



# Understandings of the role of subject leaders in the professional development of beginning teachers within a school department: A Vietnamese perspective



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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the subject leader's role in the professional development of beginning teachers. Rather than focusing only on beginning teachers' perspectives as previous research has done, the topic is approached via the multiple perspectives of teachers in a secondary school department in Vietnam drawn from surveys and interviews. Insights from career stage theory and the concept of power distance are applied to uncover differing expectations from beginning teachers, other teachers and subject leaders regarding the latter's role in professional development. This research adds to the understanding of the subject leader's role in the professional development of beginning teachers which is sensitive to both culture and context. It calls for further research within the under-researched context of Vietnamese schools.

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## 1. Introduction

Whilst every professional has a set of development needs related to age, experience, expertise and context (Busher, Harris, & Wise, 2000), this process is particularly important for beginning teachers who need to successfully develop in their early career to progress in the profession. Yet the meaning of teacher development is located not only in the personal and professional lives of teachers but also the school setting in which they work (Day, 1999; Goodson, 1992; Lisahunter, Rossi, Tinning, Flanagan, & Macdonald, 2011) with the subject team or department having a particular importance for secondary schools teachers (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; de Lima, 2008).

Therefore, rather than focusing only on beginning teachers' perspectives as previous research has done, this article explores the subject leader's role in the professional development of beginning teachers via the multiple perspectives of teachers in a secondary school department in Vietnam collected through survey and semi-structured interviews. Career stage theory (Oplatka & Tako, 2009) and the concept of power distance (Hallinger, 2010) are used to explore the expectations

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of participants about the role of subject leaders in the professional development of beginning teachers but the research does not investigate specific subject leader-beginning teacher dyads or particular professional development activities that may have taken place in the department.

Few works in English address the issues of education in Vietnam despite it being a country of some 89 million people (General Statistics Office, 2012). Whilst there are some helpful overviews of education in the country including the school system and the socio-economic background of the country (Thang & Quang, 2007; Hayden & Lan, 2013), most works either focus on the political economy of a country that needs to develop its education system in order to sustain its rapid economic growth (Hirotsato & Kitamura, 2009; London, 2010, 2011; Hayden & Lan, 2013), or specifically address the need for higher education reform (Harman, Hayden, & Nghi, 2010). We see our project as but a small contribution to addressing the dearth of literature about schools in Vietnam and call for more research to develop empirical knowledge in this context.

This article introduces career stage theory and the concept of power distance before reviewing the literature around beginning teachers and their professional development followed by that of subject leaders and their role in professional development. The findings from the surveys and interviews uncover differing expectations from beginning teachers, subject leaders and other teachers in the department as to their understanding of role of the subject leader within this context. The implications of these perspectives for the role of the subject leader and other teachers in the professional development of beginning teachers are discussed along with further research possibilities.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Career-stage theory and the concept of power distance

Career-stage theory proposes ‘that one’s experiences in and attitudes towards work vary across the life cycle’ (Oplatka & Tako, 2009, p. 426) and was developed by Rosenholtz and Simpson (1990) in their study outlining a model of teachers’ careers which identified the three stages of novice, mid-career and veteran in the case of commitment to the profession. Oplatka and Tako (2009) concluded, from a study located in Israel, that the ‘subtle distinctions’ between the teachers’ views of desirable educational leadership were related to the individual teacher’s career stage. Research projects in Hong Kong and Australia indicated differences between beginning teachers as they graduated and during their first three years of teaching in regard to the emphases they placed on their professional learning goals and the broadening perspectives of their needs (Mak, 2010; Mansfield & Beltman, 2013).

The concept of power-distance is the degree, or extent, to which an unequal distribution of power is accepted by members of a society for subordinate-authority relations (Hofstede, 1980). Hallinger’s (2010) study of education reform policy in a number of South-east Asian countries (but not Vietnam) suggests the large power differences which are evident in hierarchies mean that those in positions of power often ‘lead by fiat’ and ‘focus more on ‘telling’ staff the tasks to be accomplished with relatively little two-way communication’ (, p. 413) so factors such as power-distance mean that even where there are similarities to Western issues, the same issue might well manifest itself differently in a South-east Asian context as the research previously by Mercer and Ri (2006) may also suggest.

### 2.2. Beginning teachers and their professional development

The body of research on beginning teachers and their professional development in Western contexts is extensive but research undertaken in Asian contexts is much more limited especially in the case of Vietnam. Whilst the phrase ‘beginning teacher’ is commonly used to refer to teachers in their early career as newly and recently qualified practitioners, the precise meaning depends heavily on context. Some definitions specify the first three years of teaching (US Government, 2001) but other interpretations also include the period of initial teacher preparation training (Hobson, 2009), whilst the label ‘newly qualified teacher’ used in England speaks of a compulsory period of induction acting as a ‘bridge’ between training and a teaching career (Department for Children Schools Families (DCSF), 2008). For the purposes of this research, we have equated the category of beginning teachers with the novice stage of career stage theory (Oplatka & Tako, 2009). Whilst recognising that such a categorisation is not fixed across cultures and contexts in terms of years, it seems particularly appropriate for the Vietnamese context where, as outlined below, there is often little practical experience included in initial teacher training programmes.

In an Asian context, Singaporean student teachers with the most teaching experience had fewer problems professionally and were far more adept at problem solving (Lee, Teo, & Chai, 2010) and research based in the special administrative region of Hong Kong points to the importance of student teacher placements providing an appropriate balance between challenge and support (Tang, 2003). There has been little published in English about beginning teachers in the Vietnamese context with a few exceptions (for example, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2007; Ahn, 2013) and less, if anything, about subject leaders or subject departments. Teachers (in Vietnamese ‘giáo viên’, which literally translates as ‘the person who teaches’) are classed as civil servants and whilst the local government education department decides which school a teacher should join, it and the school jointly make the decision as to whether the teacher has successfully completed the probationary year based upon observations of teaching and the completion of allocated tasks (Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). Teacher education is crucial to the Vietnamese government’s wish to implement the new curriculum of 2002 which seeks, amongst other things, to develop new methods of teaching and improve subject knowledge (Hamano, 2008). A significant rise in teacher

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