

## Strategic leadership and school reform in Taiwan

Peiyong Chen\*

*National Tsing-Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan*

*(Received 11 November 2007; final version received 20 May 2008)*

This article examines school leadership in the context of Taiwanese educational reform since the mid-1990s. The goal of the inquiry is twofold: to explore the conflicts that school administrators have confronted in facilitating school reform and to analyze the strategic and innovative leadership practices that have facilitated improvements in school effectiveness in Taiwan. A case study of a secondary school is used to illustrate how leadership efforts can move schools forward to achieve a balanced transformation. The research lasted 3 years. The school principal and 15 other participants were interviewed. This case study revealed 4 themes of strategic leadership in coping with the conflicts accompanying school reform in Taiwan: (1) educational values, (2) timeframe for change, (3) capacity building, and (4) community involvement. Three of the school's program initiatives are described and analyzed in detail in order to illustrate the dynamic relation between strategic leadership practices and the goal of school transformation.

**Keywords:** educational leadership; school principals; school improvement; educational reform; Taiwan

### Introduction

This article examines school leadership in the context of Taiwanese educational reform since the mid-1990s. The goal of the inquiry is twofold: to explore the conflicts that school administrators have confronted in facilitating school reform, and to analyze the strategic and innovative leadership practices that have facilitated improvements in school effectiveness in Taiwan. A case study of a secondary school is used to illustrate how leadership efforts can move schools forward to achieve a balanced transformation.

### *Educational reform in the Taiwanese context*

Taiwanese schooling has undergone dramatic changes since the late 1990s, influenced by both political and economic forces. The Taiwanese government lifted Martial Law in 1987, after which Taiwan transformed itself in the 1990s from an authoritarian to a more democratic society. Influenced by the April 10, 1994, mass demonstration for educational reform, the Taiwanese government sought to decentralize and restructure the entire educational system (Committee of Education Reform, The Executive Yuan, 1996; Hsueh, 1996;

---

\*Email: [peiyongnthu@gmail.com](mailto:peiyongnthu@gmail.com)

Pan & Yu, 1999). In September 1994, the Executive Yuan established the Commission for Deliberation on Educational Reform and then developed a 5-year master plan for educational reform in 1998. The major reform initiatives included the passing of the Basic Education Law and the Teacher Education Law, the abolition of the Joint Entrance Examination, comprehensive curriculum reform, and massive school reform with the introduction of school-based management. All of these changes have had a great, ongoing impact on the reform of Taiwanese education (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2006).

#### *Decentralization of school structure*

The early educational reforms aimed to create a more decentralized and participatory system. These efforts included comprehensive curriculum reform and a more democratic decision-making process. The curriculum reform involved transferring responsibility for pedagogical matters to local schools, teachers, and parents. Also, the establishment of the Basic Education Law resulted in increased parental and teacher involvement in the process of school decision-making and the selection of school principals (Chen, 2005; Pan & Yu, 1999). Schools were required to establish curriculum development committees that included teachers, administrators, community leaders, and students to select textbooks and to plan, design, and evaluate school curricula (Chen & Chung, 2002).

Decision-making authority at each school in Taiwan is now shared by the principal, teachers, and parents; nevertheless, educational accountability still rests primarily on the principal's shoulders. The new situation, therefore, puts school principals in a dilemma: to foster a more voluntary-based and participatory decision-making climate in which the principal acts as an encouraging facilitator or to focus on accountability and result, taking on the leading role as an instructional leader.

#### *Education for creativity*

Entering the 21st century, the educational reform agenda has aimed to strengthen the competitiveness of Taiwan's human resources in the knowledge-based global economy. Innovation has been identified by the MOE as one of the capabilities that students need most in order to achieve global competitiveness. In 2002, the "Republic of Creativity (R.O.C.)" became the government's slogan to mobilize efforts and resources for educational reform (MOE, 2006). Yet, the emphasis on creativity and comprehensive curriculum reform has by no means transformed the whole system overnight. The prevailing practices remain test oriented, and test scores are still used, explicitly or implicitly, as the most important method to screen students for advancement to the next level. Thus, it is not surprising that school leaders have been ambivalent about the reform efforts. Some stakeholders have criticized the MOE for, to a certain degree, failing to acknowledge the complex, integrated nature of the system's practices and the extent to which resources, cooperation, and creativity would be needed at all levels of the educational system in order to achieve the reform goals.

My concern with effective educational reform inspired this research on school leadership in the context of Taiwanese educational reform. The article aims, first, to explore the conflicts that leaders in Taiwan have faced in their attempts to facilitate school reform, and, second, to analyze the strategic and innovative leadership practices that have made schools in Taiwan more effective in their mission to educate the young people.

## **Literature review**

School effectiveness literature, particularly in English-speaking countries, has flourished since the 1980s as an attempt to understand and promote school change (Harris & Bennett, 2001). Criticizing this literature, Fullan (2007b) has argued that large-scale reform efforts in the past have failed in large part because the processes involved in changing the culture and practices of schools were ignored. Given the complex and dynamic nature of school improvement, Fullan (2007a) and several other researchers (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Short, Greer, & Melvin, 1994; Stoll, 1996) have asserted that the school should be the baseline unit for analysis when investigating how certain factors operate to produce particular results and what strategies are actually used in particular contexts.

Additionally, as school-based management or decentralized power has become a predominant feature of current reforms in many countries (Lauglo, 1995; The World Bank, 2007), the leadership role of the principal has expanded and become more important. Fullan (2007b), for instance, has suggested that “[t]he principal is absolutely key when it comes to developing the ‘school capacity’ to manage change” (p. 15) in outcome-based reform.

The expanded role of the principal in leadership has been conceptualized into a variety of leadership models: for example, transformative leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006), facilitative leadership (Lashway, 1995), curriculum leadership, (Bernhardt, 1998), instructional leadership (Blasé & Blasé, 1994), and constructivist leadership (Lambert, 1998). Despite the differences among these leadership models, they commonly feature two core concepts: “empowerment,” emphasizing raising motivation and strengthening subordinates’ efficiency; and “value-added,” emphasizing cultural mobilization (Bass, 1998; Burns, 1978).

The idea of empowerment is predicated on the notion that school leaders should act as change agents, empowering followers to realize their potential and thus increase organizational productivity and the capacity to restructure schools. The practices of empowerment require school leaders to use less of their controlling power and to be more willing to share their positional power with others (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). This new model for shared leadership called for a participatory form of decision-making (Murphy & Louis, 1994) that would expand the roles and responsibilities of teachers and staff members in improving schools. The evolution of ideas concerning school-based management, teachers as leaders (Harris & Muijs, 2005; Lambert, Collay, Kent, Richert, & Dietz, 1997), senior management teams (Wallace, 2002), and middle management (Blandford, 1997) featured leadership as activities and interactions involving multiple people across multiple situations (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Timperley, 2005).

The idea of “value-addition” emphasizes educational accountability and performance, viewing education as a continuous process adding values to the end-users (i.e., students). This approach centers on the development of a shared vision based on the needs of the students, calling together administrators, teachers, parents, and community leaders to build up a community of practice that facilitates organizational learning (Barth, 1990; Blasé & Anderson, 1995; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Lambert, 1998). Some scholars suggested the importance of cultural factors and the potential effect of symbolic influence upon organizational action (Moorhead & Griffin, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2000; Yukl, 1994). Value-added leadership, therefore, is intended to play a vital “adaptive” role in setting the course of change and in connecting people, purpose, and practice to meet environmental needs (Donaldson, 2001; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

The empowerment and value-addition approaches make similar attempts to expand the roles of school leaders. Nevertheless, these change agents often face a power dilemma: to lead or to wait, to give instructions or to give space, to shout or to be courteous, or even to fire or to tolerate. The evolution of multiple leadership roles, on the one hand, characterized an era of “post-heroic” leadership (Huey, 1994) in which shared power, community building, and an action-oriented nature of leadership were manifest (Donaldson, 2001; Nirenberg, 1993). On the other hand, school leaders, especially principals, are still held accountable for school effectiveness. The paradox of leadership thus requires school leaders to be adept at maintaining a balance between conflicting roles and competing values while pursuing effective school improvement.

