective leadership training programs were important to principals; they were only external factors. This was reported by three principals. As Principal A stated, “*what makes a difference is principal’s internal motivation.*” Similar comments were made by Principal C “*one does not necessarily need a training to be an effective principal*” and Principal D “*the key lies in the trainee’s attitude*”.

I think principals need training, which is a part of experience in their career development. But I do not think it make a successful principal. Principals need more practice to improve their abilities, and the real growth takes place in the school life. The experience has to be accumulated step by step. In my opinion, training is just a boost power. (Principal C)

The above findings suggest some Chinese principals do not fully believe that training programs can enable them to gain successful leadership practices. It seems that they are more inclined to the factors from principals’ inner motivation and gradual accumulation.

Finally, I made a table to summarize positive and negative aspects of the Finnish leadership training; the features of effective leadership training programs that contribute to Chinese principals’ leadership practices and professional development (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of the results

Theme 1 Value of the Finnish training program			
		curriculum leadership	- school-based curriculum - citizenship education
	more effective	strategic leadership	- future-oriented, see big picture of schools - could not be answered by Finnish principals

positive results	leadership	humanistic leadership	- pay more attention to individual needs
		effective networking	- more collaboration with one university, try to help each other and grow together
	better tackle the contradiction between ideal and reality	- step by step - deeper understanding of students' overall development	
	broader understanding the nature of education	- promote ideals of education and educational philosophy - promote education cultures of respect, trust and cooperation	
	increased understanding the role of government in education	- two-track system - teachers' qualifications: master degree - students' sports accident insurance	
negative results	limited field trips and visits to schools	- contradiction between Chinese flexible working habit and Finnish rigid working traditions	
	diversified needs of the trainees	- difficult to cover all the desired topics within three weeks -	
	incapable delivering lecture	- Chinese principals wanted training from Finnish principals - most training sessions were given by Finnish professors and education officials	
	language barriers	- English - Finnish	
issues do not work in cross-cultural training programs		- differences in national and cultural contexts - differences in educational and school systems	
Theme 2 features of effective leadership training programs			
six features	systematic structure	- comprehensive - career-staged	
	targeted and personalized content	- enhance practical ability and address practical training - sound understanding of trainees' needs	
	collaboration between theory and practice	- <i>“practical application of theory, theoretical application of practice”</i> - field-based internships	
	adequate length and time		
	interactive learning	- mentors - cohort groups	

	<i>“having reflection”</i>	- getting thoughts and reflections through exchanging ideas with other principals during the training
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Conclusions

This study has explored the value of a Finnish training program and the features of effective leadership training programs that contribute to Chinese principals’ leadership practices and professional development. Research with this focus can be the first step towards enhancing our understanding of the effects of cross-cultural training on Chinese principals. Based on the results, the following conclusions can be drawn.

The results indicated two aspects of training: positive and negative. The positive impacts included more effective leadership, better strategies to tackle the contradiction between ideal and reality (students’ overall development and testing system), a broader understanding of the nature of education, and an increased understanding of the role of government in education. The negative aspects comprised limited school visit time, the diversity of needs to be addressed, insufficient knowledge of some trainers, and language barriers. However, certain issues such as differences in national and cultural contexts, the educational and school systems did not work in the cross-cultural training.

Meanwhile, some key features of effective leadership training programs emerged from the results that contributed to Chinese principals’ leadership practices and professional development. The features involved a systematic structure (comprehensive and career-staged), targeted and personalized content (sound understanding of trainees’ needs), collaboration between theory and practice (field-based internships), adequate length and time, interactive learning (mentors and cohort groups), and *“having reflection”*.

The research results are important in at least three areas: theoretically, heuristically and practically (Tracy, 2010, p. 846). Theoretically, the study has resulted in a theoretical framework of “four broad categories of successful leadership practices” designed for training effective school leaders. It identifies the areas of school leadership training that have a strong effect on leadership practices and professional development. Heuristically, the results and analysis suggested few weaknesses of the training program that concerns for the Finnish trainers for generating practical implication of leadership practices in schools. Practically, the results have also identified the discrepancy between the Finnish training institutions incompatible with and the needs of Chinese principals. The results are useful to Finnish training institutions for the improvement of designing the future leadership program, especially for the Chinese school principals. This research also provides helpful guidance to program formulators in educative trainings especially focusing on leadership. Furthermore, the results provide helpful suggestions to policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in educational leadership in China and Finland.

This study has few limitations. This research focused only on the city of Shanghai alone and excluded other five provinces in China. Other few limitation of this research was that Finnish trainers (university professors and lecturers), Chinese training organizers (education officials), and teachers (members of leadership team) were not interviewed. In fact, their participations would have enabled me to gain more comprehensive data. Secondly, the study could have been smoother and more effective if the theoretical framework of leadership practices had been designed earlier in my master thesis. Even though it was a comprehensive theoretical framework, I did not incorporate it well with the data, because I chose to a data-driven method (content analysis) to analyze the data. In other words, I let the data speak instead of theory when reporting the results. Thirdly, the study is only a *summative* evaluation of a training program. To some extent, it comes a bit late to be much helpful for the training program itself (Guskey, 2000, p. 60). It provides judgments on the program’s overall performance for program developers and decision makers, thus improving the future training program. Nevertheless, the help is so little to the training program that was over.

The study suggests the following directions for future research. Firstly, the leadership practices framework may be used to guide future training programs for school leaders in national or cross-cultural training contexts. The issues presented in the theoretical framework might be helpful to training providers when designing and implementing training programs for school leaders. Secondly, it will be useful for both partners to receive some pre-training of its counterpart culture, education and school systems before the program commences. This is particularly imperative for the Finnish training institutions as service providers. By doing so, the relevance of a training program could be maximized and the mismatches could be avoided or reduced. Thirdly, it would be important to investigate the long-term influence of this leadership training program upon participants. The researcher also offers suggestions to the Chinese policymakers to conduct a systematic evaluation of all these cross-cultural training programs while carrying out this nationwide project. According to Guskey (2000, p. 60), the evaluations should focus on *planning* and *formative* evaluation that helps redirect time, money, personnel, and other resources in more productive directions.

In conclusion, a cross-cultural training program can play a limited but positive role in expanding Chinese principals' leadership practices and professional development. The study underlines the importance of critical reflection and adaptation on the part of practitioners when importing Western educational ideas to non-Western countries. It helps readers better understand the characteristics of an effective leadership training program, as well as assisting overseas training institutions determine Chinese principals' needs. In the context of cross-cultural training, efforts must be made carefully to tailor program provision to adapt to the context and nature of the learners.

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1 Gaokao refers to the national college entrance examination in China. It is a test that colleges and universities use to select their students in China and thus it is the one opportunity a Chinese student has to get into college or university (Zhao, 2009, p. 49)