

## Adapting to Leadership in Offshore Schools: A Case Study of Sino-Nova Scotian Schools

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### Abstract

A mixed-methods study including 22 Sino-Nova Scotian school principals in China has established that preparation for leadership in that context requires the consideration of many salient factors. While many North American standards of leadership are an important foundation, effective communication within the multidimensional system is of paramount importance. It was also found that, in order to administer a successful program, principals needed to build stronger social support systems for their teachers and further create a community of practice that included cultural sensitivity and understanding.

**Keywords:** leadership; offshore schools; adaptations; culture of schooling

### Introduction

Education in the English language has proliferated in China. Many Canadian provinces (based on their regional curricula) have implemented schools across China that allow for the attainment of Canadian graduation diplomas. This, in turn, offers opportunities for Chinese students to apply to Western universities. For example,

Gregory R. MacKinnon & Tyler MacLean. (2021). Adapting to Leadership in Offshore Schools: A Case Study of Sino-Nova Scotian Schools. *Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 17(1). URL: <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/1057> doi: 10.22230/ijepl.2021v17n1a1057

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Nova Scotia (2021) currently operates 16 Sino-Nova Scotia schools (SNS) that implement the Nova Scotian curriculum at various locations.

These SNS schools (grades 10–12) are often situated within larger schools. Leadership typically falls into three categories of educators from Canada: experienced principals, experienced vice principals or departmental leads, and teachers who have built up experience in China. Initiatives are ongoing to attract principals, but a segment of this conventional cohort is looking for a post-retirement experience to apply their knowledge to a distinctly different cultural and pedagogical context. These principals, along with the agents who staff these schools, regularly recruit teachers from the Western world with a preference for Nova Scotia-trained educators. With the variation in teaching opportunities at home and the generational propensity to travel worldwide, many young teachers seize this opportunity, if only for short-term employment. The Nova Scotia government employs expert evaluators who visit the schools yearly to ensure the curriculum and associated standards are being upheld and that graduation certificates are appropriately awarded to worthy students.

Teaching and learning in China is predictably different than in Canada. The assessment-driven system in China, designed around Gao Kao examinations (Wikipedia, 2021), coupled with traditional transmission-style instruction, presents a decided challenge for educational leaders. In an effort to prepare educators arriving to the position of principal in an SNS school, the action research described herein seeks to identify the factors that impact leadership in SNS schools in China.

The following mixed-methods research study examined and analyzed the experiences of 22 Western-trained principals who have worked or are currently working in schools in China that offer a Nova Scotia curriculum. The research has been designed to identify skills that Canadian principals found useful in the Chinese setting and to highlight challenges that are common and unique to the context. The feedback collected included a focusing interview, an electronic survey, interviews, and a focus group. It is worth noting that this investigation does not attempt to leverage the notion of evidence-based research (Biesta, 2007) in an effort to define the most effective principal preparation but instead to reveal factors of consideration for a principal weighing the option of leading schools in China. While the necessary finessing of a principal's background represents a phenomenon, clearly principals will have decidedly different dispositions and preparation for the transition.

## Literature review

### ***Standards that define the role of principals: Necessary competencies***

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium has defined standards for school leadership (see Table 1). Further, Brent Ruben (2006) has defined the core competencies (see Figure 1) that principals need to be effective leaders. The attainment of these ideals presumably prepares principals for North American contexts, but how might these relate to leadership in SNS schools in China? This research responds to a need to understand how formal and tacit knowledge serves leaders in a distinctly different educational context.

**Table 1. Standards for educational leadership**

Standard	Description
	A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by:
1.	Facilitating the development, articulation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
2.	Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
3.	Ensuring the management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4.	Collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
5.	Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
6.	Understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

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Note: See (Owens & Valesky, 2007)

**Figure 1. Five core competencies of effective principals**

<b>LCS 3.0: Five Major Organizational Leadership Competency Areas, Each Including a Cluster of Competency Themes*</b>				
<b>Disciplinary</b>	<b>Personal</b>	<b>Analytic</b>	<b>Managerial</b>	<b>Communication</b>
Education	Character, Personal Values, and Ethics	Self-Assessment and Self-Reflection	Planning, Vision-Setting, and Strategy Development	Credibility and Trust
Experience	Cognitive Ability and Creativity	Problem-Definition	Finance and Law	Influence and Persuasion
Technical and Specialty Expertise	Enthusiasm	Stakeholder Analysis	Information/Knowledge Management and Boundary Spanning	Interpersonal Relations and Team Building
Knowledge of Field	High Standards	Systems, Organizational, and Situational Analysis	Technological Capability	Listening, Attention, Questioning, and Learning
Knowledge of Organization	Personal Conviction and Persistence	Analysis of Technology to Support Leadership	Collaborative Decision Making and Engagement	Organizational, Social, and Public Media and Messaging
Familiarity with Work	Self-Discipline and Self-Confidence	Problem-Solving	Mentoring and Coaching	Diversity and Intercultural Relations
Professional Development	Role Modeling	Data Analysis and Interpretation	Change, Risk, and Crisis Management	Facilitation, Negotiation, and Conflict Resolution

Note: \* LSC 3.0 © Ruben, B. 2020.

## The increasing demand for English-based schooling in China

The market for international education in China has grown rapidly in the past five years and the trend looks to continue (Leonard, 2019). “Better English, better life” is a popular saying in China; it adorns almost all training school advertisements. English is the international language of business, and Chinese citizens seem to see a value in mastering the English language for this purpose. The increased demand for English language instruction has opened the door for new opportunities that offer far more than language

training. A plethora of offshore schools offer regulated programs that result in an internationally recognized diploma upon graduation (Cosco, 2011; Schuetze, 2008).

The abundance of such international programs combined with the increasing desire of Chinese parents and students seeking to attend an overseas university, make conditions ripe for a successful business model. The Ministry of Education of the Peoples Republic of China (2018) estimates that there are over 1.4 million Chinese students enrolled in foreign universities, which represents the greatest number of international attendees from any country. This necessitates an infrastructure of so-called “prep schools” in China. Ewan Wright and Moosung Lee (2014) identified China as the fastest growing global market for International Baccalaureate schools. C. Textor (2019) cites the existence of 564 international schools in China as of 2017. Seemingly everyone in the education business wants to be a part of the Chinese market; this includes Canadian provinces seeking to promote partnerships and export educational leadership expertise.

### Success as principal in two different contexts

In order to best prepare Chinese students for Western universities, one might argue that students not only need proficiency in English but also a foundational curriculum and a developing sensitivity to cultural difference. To further this ideal, it is clear the role of the leadership in preparatory schools is crucial. Michael Fullan (2014) posits that “When the school is organized to focus on a small number of shared goals, and when professional learning is targeted to those goals and is a collective enterprise, the evidence is overwhelming that teachers can do dramatically better by way of student achievement” (p. 83). Xiaobo Yang and Carol Brayman (2010) suggest that traits that make for an effective principal are strikingly similar between Canadian and Chinese cultures, with prominent skills being organization and a propensity to guide and serve. One notable difference is how a successful principal is typically evaluated. Principals from Western societies are often judged by how their leadership impacts students, while those in China are praised for a successful and smooth-running organization (Yang & Brayman, 2010). As a direct result, in contrast with academic research trends in North America, in China there is little research that links student achievement to school leadership (Walker & Qian, 2015).

