



Supporting the professional learning of teachers in China: Does principal leadership make a difference?



Shengnan Liu ^a, Philip Hallinger ^{b, c, *}, Daming Feng ^d

^a China Ocean University, China

^b Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

^c University of Johannesburg, South Africa

^d East China Normal University, China

H I G H L I G H T S

- Examined effects of learning-centered leadership on teacher professional learning.
- Effects of leadership were partially mediated by teacher trust and agency.
- Independent variables exerted small to moderate effects on teacher learning.
- Identifies leadership behaviors that motivate and support teacher learning.
- Suggests a new focus for school leadership in China.

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of learning-centered leadership on teacher professional learning in mainland China. The research tested a model of leadership effects on teacher learning using two mediators, teacher trust and teacher agency.

Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling were used to analyze survey data collected from 1259 teachers in 41 primary and secondary schools in three different Chinese provinces. The results affirmed the efficacy of a partial mediation model with learning-centered leadership, teacher trust and teacher agency yielding significant small to moderate effects on the professional learning of teachers.

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Lifelong learning has become a byword in the global lexicon of education reform, not only with respect to students but also for teachers and school leaders (Barth, 1990; Little, 2012; Louis, 2007; Timperley, 2011). Indeed, over the past 25 years, it has become increasingly clear that sustainable improvement in the education of students depends upon school cultures that support the continuous development and learning of teachers (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 2009; Hargreaves, 1994; Saphier & King, 1985; Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, & Peetsma, 2012). In the absence of organizational values, norms, and structures that motivate and support teacher learning, schools

are unable to keep pace with changing, ever more ambitious goals for student learning (Little, 2012; Louis, 2007; Slegers, Thoonen, Oort, & Peetsma, 2014). Recognition of this critical link between teacher capacity and student learning has given rise to a growing literature focusing on 'strategic factors' that impact teacher professional learning (Cosner, 2009; Kwakman, 2003; Li, Hallinger, & Walker, 2016; Louis, 2007; Timperley, 2011; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

The current study examined the interaction of three 'strategic factors' that have emerged within this literature: principal leadership, teacher trust, and teacher agency. Scholars have documented the positive effects of several species of 'learning-centered leadership' (e.g., instructional leadership, collaborative leadership, distributed leadership, transformational leadership) on teacher capacity in general, and teacher professional learning in particular

* Corresponding author. Faculty of Education Chulalongkorn University, 254 Phayathai Rd., Bangkok, Thailand.

E-mail address: hallinger@gmail.com (P. Hallinger).

(Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003; Hallinger & Lu, 2014; Hallinger, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Slegers et al., 2014). Teacher trust and agency have, in turn, been identified as 'enabling factors' that mediate the efforts of school leaders to motivate and support the learning of teachers (e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cosner, 2009; Frost, 2006; Hallinger, Lee, & Ko, 2014; Li et al., 2016; Louis, 2007).

This focus on engaging and supporting teachers in learning throughout their careers (i.e., professional learning) also resonates in mainland China. Since the turn of the millennium, China has adopted an ambitious series of curriculum reforms that have required teachers to adapt to new system goals and learn new methods of teaching (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Ding, 2010; Feng, 2006; Qian & Walker, 2013). These policy-led efforts to reform education in China have reshaped the relationship between school leaders and teachers (Hawkins, 2000; Qian & Walker, 2013; Tang, Lu, & Hallinger, 2014; Walker, Hu, & Qian, 2012; Yang, 2015). Thus, China's policymakers, scholars and practitioners are increasingly interested in understanding the role that school principals can play in supporting the learning of both teachers and pupils (Cravens, 2008; Qian & Walker, 2013; Walker & Qian, 2015).

This study addressed several research questions aimed at understanding how principals in mainland China influence the professional learning of teachers.

1. What is the relationship between learning-centered leadership, teacher trust, teacher agency, and teacher professional learning?
2. How do dimensions of teacher trust mediate the effects of learning-centered leadership on teacher professional learning?
3. How do dimensions of teacher agency mediate the effects of learning-centered leadership on teacher professional learning?

Scholars have noted a paucity of empirical research on school leadership in mainland China (Hallinger & Bryant, 2013; Walker & Qian, 2015; Walker et al., 2012). From a practical perspective this research offers China's school leaders a more refined understanding of how they can support the learning of teachers and students. We view this as a useful outcome in a society where models of learning-centered leadership remain poorly understood and lacking in local examples.

