

Opening the black box of principal leadership literacy: Measures, drivers, and outcomes

The work of school principals has become more complex and challenging than ever due to unprecedented uncertainties, constant changes, and overwhelming digitalization (Fullan, 2025; Walker et al., 2024). To address this phenomenon, the UNESCO (2024) Global Education Monitoring Report on leadership in education calls for a new effective leadership paradigm involving 'new leadership literacies' not only to handle intricate issues but also to foster school transformation and sustainability in the new era (Arnold, 2021; Flaxman, 2023). Moreover, school principals are the gatekeepers and role models for all school initiatives. Informed by the notion of 'principal first' (PI, 2025a), principals are encouraged to cultivate their leadership literacy to 'self-lead, lead followers, and lead schools'. Hence, principals need to be positioned firmly at the center of 'futures-literate' initiatives from OECD (2025) and UNESCO (2023). However, our literature review found that principal leadership literacy, regarded as one of the crucial new literacies, has attracted little attention. This project will aim at (1) developing and validating a Principal Leadership Literacy Instrument (PLLI); (2) identifying salient individual, organizational, and contextual drivers of principal leadership literacy; (3) investigating positive outcomes of principal leadership literacy; and (4) exploring the relationships among principal leadership literacy and its said drivers and outcomes. To achieve the four aims, the project will employ an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design with qualitative and quantitative strands. The qualitative strand includes 2 interview studies with 24 principals and a panel of 3 experts. The quantitative strand involves 2 survey studies with approximately 200 and 350~400 Hong Kong school principals. This project will make four major contributions. First, the project will provide empirical insights to advance the theoretical framework on principal leadership literacy by opening the 'black box' (e.g., principal leadership literacy) between its drivers and positive outcomes. Second, the project will produce a PLLI, advancing quantitative investigations into leadership literacy and offering a rigorous tool for future international comparisons. Third, this project will enable policymakers to establish priorities to better craft related policies for principal preparation, selection, and standardization (e.g., Hong Kong professional standards for principals) to enhance principal literacy development in Hong Kong. Fourth, this project will yield a practical blueprint to foster principal leadership literacy, particularly as individual, organizational, and contextual drivers identified are malleable for future solution-focused interventions aiming for establishing 'futures-literate' schools in Hong Kong. This will advance international and local initiatives for a 'futures-literate' society in Hong Kong and beyond.