When considering the attributes necessary for successful educational leadership in schools, it is worth distinguishing loosely synonymous language in the literature. For instance, the terms *administration*, *leadership*, and *management* are sometimes used interchangeably when, in fact, they have distinct meanings (Bush, 2007, 2008; Devos & Bouckennooghe, 2009; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). “Leadership is essentially the process of building and maintaining a sense of vision, culture and interpersonal relationships, whereas management is the coordination, support and monitoring of organizational activities” (Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001, p. 29). Administration is focused on the day-to-day operation of schools and school systems and includes a wide range of tasks, such as scheduling, budgeting, and ensuring compliance with rules, regulations, and policies (Devos & Bouckennooghe, 2009). As the research herein will demonstrate, these distinctive roles have certain synergies that are played out to varied extents in North American versus Chinese school contexts.

## Adapting to China

It would not be surprising for an educator travelling to a new country to provide leadership in a school, to experience an adjustment period, as they become sensitized to the community and school norms, becoming what Kenneth Cushner and Jennifer Mahon (2002) call more “effective cultural mediators” (p. 54). The work of Milton Bennett (1993) suggests that visitors go through stages beginning with an “ethnocentric stance,” which includes a continuum of denial-defense-minimization; they move from an inability to see cultural difference to a feeling of being threatened by difference to a belief that all cultures are the same. With time, educators may progress to an ethnorelative stance, which includes a continuum of acceptance-adaptation-integration.

As leaders in the Chinese schools, principals must not only contend with their own culture shock, they must also be available to assist their staff as they deal with the pressures of taking up residence in an unfamiliar society.

## Fundamental differences in schools and schooling

Nova Scotian schools in China are considered offshore schools, meaning they operate within the rules and boundaries of a larger Chinese school. This embeds possible conflict between visiting and home cultures. Most Canadian curricula are rooted in the ideas of democracy, sustainability, and critical thinking (Schuetze, 2008), while China’s goals are traditionalist, socialist, and patriarchal in nature (Bush & Qiang, 2002).

Pedagogical values appear to be different. Hans Schuetze (2008) highlights that Western pedagogy is often student centred and project based, while the Chinese system is assessment driven and is designed with the ultimate purpose of preparing students for the all-consuming National College Entrance examination. This exam, which the Chinese call the Gao Kao, is taken at the end of the twelfth grade and is the sole determinant of what educational opportunities each student will have. It is somewhat predictable that Western pedagogy would be met with skepticism by the teachers in the greater school as well as Chinese stakeholders in the system.

## Facile communication as a barrier

Ross Thorburn (2016) cites that school-based communication between Western and Chinese staff can be difficult and the language barrier can be a significant issue in smooth operation of a school. Schuetze (2008) notes that the nebulous nature of Chinese regulations and a confusing hierarchy of control can make the principal’s navigation of the new school system difficult. According to Lia Cosco (2011), communication with private agents and owners can be particularly trying in some instances because of the distance and their lack of direct involvement in the school.

Common sense seems to dictate that the Chinese student’s command of the English language may pose challenges (Cosco, 2011). Schuetze (2008) explains that offshore schools may be seen as a way to escape the more competitive Chinese system. In some situations, as long as students pay the associated fees, they will be accepted into the program despite poor English foundations. This false promise can put students at a major disadvantage with little likely potential to graduate or achieve success in their tertiary education (Cosco, 2011).

## Staffing the school

Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers is a recurring problem noted in the literature (Cosco, 2011; Sadler, 2018; Schuetze, 2008). Licensed teachers with the required qualifications seem to be in short supply at times. Cosco (2011) cited isolation and a perceived lack of long-term job prospects as reasons that retaining teachers can be a challenge. Lily Cai and Christine Hall (2016) note the lack of induction practices for new employees in international contexts, something also highlighted in the seminal work of Linda Darling-Hammond (2012). Sadler (2018) and Schuetze (2008) posit a lack of teacher professional development opportunities as rationale for visiting teachers returning prematurely to their home countries.

## Philosophical underpinnings of the research

This action research (Sagor & Williams, 2017) is nested in a framework of pragmatism, the notion of reflecting on practice to inform future professional behaviours (John Creswell, 2014). The researchers seek to explore the challenges of a select group of adapting principals with the aim of discovering and sharing insights that may aid others who encounter analogous contexts (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

Although pragmatic knowledge generates strategies for problem solving, it does not provide recipes for educational improvement because a) each educational situation or context is unique; b) people often act in unpredictable ways; and c) education is a dynamic, interactive process in which novel problems emerge over time. (Williams, 2018, p. 21; see also Biesta & Burbules, 2003)

This study includes quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and focus groups. Pragmatism is often associated with mixed methods because both share a common focus on problems in practice and the understanding that there is not one consistent means of approaching truths about the world (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Williams, 2018). While surveys are accessed for defining trends in the feedback, the work is decidedly rooted in a naturalistic framework of interpreting multiple indicators in an effort to make context-specific generalizations based on a thick description of the setting.

## Research lens

A naturalistic approach to researching specific educational settings presumes a few important notions: the reader can understand the context of the study, a certain verisimilitude improves generalizability, and the lens of the researchers is clearly defined, so the interpretative baseline is transparent and understandable (predictable). An action research initiative's worth is arguably improved if the reader "sees themselves" in not just a recognizable setting but also in the approach to analysis. It is duly recognized that everyone subconsciously sees the world with a complex blend of biases that emanate not only from their experience but also from their personality—their own interpretive lens.

One researcher is a Canadian-born professor of education who has been coordinating a four-month practicum placement of teacher interns in China since 2002. The researcher has taught and supervised over 150 student teachers in private and



public schools in various locations in China, including Shanghai, Zhongshan, Suzhou, and Chongqing.

A second researcher, originally from Canada, has been teaching in northwest China for six years after completing a bachelor of education practicum placement for four months in Shanghai schools. In the interim period, this researcher has completed master of education degrees in curriculum and in leadership. At the current post, his teaching responsibilities are predominantly social studies at the secondary public-school level.

Both researchers were prepared as educators in Canada and would situate themselves in a philosophical framework that includes constructivist pedagogy, child-centred learning, inclusive education, authentic assessment, technology-empowered learning, and literacy across the curriculum. The personalities of each researcher could be characterized as organized in work, and sensitive and open-minded in predisposition.

## The nature of the sample

### *The work of the principal*

In order to understand how principals leverage their own experiences to adapt to leadership roles in China, it is useful to establish a baseline, to characterize a typical Nova Scotia principal and the work they do.