### *Literature of school leadership and school improvement in Taiwan*

The evolution of the school leadership and school effectiveness literature over the past 2 decades in Taiwan has similarly reflected the perceived need to develop leadership capacities for school improvement. Prior to the educational reforms of the 1990s, the majority of the school leadership literature in Taiwan focused on one key figure: the principal, and the effectiveness of his or her characteristics, style, and behavior as a leader in elementary and secondary schools. Most of these leadership studies unquestionably employed Western-originated models and questions to investigate the relationship between leadership factors and school effectiveness. Especially popular was the statistical testing of correlations between leadership and teachers’ job commitment, satisfaction, morale, and self-efficacy (Lin, 2000; Tsai, 2004). Since the mid-1990s, despite the changes in the educational system and the increasing academic interest in school improvement, most of the research on educational leadership and school effectiveness in Taiwan has used questionnaires to determine key factors that could improve school performance (Lin, 2000). Those questionnaire-based, quantitative inquiries have found some intriguing correlations; however, with few exceptions, little has been done to explore the complexity of change processes and to find strategies useful in guiding school reform in the Taiwanese context (Pan, 2003; Wong & Lin, 2006).

As the top-down reform policy of school-based curriculum development has been put into effect since 2000, the need to understand the change process with a focus on curriculum leadership at school level has become necessary. The call to study school improvement and school change processes has resulted in an increase in qualitative investigations since the late 1990s. Among educational leadership studies, three types of research interests can be delineated. First, the study of principal traits and behaviors continues, only recently giving more attention to the expanded roles, functions, and significance of school leaders. Second, particular styles of school leadership have been explored in response to educational reform agendas. Last, case studies with a focus on school improvement have recently increased to reveal the processes of change. However, much less has been done to uncover cultural factors in school leadership. Only one comparative study, conducted by Cheng, Shieh, and Chou (2002), has been made of the Western model of transformative leadership and the Chinese model of paternalistic leadership in relation to principals.<sup>1</sup>

For the research on school leaders, studies have emphasized the competencies and capabilities of school leaders that result from an expansion of the roles and functions of the principal required to deal with school change. Research can be found on the evaluation of principal’s emotional intelligence in relation to leadership (Yeh, 2007), the employment of a competing value framework as a means of raising school effectiveness (Wu, 2006), the

importance of the adaptive competence of the principal in solving daily problems and leading school change (Shieh, 2007), and the exploration of the patterns of principals' reasoning and decision-making (Lin, 2007).

In the research on leadership styles, substantial efforts have been made to determine the factors and practices of curriculum leadership (Tsai, 2005), transformative leadership (Chen, 2005), and organizational learning (Wei, 2002) that may have significant effects on school improvement. Furthermore, in the research on contextualized leadership practices, the increase of case studies illustrates the recognition of the significance of local knowledge to educational leadership in terms of how change agendas are made workable in the Taiwanese context. The following are three examples of case studies in Taiwan.

In a study of 12 schools in Taiwan, Pan (2003) concluded that effective leadership is associated with six key factors for school improvement at the school level. They are shared visions; culture-building; teacher team building; developing a school-based curriculum; establishing a positive relationship among teacher recruitment committees, the teacher associations, and parent associations; and a good connection with external stakeholders. The six factors create a synergy of improvement effects that together are greater than the sum of the parts.

In a case study of school-based management at a charter school, Lai (2007) explored leadership influence, practices, and effects in relation to school change. This study concluded that the principal's leadership could exert strong impacts on school improvement, and effective leadership contributed significantly and positively to school morale, work commitment, development of students' multiple talents, and support from local governmental agencies. Chen (2005) studied how a female principal led a middle-size secondary school's reform efforts. That case demonstrated how school leadership could be strengthened by the establishment and functioning of a top administrative team.

Those three case studies pinpointed the importance of the leadership role of the principal and the need to involve multilevel stakeholders in school change efforts. Similar findings are also supported by school reform research in Pakistan, Hong Kong, and Thailand (Cheng & Chan, 2000; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000; Simkins, Sisum, & Memon, 2003), where a decentralized model of decision-making was adopted and promoted by the governments of these three countries. Although a distributed model of decision-making is expected in school-based management practices, some of the research findings in these three countries indicated that strong and skilled principals were one of the key factors in achieving successful school reform.

Based upon the aforementioned literature review, we can ask the following questions: Is strong leadership style in conflict with or complementary to the empowerment and value-added approaches? Why is strong and skilled leadership needed in reform processes involving school decentralization and improvement? Can the centralized bureaucratic tradition found in many developing countries account for this phenomenon? What kinds of strategic leadership action are developed in response to this power dilemma? This case study in Taiwan was designed to explore these issues.

## **Methods**

### ***School structure in Taiwan***

Taiwanese compulsory education consists of 6 years of elementary education and 3 years of junior high school education. At a local level, city and county education bureaus take charge of elementary and secondary schools, and students go to schools within residency districts. In the school year 2005–2006, there were 732 junior high schools, averaging

about 1,300 students in one school and 35 students in one class (MOE, 2006). All secondary school students have to take basic competence tests in order to enter senior high schools or vocational high schools.

### *Selection of the case study school*

This research was funded by the National Science Council of Taiwan. The school on which this case study is based will be called “Sunshine School” (pseudonym). I chose Sunshine Secondary School as a research site for two reasons: the school was a low-performance, medium-size city school undergoing the school reform process, and the principal, Ms. Lin, was well-known for her effective leadership record. She had previously succeeded in transforming a low-performance school located in a remote community and had attained national “star” status due to this successful effort at school-based curriculum development.

Ms. Lin was in her 1st year as the principal of Sunshine School when this research project began. I observed the change process at Sunshine School and investigated how the new principal initiated and implemented the transformation.

### *Participants and data collection*

A case study methodology was used to identify the main factors in effective leadership. I collected data primarily through site visits, interviews, and formal school documents such as meeting notes, evaluation reports, and the principal’s written essays (Yin, 1994). The research lasted 3 years. It began in January 2004, and continued through March 2007.

### *Getting into the field and interviews with the principal*

I, the researcher, was an outsider to the school community and had little knowledge of the school and its leadership practices. In the 1st year, I participated in some of the school’s events in order to become familiar with the school site, the principal, the administrative team, and parent leaders. In the meantime, I did five in-depth interviews with the principal and we had several informal talks during my school visits. The in-depth interviews with the principal were conducted to learn more about her leadership experiences. The open-ended questions explored Ms. Lin’s life history, career path, educational visions, the primary concerns and strategies of school improvement, leadership principles, her relationship with stakeholders and the local community, and her self-evaluation of these practices.

Based upon transcripts of my interviews with the principal, I learned about the significance of three school improvement initiative programs. The initiative programs involved a variety of stakeholders engaging in leadership practices. I asked for permission to continue the research in the 2nd and 3rd year to interview the administrative staff, teachers, and parents most involved in the initiative programs. During the 3 years of the case study, I observed the change process and was able to see what actions led to specific improvement.

### *Interview with staff, teachers, and parents*

Besides Ms. Lin, 15 other participants were intentionally chosen to be interviewed because of their deep involvement in the school’s initiative programs and leadership practices. They consisted of four main division directors (Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, General

Affairs, and Counseling), four administrative staff (Chief of Curriculum & Instruction, Chief of Activity, Chief of Media and Data Processing, the clerk in Student Affairs Division), three teachers (Music, Science, Health), and four parents (one ex-chair and three board members of the parent association). Other than the four directors of administration that I directly asked to interview, the rest of the interviewees were recommended by the principal, an administration director, or a parent active in the reform process.

The guideline questions for interviewing these participants covered the following topics: (1) perceptions of school visions, values; (2) observations on the principal's leadership and her relationship with the administration staff members and teachers; (3) roles and responsibilities in developing innovative programs; (4) comments on school improvement programs, parents' involvement, and student learning and performance; (5) the functioning of and collaboration among the administrative team. Additionally, parents who were interviewed were asked to evaluate the functioning of the parent association. The length of the interviews ranged from 1 to 3 hr, except for the multiple interviews with the principal, which totaled 12 hr. All interviews were digitally voice-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### ***Data analysis***

In this case study, transcriptions, field observations, and school documents were analyzed using Atlas.ti (V5.0), a software program for analyzing qualitative data. The data were coded, compared, and analyzed for developing patterns, categories, and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The emergent themes were developed in two ways: (1) using a data-driven approach (Boyatzis, 1998) confined by the guiding questions and (2) based on a constant dialogue between the data and the prior literature (Polkinghorne, 1991; Seidman, 1998).

