

## *Blue Skies — Beginning Principals Learning in Context*

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This article addresses the preparation and ongoing learning of beginning principals in Hong Kong. While acknowledging the positive effects of recent policy in framing a more holistic and coherent approach to school leadership development, this article very briefly outlines the evidence-based background and shape of a programme jointly developed by experienced principals and academics for beginning principals in Hong Kong.

The paper has three sections. The first section outlines the leadership development context of Hong Kong and how this has led to a need to shift attention from formative structures to ongoing learning. The second section discerns a number of key features which emerged from a review of research into the established programme targeting the development of Newly-Appointed Principals. This section also displays the juxtaposition of the Hong Kong findings with some international literature and, in the process, identifies processes and mechanisms that appear more effective for leadership

learning. The final section briefly introduces a new programme for beginning principals — *blue skies* — which was built around these identified findings. The purpose of this article is not to review in-depth the current state of leadership development in Hong Kong, to offer an extensive literature review of such, this has been done elsewhere (Walker & Dimmock, in press). Rather, the main purpose is to introduce a new leadership learning programme.

## **The Leadership Preparation Context**

In the decades prior to 2000 leadership preparation and development in Hong Kong tracked an incoherent and scattered course. New principals were required to attend a basic course focusing on administrative matters only. Other opportunities for serving and would-be principals were diffuse and organised on an ad hoc basis by the Education Department, different School Sponsoring Bodies, higher education providers and their associated specialised centres, and some professional associations. Preparation was linked only loosely to major education reform initiatives and only occasionally touched “real” leadership life in schools. The focus of preparation and “upgrading” courses were often determined by the formal system or by the preferences and/or expertise of academics. In terms of methodology, the few centrally supported programmes for education leaders pre-2000 appeared overwhelmingly classroom based, were tendered-out to universities, rarely involved practicing leaders in more than “legitimising roles” and, with few exceptions, were largely detached from school life.

Prompted by the government’s ever-more-invasive reform agenda, particularly related to changes in school governance structures, and increased grumblings within the school leadership community, the then Education Department set in a motion a process to establish a formal leadership development framework. In 2002 this resulted in the implementation of *Continuing Professional Development for School Excellence* (Education Department, 2002). The policy presented a coherent framework for principal development — one that aimed to meet the needs of Hong Kong’s practicing

and aspiring principals at various stages of development. For the first time it differentiated levels of leadership, mandated pre-principalship certification, introduced a set of principalship beliefs and “standards”, and a time-regulated structure for development.

Within a relatively short time the reforms have embedded frameworks, requirements and programmes into the psyche and career planning of school leaders and begun to shift beliefs about the importance of different forms of preparation. Given the secure anchoring of structures provided by the policy, the next step was to look more deeply into the programmes comprising the policy. This step aimed to move beyond the formal policy structures legitimising leadership preparation toward ways programmes could build a meaningful and enduring learning culture among the school leadership community. In other words, the next evolutionary stage entailed identifying how programmes could best help school leaders learn. The next section reports a synthesis of studies recently undertaken into the efficacy of the established programme for Newly-Appointed Principals. These findings were used to inform the development of a new type of programmes.

## **A Synthesis of Hong Kong Studies**

From 2000 beginning principals underwent a designated programme which incorporated a needs assessment, an induction programme, a *School Leadership Development Programme* and an *Extended Programme*. They were also required to engage in activities relevant to their personal and school needs, and submit annually a professional portfolio to their School Management Committees (SMCs). Approximately 95% of all principals taking up their first appointment from September 2000 to September 2003 went through the programme. A collection of studies<sup>1</sup> of the designated programme was reviewed in an attempt to identify what those involved considered the more effective learning mechanism (for more detailed discussion see Walker & Dimmock, in press). The studies were conducted both while the programme was in train and, more importantly, after the

principals had finished the programme and were well-ensconced in their schools. Findings of the studies were synthesised and, when taken together, eight key (closely related) features were distinguished (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Features Believed to Be Most Important to Maximise Leadership Learning in Hong Kong**

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1. Learning happens best when closely linked to school and leadership context;
2. An ongoing focus on real-time, real-life issues forms the most meaningful basis for learning;
3. Learning appears more relevant with substantial involvement of experienced principals (in terms of mentoring, sharing, observing and questioning);
4. Experienced principals involved require relevant training and role definition;
5. Structure is important, but it needs to be flexible enough to meet diverse needs (in terms of both learning methods and content);
6. Different beginning principals and groups require multiple opportunities for reflection, sharing and questioning;
7. Learning must respect existing skills, values and knowledge (experience);
8. Cohort bonding (and collaboration) and opportunities for sideways and hierarchical networking are essential for relevant learning.