The recent work of Monica Williams (2018) has been instrumental in defining the typical educational leader in the Nova Scotia context. In her work, she gathered feedback from a sample of 316 principals (51% female) who were surveyed to ascertain the nature of their leadership. The sample was asked to select the top five activities that consumed most of their time from a menu of options that included an open category of “other.” The top ten most frequently chosen activities for each group are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. How do Nova Scotia principals spend their time?**

Activity	Percentage (%) of principals
Completing office work	84
Problem solving, managing conflicts, and crises	74
Interacting with students, staff, and parents	66
Attending/chairing meetings	43
Ensuring safety and security	43
Managing human, financial, and technical resources	42
Fostering positive learning environments	39
Focusing on student learning and achievement	33
Advancing student inclusion and well-being, including mental health	33
Supporting quality teaching	18
Leading policy development and/or implementation	Nil
Communication and partnerships	Nil
Implementing public-school programs	Nil

Finally, the work of Gregory MacKinnon, David Young, Sophie Paish, and Sue LeBel (2019) suggests that Nova Scotia principals seek more professional development in the affective leadership skills.

Systemic and school environment trends have dictated that educational leaders need a skill set that positions them to respond more aptly to issues of poverty, socioemotional health, and mental health while attending to improved community building both within the school and in the greater public. (p. 1)

### **Methodology for sampling the adaptation of Nova Scotia principals**

With a goal of improving principal preparation for offering school leadership in China, this work is arguably situated in an action research framework. The research aims to understand the factors that might be considered in taking on such leadership rather than defining the optimal preparation. Rodney Beaulieu (2013) captures the nuance of this interpretivist stance.

The main goals of action research are to invoke the voices of stakeholders to inform the next action steps in the research, when these steps aim to improve their quality of life. Unlike other forms of interpretive research, action research is about seeking perspectives that are defined by the stakeholders, not by principal researchers, and it can involve exposing truths that are not guided by the myths of objectivity. For action researchers, seeking a singular truth or perspective is not necessarily a desirable goal. Instead, capturing the various stakeholders' perspectives can expose a broader view of the conditions that exist in a setting and offers opportunities for developing strategies that accommodate those different views. (p. 30)

### **Survey design**

The investigation unearths the lived experience of working school principals in China (Van Manen, 1990) using mixed methods. While the researchers both have extensive experience as educators in China, neither one was a school principal. To begin to understand that context, an exploratory interview was conducted with a principal who had experience in three independent SNS school settings. Based on identified categories in the conversation transcript, an electronic survey was developed to sample possible trends in the experiences of 22 principals. The survey was designed in a specific way to gather demographic information about the principal's background and the nature of the school they oversaw. Further, the survey posed a series of statements based on the exploratory interview with a request that respondents select an item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. This allowed for the calculation of mean value responses, however, as a non-continuous variable; consequently, these only served to suggest trends and were not addressed as statistical items. Finally, the survey posed ranking questions to sample the relative importance of professional preparation factors. Survey items were piloted for language ambiguity with five teachers unconnected to the research.



The issue of a random or careless responder (i.e., a participant responding without regard to item content) (Beach, 1989) and acquiescence response bias (e.g., the favouring of one side of the Likert scale) was mitigated by the addition of *reverse-keyed* questions (Kam & Meyer, 2015). If three of the reverse-keyed questions were inconsistent, the survey was removed from the sample. In the empirical materials, this did not result in surveys being eliminated from the data set.

### Interviews and focus group

Based on the survey trends, a standardized open-ended interview schedule (Patton, 2002) was developed (see Appendix 1). Interview questions were piloted for ambiguity with five teachers unconnected to the research. The survey sample ( $N = 22$ ) was invited to participate in independent interviews. A convenience sample of the first ten respondents was established for interviews 50–70 minutes in length. Using the Zoom® software, individual interviews were conducted online and audio recorded. Transcripts of the interviews were coded in an iterative inductive process (Creswell, 2009; Thomas, 2006) of theme generation, coalescing categories, and the re-examination of themes for inclusiveness (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Two researchers coded transcripts independently and negotiated a series of findings statements through a peer debriefing process (Guba, 1981; Richards & Hemphill, 2018) that included a review of initial survey results. The interview sample ( $N = 10$ ) was invited to participate in a member check (Guba, 1981) in order to both corroborate findings and dispel outlier data (non-consensus opinions). A convenience sample of the first five invitation respondents was scheduled to meet in a Zoom® focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The audio-recorded session (which was approximately 90 minutes) was transcribed to glean representative quotes in an effort to further triangulate the empirical findings. The accumulated results are hereafter discussed using a thematic analysis, drawing on the composite feedback to identify factors worthy of consideration as principals consider undertaking leadership in a comparable educational system.

## Results

### A profile of the sample of principals

It was useful to collect demographic data from the survey to characterize the sample ( $N = 22$ ). Results showed that 80 percent of principals were 50 years of age or over, the declared gender distribution was 27 percent female and 73 percent male. Of the entire group, 60 percent were principals in only one SNS school, 30 percent were principals in two SNS schools, and only 10 percent had been principals in more than two SNS schools. Table 3 shows how long each participant had served as principal at their current SNS school.

**Table 3. Experience as principal in the current SNS school**

Period of tenure at SNS school	Number of principals	Percentage (%) of principals
0–12 months	6	27%
13–24 months	4	18%
25–36 months	6	27%
37–48 months	1	5%
greater than 4 years	5	23%

Almost half the sample were short-term principals (up to two years), a potential predictor that the style of leadership would likely invoke less long-term planning and more management of the status quo. Nearly 60 percent had been a principal in Canada for more than five years; 30 percent had been a principal in Canada for only one year. This suggests that these positions could be populated based on a range of personal agendas, from willingness/interest in travelling through to interest in a pre-retirement challenge.

The principalship at SNS schools in China is over a school system of grades 10, 11, and 12. The sample consisted of approximately 10 percent former elementary school principals, 30 percent former middle school principals, 30 percent former secondary school principals, and 30 percent first-time principals. Under inspection, the final group consisted of educators that fell into several categories, namely former vice principals, former department heads, or certified teachers with or without significant experience. In the overall sample, over 85 percent had master's or doctoral degrees.

Over 75 percent of the larger schools in which the SNS school was situated had more than 1,000 students. Almost 70 percent of the SNS schools in the sample had 10 or more teachers, and more than 75 percent of the SNS schools had one-third or greater teacher representation by Chinese citizens. Almost 80 percent of the non-Chinese teachers in the SNS schools received their teacher certification in Canada. Approximately 30 percent of the SNS schools had less than 100 students, nearly 15 percent had more than 400 students, and the remainder fell between these limits. Over 85 percent of the SNS schools had greater than 50 percent female students. Almost 70 percent of the SNS schools were situated in northern or eastern China, and over 90 percent were located in urban areas with populations greater than 10,000 people.

When participants ( $N = 22$ ) were asked to rank the most important skills for an incoming SNS school principal, they chose the following three categories: communication skills (larger school principal, school agent, and teachers), organizational skills, and instructional leadership skills. They ranked budgeting for the SNS school the lowest. It was interesting that communication was ranked highly; this result is analogous to the Nova Scotia principals ( $N = 316$ ) sampled by Williams (2018), albeit in a different context both geographically and culturally.