This process resulted in the identification of four strategic themes for understanding dynamic and effective school leadership practices. The four themes of strategic leadership were educational values, timeframe for change, capacity building, and parental involvement. The four themes were similar to those of Leithwood et al.'s (2004) about the features of successful leadership: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning organization. The list of the multidimensional leadership practices and improvement effects of the Sunshine School leaders, shown in Table 1, is based on the four themes.

The strategic leadership scheme presented in Table 1 is discussed in the following section and is divided into three subsections: (1) the Sunshine Secondary School setting, (2) the four strategic themes, and (3) three major initiatives. These three parts explicate how the leadership practices of this case study were developed out of the local school context, and how the strategic actions influenced school improvement efforts.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***Backgrounds and overview***

#### *Sunshine School setting*

The research site, Sunshine Secondary School, is located in the northern part of Taiwan. It is a middle-size public junior high school with about 1,700 students in 51 classes and 140 staff members. The school is located near a night-market street. About 70% of its student

Table 1. The four themes of strategic leadership in Sunshine School.

| Leithwood et al. (2004)                            | Strategic Focus                              | Leadership Targets  | Leadership Practices   | Improvement Effects   |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| Setting directions                                 | Goals directed                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear directions</li> <li>• Balance between change and traditional norms</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong leadership in the early phase of change</li> <li>• SWOT analysis</li> <li>• Communication &amp; persuasion</li> <li>• Promoting creative education, multiple intelligence, and literacy competence</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus</li> <li>• Coherence</li> <li>• Identifying school</li> <li>• Teachers' self-efficacy/empowerment</li> <li>• Professional learning team</li> </ul>   |
| Developing people                                  | Timeframe consideration                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raising motivation</li> <li>• Setting high expectations for staff</li> <li>• Ensuring high quality of initiative programs</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiating change programs (e.g., ICC, Reading Campaign, Student Orchestra Club)</li> <li>• Modeling, coaching, mentoring</li> <li>• Changing teachers' work attitudes</li> <li>• Recruiting the right persons, self-management</li> <li>• Sharing innovative programs in public</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative working culture</li> <li>• Collegiality, trust, inclusiveness</li> <li>• Attracting intelligent students</li> <li>• Improving students' reading capacity</li> <li>• Strong support from and connection with the Community and local leaders</li> </ul> |
| Developing people/<br>Redesigning the organization | Capacity building                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowering</li> <li>• Professional growth</li> <li>• Changing work culture to productive relationship</li> </ul>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementing programs</li> <li>• Shared working principles</li> <li>• Shared decision-making</li> <li>• Teamwork, action learning</li> <li>• Peer support and pressure</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support from the county government</li> <li>• Raising test scores</li> <li>• Improving school reputation</li> <li>• The Award of Innovative School</li> <li>• The Award of Friendly Campus School</li> </ul>   |
| Redesigning the organization                       | Parental Involvement (Community Partnership) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking additional support and resources from community and educational agencies</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean-up local favoritism</li> <li>• Enlarging the pool of parent volunteers</li> <li>• Fund-raising</li> <li>• Extra budget from the local government</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Winner of Creative Education</li> <li>• First prize winner in the county music contest</li> <li>• The Award of Best Practices School</li> </ul>  |



population comes from lower middle-class and blue-collar families. In the past, the school was called a “gangster school” (i.e., a school with many student gangsters hanging around the neighborhood). For this reason, parents from this district would rather transfer their children to other schools or to private schools if they could afford it. The continuous decline of the birthrate has also negatively affected the school’s enrollment.

Ms. Lin believed that “creativity” could serve as a core value to transform the school from a “gangster school” to a place for creative learning. Her strategic leadership practices, developed within the school context, appear to have induced in school stakeholders the shared meanings, motivations, and actions that eventually brought about successful school improvement (cf. Fullan, 2007b). After 3 years of implementation, the school culture was reshaped, staff and teachers were empowered, and social capital was accumulated. Equally important, reading capabilities, problem-solving skills, and the basic competency tests of the students were significantly improved (see Table 1).

### *Administrative structure*

In Taiwan, school administration usually consists of seven divisions, but the main functions relating to the core technology of schooling fall upon the following four divisions: academic affairs, student affairs, general affairs, and student counseling. The academic affairs division takes charge of teaching and curriculum, the student affairs division manages student discipline, the general affairs office deals with infrastructure and equipment, and the student counseling division takes care of student psychological needs. Each division consists of 5 to 13 staff members, and one to five chiefs are assigned to each division. Division directors make up the upper-level leadership team while the rest of the staff members and the chiefs in each division constitute lower level administrative teams.

### *Early transition process*

In the past, the main role of school administration was to implement the policies mandated by the Ministry of Education (MOE). After Taiwan’s educational reform was launched in 1994, school-based management and participative decision-making were promoted by the government. Even so, the hierarchical and compliant culture of the school bureaucracy still prevailed, presenting obstacles when staff and teachers were unwilling to take risks or attempt to solve school problems on their own.

When Ms. Lin took Sunshine’s principal position in 2003, she faced a daunting situation, including the school’s deteriorating reputation, a malfunctioning administration, resistance to change by the majority, and a stifling work culture. Ms. Lin described teachers’ attitudes:

Some of the teachers were just like the inert public workers 30 years ago. They left school as soon as their classes were over for the day . . . . They were reluctant to engage in any school-wide activity . . . or professional development workshops.

The four administrative divisions were physically isolated and there was little coordination or communication between them. The entire school was inefficient. The teachers kept aloof from school activities, and many of them declined to spend a day during winter or summer breaks for course preparation. Ms. Lin decided to take action. With a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and emphasis on self-management, Ms. Lin outlined “creativity” as a focusing value to foster school

change. The first step she took was to reshape the work culture and rebuild the administrative leadership team of the school. She said:

I made a couple of changes immediately. The staff and teachers felt that they had entered a combat zone full of landmines. . . . They might step on the bombs out of carelessness . . . . I would rather wait for them to reflect upon the new situation they had, but I did not have enough time. I used my position of power to make clear requests and impressed them with my strong leadership style as a determined, strong, straightforward, and demanding principal.

Ms. Lin, after analyzing the school's conditions, made up her mind to use her positional power to begin the changes she wanted to make. Her beginning move was to alter teachers' attitudes about attending school meetings. Ms. Lin gave an example of her leadership action:

I asked the director of the personnel division to close the door when the meeting started . . . . It was the very first time that they were afraid of being late for the meeting . . . . I said: "It is really wrong to be late and make other colleagues wait for us. Please do not be late and I promise I will end the meeting on time." I made it work! In fact, school staff and teachers were reluctant to attend meetings because of the ineffectiveness of the group decision-making process in the past. They spent a lot of time in every meeting, but seldom came up with a consensus or with sound decisions.

#### *New leadership team*

Because of the new demands and pressure, three out of four division directors resigned their positions after the 1st year. The next year, the new directors were selected by Ms. Lin. They then formed an upper-level leadership team and developed a collaborative work culture. Ms. Lin exercised leadership with the upper-level administrative team to facilitate a more dispersed decision-making process that nurtured cooperation and risk-taking. Ms. Lin also supported division directors' firing unqualified teachers and recruiting capable staff members to create effective lower-level leadership teams.

The golden principle of effective management is that the right people should be assigned to the right positions (Drucker, 1990). It is one of the most important responsibilities of successful leaders. Most staff members, teachers, and parents in my interviews made such observations. They attributed Ms. Lin's effective leadership to the robust administrative team, which consisted of four competent and capable division directors and middle-level chiefs. The same standard also worked for the recruitment of lower-level staff such as school guards. The general affairs division director recalled:

We could not fire the lousy technical worker in my division, who gambled and owed many colleagues a lot of money for a long time, since this employee had a strong background . . . . Three local councilors came to Ms. Lin's office to show their "concern" about the laid-off worker . . . I think our principal had guts, a sense of justice, and the moral strength to fire this worker and go against the local authorities.