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Much international work has also been recently conducted into the area of school leadership development.<sup>2</sup> As the international research findings gel, they provide advice on how to shape worthwhile leadership learning programmes. Table 2 juxtaposes international research outcomes with those from Hong Kong. Also included are mechanisms found across sites as useful for operationalising the key features. The research outcomes and recommendations are apparent in the shape and content of the programme described below.

### **A Programmed Response — Blue Skies**

This section outlines a programme developed in response to the emerging understandings and insights sketched above. The new programme is currently being piloted in Hong Kong and is included to illustrate our attempt to translate emerging findings into a workable leadership learning programme. Further details of the programme *blue skies — a Professional Learning Programme for Beginning Principals* (Walker & Quong, 2005a) can be found at [http://www3.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/eldevnet/blue\\_skies.asp](http://www3.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/eldevnet/blue_skies.asp).

**Table 2 Key Features of School Leadership Learning Programmes**

Key features of school leadership learning programmes identified in both Hong Kong and internationally	Examples of micro-structures and processes associated with successful school leadership programmes
Mechanisms/content to maximise contextual- and cultural-sensitivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action learning</li> <li>• Policy/reform components</li> <li>• Differentiated expectations</li> <li>• Cultural consideration</li> </ul>
Linkage to leadership reality and school life and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Real" problem-based focus</li> <li>• Opportunities for acknowledging diverse views</li> <li>• Opportunities for increasing personal awareness</li> <li>• Action Learning</li> </ul>
Opportunities for reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small group structure (within larger cohort)</li> <li>• Extended time frame</li> <li>• Relationship building</li> <li>• Use of journals and records (or portfolios)</li> </ul>
Intense involvement of experienced practitioners as mentors and/or coaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement from design to implementation to review</li> <li>• The training of mentors and/or coaches</li> <li>• Defined role (flexibility within structure)</li> <li>• Focus on reality</li> </ul>
Multiple learning gateways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple delivery modes</li> <li>• Suitable for different learning styles</li> <li>• Flexible content to address both basic and variable situations</li> <li>• In and outside of school (and education)</li> </ul>
Intentional design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility within structure</li> <li>• Internal and external quality assurance</li> <li>• Cultural setting and expectations</li> </ul>
Formal and informal grouping and networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal networking through purposefully constructed learning sets</li> <li>• User-friendly structures for electronic networking</li> <li>• Encouragement of informal, self-driven networks (within and beyond education)</li> </ul>
Meaningful evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formative and summative evaluation</li> <li>• Self-evaluation</li> <li>• Focus on impact on practice and student learning</li> </ul>
Participant control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible time/involvement schedule</li> <li>• Self-paced (within structure)</li> <li>• Focus areas</li> </ul>

*Blue skies* is loosely guided by the *Key Qualities of the Principalship in Hong Kong* (Walker et al., 2000) and is designed to fit coherently with existing programmes for Aspiring and Serving Principals, and a centralised Induction Programme. It is a twelve-month learning programme for beginning principals which starts at the end of their first year in post and begins in earnest at the beginning of their second year. This is intentional and based on a belief that beginning principals benefit from a year working to better understand their unique organisational context and challenges and to gain the technical skills necessary to manage a school. Importantly, the programme was developed by a group of academics and practicing principals, all of whom had been heavily involved in the design and implementation of the previous NAP (Newly-Appointed Principals) programme and other leadership development initiatives. Again, this was purposeful in that it recognised that meaningful learning programmes cannot be developed simply on cold academic desks or, indeed, directly from current practice.

The stated purpose of *blue skies* is that: “Beginning Principals (will) leave the (*blue skies*) programme with increased confidence in themselves as leaders. (And) be better equipped to both lead and manage their schools. Following their involvement they will be more knowledgeable, resilient and connected to learning networks” (Walker & Quong, 2005b, p. 3).