The survey, interview, and focus group feedback was reviewed in an iterative fashion that culminated in the establishment of thematic areas. Survey design and the subsequent open coding of interview and focus group transcripts was informed by a preliminary interview with an experienced principal. Axial coding followed, where categories were constantly enlarged and collapsed; a reorganization to adequately cover a range of subcategories. This iterative approach generated themes including space sharing, operating regulations, efficiency in operations, differences in pedagogy, attracting principals to China, attracting and retaining teachers for China, teacher professional development, quality interviewing of prospective teachers, teacher incentives and accommodations, student English proficiency, the role of agents, curriculum scrutiny, and parental expectations. The discussion that follows combines the results to make confident assertions about the experience of principals.

## Sharing space with the larger school has its challenges

The larger host school in which the SNS school resided would necessarily have its own administrative structure, including regional education officers and principals. These people would wield authority over the use of space and the operational timetable. Given that their ultimate responsibility was to promote the seamless functioning of the larger school, it is predictable that they may have lesser concern for the day-to-day operation of the SNS school. This could result in a lack of alignment of school agendas, emphasizing one important rationale for facile communication. In the survey, approximately 62 percent of respondents were either neutral or in agreement that the principal of the host school had considerable control over the day-to-day operation of the SNS school. It is important to note that in all facets of this research that are linked to relationships, the uniqueness of each school context is bound to be reflected in the responses of the participants. SNS principals found it challenging to have schedules changed by the larger school administration at a moment's notice. The following representative quotes drawn from participant feedback speak to the complexity of the inter-school relationship. (Excerpts from interview transcripts are indexed by I#, whereas quotes from the focus group bear the code F#. The number labels the person contributing.)

That's one of the things we actually do tell our teachers in the introduction letters for new staff coming, that there is some unpredictability and make-up days that can come at the last minute so staff know to expect these kind of things. (I1)

Even in the simplest things, like trying to find out what the school's timetable is going to be for a year, it seemed like no matter what question you asked ... there were layers and layers and layers of administration to get through who all had to sign off on whatever it was, and then you would finally get an answer. You would do a week or two of detailed work and get everything set up and then you would be notified that several holidays have been arbitrarily or instantly changed. (I7)

The main school would get priority, you would have to wait several weeks in advance and they wouldn't let you in to set up your own labs. (I4)

It's a pretty easy thing in our school that if the Sino Canadian program books the presentation room for something it can easily be usurped by an outfit from the main school. (I1)

Due to the proximity of the schools, it was unavoidable that the host-school teachers and students would be aware and curious of the operations of the SNS school. Approximately 71 percent of survey respondents were either neutral or disagreed with the statement that Chinese SNS teachers were well supported by host-school teachers. This sample of principals sensed a palpable animosity because the SNS schools tend to run smaller classes over a shorter day, offering SNS students more freedom within the instructional process. Interview and focus group excerpts support this assertion.

When they had that terrible bus crash in Saskatchewan and all those Jr. A hockey players were injured and killed, there was a big thing in Canada, people were putting hockey sticks out on their front porch as a tribute. One of our teachers, an Ontario guy, big hockey fan, did a little project with the kids and they all made cardboard hockey sticks and put them outside the front doors of the classrooms and it was all good and meaningful. The following morning, we get to school and it had all been cleaned up and ... put away. I asked about that and the rules were that we couldn't have decorations like that out for more than one day. They would tolerate it for one day and then [it was] gone. (I3)

Kids would be doing some group work outside or exploratories, and they would be told, "Oh no you can't do that because the other students can see that and they don't do that in the main school so you better not do that there." (I1)

Obviously, there is going to be pre-existing tension. All international programs are quite small in comparison to the regular high schools; therefore, we are going to be in a fishbowl and will be subjected to a higher level of criticism and analysis. (I6)

Eyes were watching us very carefully; we were often told to tone things down. (F1)

When having a Halloween party, we had to be extremely discrete about operating those events because I didn't want to antagonize or sort of be boastful about the activities we can do in our situation, so a very careful balancing act between cultivating relationships with [the] larger school and maintain independence as a Canadian program—that sort of tension did exist. (F2)

I think, too, that is something with the newer policies from the Chinese government: there was absolute limit on Western celebrations. (F3)

### **Operating the school: Regulations and red tape**

Principals sometimes found it difficult to access materials and make administrative changes because of red tape and regulations. While over 80 percent of the survey sample were either neutral or in agreement that sufficient funds were available for running the school, a nearly equal number (76%) suggested that protocols for accessing money for school operations were cumbersome. Ultimately, 76 percent also recommended that there were sufficient resources to support the curriculum. Transcript excerpts from interviews and the focus group helped to contextualize the survey results.

It is kind of interesting because there are some things that are very slow to go through and there are things that a normal principal in a Canadian school would just be able to decide on their own, and

that is the frustrating part, and the teachers don't necessarily see that, and they feel frustrated with me. (I4)

Because of the way all of the international programs are structured, they all come from different municipalities and provinces [in China], so they all have their own educational guidelines to follow, so it is virtually impossible for the department [Nova Scotia Department of Education] to establish a universal set of guidelines for everyone. (I6)

China post disrupt deliveries of materials [such as curriculum resources]. (F1)

Changes and period latency is to be expected [in China]. (F4)

It remains that 81 percent of the survey participants suggested that a lack of clarity in Chinese regulations made the job of principal more difficult. The issue of communications had far-reaching implications, as will be discussed further below.

### **Efficiency in operations**

Principals claimed that in negotiating with agents or the host-school administration, they were rarely denied their requests regarding daily operations, but the Chinese hierarchy had a way of putting them off: skirting issues, being vague, and often avoiding promises. Operationally, the time-lag associated with day-to-day decision-making was quite different from the North American experience, where principals make multiple decisions daily without the need to consult anyone. Participants captured this inefficiency in their comments below. Nearly 95 percent of the survey participants were either neutral or agreed that it was important to leverage their relationship with the host-school principal to foster SNS school improvements. Power structures are evident in these representative quotes.

We didn't feel any tension but we wondered why our recruitment went down for three consecutive years and when we asked, we didn't get a straight answer. (I3)

In a Chinese system they don't say no to you. They will take you around in constant circles until you give up. (I8)

They will find a different way of telling you no. We would go into the meeting with the director and we would have everything planned. We would walk into his office, then we would walk out of his office, and we would be about 10 steps down the hall and I would say, "that is not going to happen." We learned to read the situation. You really have to listen. (I8)

In both schools, I was lucky enough to have directors with a lot of power. They were in favour of the program; we asked, we got. (F1)

I would definitely characterize those situations as meeting a lot of resistance; [it's] more of a logistical thing to get these things accom-

plished. Vague and ambivalent answers, but sometimes it doesn't come to fruition. (F2)

[Support was] highly dependent on whether you had someone with a lot of degree and depth and responsibility for international education. The key issue was always how supportive are these people in the power positions of the program? Power people caught between [the] parent community who wanted it, but they themselves ideologically, philosophically really were not that warm to it. My central issue is around the cultural context in which these kinds of programs play out. (F4)

### **Differences in pedagogy cause tensions**

Principals found that the Chinese in general were skeptical about student-centred learning, especially as it related to more student autonomy and the value of extra-curriculars in child development. The Chinese were preoccupied with the Gao Kao (high-stakes standardized examination), and it sometimes caused tensions between schoolteachers, students, and parents. Over 90 percent of the survey sample were either neutral or agreed that there were significant tensions between public and private school approaches to education. Similarly, over 90 percent were neutral or agreed that the educational expectations were different in the two contexts. Interviews and a focus group helped to deconstruct this trend. Being scrutinized for pedagogical choices, however subtly, put pressure on the principal. The detection of this tension corroborates the findings of Schuetze (2008) and is evident here.