The changes in personnel and in the administrative climate altered the impressions of parents and staff members. One parent, who was a standing committee member of the school parent association and worked at a nearby post-office, stated openly that Ms. Lin brought hope to blue-collar families as they saw the improvement that was ongoing at the Sunshine School. He said in his interview: "We could embrace dreams of a bright future for our kids after Principal Lin came."

In addition to making the new leadership team and emphasizing improvement, Ms. Lin showed her school reform leadership through her strategic thinking and action, which I

have distilled into the aforementioned four themes: educational goals, timeframe for change, capacity building, and parental involvement (Table 1).

#### ***Four themes of strategic leadership***

##### *Educational goals: rote learning versus creativity*

The first theme we will take up is educational goals. Prior to 2001, the only way for junior high students to go to high school was to take a joint entrance examination. This examination was abolished in 2001. In the same year, a basic competence test was introduced in junior high schools to assess students' basic knowledge about the subjects they learned at the junior-high level. Junior high students could now be admitted to high schools either by their test scores or by recommendation.

The passing of the Basic Education Law set the tone for new educational goals emphasizing students' individual potential and development, multiple kinds of intelligence, and creativity. The MOE announced in its 2002 White paper that creative education was its core agenda to boost Taiwan's competitiveness (MOE, 2002). A national project for the Enhancement of Creative Education was initiated and implemented between 2002 and 2005 (MOE, 2007). Since 2004, each city and county has produced its own white paper on creative education.

The government's emphasis on creative education and the students' need to do well in the basic competence test are difficult to reconcile. The basic competence test has become the most important channel for students to compete for limited places in the high schools. The test is basic, and many students get perfect scores. This means that a small careless error can cost talented students heavily when they compete to enter the best public high schools. In order to do well in the basic competence test, students need to do tedious preparation. By contrast, creative education encourages teachers and students to think differently, to solve problems in alternative ways, and to challenge the conventional way of doing things.

Many principals and teachers have been troubled by the conflicting goals. Some principals have chosen to ignore the goal of creative education and to make all efforts focus on the competence test. The reason is quite straightforward. Higher education has expanded over the past years, but the high school system has not. As a result, more than 90% of high-school graduates can go to college, but only 55% of junior high graduates can enter high schools (Ministry of Education Statistics, 2006). Those failing to enter high schools have no choice but to go to a vocational school or retake the competence test the next year.

Ms. Lin believes that both goals are important and can be tied together. The two goals should be seen as complementary. Most teachers and staff at Sunshine considered the competence test to be much more important than creative education. Yet Ms. Lin knew that the whole school lacked creativity and that creative education was desperately needed for school restructuring. Ms. Lin needed to persuade her colleagues and prove to them that creativity and creative education were of great importance.

Ms. Lin shared with her colleagues her strategic thinking: To improve its overall performance on the competence test, the school must attract academically capable students and keep them from transferring to other schools. Creative education provides alternative ways of learning and more challenging courses for students. It thus can draw exceptional students to come and stay in the school and is complementary to the goal of improved performance on the competency test. In addition, the school can acquire

additional, irregular resources through emphasizing creative education since it has been a priority of the government reform policies.

By persuasion and her persistent leadership, Ms. Lin led school members by maintaining an acceptable balance between pressures for a shift to a creative policy and for continuing to pursue educational preparation for competence tests. For example, special after-class programs were initiated for ninth graders preparing for the competence test. Teachers in better performing classes began to do substitute teaching in “weaker” classes. Regarding creative education, Ms. Lin and her team developed several innovative programs in reading, music, and creativity (described later). The school organized many informative lectures and practical workshops. The administrative staff also brought new ideas into conventional ceremonies and revitalized them with educational meaning.

Ms. Lin also played an active role in promoting creative education in the local county. The extra efforts proved to be rewarding. The Sunshine School was assigned to be the county’s center for creative education, and Sunshine won twice (in 2003 and 2004) the national award for the best-practices school in creative education. As a result, the outstanding performance not only earned the school a favorable reputation but also additional resources and funds sponsored by the local government and community leaders.

#### *Timeframe: short-term versus long-term considerations*

Another area that needs substantial strategic consideration is timeframe. Few scholars (Fullan, 2004; Hargreaves, Denris, & Associates, 2006; Kotter, 1996) have recognized the contentious but complementary relationship between short-term gains and long-term development. Kotter advocates “quick wins” for long-term results. Short-term improvement is valuable, for it can increase confidence and the willingness of organization members to invest in more difficult long-term challenges. Strategic thinking and action within the desired timeframe is thus part of effective leadership.

School reform is a long-term process of fundamental change. As the Sunshine School case illustrates, extra efforts and care are most needed at the initial stage of reform. The key question is: How to effectively make short-term programs and hard work contribute to long-term results? The government initiated many reform programs targeting various subjects and problems. Were they equally important? Long-term results require strategic leadership and focused efforts. Without strategic thinking and focusing, school principals might be confused by a long “shopping list” of reform measures and programs.

Further, people might lose confidence and patience in school reform if the changes cause organizational instability and substantial conflicts with traditional norms. In addition, limits on the duration of a principal in any school created timeframe pressure for the school leader to make school improvements within one election term of 4 years or two terms of 8 years. Therefore, the leadership must be aware of the tensions of time – between the long term and the short term – and be able to generate short-term satisfaction and benefits to fuel the long-term improvement process.

Ms. Lin successfully balanced the need for short-term achievements and the long-term goals of reform through two strategies: developing innovative programs (details of three examples of innovative programs will be provided later) that were feasible and able to transform the image of the school and actively providing opportunities for school staff and teachers to be recognized and affirmed for their efforts on school reform. The Sunshine School held regular teachers’ teaching presentations. Ms. Lin also encouraged school members to present their teaching efforts at various seminars and conferences. These

presentation experiences directly contributed to their inner satisfaction and built confidence that they were doing the right things with the right methods.

The two strategies actualized an empowering process that enhanced the self-efficacy of staff members and teachers, which is a phenomenon that has been recognized by a number of other researchers (Bandura, 1986; Barth, 1990; Blasé & Blasé, 1994; Short & Rinehart, 1999). Conger and Kanungo (1988) have referred to this kind of empowerment as a motivational construct. It is through this enabling process, whereby individuals enhance their efficacy expectations, that they are able to persist in the face of barriers and successfully take actions towards desired outcomes.

### *Capacity building: stability versus structural changes*

Capacity building is a key factor critical to successful school improvement, as many scholars have observed (Copland, 2003; Donaldson, 2001; Fullan, 2005; Lambert, 1998; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharatt, 1998; Marks & Louis, 1999). School reform often implies changes in organizational personnel, structure, and culture. Structural and cultural changes might be considered a threat to bureaucratic stability and job security. In many schools, the hierarchical nature of administration creates a gap between administrative staff and teachers. Further, the balkanization of teaching professionals has a long time history that impedes teachers from developing a collaborative work culture within schools.

Ms. Lin added the practice of teamwork to the school's functional structure. Self-management, a kind of empowerment leadership practice, was also monitored and encouraged by Ms. Lin. She organized a leadership team consisting of the four division directors and herself. The weekly meetings of the leadership team became the school's most important decision-making mechanism. Open discussions and mutual influence helped the leadership team to develop their shared vision, core values, and working principles.

Although the entire administration of the school was still hierarchical, people at the top level of the administration began to change by forming supportive and collaborative relationships with each other. The leadership's team capacity was built through practicing shared decision-making and team leadership. The collegial relationships and teamwork thus created a learning space for the principal and four division directors to acquire new skills and attitudes. It was within this process that the principal learned how to "disarm" herself from her position of power in order to build school capacity with a participative mode of decision-making. The counseling division director, Ms. Fu, commented:

The weekly meetings [of the leadership team] with the principal were informal and open . . . From the discussions we could learn great ideas from other division directors and the principal. Communication was effective because we clarified Principal Lin's ideas, and the school vision became clearer every time we discussed things. . . . Yet we did not agree with the Principal all the time; sometimes we supported other directors' ideas if theirs were more convincing.