The programme presents an integrated approach to ongoing professional learning for beginning principals and is designed: to foster a positive and hopeful start to the principalship; to assist personal clarification of what is important in the principalship and; to engage principals in ongoing professional learning — all within a supportive collegial environment. The formalised learning beliefs underpinning *blue skies* assume that beginning principals:

- are self-directed learners;
- cannot learn effectively without a solid knowledge of themselves — including their strengths and weaknesses — as people and as leaders;
- learn through personal reflection, asking hard questions and receiving feedback and new ideas from peers and others;

- need an intentional and personalised design to guide their learning;
- have many commitments and demands on their time. As a result, they are more likely to commit to learning when the goals and objectives are realistic, and perceived as being immediately useful;
- bring with them a wide range of experiences, knowledge, skills, interests, and competencies to all learning situations;
- sometimes fear external judgment and that this can produce anxiety during new learning situations;
- need to see results from their efforts and receive accurate feedback about their progress;
- need ample opportunity to share and learn from each other, and other principals and professionals;
- relate most strongly to learning which connects directly with their school context.

At the heart of *blue skies* are a group of carefully selected *Sponsors* and approximately 17 learning sets called *Learning Squares*. A *blue skies Sponsor* is a recognised (effective) experienced principal who formally agrees to “sponsor” one or more beginning principals for the duration of the Programme. A *Sponsor* agrees to take shared responsibility for the beginning principals’ learning and professional welfare during the first years of their principalship (and hopefully, following the completion of the formal programme). A *Sponsor* has three interrelated roles — peer mentor, principal coach and professional counsel. Each *Sponsor* is carefully matched with three beginning principals to form a *Learning Square*. This configuration was designed so that support, learning and responsibility could be spread, i.e., support provided by the *Sponsor* for each beginning principal and the support that each beginning principal provides each other. Symbolically, the four corners of the square represent the four partners each supporting an equally weighted corner of learning.

The programme works through four major stages — Welcome and Briefing (beginning principals) or formal training for Sponsors; Stocktake, Leaders’ Forum and the Partnership Programme. The first stage for sponsors

involves initial programme familiarization and two dedicated training occasions — one specifically targeting the programme philosophy, justification and mechanisms, as well as strategies for initial group formation; and the other explicitly targeting the skills and knowledge necessary to be a successful Sponsor. The first stage for participants, the “Welcome and Briefing”, is run by a small group of experienced principals who outline the programme rationale and structure, introduce *Learning Square* members, clearly explain expectations and distribute Stocktake tasks. At the conclusion of the briefing, beginning principals are asked to set an initial behavioural learning goal and, given that the programme is voluntary, are asked to formally commit, or elect not to attend.

The second stage of *blue skies*, “Stocktake”, asks Beginning Principals to carry out a set of tasks in their schools within a period of one month. The tasks include a “School Capability Audit”, “Core Values Scan”, “Perceptions and Expectations”, “Icons, Rules and Resources” — and to set some initial learning goals. The tasks are designed to firmly ground the programme “up front” in the reality of school life and leadership from the outset and to kick start the processes of reflection, curiosity and analysis. The third stage involves the entire cohort of sponsors and beginning principals (in *Learning Squares*) in a focused “Leadership Forum”. The forum has two major and closely interwoven purposes. The first is to begin in earnest the building and bonding of professional and learning relationships in and between *Learning Squares*. The second is to reinforce the school-based focus of the programme — this is done through using the completed Stocktake tasks as the basis for group activity and interaction. In other words, the information collected in the beginning principals’ schools underpins *Learning Square* activities during the Forum. The Sponsor’s job during the forum is to build group relationships, focus learning on school leadership and improvement for student learning and work with their *Learning Squares* to set initial learning goals and plan an initial meeting schedule and framework for the duration of the programme.

The fourth stage — the “Partnership Programme” — forms the



programme's learning core in terms of purpose, intent and time commitment; it focuses clearly around individual school, principal and *Learning Square* needs. The stage is about ongoing collaborative learning and support, and seeks to build a unique and flexible learning partnership over a period of approximately ten months. The partnership also draws on other expertise, opinion and research, as necessary.