There are very different perspectives on what education should look like, and you do have to compromise because you are not in charge there. (I4)

There are a lot of attempts to reign us in or bring us under control for doing things that would be normal in an NS school. Things like taking the kids outside for a lesson in biology, they would see as a waste of time because they are not sitting at a desk. "That is not real learning, we're out of control." (I4)

You have two educational systems. One is based on the Gao Kao (National Entrance Exam), which is a cumulative test of all they learn in high school. It is one all-inclusive test that will determine what university you will get into. The educational philosophy in the West, and particularly [in] NS, is not structured in that way. Also, with respect to classroom dynamics, like presentations or having the kids up at the board, what the Chinese observe in our classrooms would be very different than the dynamics in their own classrooms. (I6)

They misunderstood the pedagogy because it was so different; [therefore there is a] built-in skepticism. (F1)

The teachers with more exposure to a Western philosophy of student-centred, independent learning in the Canadian system were more accommodating when it came to understanding how you op-



erate and manage the instructional time; others in the school focused on Gao Kao. (F2)

Within the larger context, the focus on math and science and rote learning, these were the reigning gods. (F4)

Principals reminded us frequently that they needed to help new teachers understand the tendency for the Chinese to teach to the test, and how this predisposition may affect how they should interact with new students steeped in such a system. The difference in teaching styles is revealed in quotes.

I said to my teachers as soon as I got there and had been there for about two weeks, we have to teach the Canadian curriculum. I got that, but we have to teach a hidden curriculum to our kids and to their parents because they need to understand that everything is so radically different, like risk-taking is important and being wrong is okay, asking for help is a good idea, and that engineering and medicine are not the only jobs that are valuable. (I7)

It means learning for Western teachers, as they have not seen such a system before; learning all around, as the Chinese seek to understand our approach and we adjust to theirs. (F4).

### **Attracting principals to lead SNS schools**

The most common backgrounds of leaders in SNS schools were found to be teachers, vice principals, or principals from Nova Scotia. New SNS principals, therefore, arrived with different school backgrounds on which to build. Some found it more challenging than others. In surveys, they predominantly highlighted the importance of effective communication with the Chinese, strong instructional leadership, and refined organizational skills. In the focus group, it became clear that the Chinese expect someone to manage the school efficiently, but credentials and practical experience with their system were also held as important prerequisites. It appears as though the Chinese increasingly are showing preference for a principal who started as a teacher in the Chinese system and has gained experience and understanding of the Chinese ways and protocols in education. Principals had a good sense of what was preferred, as evidenced in these quotes.

There is a level of understanding and awareness of how these programs function in China. I think that program operators actually feel quite confident with teachers who have master's degrees and a significant amount of experience in China itself. (I6)

I was talking to a company a few weeks ago and they seem to have a lot of uptake with teachers in their company because they are having trouble attracting principals now; so they are hiring in-house rather than recruiting principals from other countries. (I9)

The Chinese admin looks for you to put out fires; they want people who can diffuse situations. (F1)

Having an understanding of Chinese culture and saving face are really important. (F3)

They have a deep respect for the competence and ability of administrators that come over; [they] have an appreciation of someone who has deep understanding of cultural complexities; they have respect for credentials but trust experience as a foundation. (F2)

## **Attracting teachers**

The task for principals to populate their school with qualified teachers was ongoing and sometimes complicated by the involvement of agents and Nova Scotia Department of Education (DOE) officials. Principals were often informed of limits of teacher hires in categories outside of White Caucasian males from North America or the U.K. There was also public pressure to offer a Nova Scotia school package that included Nova Scotia teachers (presumed to be Caucasian with no strong accents):

I got flooded with Filipino folks who were super qualified and they were ready to roll, but in our school, there was a quota on how many teachers can be from the Philippines, there is a quota on how many teachers of colour we can have. (I1)

They had very high expectations, but they think you have to be a White male to educate their son in physics or chemistry. They can be prejudice[d]. (I5)

They expected Caucasians, but not necessarily males. (F2)

Principals talked about the uncomfortable position of filling teaching needs in the school with teachers at the last minute. These teachers may only have bachelor's degrees in core areas outside of education, a trend duly noted by Pauline Leonard (2019).

NS really frowned upon not having NS teachers or Canadian teachers in the classrooms, but it was almost impossible. One of the guys was telling me he had six teachers on staff, and he didn't have one Canadian and he was an American himself! (I3)

Funny story here: when we first went in 2009, they couldn't get a geography teacher. I went over with my husband who had a business degree but was not a teacher. They asked if he would fill in, so he did. All of the qualities that make him an absolutely wonderful father served to make him an absolutely wonderful teacher. He stayed as a geography teacher for four years, and they would have kept us longer. ... [The] Department of Education just said you have to have an NS teacher and that was it. (I8)

Classes could be covered by non-teachers until teachers arrived; delays were frequent. (F1)

There was more pressure from the Nova Scotia government to have qualified teachers than [from the] Chinese. (F5)

There was pressure from the Nova Scotia government to uphold credentials. (F3)

Principals who may have been involved in recruiting found China to be unappealing to young teachers at times. While the world is arguably smaller, with young people rarely hesitating to travel abroad, a balance of improving opportunities at home, international politics, and safety have beginning teachers reconsidering international careers (Leonard, 2019). Many principals communicated a need to be honest about the employment responsibilities and the nature of living in a new culture. In this way, teachers were conditioned upon arrival and were more likely to stay beyond the first few weeks. Inevitably, some new hires simply had no resilience to the monumental changes and left immediately, posing a new challenge for the principal about to mount a new programmatic year.

He's [the superintendent] gone to job fairs and sets up a little booth and nobody comes to talk about coming to China. There is nobody interested, so it's a problem. It's a huge problem, and I think it is about to get worse. (I1)

I think the biggest hurdle is what people hear about China. I think the salaries are good and generally the accommodations are passable. A lot of teachers struggle with what they see in the media in Canada about China. (I4)

The increased number of jobs in Canada has shifted recruiting. [There are] not too many young teachers [but rather] more experienced teachers and teachers already in China. (F1)

In 2019, it became apparent that Canada-China relations had a direct effect on recruitment. (F2)

## **Retaining teachers**

The survey indicated that over 90 percent of principals were either neutral or felt that it was difficult to retain teachers. The factor most directly related to retention was the support of incoming teachers. The survey group overwhelmingly recommended (95%) that incoming staff required significant support. In qualitative feedback, principals often recounted a highly social supportive role with new teachers, well beyond a typical professional principal-teacher relationship common in Canada. Principals found that supporting young teachers when they first arrived and continuing to socialize with them to some extent helped with their adjustment to the Chinese context. The adventure of teaching in a foreign country predictably wanes after the realities of the employment post have set in and the distance from home becomes evident. These lifestyle changes can weigh heavily on new teachers. Contracts in SNS schools are for often one to two years, and many teachers leave after that. For principals, this impacts long-term planning, and in this context their skills at hiring quality people come into focus. Creating a cohesive faculty community both around unity of purpose and being socially linked to teachers (to mitigate feelings of isolation) were voiced as big responsibilities of the principal. This was, of

course, also situated in the responsibility and organizational skills of mounting a quality program under the scrutiny of the Nova Scotia DOE.

