

**【School Education Reform Series】**

Can Teacher Leadership  
Contribute to  
Secondary School  
Revitalization in Hong Kong?

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## **School Education Reform Series**

School education has become one of the most essential institutions in modern society. Tremendous resources have been invested in schools. Most modern societies have made it compulsory for their young people to spend a lengthy period of time in education. The effectiveness and efficiency of school education have been viewed as the necessary conditions for the development and prosperity of all modern societies. With the development of global economy and the emergence of the information age, all societies are under pressure to improve or even reform their school education system, if they are to enhance, or at least to maintain, their competitiveness in the ever-changing world economy.

How should Hong Kong equip its new generation to meet the challenges of the 21st century? School education reform is certainly one of the key issues in this matter. Which direction should our school reform take? What school reform programs should we adopt? How should we summarize and evaluate the existing school reform programs? How should we share, disseminate and promote those school reform programs that have been proven effective?

To address these issues, the Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research publishes the School Education Reform Series. It aims to provide local educators with a forum to exchange their ideas and experiences on the matter. To these ends, this series will publish research results, program designs, summaries of practices and experiences, and evaluative reports pertaining to school reforms in Hong Kong.

# Can Teacher Leadership Contribute to Secondary School Revitalization in Hong Kong?

## *Abstract*

*The fast-changing world and the new wave of education reform in Hong Kong require schools to secure and sustain school improvement. However, to achieve it with the traditional notion of leadership that equates leadership with position or authority is obviously inadequate. A more expanded notion of leadership that embraces the development of new leadership roles for teachers in a much broader arena is thus necessary in order for school improvement initiatives to be successful. Under this situation, the notion of teacher leadership has emerged in recent decades, urging the expansion of teachers' roles beyond the classroom to sustain school improvement through the mutual construction of a learning culture.*

*The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand and explain secondary school teachers' perceptions and preferences of leadership roles in terms of school revitalization. The research focus was to examine how teacher leaders secure and sustain their school improvement efforts by negotiating the contradictions and tensions within a complex system of interacting cultures. Data was collected from a focus group of teacher leaders in a secondary school. This study illuminated four issues about teacher leadership and school revitalization. First, teacher leadership is a blend of personality and chemistry arising from teachers' responses to developments not only*

*within, but also outside the educational context. Whether teacher leadership contributes to secondary school revitalization in Hong Kong depends on a reciprocal process that builds capacities at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels. Second, teacher leadership contributes to secondary school revitalization when both teacher leaders and their principal engage themselves together through parallel leadership for improved student learning. Third, both school reculturing and school restructuring are prerequisites of school revitalization. Last, the culture in which teachers find themselves has a strong impact on the extent of leadership exercised by them.*

## **Introduction**

Fullan (2001) states that teachers are the key to school change. This notion has appeared in a vast educational literature over the previous decade (for example, Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996, 2001; Leithwood, 1992). In reality, however, teachers are often found unable to assume this significant role in school change because many teachers confine their roles mainly in the classrooms. Lortie (1975) describes teaching as “isolated and mundane, a task-oriented job, and lacking in opportunities for collegial relationships” (cited in Gonzales, 2004, p. 2). Throughout the decades, teacher isolation has continued to remain a core problem in many schools. Skarstad (1994) echoes thus:

Teachers are thought to be primarily interested in their own classroom and look for what helps them within those four walls. Concerns beyond the classroom are not the focus for the majority of teachers. Words expressed for teachers are,

“Give me things I can use in my classroom,” or “if it does not concern my classroom, leave me alone.” (p. 1)

Such findings appear to be valid for many teachers in Hong Kong today. This teacher culture is particularly hazardous to secondary schools where school structures and cultures are more complex. Besides, this isolated teacher culture runs counter to the need for building teachers' leadership capacities and collegiality to secure and sustain school improvement in this new age of education reform in Hong Kong. Further, the extent of leadership exercised by teachers is also determined by their role perceptions and preferences under the influence of the school culture and the societal culture. It is therefore meaningful to study whether teacher leadership can contribute to secondary school revitalization in Hong Kong in the light of teachers' perceptions and preferences of leadership roles.

This paper comprises six sections. The first section establishes the background and the purpose of the study through discussing issues about effective school leadership with respect to the international context as well as the Hong Kong context. The second and the third sections respectively review the literature and introduce the research methodology. The major findings will be illuminated in section four, and the key issues in section five. The sixth section then briefly summarizes the major findings and discusses the implications of the study.

### **Background and Purpose of Study**

In recent decades, international research studies have tried to explore the importance of leadership in attaining sustained

school improvement. “Effective leadership is widely accepted as being a key constituent in achieving school improvement” (OFSTED, 2000, cited in Harris, 2002, p. 15). In like manner, links between the principal’s leadership, teachers’ motivation, and the quality of teaching and learning can be identified in the school improvement literature (for example, see Bush & Jackson, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1999). Very often, nonetheless, leadership is understood as one-dimensional and hierarchical when school leaders refer to the formal leaders at the top, particularly the school principal. Ball (1987) remarks “this traditional notion of the leader as the strong, charismatic and preferably heroic individual at the apex of the organization rests on a structural organization science” (cited in Frost & Harris, 2003, p. 486). This structural approach of leadership interprets school improvement through the lens of leadership theories emphasizing formal roles with defined responsibilities. Restructuring<sup>1</sup> is thus considered the focus of school change.