The majority of staff members agreed that the principal led the school by her creative thinking and rigorous demands. The general division director described this:

In the first and second years, almost all the divisions relied on the principal's direction to design and implement programs, events, and activities. The principal had high expectations of us. . . . We were strongly urged to try new ideas and alternative ways of managing and running the school.

The principal strengthened school management capacity by having high expectations, coaching, mentoring, and teamwork. Her leadership style affected division directors, and they also built teams in their own divisions. After the administrative team began functioning well, she backed away from her direct leadership interventions and became instead more of a consultant to the *team*. As proof of the success of her strategy, in 2007 the Sunshine School was evaluated and given the county Award for Best Practices School.

*Parental involvement: favoritism versus genuine participation*

The importance of parental involvement in school reform has been recognized by many researchers who have investigated the implementation of decentralization or school-based management policies in a number of developing countries (Fullan & Watson, 2000; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000; Levin & Lockheed, 1993; Van der Werf, Creemers, & Guldmond, 2001). In Taiwan, parental involvement becomes a complicated issue for many schools. School reform seeks broader community participation. However, local favoritism and influential people's personal agendas may hinder the goal of getting the community more involved. It was reported that many city councilors were the chairpersons or vice chairpersons of parent associations of public schools (Liberty Times, 2004), and this has become a legal concern regarding conflict of interest in Taiwan (Chen, 2004). Local political elites who were active in the parent association might be more interested in impressing voters than helping the school. Similarly, local business people might be interested in doing business – such as student lunch meals, field trips, school construction – with the school.

Ms. Lin cleaned up such favoritism and encouraged the genuine involvement of parents. She selected as the director of the General Affairs Division someone with high moral standards. Ms. Lin made financial documents transparent and discouraged business between the school and parents. Some parents with personal agendas walked off the board of the parent association. Other parents with compassion and commitment joined. Gradually, the parent association became a committed partner of the school.

The parent association developed new bylaws and vision statements and enlarged the number of seats on the association board in order to strengthen parent participation in school-wide decision-making. The school organized self-development workshops for parents. The school also occasionally helped community services. The partnership between the school and the parent association was mutually beneficial.

The parent association shouldered greater responsibility for fund-raising campaigns and encouraged more parents to become involved in school activities. Through parent engagement, the school enhanced its social capital and improved the physical conditions that contributed, directly or indirectly, to student achievement and school success. As a result, more and more parents identified with the school, the image of “gangster school” faded out, and the image of “school for people with dreams” replaced it.

*New initiatives for school improvement*

While school improvement implied a great deal of innovation and effort, Ms. Lin gave much more attention to three new initiatives relative to other measures. It was largely through the three initiatives that empowerment and “value-added” leadership practices could be applied and members of the school developed shared vision and worked together to make a better school. In the following, I briefly describe each of the three initiatives and

discuss how the four strategic themes (educational goal, timeframe, capacity building, and community involvement) were incorporated into these initiatives and make a coherent picture of the school's improvement process.

### *Program description*

*1. Intelligent Ironman Creativity Contest (IICC).* The Taiwanese government has promoted the reform policy of creative education since 2001. The Intelligent Ironman Creativity Contest (IICC) was initiated by the MOE, which holds them annually to stimulate students' creative learning. Usually, each school assigned school teams to participate in the IICCs held by local educational agencies. The champion school team in the local then went on to compete with other teams at the national level. Through a series of contests, the student winners then represent the national teams participating in the international Academic Olympiads (MOE, 2007).

Ms. Liu, Chief of Curriculum and Instruction in the Academic Affairs Division, initiated the IICC. She embraced the goal of creative learning to strengthen national competitiveness. The learning program of the IICC is to stimulate students to think and inspire them to solve problems critically and creatively. Student participants teamed up in groups of five to six members. With diverse capabilities, team members could complement one another and stimulate their learning during the contests. Sunshine's champion team was then invited to attend the IICC in Hong Kong and competed with teams from Hong Kong and China in 2006. Although the team did not win in this international contest, they appreciated the learning process and the opportunity to meet and get to know teenagers from cross-strait societies.

*2. School-wide reading campaign.* The reading rate has now become an indicator of international competition (Global Views Monthly, 2007). In Taiwan, the reading campaign has been advocated by the ex-minister of the MOE, business leaders, and the mass media since 2000. Due to the pressure of intensive exams, teenagers (13 to 18 years old) primarily read textbooks and borrowed the smallest number of library books of other kinds compared to any other age groups. Some educators thus worried about the creativity of Taiwan's future human resources (Global Views Monthly, 2007).

The Sunshine's school principal believed that reading was essential for all students' learning. Upon her arrival, Sunshine staff and teachers were reluctant to advocate reading since the school library was remote and not very accessible to most of the classrooms. Many staff members discouraged Ms. Lin from promoting the school-wide reading campaign because it would create a difficult relationship between the principal and the majority of teachers and staff.

Ms. Lin asked a middle-level staff person to work with her on this program. By designing a movable box with 40 books, the physical library was transformed into a "walking library," reorganized into 51 such movable boxes, one for each class. In the 2nd year, Mr. Tu, Chief of Media and Data Processing, took over the management of the school-wide reading program, along with the middle-level staff of the Academic Affairs Division. He advocated the reading program by two reasons:

First, the majority of our students' families come from the lower classes or are raised by grandparents . . . , "reading" is a fundamental way to help the disadvantaged students build their competences . . . . Second, as we enter the information age, it is important to teach our students how to obtain and organize knowledge in general.

To make reading a school-wide learning activity, full support from classroom teachers was essential. Mr. Tu communicated frequently with teachers and provided support if needed.

*3. Student orchestra club.* Right after assumed the principalship, Ms. Lin decided to restructure the orchestra club to attract promising students to enroll in Sunshine. Looking at the student demography in the school district, Ms. Lin realized that Sunshine “lost” about 30% of its potential students to other schools. She appointed a veteran teacher to reorganize the orchestra club. Mr. Huang, who was retired from military and then became a teacher 6 years ago, was well known for his disciplined teaching and effective class management.

Some conflicts arose as some of the parents did not want Mr. Huang to accept this new mission, and the new assignment required the administration to reshuffle the class teachers. Making the move right after the semester began could have brought about chaos because of the complicated rescheduling and reassigning of teachers in the 51 classes. Yet, after the appointment and reshuffling were settled, Mr. Huang accepted this mission without doubt because he had confidence in the principal’s leadership. Mr. Huang complimented the principal as “a BIG tree,” protecting and shading the entire school.

Table 2 summarizes the three programs.

#### *Analysis of strategic themes*

The following is a summary of the four themes of strategic leadership practices and the resultant improvement effects in Sunshine.

*1. Educational values.* School visions usually present a mixed picture of prevailing values and long-term projects. The three new initiatives were developed as levers for a reform agenda. The reading program was to balance between the two goals of test performance and creative education, with an emphasis on the long-term effect on students’ reading competence. The Intelligent Ironman Creativity Contest took a supplementary role in advocating the importance of creativity and integrating such an element into students’ learning through the contest. Despite the informal nature of learning in the IICC program, students’ enthusiastic engagement in the contest altered teachers’ thinking and led them to acknowledge the magical effects of creative learning.

The restructuring of the orchestra club was the most ambitious and “expensive” project. Although the primary goal of the student music club was to develop students’ potential and nurture their multiple talents, this program also implicitly served as the school’s benchmark for attracting smart students to come to Sunshine.

The orchestra band won county and national contests after 1 year’s training. The “quick wins” happened due to the strong team of experts recruited by Mr. Huang. He rigorously disciplined and warmly encouraged students to excel both in music and academics. Also, through the students’ outstanding musical performance, the teachers eventually changed their minds. Mr. Huang recalled:

The majority of school teachers did not support the club at first. They thought it might distract students from rote learning for exam preparation . . . . I had to reassure teachers that club students excelled in academics and at the same time suggested to our principal we sell our school’s new image by holding music concerts for our community and arranging international concert performances overseas . . . . Students did a great job and the teachers changed.