1. Theoretical perspective

The theoretical model employed in this study was built on findings from prior research conducted on school leadership and teacher professional learning (e.g., Frost, 2006; Hallinger et al., 2014; Li et al., 2016). Our model proposes that learning-centered leadership will have both direct effects and indirect effects, mediated by teacher agency and teacher trust, on the professional learning of teachers. The study tested this model to determine both the nature of leadership effects on teacher learning (i.e., direct, indirect or both) and to examine how dimensions of teacher trust and agency interact with principal leadership to produce these effects.

Traditionally, teacher learning was viewed quite narrowly as a process by which knowledge from outside the school was introduced, usually through workshops, to teachers. This 'outside-in' approach to professional learning ignored the fact that schools contain a wealth of 'professional knowledge' within their faculties (Barth, 1990; Cosner, 2009). Over time, the process of professional learning among teachers has been reconceptualized as the collegial exchange of knowledge, skills, and experiences aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Konstantinou & Fincham, 2010; Kwakman, 2003; Little, 2012; Louis, 2007).

Unfortunately, all too often this professional knowledge is not

shared for the benefit of teachers, either individually or collectively (Barth, 1990; Konstantinou & Fincham, 2010; Little, 2012; Timperley, 2011). Many years ago, Rosenholtz (1989) described how the 'balkanization' of school cultures can foster isolation among teachers and limit the exchange of knowledge. Thus, a key challenge in encouraging the professional learning of teachers lies in building trusting relationships among teachers.

The professional learning of teachers often takes place in formal settings such as professional development programs, teaching research groups, and formal mentoring programs (Timperley, 2011). However, teachers also learn through informal interactions that occur during the course of peer teaching, collaborative planning, shared assessment, and informal mentoring between colleagues (Lai, Li, & Gong, 2016; Little, 2012). Regardless of the vehicle for teacher learning, a fundamental issue for both system- and school-level leaders concerns how to motivate and support teachers not only to engage in continued learning but to do so with enthusiasm and the intent to put new knowledge into practice (in de Wal, den Brok, Hooijer, Martens, & van den Beemt, 2014; Lai et al., 2016; Li et al., 2016; Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011).

For those interested in school improvement, the question then becomes, 'how can leaders create school environments in which teachers become proactive in seeking out and sharing this untapped wealth' (Saphier & King, 1985)? In this study, we conceptualized teacher professional learning as a form of workplace learning characterized by dynamic, ongoing, interactive exchange among teachers (Konstantinou & Fincham, 2010; Kwakman, 2003; Little, 2012; Timperley, 2011). Our construct of teacher professional learning consists of four dimensions: collaboration, reflection, experimentation, and reaching out to the knowledge base (Evers, Kreijns, & Van der Heijden, 2015; in de Wal et al., 2014; Kwakman, 2003; Saphier & King, 1985; Schechter & Qadach, 2012).

A growing global literature highlights the important role that principals and middle-level leaders play in fostering teacher learning and school improvement (Cravens, 2008; Goldring, Huff, Spillane, & Barnes, 2009; Hallinger & Lu, 2014; Heck & Hallinger, 2010, 2014; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010; Saphier, King, & D'Auria, 2006; Slegers et al., 2014; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). Learning-centered leadership, sometimes referred to as instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger, 2011), emphasizes leadership practices that support teacher development as well as student learning. It should be noted that this role orientation does not describe the traditional practice of principals in China where managerial and political roles have typically assumed priority (Qian & Walker, 2013; Tang et al., 2014; Walker & Qian, 2015; Walker et al., 2012; Wang, 2016; Zhang & Pang, 2016).

Learning-centered leaders foster a shared vision for learning in the school and create a supportive environment not only for student learning but also for teacher development (Hallinger, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Knapp et al., 2010; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Printy, Marks, & Bowers, 2009; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). They act as role models by sharing their own learning experiences and actively participating in professional development with teachers (Robinson et al., 2008). Principals also fulfill this role by helping teachers identify their development needs, encouraging experimentation, finding and allocating resources to support teacher learning, and enhancing the implementation of new learning (Barth, 1990, 2002; Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger et al., 2014; Knapp et al., 2010; Saphier et al., 2006; Thoonen et al., 2011; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). Increasingly, research on learning-centered leadership has sought to illuminate the 'paths' or means by which school leaders create school cultures that support the learning of both teachers and students (Barth, 2002; Hallinger & Lu, 2014; Heck & Hallinger, 2010, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2010; Ross &

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