My feeling is you try to stay in close contact with all your teachers all the time. Keep asking them how they are doing. Keep asking if there is anything that they need, or if there are any problems, how can I help you out with it? You have to be available to the staff and develop the rapport where they know if they need you, they can count on you. (I1)

I would take them around and show them how to get on the subway, download the app so they could get a share bike, or take them out on the weekend if they are lonely and show them the parts of town with the good restaurants where the expats hang out and whatnot. (I3)

We had a very social atmosphere; my wife and I were like guardians to them [teachers]. We had potluck dinners and played games on the weekend together, and they would go out at night, of course, to the bars and the pubs. We would go to dinner with them. We mostly kept busy. We only lost one. It was my first year, first week. I didn't lose anyone else after that. (I5)

I made it [creating a welcoming community] a priority with my new hires because I knew how easy it was to get a huge amount of culture shock and get on the next plane home. (F5)

We played many roles, we provided professional support, we also provided parental support in a sense; I think it is important to sustain the commitment. (F4)

You need to eliminate as much external stress and anxiety from every teacher as much as possible so they can just focus on being a teacher. It isn't just necessarily from the principal's perspective, it is also whether the school can support [them]. When I heard of teachers leaving it wasn't because the principal wasn't supportive enough, it usually had to do with the schools themselves, the inability to manage the expectations of teachers. (F2)

### **Professional development as a perk to maintain teacher cohorts, or necessary?**

It has been shown (Cai & Hall, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2012) that for teachers new to the profession, the lack of a mentored induction period is detrimental to building self-esteem and efficacy. This is particularly the case when teachers are adapting not just to the responsibilities of the profession but also to a different social and pedagogical framework (MacKinnon, 2020). In these instances, it is not only important for principals to provide opportunities for professional growth but to enculture a learning community within the teaching faculty (Little & Horn, 2007; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Some principals were able to access onsite expertise to offer professional development opportunities, but their own instructional leadership was im-

portant—especially at the outset. The survey confirmed the need for professional development: 95 percent of principals said it did not exist and interviews suggested it was neither a priority of the SNS school or the province, so principals had to take the initiative.

You are very much on your own and you can tap into the resources of the staff that you have [the school rarely provides professional development resources]. (I1)

It was all put on by staff, administration, and teachers. Basically, the science teacher would put something on about doing video labs online, and we would always share resources as best as we could. (I5)

[You] have to depend on the skills of the staff that you have. (F5)

I try to apply my own experience as a teacher to this new context and assess what my teachers are going to need up front to cope, you know the Maslow survival continuum. They need instructional tips up front, it just isn't the same for new teachers who must first deal with the language barrier before they even address subject content. (Preliminary focus interview)

## **Realistic interviews**

The sample suggested that good interviews were important to attract teachers, but agent involvement complicated issues because of a difference in end purpose. Principals were particularly tuned to the flexibility of candidates—their ability to adapt to change and get past what Bennett (1993) calls the ethnocentric stance.

In the recent years it has been very difficult to get NS-qualified teachers. That requires you to address an applicant and evaluate a résumé far deeper than just looking at their educational experience. Most importantly, there is a greater necessity for a thorough interview and how you approach an interview. (I6)

A lot of pressure from the agent ... lots of latitude [in hiring], but importantly [an emphasis on] how the young teacher would adapt. (F1)

## **Travel, student loans, adventure, and contract incentives**

Principals noted that it was evident that beginning teachers were interested in adventure and travel, but that financial incentives were important as they had student loans to pay. They suggested that a large segment of teachers were only interested in a one- or two-year plan, which made it difficult for principals to make long-term school development plans.

In my opinion they are lured by the excitement of travel. Also, many young teachers come to China to pay off their bills, so it's about money. (I1)

Money, work, and culture/travel. Those are the reasons. (I5)

If the financial reward was greater than it was in Canada, you could live like a king over there. If a student could look and say, I can pay off

all my student loans within two years—here, it takes nine and a half years to pay it off. That is one area, probably the biggest one too. (I2)

Financial incentives [are] important. (F1)

With respect to school development plans, a two- to three-year plan was the best you could do and roll with the punches. (F4)

### **Poor accommodations impact tenure longevity**

Some principals suggested that teachers and principals were distracted from the work and the cultural experience due to poor accommodation arrangements. As a principal, it would add significant stress to bring teachers to your school from afar and not be able to reliably offer safe and comfortable living conditions. By many accounts, this became a prerequisite.

It was a constant fight for appropriate accommodation. Things like painting the walls and washing the curtains. I created a list and told them every apartment needs to have these things in it before a staff member comes. The first apartment they showed us, I was on my way out and going right to the airport. (I8)

Beijing was quite expensive and teachers and hired administrators often needed to supplement their housing allowance to get something decent. (F2)

I spent a fair amount of my time making sure the accommodations were okay, even electricity rates, it took an inordinate amount of time. (F4)

I lost a teacher, she said it had nothing to do with classroom stuff. [She said], “I can’t handle living in China with all these obstacles.” A level of security and comfort is a prerequisite for retaining educators. (F2)

### **Students arriving with poor English proficiency**

One hundred percent of the survey participants reported (neutral or agree) that students were highly motivated, yet over 85 percent contended that students had poor entry English skills. Some principals wanted more involvement in student interviews because poor English proficiency was a considerable barrier to success for incoming Chinese children, which aligns with the findings of past research (Cosco, 2011). With only agent involvement in interviews, children were sometimes admitted based on an “ability to pay.” Further, there was evidence that if children were unsuccessful after admittance, there was pressure from the agents to keep them at the school—sometimes by supplementing their education with additional support—even if their predicted success was unlikely. Although pre-testing was the protocol on paper, principals relayed the fact that this process was not always followed.

We had a good entrance process that mattered ... but at another [school], they had a test but the placement of students was highly political. (F1)



We found out where students were and moved them forward. It was sometimes muddy. It was important to let it be known what spells success; the political pressures, the economic pressures, those are realities, you have to choose how much time you are going to spend on that. (F4)

Some of these students come from people of power, so you are sometimes pushing a rock uphill. (F1)

You have to negotiate that balance between the pressures, the agency, the school, knowing full well that if you put children with limited proficiency [in class], you are putting your teachers in a problematic situation [as they are] actually trying to deliver the curriculum. (F2)

I coached my teachers [that] for Grade 10 you must become an ESL teacher [Grade 10 is the entrance grade in the SNS school when English levels are predictably poorest]. (F5)

### **Agents have a different goal**

Agents are an essential part of any offshore program and act as a program operator or owner. In SNS schools, they often have close political connections in both Nova Scotia and China that allow them to operate the program with greater ease. Agents usually have a business background, and they invest their time and money in the schools with the expectation of reasonable profit (Schuetze, 2008).