Table 2. Three program initiatives in Sunshine Secondary School.

|                   | Intelligent Ironman Creativity Contest (IICC)   | Reading Campaign   | Orchestra Club  |
|-------------------|---|--|---|
| Goals             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>learning creative thinking and problem-solving</li> <li>arousing students' interest in learning</li> </ul>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>fostering the learning community</li> <li>developing and enhancing reading ability</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>promoting aesthetic education</li> <li>appreciating arts and music</li> </ul>                                  |
| Students          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>five to six student groups from each class</li> <li>20 teams in total</li> </ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all students (principal leads by personal example of making reading a daily habit)</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>beginning with 13 students, after 3 years the number increased to three bands of about 100 students</li> </ul> |
| Incentives        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the champion team representing the school to attend IICC in Hong Kong and the Taipei County Contest</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>setting up goals and rewards to provoke students' interest</li> <li>the best students treated by the principal in the 1st year</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>performance opportunities in community and public concerts</li> <li>traveling overseas</li> </ul>              |
| Period            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>several weeks</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 years</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 years (ninth graders quit to prepare for entrance exams)</li> </ul>  |
| Staff             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ms. Liu and Academic Affairs (leading)</li> <li>teachers (support)</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mr. Tu (leading)</li> <li>principal (support)</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mr. Huang (leading)</li> <li>four divisions (support)</li> <li>principal (full support)</li> </ul>             |
| Community support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>little</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>volunteer librarians</li> <li>book donations</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>logistics and labor (backup team)</li> <li>fund raising for travel</li> </ul>                                  |

(continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

|            | Intelligent Ironman Creativity Contest (IICC)  | Reading Campaign   | Orchestra Club  |
|------------|--|--|---|
| Strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>informal teamwork and frequent discussion about program design</li> <li>collaborative across subject matters</li> <li>enhancing teachers' professional development</li> <li>enlarging teachers' involvement</li> <li>cooperation between administrators and teachers</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"walking library"</li> <li>frequent communication with class teachers</li> <li>evaluating reading effectiveness by collecting students' reading notes</li> <li>changing the book list based on students' reading notes</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>external coaches teaching different instruments</li> <li>performing opportunities in the community and a shopping mall</li> <li>public recognition through mass media reports</li> </ul>   |
| Effects    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>broadening students' horizons.</li> <li>enhancing students' problem solving and creative thinking capability</li> <li>winning the first prize in the county contest</li> <li>augmenting the fame of the school</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increasing the total amount of books read in the last 2 years</li> <li>strengthening students' basic skills and learning capacities</li> <li>accustoming students to reading</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no more "gangster school"</li> <li>school popularity increased</li> <li>improved enrollment rate and passing rate on the exam</li> <li>good community connections</li> <li>became champions in county and national contests</li> </ul> |

2. *Timeframe considerations and effects.* The scope of influence and the length of each of the three programs were different. The reading program covered all students all year round, while the orchestra band and IICC programs engaged about 100 students each. The IICC was held within a period of several months, whereas the students participated in the orchestra club throughout Grades 7 and 8.

The effect of the IICC was visible in students' performance in the contests. The best group representing Sunshine competed with other teams in the same county, and they won the champion in the preliminary round of the county IICC. Their victory encouraged both staff and students to develop and participate in the program. The educational goal of creative education was thus legitimized and was increasingly and widely supported by the school members.

The intangible influence of reading was already supported by staff and teachers, due to the public campaign and belief in the long-term effects of reading. The staff members collected and analyzed class reading data each semester and reported it to the entire school. In the 1st year, Ms. Lin even announced she would buy a meal in a fancy restaurant for those who had the best reading record. In following semesters, the school gave awards to individuals and classes that had the best record of book reading. Through such honors, students were encouraged to make reading a daily habit. Through school-wide campaigns and incentives, the school indeed created a whirlwind of reading and the records continued improving over consecutive years.

Ms. Lin did not distract the attention to many programs. She focused on the programs that were attentive to teaching and learning and which could probably improve the school's reputation within a relative short period of time. Consequently, the school attracted more outgoing and bright students to come to Sunshine, and in turn assured that there would be a promising list of students able to get into the best public schools in the near future.

As mentioned above in the literature, "quick gains" can be the stepping-stones for long-term development. Short-term achievements satisfied school constituencies and enhanced the confidence and commitment of staff members, who might then show more willingness to take risks and accept challenges for the long-term goal.

3. *Capacity building.* Capacity building at times is more like a risk-taking journey of learning-by-doing to fulfill a difficult mission than a fitness routine for muscle training. The Sunshine School's IICC program illustrates such a creative learning process as well as the importance of teamwork in moving a school forward.

The Sunshine School was designated the center for creative education in the county. To be the model of creative education for other schools to follow, Ms. Lin encouraged school staff and teachers to teach and solve routine problems creatively. Ms. Liu, Chief of Curriculum and Instruction, was a veteran teacher respected by all the other teachers and staff members. She was willing to take risks in initiating the IICC program. She teamed with three staff members in the same division and worked out the content and procedural details of the contest. The most challenging task was to design content across Science, Mathematics, Chinese, and English and make the contest fun, stimulating, and challenging for students. Ms. Liu commented:

The principal sometimes gave me feedback, and the director of Academic Affairs division supported me fully . . . . I'm also lucky to have a stimulating team with me . . . . We have different specialties and that is important for making a varied work-group . . . . We discussed the IICC program all the time during the design period. We employed every minute of free time, including lunch time, to make the contents interesting, inspiring, exciting, and refreshing.

Team capacity was nurtured through the process of designing IICC programs. In the 1st year, Ms. Liu and her team worked out almost the entire program through frequent informal dialogues with her colleagues in the office. In the 2nd year, the science teachers joined and cooperated with Ms. Liu's team. The teachers then integrated the contest program into the regular science courses. They also arranged professional development meetings for discussing and designing the contest. Ms. Chen is a veteran lead teacher of the science subject matter. She commented on this program in the interview:

The implementation of IICC was beyond our expectations. It turned out to be very positive . . . I've never seen not only advanced students but also the ordinary ones who usually were bored in my class become so actively and enthusiastically engaged in the entire process. During the contest period it seemed that they were thinking and learning in a few hours as much as they learned in a week or a month in my class . . . Students had a lot of fun during the contest and I think the creative thinking of the students was indeed cultivated by such a comprehensive and integrated program.

*4. Parental involvement.* Community-school partnership has proved vital for school reform, especially for less-affluent schools (Muijs, Harris, & Chapman, 2004; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Ms. Lin attracted helpful and committed parents and created a platform for school-community collaboration. Through programs, the school identified potential partners for collaboration and supported sustainable improvement efforts.

- (a) Volunteer mothers in the library: To promote reading, Sunshine involved parent volunteers who were responsible for managing and allocating books for different grades. To encourage students to read, volunteer mothers paid attention to students' reading habits and made suggestions to the school for purchasing new books. These mothers created a warm and friendly atmosphere in the library, where students loved to hang around to read. Students and school staff recognized and respected the contribution of the volunteer mothers. The mothers maintained their relationship with the school even after their children graduated.
- (b) Backup team for the student club: The backup team consisted of committed parents who promoted the student orchestra club. They helped Ms. Huang to run the club and take care of the club students. They provided labor necessary for the school to hold the community concerts and important school events. They helped fund-raising for the club students performing overseas. Without these essential supports by the backup team, the school could not have made "quick gains" so smoothly.

Although there were some protests from staff members since the band spent so much money and energy on holding formal concerts, the program turned out to have a positive effect since the school received mass media attention and the community appreciated the school's efforts. Over the course of about 3 years, the school's positive reputation grew and its past image as a "gangster school" faded away. Ms. Fu, the counseling division director, identified with the principal's strategic action:

We needed to perform better and to make our school known to the public. As one member of this community, I feel it is very important to improve the school's reputation and to make good connections with the community so that we can bring hope to poor families and to our next generations.

## **Conclusion and implications**

### ***Conclusion***

This case study analyzed how a school principal transformed a school in Taiwan. I have argued that, given the substantial changes in educational policies in Taiwan since the late 1990s, research on Taiwan's school leadership and improvement must pay more attention to the new and shifting contexts in which the schools and leaders have been working.