On the other hand, however, a growing body of receptive audience for teacher leadership has emerged in the Western educational community. It embodies a more expanded notion of leadership urging reculturation of teachers’ professional identity from followers to leaders and from knowledge keepers to collaborative learners (Gonzales, 2004). Muijs and Harris (2003) insist that only by nurturing teacher leadership can school improvement and effectiveness be sustained. Their view is well grounded in research evidence in Western societies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Britain (for example, see Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Frost & Durrant, 2003; Frost & Harris, 2003; Harris, 2003, 2004; Katzenmeyer

& Moller, 1996, 2001; Lambert, 2003). They assert that teachers actually play significant leadership roles in terms of school improvement through capacity building, mutual learning, and collaboration. Their view thus suggests a process of cultural change involving teachers' beliefs, practices, and relationships that transforms teachers' perceptions and preferences of professional roles as leaders and the culture as a learning community. Given this, reculturing<sup>2</sup> best describes the focus of school improvement in the notion of teacher leadership.

This debate between structure and culture as the proper focus for school improvement has been discussed in the educational literature (for example, see Fullan, 1993; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Gonzales, 2004; Hargreaves, 1994). Nonetheless, in this new age of education reform in Hong Kong, to secure and sustain school improvement with the traditional structural notion of leadership is obviously inadequate. "While the major developments in society and economy — including the emergence of a global economy, the information revolution and support for lifelong learning — pressed the need for change to penetrate the classroom" (Dimmock, 2002b, p. 138), a more expanded notion of leadership that embodies school reculturing is definitely necessary in order for school improvement initiatives to be successful.

Nevertheless, contextual factors have to be considered when studying school improvement through teacher leadership in Hong Kong. Walker and Dimmock (2002) urge policy makers and school leaders in Hong Kong to develop contextually bounded school leadership and management theories. They

emphasize the need to understand the similarities and differences between societies and their education systems when introducing global educational policies and practices. Walker (2004) asserts that issues about educational leadership have to be examined with regard to the interweaving societal cultural context and the organizational context, especially that the Chinese culture has shaped the deep hierarchical and bureaucratic structures in many schools here. In a similar vein, Gonzales (2004) posits that school improvement focusing merely on reculturing “fails to consider the existence of structures that inhibit community action” (p. 42). She echoes Fullan and Hargreaves’s (1991) assertion that the story of school change is both cultural and structural. While reculturing acts as the focus of change, restructuring plays a supporting role. Taking this stance, the Chinese cultural influences on the school structures are greater barriers when nurturing teacher leadership in Chinese societies like Hong Kong than their Western democratic counterparts.

In the light of these assertions, the purpose of this study was to examine whether teacher leadership can contribute to secondary school revitalization in Hong Kong. The research focus was to understand and explain secondary school teachers’ perceptions and preferences of leadership roles in terms of school revitalization. Other than producing merely a descriptive account, it also aimed at examining how teacher leaders secure and sustain their school improvement efforts by negotiating the contradictions and tensions within a complex system of interacting cultures. The ways that principals can nurture teacher leadership formed an additional focus of this research.

Given this purpose, the research was guided by the following subsidiary questions:

1. What does teacher leadership mean to teachers in Hong Kong secondary schools?
2. Do teachers in Hong Kong secondary schools see themselves as leaders?
3. Do teachers believe that teacher leadership or increased opportunities to lead in the school can promote school revitalization?
4. Would teachers like more opportunities to exercise teacher leadership?
5. How can principals/schools nurture teacher leadership?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Teacher leadership***

A review of the educational literature will help us understand the notion of teacher leadership. While most agree that teacher leadership is a kind of shared leadership, they differ in the extent of teacher leaders' influence in schools. Some regard teacher leadership as leadership of operational tasks (for example, see Zepeda, Mayers, & Benson, 2003). Department and committee chairs are the most visible teacher leaders in this perspective. However, this assertion still defines teachers' leadership roles in terms of the structural approach of school leadership, and thus fails to identify the extent of leadership exercised by teachers in terms of school reculturing and school improvement. Taking a different stance, some extend the notion to all teachers. For example, Harris (2003) defines teacher leadership as "centrally and exclusively concerned with the idea that all

organization members can lead and that leadership is a form of agency that can be distributed or shared” (p. 317). In like manner, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) state that “teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice” (p. 5). Besides, Lambert (2003) regards leadership as being the work “embracing a shared vision, inquiry, dialogue, reflection and a focus on learning” (p. 426), and asserts that “a learning community is at the heart of a high leadership capacity school — they are parallel constructs” (p. 426). In a similar vein, Muijs and Harris (2003) emphasize the role of teacher leaders in developing a collaborative culture to improve learning and teaching:

Teacher leadership is primarily concerned with developing high quality learning and teaching in schools. It has at its core a focus upon improving learning and a mode of leadership premised upon the principles of professional collaboration, development and growth ... a form of agency where teachers are empowered to lead development work that impacts directly upon the quality of teaching and learning ... a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively. (pp. 39–40)

The notion of teacher leadership is best documented in a recent empirical work of Gonzales (2004). She argues that not all teacher leadership appears through formal administrative roles. It is “a horizontal leadership based on a reciprocal process that is developed through the mutual construction of a learning culture (Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 1996). It is

more collaborative than directive, more spontaneous than structured. It is a “sleeping giant” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996, p. 1). This assertion of teacher leadership can thus explain how school reculturing occurs through teachers’ learning and working together.

Nonetheless, the above assertions focus too much on teachers’ leadership roles while neglecting the principals’ leadership. Instead of merely emphasizing teacher leadership, Crowther et al. (2002) propound the notion of parallel leadership. According to them:

Parallel leadership encourages a relatedness between teacher leaders and administrator leaders that activates and sustains the knowledge-generating capacity of schools: Parallel leadership is a process whereby teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action to build school capacity. It embodies mutual respect, shared purpose, and allowance for individual expression. (p. 38)

The assertion of Crowther et al. (2002) has successfully shed light on how parallel leadership engages both teachers and their principals together in terms of professional learning, culture building, and school-wide pedagogy to enhance the overall capacity of a school toward positive student learning outcomes.

Factors that influence teacher leadership development are well documented in the Western educational literature. Some scholars (Frost & Durrant, 2003; Frost & Harris, 2003) suggest that personal capacity of teachers has an impact on the extent

of leadership they exercise. Such personal capacity involves “authority, knowledge, situational understanding and interpersonal skills” (Frost & Harris, 2003, p. 490). In terms of authority, the position in the hierarchy is interconnected with the authority possessed in the traditional hierarchical model of organization. In addition, the extent of leadership exercised by teachers and the way they do this is also influenced by the value of their personal knowledge. When teachers learn beyond their tacit knowledge, their confidence increases with higher pedagogical knowledge, organizational knowledge, and community knowledge (Frost & Harris, 2003). Apart from authority and knowledge, Frost and Harris (2003) also consider personal capacity being situational understanding and interpersonal skills — that is, the ability to read situations and the “influencing skills” in schools respectively. This echoes the assertion of Mitchell and Sackney (2000) with regard to the interpersonal capacity of teachers. In their discourse, interpersonal capacity refers to the extent to which teachers can form and sustain collaborative relationships with their colleagues (cited in Frost & Durrant, 2004, p. 309). The extent of leadership exercised by teachers and the ways they do this were explored in this study in the light of these assertions.

### *School Revitalization*

School revitalization denotes an approach to educational change with improved school capacity for development. According to the Think Tank Report of the National College for School Leadership (2001), school capacity is defined as the school’s collective competency to cause effective change (cited in Harris et al., 2003). This notion of collective competency is

enlarged in the research program of the National College for School Leadership entitled “Building Capacity for School Improvement.”<sup>3</sup> Three interconnected dimensions — namely personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities — are propounded. The study asserts that they are the key elements of the “professional learning community” concept. It also claims “the synergies, interconnections and the emotional and spiritual glue that arise from and surround these components is the heartland of ‘capacity’” (cited in Harris et al. 2003, p. 90). In this study, the researcher has adopted the interpretation of Mitchell and Sackney (2000) in defining personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities. In their discourse:

Building *personal capacity* relates not only to knowledge and skills, but also to the active and reflective construction of knowledge — a personal and potentially transforming phenomenon. *Interpersonal capacity* involves working together on shared purposes — and taking collective responsibility for each other’s learning and well-being. *Organizational capacity* is concerned with building, developing and redesigning structures that create and maintain sustainable organizational processes... It is about building a system that invests heavily in professional learning and relationship building. (cited in Hopkins & Jackson, 2003, p. 91; italics original)

From this perspective, building personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities are interconnected with organizational learning conducive to a school culture of professional learning communities. Only by attaining such school revitalization capacity that embodies cultural changes can school secure and sustain continuous improvement.

## Research Methodology

This was an inquiry-based case study that intended to interpret perceptions, beliefs, and practices of a focus group in a single school setting. The complexity involved requires an inquiry tool that is sensitive to underlying meaning when collecting and analyzing data. For this, a qualitative research methodology was selected. In terms of data collection, purposeful sampling strategy was employed in this study. Participants were chosen from the middle managers in the target school. In the Hong Kong secondary school sector, they refer to those who are subject department heads or committee heads, and at the same time classroom teachers. To make the study more focused, a group of middle managers that possessed relatively more traits of teacher leaders than their counterparts in the school setting were selected. They were thus the information-rich cases.