In designing the "Partnership Programme" the development group recognised that principals are busy and face severe time limitations which can restrict formal professional learning. On the other hand there was acknowledgment that if a concerted effort was not made to design or structure professional learning, then it may not happen as effectively and, as a result, beginning principals could remain professionally isolated. "The Partnership Programme", therefore, is based on a balanced mixture of structure and flexibility, or what we labelled "flexibility within structure". There are certain components which everyone does together as a cohort, and others which are done in *Learning Squares*. For *Learning Squares*, the principals themselves decide the "how", "why" "when" and "where" of their learning. Subsequently, it is hoped that blue skies will evolve through individual/contextualised learning agendas and recognise that the key to making the *Partnership Programme* work are the relationships formed within the *Learning Squares*. The required and elective components of *blue skies* are introduced in Table 3.

The programme, including in its present early life, is being evaluated on an ongoing basis both internally and externally. A rigorous quality assurance (QA) scheme has been planned and an external consultant engaged. However, at this very early stage of implementation, it is not possible to make any definitive judgements about the programme's success; in fact, these may not be clear until well after the formal programme is completed. The programme, based on quite clear research findings both locally and internationally, is designed to "chip away" at the existing culture of leadership learning and turn it toward a more realistically grounded, collaborative affair. Whether this will suit the unique Hong Kong context is yet to be seen.

**Table 3 Blue Skies Partnership Programme: Required and Elective Components**

Required Component	Structure/Focus/Purpose
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Square Breakfast Meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least five Learning Square Meetings (every other month) scheduled by members in schools on rotational basis.</li> <li>• Focused on school and leadership issues faced by beginning principals.</li> <li>• Regular contact, learning and support focused on real issues.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breakfast Inspiration Series</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five centrally scheduled meeting for entire Cohort every other month. Presentation by high profile speakers (from in or outside of education).</li> <li>• Focused on challenge, excitement, difference and "new ideas".</li> <li>• Whole group connection, valuing of principals, infuse new and socially-responsive mindsets.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer Learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A total of two days (any configuration) in Learning Squares engaging in activities negotiated to provide maximum benefit to beginning principals (e.g., principal or student shadowing, seminars, targeted visits, etc.).</li> <li>• Focused on school and leadership issues faced by beginning principals.</li> <li>• Encourage sharing, openness, learning and support of real issues.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual Learning Plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic Individual Learning Plan to set and work through personal/Learning Square Learning goals (includes goals, link to school development and review, etc.)</li> <li>• Focuses on individual/school-based learning organised around the Six Core Areas of learning.</li> <li>• Encourage strategic intent, individual planning and accountability. Ground learning in school and individual context.</li> </ul>
Elective Component	Description
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing the Knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicated email system for discussion, questions and networking.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memorable Messages — ACT</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collection of "rear mirror" advice from experienced principals which AFFIRMs something positive they did as a beginning principal (BP); something they would certainly CHANGE if they could go back, and something they wished they had TRIED.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mini-Modules</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A set of twelve purpose-written booklets (in electronic form) targeting areas identified as important to BPs. Distributed each month to entire cohort. For example, BPs and the Law, Enquiry Learning, "Getting out of the Engine Room", Performance Management, "Asking Hard Questions".</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-Time Advice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A register of expertise available to BPs.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional Self-Appraisal and Insight</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A collection of psychometric and other mechanisms which principal can choose to access. Other opportunities are disseminated and offered.</li> </ul>

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| • Other Learning Opportunities | • Blue skies does not intend to be restrictive or self-contained. It is designed to meld with other programmes. |
| • Additional Resources         | • List of websites and other resources which may be useful to schools.  |

*Blue skies* is only very recently implemented and is, as yet, untested. As such, it can be seen as another small step in the evolution of worthwhile learning programmes for school leaders in Hong Kong — one which focuses firmly on improving and implanting collaborative learning habits.

## Notes

1. Cheung (2004), Cheung & Walker (in press), Education and Manpower Bureau (2004), Lam (2003), Pang & Gamage (2005), Walker (2004a), Walker (various years), Walker & Dimmock (various years), Wong (2004), Wong (2005), Wong & Ng (2003).
2. Bolam (2003), Earley & Weindling (2004), Hallinger (2003), Hallinger & Snidvongs (2005), Huber (2004), Walker & Dimmock (2005), Weindling (2004).

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