This study confirmed the argument made by a number of scholars (Blasé & Anderson, 1995; Fullan, 2007b; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999) that the principal is absolutely important in leading and managing school reform, despite the current trend toward emergent models of relational leadership, such as facilitative and transformative leadership. This particular case provided evidence that a strong, committed, and skilled leader – the principal – is needed to deal with the dynamic complexity of reform. The importance of leadership cannot be reduced by mechanisms such as committees, SOPs (standardized operating procedures), or participative decision-making. Facing the school members' lack of motivation and skills to implement the needed changes, it was the principal who empowered and mobilized school members to act by identifying strategic focuses, organizing task groups for prioritized programs, offering guidance and support, and making tough decisions, such as firing uncooperative staff or severing influential parents' business ties with the school.

Leithwood and his team (2004) studied effective school leadership and suggested three key elements for successful reform: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. This case study reached a similar conclusion and came up with four themes: setting goals, deciding a timeframe for change, developing school capacity, and strengthening parental involvement. This study investigated the significance of strategic leadership in each theme.

This study found that the most challenging leadership task regarding setting goals was minimizing the conflicts between the goals of test-driven education and creative education, and between the needs of stability and reform. The theme of timeframe was also essential for strategic leadership, even though it has seldom been explored in past research. In the early stages of reform, the timeframe strategy of "quick wins" was especially important in winning community support, strengthening staff's self-efficacy, and generating the stakeholders' confidence in pursuing excellence. Regarding school capacity development, this case showed the importance of getting the right people to form the top leadership team and task groups. It requires school leaders to make tough personnel decisions. In terms of fostering genuine community involvement, it also requires principals to prevent schools' votes or business opportunities from falling into the hands of unduly influential parents.

### ***Implications of the case study***

Hallinger and Kantamara (2000), based upon their findings in Thai school improvement research, concluded that calling upon the norms of Thai culture to encourage people's respect for positional power enabled school leaders to foster early change. However, such a cultural strength might become a limitation if deeper implementation goals can only be achieved by means of collaborative learning and participative leadership. It illustrates the typical dilemma faced by school principals of striking a balance between wielding and sharing power. During the change process, strong leaders are required to lead school reform but at the same time to "disarm" themselves from positional power in order to nurture a collaborative and participative culture.

Hallinger and Kantamara's conclusions were also supported by this case study. On the one hand, the findings of this study shored up school improvement research in developing countries such as Hong Kong and Thailand, showing that powerful and skilled school leaders were more likely to be able to initiate school change and make their reform efforts successful. On the other hand, the analysis of strategic leadership in this case study also showed how the principal "disarmed" herself to empower staff by means of implementing the three innovative programs. The principal exercised the strategy of empowerment, encouraging staff members to realize their potential. The changes occurred at multiple levels, and the capacity and skills of the change agents were variously developed within the change process. Also, the principal exercised the strategy of "value-added" power, using a strategic scheme to broaden the participation of school stakeholders. The staff learned how to lead and cooperate with one another by and through experiencing real change.

Therefore, as shown in this study, the strong principalship and distributed mode of leadership or participative mechanism can be simultaneously developed. The co-production of the strong leader and the dispersed leadership practices thus justifies the need for strategic leadership for comprehensive reform agendas, which, eventually, put these leadership practices into effects and thus raised school effectiveness.

The strong principalship was especially necessary for initial change and for making a transition from leadership by one to shared responsibility. Nevertheless, how the transition is made possible and smoothly developed needs further investigation in cross-country comparison in order to uncover effective as well as failed practices of leadership in different cultural and organizational contexts.

### *Limitation of the case study*

This is an exploratory case study revealing the process of school change in the context of Taiwanese educational reform. Although the results from this single case study cannot be generalized to the entire school system in Taiwan, the scheme of strategic leadership analyzed herein can be formulated as a workable template for reform action to improve other disadvantaged city schools in Taiwan and, perhaps, elsewhere.

Further study is needed to solve the following questions: the changing function, practices, and effects of the leadership team within the change process compared to the hierarchical structure of leadership; the sustainability of improvements after the strong principal leaves the school; the variance and commonality of strategic leadership frameworks between schools and societies. Comparative studies addressing these questions are necessary to enrich the field of educational leadership studies, particularly in contexts of school reforms made due to global economic pressures.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the National Science Council in Taiwan for funding this project. I wish to thank the principal, teachers, staff, and parents who participated in this research and kindly shared their ideas and experiences with me. I also thank the two referees for insightful comments that improved the manuscript. Special thanks go to Joel Stocker and my research assistant, Minxu Chan, for their support in completing this article.

### **Note**

1. Chinese paternalistic leadership can be categorized into three types of leadership behavior: authoritarian, moral, and benevolent. These three styles of traditional leadership are embedded in the cultural practices of Confucianism. Authoritarian leadership has its root in Chinese imperial rule and politicized Confucianism, emphasizing centralized power and legal authority,

as well as tactics of control. Moral leadership is based in cultural Confucianism and emphasizes governance by virtue, moral example, and propriety. Benevolent leadership originates from the Confucian ideal type of the ruler and superior, who shows caring, kindness, and gentleness to subordinates in exchange for their loyalty and obedience. The norm of reciprocity is enacted by such an exchange (Cheng et al., 2002).

### Notes on contributor

Peiying Chen is an assistant professor at the Center for Teacher Education, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan. She received her Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Educational Administration from the University of Southern California, USA. She specializes in issues related to school leadership, teachers' professional development, comparative education, and gender.

### References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundation of thoughts and actions*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Barth, R.S. (1990). *Improving schools from within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bass, B.M. (1998). *Transformational leadership: Industrial military, and educational impact*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bernhardt, R. (1998). *Curriculum leadership: Rethinking schools for the 21st century*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Blandford, S. (1997). *Middle management in schools*. London: Pitman.
- Blasé, J., & Anderson, G. (1995). *The micropolitics of educational leadership*. London: Cassell.
- Blasé, J., & Blasé, J.R. (1994). *Empowering teachers: What successful principals do*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Burns, J. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Chen, C.C. (2004). *Evaluation report of law: Can a local councilman also be a board member of parents' association?* Taipei, Taiwan: Humanistic Education Foundation. (in Chinese)
- Chen, H.L., & Chung, J. (2002). A study of the problems and coping strategies for: School-based curriculum development. *Journal of Taiwan Normal University*, 47(1), 1–16. (in Chinese)
- Chen, P.Y. (2005). Exploring transformational leadership: A case study of a female principal's leadership experiences. *Contemporary Educational Research Quarterly*, 13(2), 1–36. (in Chinese)
- Cheng, B.S., Shieh, P.Y., & Chou, L.F. (2002). The principal's leadership, leader-member exchange quality, and the teacher's extra-role behavior: The effects of transformational and paternalistic leadership. *Indigenous Psychological Research in Chinese Societies*, 17, 105–161. (in Chinese)
- Cheng, Y., & Chan, M.T. (2000). Implementation of school-based management: A multi-perspective analysis of the case of Hong Kong. *International Review of Education*, 46(3–4), 205–232.
- Committee of Education Reform, The Executive Yuan. (1996). *"Final Report" of the Council on Education Reform*. Taipei, Taiwan: Author.
- Conger, J.A., & Kanungo, R.N. (1988). The empowerment process: Integrating theory and practice. *The Academy of Management Review*, 13(3), 471–482.
- Copland, M.A. (2003). Leadership of inquiry: Building and sustaining capacity for school improvement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(4), 375–395.
- Dimmock, C., & Walker, A. (2005). *Educational leadership: Culture and diversity*. London: Sage.
- Donaldson, G.A. (2001). *Cultivating leadership in schools: Connecting people, purpose, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Drucker, P.F. (1990). *Managing the non-profit organization: Principles and practices*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Fullan, M. (2004). *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Fullan, M. (2005). *System thinkers in action: Going beyond the plateau*. London: Innovation Unit, Department for Education and Skills.
- Fullan, M. (2007a). *Change theory: A force for school improvement*. United Kingdom Workshops 2007: Preliminary reading. Retrieved February 10, 2008, from: [http://www.michaelfullan.ca/home\\_articles/UK07PreRead.pdf](http://www.michaelfullan.ca/home_articles/UK07PreRead.pdf)