Data was collected through two-hour semi-structured interviews with each participant. Triangulation to enhance trustworthiness of the data was acquired through observation focusing mainly on the participants' leadership roles, and their willingness to collaborate and learn with others for school improvement. The four participants also varied in terms of gender (two males and two females), leadership roles and responsibilities, as well as modes of involvement for school improvement. For the sake of confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms were used when referring to the school and all participants to ensure anonymity. Besides, no vitae were elucidated other than simple references to professional experience. Finally, the transcribed interview data and tentative

interpretations were given to the participants concerned for checking, such that any information that would identify them could be spotted.

The research setting of this study was a well-established aided secondary school in an old district inhabited by people of lower socio-economic status. Located at the crossroad in the periphery of the district, the school still looks tall even though the old buildings around it have been demolished and replaced by much taller ones in the previous decade. This has perhaps effected from the good reputation owned by the school for decades. Students mostly come from the proximity where they live in public housing estates. With a large number of parents being uneducated and more parents commuting to work in the Chinese mainland in recent years, most students enjoy much less social capital from their families as compared with their counterparts in other districts of Hong Kong. As such, the school has played a dominant role in student learning, where students, if motivated and given the opportunity to stretch their potential, can always excel themselves to the full. Given this, the leadership capacity of the school toward the necessary changes to enhance student learning is of crucial importance.

Nevertheless, teachers' morale and professional efficacy in the target school have been declining in recent years. Micropolitics has adversely affected the relationships among teachers. "Blame culture" prevails. Except in some subject departments, there is rarely professional trust and collegiality. While many teachers have given up revitalizing the school, there is still a group of teachers who sustain their school improvement

efforts despite the barriers and frustrations. Sometimes, the toxic cultures also demoralize them very much. Luckily, they never forget their core values as teacher leaders — everything is done for students' learning outcomes. They are actually the school's most valuable human capital that secures school improvement, and have it sustained through influencing and motivating other teachers. The participants of this study were actually selected from them. They are the “deviant cases” out of the dominating negative force in the school.

### **Major Findings**

This study supported the notion that teacher leadership can contribute to secondary school revitalization in Hong Kong. Most teachers under study recognized the leadership roles of teachers. They agreed that teachers have an impact on their students in the classrooms, and on their panel or committee members under their charge. However, their perceptions of leadership roles were mainly shaped by the school hierarchical structures and confined to their school context. They found it difficult to be leaders beyond their formal positions and responsibilities in the school. Overall, such perceptions were considerably influenced by the societal culture and the school culture, where the traditional roles of teachers have been related mainly to improving teaching and learning in the classrooms, and at most managing people and resources for the well-functioning of their subject departments/committees.

First and foremost, school leaders were considered to be formal leaders in the school organizational structures. Responses from all the teachers in this study put the principal,

vice-principals, and senior teachers like subject department chairs and committee chairs as school leaders. They were regarded as leaders for their authority in terms of decision-making or policy-making in schools:

The principal, vice-principals, and subject department chairs are the school leaders for they have the power of policy-making and implementation. (Mary)

In the school organizational structures, the administrative posts covering the principal, vice-principals, subject department chairs, and committee leaders are the school leaders. (Robert)

Therefore, the teachers' perceptions of leadership roles were still shaped by the administrative positions in the formal hierarchy of the school. Besides, leadership roles were mainly limited to decision-making in terms of school policies and ways of implementation. Given these, teachers had never considered themselves leaders at the school level.

In searching for the reasons that explained teachers' perceptions of leadership roles in Hong Kong, all the participants in this study explained with reference to the societal influence they received from the Chinese cultural values like respect for rank and seniority. According to the Chinese core values, followers in an organization should respect and obey their seniors. They accept their roles as followers instead of leaders who make important decisions for the whole organization:

Chinese society is quite conservative, particularly in schools. Despite the implementation of school-based management, the principal may not work in line with the majority wishes, even

though he may listen to their opinions. Usually, the principal makes the decisions on his own preference. (Angela)

In a similar manner, when asked what teacher leadership meant to them, most perceived teacher leadership in terms of teachers' influence on their students and their colleagues in their subject departments/committees. Therefore, teacher leadership was confined to roles in the classrooms and their formal administrative and management responsibilities. In their opinion, it was hard for teachers to be leaders beyond the classrooms and their formal positions because of the school's rigid bureaucratic and balkanized structures:

As a classroom leader, the teacher is a leader who has an influence on student development. As a panel chair, he or she should communicate with the principal, have a vision for improvement, and motivate the staff to work with him or her. However, a panel chair is in no position to motivate teachers of other panels or committees. (Angela)

However, one participant in this study gave an idea about teacher leadership beyond such formal roles. He defined it with regard to teachers' influence on others beyond the classrooms and the management duties. Teacher leadership, in his opinion, was the roles to influence and develop others to enhance their capacities. Apart from this, two other participants also recognized that as leaders of subject panels/committees, they had actually taken on leadership roles beyond the operational matters to develop their members in terms of their professional capacities:

I share professional knowledge with my colleagues through peer observation. (Angela)

Since some teachers in my panel did not take this subject as their major study in the university, I usually take much time to develop them with the subject knowledge and the pedagogical skills, and provide them with support throughout the year. Besides, I also promote professional learning within my subject panel through peer observation. In the current year, I got more opportunities to work and learn with teachers of other subjects through collaborative curriculum development. All teachers involved can learn from each other through the common planning time. (Mary)

As such, while their perceptions of leadership roles were bound by their administrative positions, their preferences of the roles had indeed gone beyond these formal roles by causing positive influence outside their official circle in the school organizational structures. Such positive influence outside their formal administrative circle included mutual support and collaboration, professional networking, and a collegial culture. This study exhibited that they had learnt together with other teachers and they enjoyed very much these collaborative experiences in the school. This notion of mutual influence and support was also identified in two other teachers in the current study:

Actually, I am not very familiar with what is leadership, but to me, leaders are ones that have an influence on others to work with them toward shared goals. (Peter)

I like sharing with other teachers about our work in this school. Therefore, I take time to have professional dialogue with another form-teacher of my class in supporting student development, and join the learning team of teachers this year. (Robert)

Despite this, they did not realize that they were teacher leaders having an influence in school development and improvement. Without realizing that mutual support and collaborative learning can cause positive influence on organizational learning and school improvement, the teachers opined that it was hard for them to build collaborative relationships. Obstacles suggested included the balkanized teacher culture, micropolitics, and a low sense of self-efficacy:

It is very difficult to be a leader beyond the classrooms as others may be suspicious of my intention and gossip about me. (Mary)

I lack the experience and training about leading a team. (Peter)

Thus, whether teachers see themselves as leaders depends very much on their perception of school leadership and their self-efficacy. Teachers in this study felt insecure to be leaders beyond the classrooms and their administrative positions. However, even though teachers' perceptions of leadership roles were much influenced by the Chinese cultural values, their core values and self-efficacy could be a powerful counterforce against the societal influence. With a stronger sense of self, teachers in this study were more committed to their core values and beliefs of working for school improvement through professional learning, mutual support, and collaboration. On the contrary, with a weaker sense of self-efficacy, teachers were more subject to the Chinese societal influence, which had impeded them from being leaders beyond their formal positions and roles in the school structures.

Apart from this, all teachers in this study shared the view that teacher leadership or increased opportunities to lead in the

school can promote school revitalization. Two teachers believed that teacher leadership in terms of mentoring helps to increase their personal and interpersonal capacities:

When I started teaching an unfamiliar subject previously, I was the only one to explore and learn how to teach this subject. However, under the good mentoring and modeling of my panel head later, I had professional growth by learning together with other teachers in the panel as a team, and then, I confirmed my capacities. (Angela)

When I started to be a teacher, my panel head was a good mentor. My personal capacity was enhanced through co-teaching and professional dialogue. (Robert)

In addition to mentoring, three teachers in this study agreed that teacher leaders are actually the good leadership models to other teachers. This can improve the teacher culture through leadership modeling and mutual influence:

I can learn how to lead from a good leader. In this school, Mr. Chow and Mr. Chan, who are now a school principal and a vice-principal respectively, were once my leaders in the school organizational structure. They both planned and implemented their work systematically. Besides, they also helped their members to develop in terms of professional knowledge and skills. I also learnt to care for my panel members from Mr. Lee, who was once my panel chair in this school. (Mary)

My teacher leadership perception came from some experience sharing opportunities with teachers of other schools. I was very much impressed with their initiative to improve their schools, the courage to take risk, and their willingness to share. They have been my leadership models. I have been trying my

best to communicate, share and learn with teachers here for a better culture. This explains why I am willing to join the learning team. (Robert)

Besides, all teachers involved demonstrated their experience of personal and professional growth through mutual support and collaboration with other teachers in the school. Apart from their personal and interpersonal capacities, the commitment to collaborative and networking relationships had also nurtured a positive impact on the school's organizational capacity:

The experience of working together in the collaborative lesson planning as well as the lesson study has helped me to increase my expertise and confidence. Therefore, I am more open-minded, and I won't be displeased with any professional feedback that is negative. (Angela)

Hence, considering personal capacity, teacher leadership in terms of collaborative professional learning helps to increase teachers' knowledge, confidence, open-mindedness, and reflective ability. Apart from personal capacity, the study also demonstrated that teacher leadership helps to enhance interpersonal capacity. Consensus, mutual understanding, trust, and increased motivation were considered by teachers in this study outcomes of collaborative professional activities. Given this, teacher leadership can help to nurture a collegial school culture and thus school revitalization:

I enjoyed working as a team. I have learnt much from the recent collaborative programs and the learning team. I believe that all teachers involved have learnt from each other in terms of knowledge and skills. There has been better understanding among us too. (Robert)

I believe the mutual trust among teachers working together can help to revitalize the school because it can touch the heart and soul of one another. (Mary)

This year, we have the common planning time for collaborative lesson preparation. We have gained in four ways: wider horizon, willingness to work toward the shared goals, collective wisdom, and collaborative relationship. Through working and reflecting together, we not only understand more about ourselves, but also feel each other's humanistic goal of working for improved student learning. (Mary)

As regards the organizational capacity, the school's formal structures that allow flexibility or opportunities for professional learning and relationship building also play a significant role in terms of the building of collaborative culture. In the current study, the common planning time for collaborative lesson preparation had given teachers the opportunities, including time and space, to learn and reflect together for school improvement.