For agents in the business of selling English language teaching, the budget and margins are at the forefront, and this translates to schools applying pressure on the principal. For instance, it was sometimes difficult to get additional resources. Principals found that requests for teaching materials had to be justified.

Because agents feel compelled to follow through on the delivery of a product, in a shortage situation they may take on unqualified teachers. This puts considerable pressure on the principal to deliver a quality program while under the scrutiny of the diploma-granting agency (i.e., the Nova Scotia DOE).

Some principals felt that agents sometimes oversold the virtues of the employment position to potential teachers. This occasionally resulted in teachers arriving in China, realizing everything was not as advertised, and leaving early. One principal said, “Being honest and frank and forthright about the context served us better in the long run” (F4).

Principals suggested that agents sometimes promised parents unreasonable results and opportunities just to secure money from them.

It's a huge business for them. My school is the best, they are lauding that. (F5)

There are multiple people playing multiple games; the trick is to figure out whose interests are being served here and for what purpose. (F4)

### **Curriculum is scrutinized**

Principals felt compelled to promote an inclusive environment and child-centred learning, as per Nova Scotia standards. The host school voiced skepticism at many

levels about the SNS school and its pedagogical foundations. Most principals sensed a subtle attitudinal critique of what they were trying to accomplish in their section of the larger school.

Principals of SNS schools felt that evaluations and support from the Nova Scotia DOE were sometimes inconsistent but nonetheless reasonable. Further, they were not intimidated by the process and fully understood and agreed with the intent of quality control.

The Chinese system was sensitive to the aspects of the curriculum presented to students. In the survey, over 85 percent of participants were either neutral or in agreement with the statement that the Chinese were sensitive to the curriculum taught in the SNS school. Principals reported Chinese officials removing pages from assigned texts, particularly in regards to the so-called “3Ts” (Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen). One might contend that the removal of contentious issues was counter to teaching children critical thought. Principals, however, largely ignored this issue and simply followed the rules as a visitor to the country.

[We were] certainly made aware early on that there were certain things you didn't talk about and shared that with new teachers. (F2)

When texts arrived at schools, sections on Tiananmen square were missing. (F2)

### **Parents want higher grades—unrealistic expectations**

The high-stakes nature of the Chinese system made parents much more aggressive in arguing the measure of their child's performance. Visitors to the education system have often jokingly called the child a “retirement plan” for parents. This attitude, of course, exerts tremendous pressure on the child to perform well—and also on the school to make sure that happens. Principals were aware of parental affluence and their power to sway school decisions, Guan Xi (political cachet) with school officials was subtle but present in aspects of the system. As alluded to earlier, the system would allow poorly prepared students to enter and continue. As a result, the principal had to contend with the unrealistic potential of students and communicate with their parents.

The research cohort recommended that it was very important to be direct with parents about the rationale for decisions around grades and to assure them that the school was trying to create educational opportunity for their child. Parents were typically not at all interested in SNS schools providing extracurricular activities for their children, as these would have no bearing on high-stakes testing.

Principals recommended that it was crucial to communicate with parents in a calm, rational, and empathetic way, as that would resonate with the Chinese approach.

They will keep asking for things until you give in. (F3)

The parents saw the relationship with you, the principal, as a part of the investment in the child's future. They see value in a positive working relationship with the principal. (F4)

[In] all my parent-teacher meetings, I found that the parents liked this [collaborative] approach. (F2)

Being honest with parents [was] very different from a regular parent-teacher evening [in China], where the teacher admonishes the parent for a poorly prepared child ... parents say they are happy with this approach and approve of what you are trying to accomplish. (F2)

The school didn't need extracurriculars as the Chinese students and parents were focused on getting the best education and opportunity. (F5)

Principals noted that it was difficult for teachers to get feedback from parents. Constructive criticism would typically only be shared with the principal. The feedback from parents was, in effect, stifled by a culture of saving face. The Chinese have a great deference for those who hold positions of authority (Zhai, 2017). Relatedly, in a traditional Chinese public school, "it wouldn't be usual for a Chinese teacher to offer comment [to the principal] because they are in a position of vulnerability—they may not be hired the next year" (F4).

In communication with parents, agents, and education officials, it was not uncommon to have a translator. Principals suspected that translations were inaccurate, resulting in faulty messages. Principals were nearly unanimous in suggesting that the translation of their talking points with parents or officials was sometimes filtered or changed to suit hidden agendas.

## **The implications**

The cumulative feedback from the aforementioned research seems to provide clues regarding the tensions that accompany applying leadership experience to new contexts. These findings have important implications for the broader domain of preparing principals to take on leadership in China, especially if potential leaders have the misconception that "schools are schools," wherever you choose to provide educational leadership.

The distinction between administration and leadership (Devos & Bouckenoughe, 2009) is an important one. In China, there is a decided emphasis on the operationality of the school. In North America, the principal's work would normally go beyond that to include vision and instructional leadership. Oddly enough, a recent study of a Canadian leadership certificate program (MacKinnon et al., 2019) showed there was a decided lack of emphasis on building relationships in the school and the community. If that is the norm in leadership training, it does not bode well for principals undertaking leadership in China. This is evidenced in the importance this research assigns to communication with: the host-school administration (with different agendas), new teachers (requiring socialization and cultural sensitization), agents (with monetary goals), and parents (with high aspirations). These attributes are realistic expectations of a new leader in an SNS school, and they rely heavily on soft skills that are not necessarily a part of the theoretical or tacit knowledge acquired previously in Canada.

In surveys and qualitative feedback, principals identified the following as important preparation to provide leadership in SNS schools in China: communication skills, organizational skills, and instructional leadership skills. While the latter two

seem to be of equal importance in North American and Chinese contexts, effective communication skills have been shown to be of paramount importance for principals in SNS schools in China.

It is predictable that principals taking up positions of leadership in SNS schools would need to be flexible given the context of existing within a host school and a host culture. In fact, this sample of principals suggested that the sooner one accepts difference—effectively moving to an “ethnorelative” (Bennett, 1993, p. 21) stance—and learns to leverage the system to the students’ benefit, the easier the job will be. This cohort was clear in their assertion that listening carefully and learning how the stakeholders interact was instrumental in offering a quality program within the constraints of the Chinese system. Further, they suggested that being students of the culture (Cushner & Mahone, 2002) allowed them to understand why things were done a certain way and accept top-down management styles and certain control features inherent in a communist society.

The job of recruiting teachers is becoming more difficult for a host of political and economic reasons. However, the increasingly demanding Chinese regulations have ensured that teachers are adequately qualified, thereby reducing the incidence of underground markets of ill-prepared instructors (Leonard, 2019). The focus of new principals could, therefore, be more squarely placed on improved interview skills to identify “adaptable” teachers that are more likely to commit to and enjoy the intrinsic challenges of international teaching.