- Fullan, M. (2007b). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.). New York and London: Teachers College Press.
- Fullan, M., & Watson, N. (2000). School-based management: Reconceptualizing to improve learning outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 11, 453–473.
- Global Views Monthly. (2007, August). Reading survey. *Global Views Monthly*, 254, p. 136 (in Chinese)
- Gronn, P. (2002). Distributed leadership. In K. Leithwood, P. Hallinger, G. Furman, P. Gronn, J. MacBeath, W. Mulford, et al. (Eds.), *Second international handbook of educational leadership and administration* (pp. 653–696). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Hallinger, P., & Kantamara, P. (2000). Educational change in Thailand: Opening a window onto leadership as a cultural process. *School Leadership and Management*, 20(2), 189–205.
- Hargreaves, A., Denis, S., & Associates. (2006). *The long and the short of raising achievement: Final report of the evaluation of the "Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning" Project of the UK Specialist Schools and Academic Trust*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College.
- Harris, A. & Bennett, N. (Eds.). (2001). *School effectiveness and school improvement: Alternative perspective*. London: Continuum.
- Harris, A., & Muijs, D. (2005). *Improving schools through teacher leadership*. New York: Open University Press.
- Hsueh, H.H. (1996). *Local education reform movement in Taiwan*. Taipei, Taiwan: Avanguard. (in Chinese)
- Huey, J. (1994, February 21). The new post-heroic leadership. *Fortune*, 42–50.
- Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail*. Boston: Harvard Business School.
- Lai, C.F. (2007). The influences, practices, and effects of school leadership: A case study of a charter school in Taiwan. *Contemporary Educational Research Quarterly*, 15(4), 93–128. (in Chinese)
- Lambert, L. (1998). *Building leadership capacity in schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Lambert, L., Collay, M., Kent, K., Richert, A.E., & Dietz, M.E. (1997). *Who will save our schools? Teachers as constructivist leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Lashway, L. (1995). *Facilitative leadership*. Retrieved June 9, 2008, from: <http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED381851>
- Lauglo, J. (1995). Forms of decentralization and their implications for education. *Comparative Education*, 31(1), 5–29.
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2006). Transformational school leadership for large-scale reform: Effect on students, teachers and their classroom practice. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 17, 201–227.
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R. (1999). *Changing leadership for changing times*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Leithwood, K., Leonard, L., & Sharatt, L. (1998). Conditions fostering organizational learning in schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 34(2), 243–276.
- Leithwood, K., Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: Wallace Foundation.
- Levin, H.M. & Lockheed, M.E. (Eds.). (1993). *Effective schools in developing countries*. Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Liberty Times. (2004, December 2). *Elected city councilors interfere in school governance*. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from: <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2004/new/dec/2/today-life7.htm>. (in Chinese)
- Lin, M.D. (2000). The impact of principal leadership: An analysis of the research findings, 1970–1999. *Proceedings of the National Science Council (Part C: Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 10(2), 232–254. (in Chinese)
- Lin, M.D. (2007). Principals' thinking frameworks: Implications and preliminary research findings. *Secondary Education*, 58(3), 8–25. (in Chinese)
- Marks, H.M., & Louis, K.S. (1999). Teacher empowerment and the capacity for organizational learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35(5), 707–750.
- Ministry of Education. (2002). *White paper on creative education*. Retrieved June 9, 2008, from: <http://www.creativity.edu.tw/modules/wfsection/article.php?articleid=195>
- Ministry of Education. (2006). *Action plan of education reform*. Retrieved June 9, 2008, from: [http://www.edu.tw/content.aspx?site\\_content\\_sn=1383](http://www.edu.tw/content.aspx?site_content_sn=1383). (in Chinese)



- Ministry of Education. (2007). *Project on the enhancement of creative education*. Retrieved June 9, 2008, from: [http://www.creativity.edu.tw/project\\_introduction/english\\_intro.php](http://www.creativity.edu.tw/project_introduction/english_intro.php)
- Ministry of Education Statistics. (2006). Retrieved October 20, 2007, from <http://www.edu.tw/>
- Moorhead, G., & Griffin, R.W. (2004). *Organizational behavior: Managing people and organizations* (7th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Muijs, D., Harris, A., & Chapman, C. (2004). Improving schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas – A review of research evidence. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 15*, 149–175.
- Murphy, J. & Louis, K.S. (Eds.). (1994). *Reshaping the principalship: Insights from transformational reform efforts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Nirenberg, J. (1993). *The living organization: Transforming teams into workplace communities*. Homewood, IL: Business One Irwin.
- Pan, H.L. (2003). *Educational leadership in school innovations*. NSC report, No: 91-2413-H-003-008. Taipei, Taiwan: National Science Council. (in Chinese)
- Pan, H.L., & Yu, C. (1999). Educational reforms with their impacts on school effectiveness and school improvement in Taiwan, R.O.C. *School Effectiveness and School Reform, 10*(1), 72–85.
- Polkinghorne, D.E. (1991). Qualitative procedures for counseling research. In C.E. Watkins & L.J. Schneider (Eds.), *Research in counseling* (pp. 163–207). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sanders, M.G., & Harvey, A. (2002). Beyond the school walls: A case study of principal leadership for school-community collaboration. *Teachers College Record, 104*(7), 1345–1368.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. New York: Teacher Colleges, Columbia University.
- Sergiovanni, T.J. (2000). *The lifeworld of leadership: Creating culture, community, and personal meaning in our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Shieh, W.H. (2007). The meaning of principal's leadership: Elementary school principals' perspectives. *Journal of National Hualien University of Education, 24*, 45–75. (in Chinese)
- Short, P.M., & Rinehart, J.S. (1999). The relationship of teacher empowerment and principal leadership orientation. *Educational Research Quarterly, 22*(4), 45–51.
- Short, P.M., Greer, J.T., & Melvin, W.M. (1994). Creating empowered schools: Lessons in change. *Journal of Educational Administration, 32*(4), 38–52.
- Simkins, T., Sisum, C., & Memon, M. (2003). School leadership in Pakistan: Exploring the headteacher's role. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 14*(3), 275–291.
- Spillane, J.P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J.P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J.B. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 36*(1), 3–34.
- Stoll, L. (1996). Linking school effectiveness and school improvement: Issues and possibilities. In J. Gray, D. Reynolds, C. Fitz-Gibbon, & D. Jesson (Eds.), *Merging traditions: The future of research on school effectiveness and school improvement* (pp. 51–73). London: Cassell.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (Eds.). (1997). *Grounded theory in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- The World Bank. (2007). *Global education reform*. Retrieved July 21, 2007, from [http://www1.worldbank.org/education/globaleducationreform/06.GovernanceReform/governance\\_ref.htm](http://www1.worldbank.org/education/globaleducationreform/06.GovernanceReform/governance_ref.htm)
- Timperley, H.S. (2005). Distributed leadership: Developing theory from practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 37*(4), 395–420.
- Tsai, C.H. (2004). The analysis of Taiwanese principals' leadership literature in the past 50 years. *Proceedings of the National Science Council (Part C: Humanities and Social Sciences), 14*(6), 96–100. (in Chinese)
- Tsai, C.T. (2005). *Curriculum leadership and school-based curriculum development*. Taipei, Taiwan: Wu-Nan Book. (in Chinese)
- Van der Werf, G., Creemers, B., & Guldmond, H. (2001). Improving parental involvement in primary education in Indonesia: Implementation, effects and costs. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 12*, 447–466.
- Wallace, M. (2002). Modeling distributed leadership and management effectiveness: Primary school senior management teams in England and Wales. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 13*, 163–186.
- Wei, H.C. (2002). *Schools that learn: From concept to practice*. Taipei, Taiwan: Wu-Nan Book. (in Chinese)

- Wong, B.H., & Lin, C.D. (2006). A study of Taiwanese school principals' leadership and school effectiveness in the past 20 years. *Journal of National Hualien University of Education*, 22, 283–306. (in Chinese)
- Wu, J.F. (2006). A study of the application of competing values framework on the relationship between principal's leadership behavior and school organizational effectiveness in elementary schools. *Educational Policy Forum*, 9(3), 155–186. (in Chinese)
- Yeh, L.C. (2007). A comparison of principals' emotionally intelligent leadership competences in elementary and junior high school. *Contemporary Educational Research Quarterly*, 15(1), 39–76. (in Chinese)
- Yin, R.K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yukl, G.A. (1994). *Leadership in organizations* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Copyright of School Effectiveness & School Improvement is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.