In the current study, teachers in general would like more opportunities to exercise teacher leadership. All of them displayed an eagerness to improve teaching and learning for improved student learning. They also demonstrated their enthusiasm toward learning and reflection. Besides, three of them had taken steps to enhance their professional learning and relationship building through mutual support and collaboration. As such, there had been some transformations in the school's organizational capacity, with the formation of an informal learning team among teachers who joined on a voluntary basis:

As a panel head, I have tried to build shared vision and commitment with my panel members. Thus, I empower my member with shared decision-making power. She is then willing to talk and share with me for mutual understanding. The peer observation we conducted these few years have proved that both of us could learn from each other through sharing and reflection. (Angela)

I am willing to take on this role as a teacher leader because I enjoy learning together with other teachers. Sometimes, I take lunch together with some teachers for professional sharing. (Robert)

Even though teachers agreed that they would like more opportunities to exercise teacher leadership, they considered it a difficult process. According to them, there are several significant factors determining the extent of leadership exercised by teachers, encompassing personality factors and contextual factors both inside and outside the educational context. As regards personality factors, they cover personal core values and beliefs, positive attitudes, self-confidence, courage, resilience, and an ability to improve through reflection:

It depends on personal core values of being a teacher. To me, as a teacher, I have strong mission to help students learn. Then when my morale is affected by the negative force, I rejuvenate myself with my core values. (Angela)

Courage. Behind such courage, I realize what I am doing.... An understanding of what I am doing — my goals.... A sense of self-understanding, which involves accepting one's weaknesses and building one's confidence.... However, I lack the experience and training as regards leading a group or team to work together. (Peter)

Some also sustained their work through failure and negativity by making their work meaningful:

Personally, I have a strong dedication to make my life meaningful by making contributions to society. (Angela)

I will not forget my meaning in work. (Peter)

As for the supporting factors within the educational context, mutual trust, support, and collaboration were considered by teachers in this study to be crucial factors supporting teacher leadership. On the other hand, micropolitics in school was considered an impeding factor:

When I started teaching here, I worked alone, feeling unsupported. I also left the school right after school. Now, with the influence of my friends who love students and work enthusiastically here, I feel supported and become more vigorous in work. For instance, when I stayed at school with students very late after school every day in preparation for a school function under my charge, I felt disappointed at first when my friends discouraged me by saying that I should not have implemented this function that had made me overloaded. Nevertheless, later I found they were willing to give me voluntary help in the process. This sense of support has encouraged me to work more vigorously. (Angela)

As for other teachers, I believe whether there is mutual trust, support and collaboration among teachers has an impact on their willingness to have more opportunities to exercise teacher leadership. (Mary)

It is sometimes difficult in school because if I always share with the same group of teachers, other colleagues who don't like them may be suspicious of me too. (Robert)

Insufficient time and the rigid school structures were also considered to be impeding factors for teachers to exercise teacher leadership:

It worries me sometimes when it is difficult to spare time for professional sharing in school. (Peter)

As for the supporting factors outside the educational context, religion and family support also have a strong impact on teacher leadership. First, religious beliefs had provided the spiritual support to one teacher involved to sustain commitment by searching for the meaning of life through work. Two other teachers also expressed the importance of their family with which they got the emotional support to sustain their work:

Personally, I have a strong dedication to make my life meaningful by making contributions to society. This is partly due to my religion that has influenced me to search for meaning in life. (Angela)

I can sustain my leadership roles because I get support from my son. Besides, I keep a balance between work and life. (Mary)

There are two ways out. I share with my wife, colleagues and even students to balance myself emotionally, such that I would not give up. (Peter)

Finally, this study illuminated that the principal plays a very significant role to nurture teacher leadership in terms of leadership modeling, support, and recognition. In the school under study, the remote leadership of the principal had created a school culture that did not encourage or promote communication for mutual understanding between the principal

and teachers, and among teachers in general. Other than remoteness, responses from teachers in the study showed a lack of trust in the principal because they thought he just listened to teachers' opinions without any follow-up actions. Some teachers thought that they could not rely on the principal to do anything for them. Instead, they had to exercise leadership and work with their core educational values more independently, even without realizing whether their work could well meet the school-level needs:

It is the responsibility of the school leader, I mean the principal, to promote the culture of collaboration in a school. For instance, different panels or Key Learning Areas can be pooled together during teacher development days for improved communication and development of shared goals. (Angela)

Nonetheless, the support and recognition from the principal could still be a powerful force to motivate teachers intrinsically. Even though two teachers expressed some disappointment with the leadership modeling of the principal, one of them found that the principal's recognition had personally empowered her to be a teacher leader:

The principal is willing to listen to our opinions; however, there may be no implementation or action taken afterwards. He just listens! Anyway, the principal's appreciation and recognition to me has empowered me. That was what I failed to get from the previous principal. (Mary)

As such, the parallel leadership of the principal is crucial in terms of leadership modeling, development of shared goals in school, professional learning, and culture building.