A unique task for a leader in an SNS school is to promote the well-being of their staff. Unlike an “arms-length” approach that would be typical in North America, the principal must exert a more personable approach. This sample of research participants was unanimous in asserting the importance of making sure a new teacher is comfortable in their accommodation, lifestyle necessities, and social life; this was communicated as having a “monumental” impact on their happiness, which would be reflected in an exemplary effort in the classroom. This has been corroborated in recent research concerning teacher interns in Chinese practicum placements (MacKinnon, 2020).

One aspect of promoting program success relies on the instructional leadership offered in the school, not just personally by the principal but via creating structures that encourage professional development. In their article entitled “Normalizing Problems of Practice: Converting Routine Conversation into a Resource for Learning in Professional Communities,” Ilana Little and Judith Horn (2007) encourage busy educators to seriously consider the day-to-day pedagogical reflections they share. In the uncertain Chinese context, which inherently will be isolating, new teachers reeling from the many changes, need principals to create comfortable spaces to grow professionally.

This research has established that even experienced principals struggle to apply what they know of leadership to SNS schools in China. The transition is complicated by a difference in emphasis in the systems, cultural norms that impact schooling and parental involvement, a requirement for enhanced communication skills, and an ability to finesse the support infrastructure. These factors in part account for the success that untrained principals with teaching experience in China enjoy—it is enormously helpful to know the system and the people.

It is acknowledged that principals working in SNS schools will have to assume an adaptive leadership style (Owens & Valesky, 2007), but certain aspects of their learned experience will take the forefront in China. With reference to the standards outlined in Table 1, the two standards that this research points to as most important to develop for the SNS school context are: “advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” and “collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.” Of the five competencies identified by Ruben (2006) in Figure 1, this research suggests the more affective skills are particularly needed in SNS schools. Refined communication skills are foundational in the North American context (Schumaker & Sommers, 2001; Ruben, 2006), but this research contends they are a matter of survival in SNS schools in China

### **Limitations and delimitations: Further work**

This study accessed a recent cohort of principals that have either led SNS schools in the past or are currently a principal in one. This is a convenience sample that constitutes educators with a range of backgrounds that extend from minimal to significant leadership experience. The context, infrastructure, and financial and political support of SNS schools is unique to the Nova Scotia (2021) model. As such, it may differ from other Canadian provincial initiatives in China. This article is intended to provide a reflective piece on the factors that principals may consider as they adapt their leadership practice to a distinctly different system.

As long as assessment systems are the driving force for education in the public system, constructivist, child-centred pedagogies will not gain a foothold. This is because the Chinese system dictates efficiency models that favour passive transmission styles of teaching, which are more appealing for promoting student success on tests. These deductive pedagogies pose philosophical challenges to school leaders given the identified need to prepare children with 21st century skills (World Economic Forum, 2016). Jenny Anderson (2016) reports that Chinese students are woefully unprepared for the real world because rote learning does not necessarily teach critical thinking. It remains to be studied how far along the continuum the Chinese system lies on the continuum of rote and problem-based learning.

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## Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. In the sample, 30 percent of those interviewed did not have principal experience in Canada. We are interested in the circumstances that would have influenced such an educator assuming this leadership position. These are some of our ideas. Which do you think are most likely?

- a. Retired teacher with lots of experience as an educator in Canada but never assumed a leadership position.
- b. An educator with a master's degree.
- c. An educator from Canada who may have been a vice principal.
- d. A person who started as a teacher in China and has risen through the ranks and become principal in China because of their demonstrated expertise and understanding of the schooling context.
- e. Lack of interest in the post and the Chinese taking any certified teacher who offers to come.

(We think either young folks who worked their way up within their schools, or retired teachers who wanted to try their hand at administration.)

2. According to the survey, the three most important skills for a Canadian principal were instructional leadership skills, organizational skills, and communication with the Chinese principal/director. Why do you think those were chosen?

Budgeting skills were the lowest ranked. Why do you think this was ranked so low?

3. Most people surveyed said that neither the agent, principal of the main school, or the Nova Scotia DOE has considerable control over the day-to-day operation of the school. Has this been your experience?

I was really surprised when two-thirds of the participants mentioned that inspections from the DOE were inconsistent. Do you belong to this majority? What do you think they mean and how is this a problem?

Some folks went out of their way to tell us that the DOE does offer support. What supports do they offer and what does their day-to-day involvement look like?

How often do you seek the DOE's support or advice? How often do you seek the support of other principals?

4. The survey basically says that there is some tension between the public (main) school and the private (Nova Scotia) school. Have you noticed this? What does the tension look like in regard to teachers, school rules, and fundamental educational ideas?

Can you give examples about uniforms and punishment.

Some say that there is some resentment toward the Chinese SNS program teachers by those in the main campus. Have you seen this? What is the nature of this resentment?

Over 90 percent agreed that it should be a priority to gain support from the main campus. Why is this so important and how does one go about gaining support?

5. What is the nature of the relationship between yourself (Nova Scotia administration) and the principal of the main school and the director of the international department?

The vast majority of your peers stated that the unclear nature of Chinese regulations make the job much harder. Can you give an example?

Even though most people surveyed said that there was enough money and resources available to run a successful program, they said accessing the money was laborious. What has your experience been?

Why is it hard to leverage for improvements?

What is your biggest frustration with the difference in the pace of administrative approvals?

Please describe the issue of scheduling in the school.

6. Over 85 percent said Chinese and North American expectations are different. How are these expectations different? What are the challenges?

When people were given an opportunity to comment on their experience, many mentioned that dealing with parents poses significant challenges. We hear that parental support is mostly good, but meeting expectations can be difficult. Does that seem like a fair assessment? Why?

What specific challenges do you have in this area?

What are three things you suggest one should do when dealing with parents?

7. An overwhelming majority said that the Chinese government is highly sensitive to what is being taught in the curriculum. What is the nature of the sensitivity and how does it affect the program?

Have you experienced censoring? Give an example.

8. At least a quarter of participants said that the overall English level in the school was excellent. What has your experience been?

Although a quarter claimed the above, 85 percent said that a student's poor English poses a barrier to learning. What aspect of learning does this impact specifically? The presentation of a concept? Assessment? The delivery of activity instructions? (Where do you think it is most evident?)

9. Over 70 percent said that the adequate qualification of incoming teachers is a big problem. What is the typical profile of an applicant? How can you attract better qualified applicants?

Are there professional development opportunities available for teachers?

Over half of the participants said that helping students learn may not be the primary rationale for a lot of teachers visiting China.

What might be the teacher's rationale? Have you experienced this?  
If so, how has it impacted the program?

10. What are the factors that make the retention of Nova Scotia teachers difficult?

What supports are in place for new teachers experiencing home-sickness or culture shock?

A highly ranked skill chosen by the sample was interpersonal relationships with staff. What do you do to guarantee this takes place?

11. More than 50 percent say that it is hard to attract new students to the program. Has this been your experience? Why do you think some of the schools are not popular?

12. What do you see as your ultimate responsibility as principal?