



**How Successful Principals Working in Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Contexts
Make Use of Autonomy for School Improvement:
Evidence from Different Research Projects in Hong Kong**

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Schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts have gained increasing policy and research attentions in western countries (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll & Russ, 2004), but this still an under-researched area in Hong Kong. Previous local research on schools and principals that showed academic success (e.g., Darren, Walker & Ko, 2014) may overlook schools that may show strengths in non-academic areas. Mixing data and analysis from different research projects can enrich research findings in schools in similar challenging contexts but differed in areas of school improvement (medium of instruction vs career education). For example, this paper reports findings of two schools in the same catchment area, but in different academic bands (Band One vs Band Three).

Comparing the current results with the conclusions on school improvement in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas reported by Muijs and colleagues (2004), we find that leaders in the two case schools tended to be more transformational than instructional and looked for strategies and approaches that might assist their schools. They would recruit from the existing staff, empower them to enrich existing work with new meanings in their contexts. For example, in the Band One school, the principal communicated their academic focus on English as a vision and mission for the school to achieve the EMI status that would allow them to use English as a medium of instruction for all subjects other than Chinese Language and Chinese History. In contrast, the principal of the Band Three school soon identified that their mission was to set up goal orientations for students at different year levels through career life planning. Both principals had made the school improvement sustainable by maintained the improvement with a strategic and operational focus that was compatible with the wider structural and cultural reform agendas. Evidence also indicated that the school improvement processes involved structural, functional and cultural autonomy implied in school-based management.