In addition, this study also exhibited several other factors that principals/schools should consider when nurturing teacher leadership. Teachers agreed that more opportunities to exercise leadership roles in the school help to nurture teacher leadership. Such opportunities may include shared decision-making opportunities as well as the provision of time and space for collaboration, relationship building, and reflective activities:

The time and space for collaborative lesson preparation and the learning team of teachers have helped us to build a collegial network in the school. (Mary)

Finally, the study demonstrated that the school may better use external forces/resources to nurture teacher leadership. All teachers in this study agreed that they had developed a more expanded notion of school leadership mainly because of their sense of urgency in response to the changing needs in this new age of education reform in Hong Kong. They believed that teachers should play a more significant role in terms of school development and improvement. Further, some asserted that external resources could be better utilized to develop teacher leadership:

Before, only the principal and the vice-principals could manage the school, but now, things in school have been so complicated that more people are involved. For example, the more complex issues arising from student learning, behavior and even family problems have involved more teachers to support student development. (Peter)

External resources like teachers' district networks can help teachers develop professional learning and build learning communities beyond the school. (Robert)

The key issues influencing whether teacher leadership can contribute to secondary school revitalization in Hong Kong will be discussed and presented as statements in this section.

### *Statement 1*

*Teacher leadership is a blend of personality and chemistry arising from teachers' responses to developments not only within, but also outside the educational context. Whether teacher leadership contributes to secondary school revitalization in Hong Kong depends on a reciprocal process that builds capacities at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels.*

This study illuminated that teachers' personal capacity increases when they identify their roles as active learners in schools. Here personal capacity is not confined to knowledge and skills, but also educational core values and beliefs, positive attitudes, self-confidence, courage, resilience, and an ability to construct knowledge actively through reflection. Lambert (2003) states that teacher leaders are those who keep alive the dream of making a difference, or have been motivated by other engaging colleagues; they are "reflective, inquisitive, focused on improving their craft, action oriented; they accept responsibility for student learning and have a strong sense of self" (p. 422). Such personal capacity greatly influences the extent of leadership exercised by teachers beyond their classrooms.

In addition, the sources of authority teachers draw upon

also determine the extent of leadership exercised by them (Frost & Durrant, 2003; Frost & Harris, 2003). In Hong Kong, secondary school teachers choose to lead in their formal positions in the school organizational structures. Their perceptions of leadership roles are basically shaped by the school hierarchical structures and confined to their school context. Therefore, they find it difficult to be leaders beyond their formal positions and responsibilities. Given this, authority is a critical factor shaping teachers' perceptions and preferences of professional roles.

Besides, teachers' personal capacity is interconnected with their leadership efficacy (Frost & Harris, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Teachers have higher professional efficacy to lead with increased knowledge and skills. In the current study, one participant demonstrated an intention to have more opportunities to exercise teacher leadership, but his sense of self-efficacy, particularly in terms of his interpersonal capacity, had inhibited him from fully exercising such roles as developing and leading professional communities in the school. This was identified to be a dissonant theme from the other participants who exercised teacher leadership on a broader base that changes the teacher culture from being knowledge keepers to collaborative learners (Gonzales, 2004).

The current study also echoed the educational literature (for example, Frost & Durrant, 2004; Hopkins & Jackson, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000) that personal capacity is interconnected with interpersonal capacity through organizational learning which is conducive to a school culture of professional learning communities. Only by attaining such

capacities that embody cultural changes can school secure continuous improvement. The variations over the extent of leadership exercised by the participants in this study can well illustrate this. Even though teachers' construction of their roles in schools is mainly confined to the classrooms and their formal positions in the school organizational structures, those who try to take on roles beyond such boundaries, and acquire job-embedded professional learning together with their colleagues, are able to nurture their leadership capacity together (Harris et al., 2003; Hopkins & Jackson, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Given this, teacher leadership helps to nurture a collegial school culture that enhances the organizational capacity for school revitalization (Lambert, 2003).

Finally, emotional and psychological support is another crucial favorable factor of teacher leadership. In the school context, support from colleagues can strengthen teachers' roles of teaching, learning, and leading together. Outside the educational context, religion and family support are also the supporting factors. One participant in the current study attributed her sustained commitment to her religious beliefs that provide her with the spiritual support to search for the meaning of life. Besides, teachers sustain their work with the emotional support from their families.

### ***Statement 2***

*Teacher leadership contributes to secondary school revitalization when both teacher leaders and their principal engage themselves together through parallel leadership for improved student learning.*

The engagement of the principal has proved to be significant to determine whether teachers are willing to exercise their leadership roles. With the principal's recognition, teachers are able to exercise leadership with a broader base. They may even go beyond their formal leadership roles and exercise informal leadership in the school context through developing professional learning communities. In addition, teachers are more willing to exercise leadership when their principal cherishes mutual trust and respect, develops a sense of shared purpose, and encourages a high degree of individual expression and action (Crowther et al., 2002). In the school under study, teacher leadership could be developed because teachers enjoyed a high degree of autonomy under the remote leadership of the principal. Nonetheless, with a lack of mutual trust and a sense of shared purpose, it was difficult for the participants to extend their perceptions, beliefs, and practices to other teachers in the same school. In the light of this study, therefore, parallel leadership (Crowther et al., 2002) that engages teacher leaders and principals together for improved student outcomes should be encouraged.

### ***Statement 3***

*Both school reculturing and school restructuring are prerequisites of school revitalization.*

This study demonstrated that a reculturation of teachers' professional identity from followers to leaders and from knowledge keepers to collaborative learners (Gonzales, 2004) is significant to secure the school capacity for improvement. One participant in the study acknowledged that his leadership

capacity was limited without leadership modeling or collaborative learning throughout the years. What he had achieved in terms of professional relationship with his colleagues was a type of contrived collegiality which is organizationally induced (Lam, Yim, & Lam, 2002). There was a lack of mutual trust and regard for the building of collaborative culture, which made school revitalization difficult.

School reculturing has to be supported by school restructuring to sustain the school revitalization capacity. Time constraint has always been considered a major barrier for teachers to exercise leadership in schools. Taking this stance, schools have to make appropriate structural or institutional changes including the use of time, such that the school organizational structures invest heavily on professional learning and relationship building. In this study, the common planning time had given teachers the opportunities, including time and space, to work, reflect, and learn together for school improvement. It is under this condition when the personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities of the school increase together that school revitalization takes place.

#### ***Statement 4***

*The culture in which teachers find themselves has a strong impact on the extent of leadership exercised by them.*

Teacher leadership is embedded in culture (Gonzales, 2004). Teachers' role perceptions are thus shaped by the school culture as well as the societal culture. As for many teachers in Hong Kong, their traditional roles have been related mainly to

improving teaching and learning in the classrooms, and at most managing people and resources of their subject departments or committees. Many teachers therefore do not construct their roles as leaders. This study exhibited that to some extent the Chinese cultural context has shaped the current professional identity of many teachers. In Chinese societies like Hong Kong, the values of harmony and respect for hierarchy are pre-eminent, and group harmony outweighs individualism (Dimmock, 2002a; Walker, 2004). Under the influence of these Chinese core values, followers in an organization should respect and obey their seniors. Given this, teachers in this study acknowledged that they accepted their roles as followers instead of leaders, even though they had actually taken on informal leadership roles in the school context.

Another constraint of teacher leadership exhibited in this study is the micropolitical context of the workplace. Sometimes, teachers hesitate to exercise leadership for fear of being too aggressive in a teacher culture of isolation and privatism.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This study investigated secondary school teachers' perceptions toward the notion of teacher leadership and its role in promoting school revitalization. Teachers' perceptions formed the basis of the research, because it can shed light on teacher capacities to develop a new kind of professionalism and collective leadership based on mutual trust, recognition, empowerment, and support. Such capacities — namely personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities — are interconnected with

organizational learning conducive to a school culture of professional learning communities. Only by attaining such school revitalization capacity that embodies cultural changes can school secure and sustain continuous improvement.

This study illuminated four issues about teacher leadership and school revitalization. First, teacher leadership is a blend of personality and chemistry arising from teachers' responses to developments not only within, but also outside the educational context. Whether teacher leadership can contribute to secondary school revitalization in Hong Kong depends on a reciprocal process that builds capacities at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels. Second, teacher leadership can contribute to secondary school revitalization when both teacher leaders and their principal engage themselves together through parallel leadership for improved student learning. Third, both school reculturing and school restructuring are prerequisites of school revitalization. Last, the culture in which teachers find themselves has a strong impact on the extent of leadership exercised by them.

Given these findings, teacher leadership cannot be nurtured or sustained in a system with different definitions of teachers' roles in terms of school development or improvement. A review of the current teacher development programs as well as principal training courses in Hong Kong is much needed, so that teacher leadership identity could be constructed in an enabling culture at different levels.

## Notes

1. Restructuring as reviewed by Hargreaves (1994) embodies no less than a “redefinition of rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships for students, teachers and leaders” (p. 242).
2. Reculturing acts on and supports “the culture itself so that teachers are more able to make change as a community in the interests of the students they know best” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 255).
3. The National College for School Leadership started a research program in November 2000. The study aims at building a model for building capacity for school improvement. The model is developed from a framework that contains five elements for capacity building. They include foundation conditions, the personal capacity, the interpersonal capacity, the organizational capacity, and external opportunities.

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