Contextualising the career pathways of women principals in Hong Kong: a critical examination

Anita Kit-wa Chan*, George Siu-keung Ngai and Po-king Choi

The fields of gender and educational leadership have been enriched recently by analyses of national case studies from non-western contexts. By contextualising women’s career development, these studies highlight the importance of including experiences other than those generated from Anglo-American-Australian contexts, thus broadening our knowledge base for more nuanced theorisation in the field. This paper contributes a close examination of the career histories of eight female primary school principals in Hong Kong. Our analyses identify a range of facilitators, including the expansion of promotion opportunities, strong values placed on education and training, professional encouragement and support and help in relieving family responsibilities. Valuable these factors may be, but we argue that they are incidental, informal, familial and individual, and incur the costs of burn-out and guilt. The discussion not only underlines the significance of case study and cultural and contextual specificities, it also provides a nuanced understanding of Chinese patriarchy.

Keywords: gender; leadership; culture; Chinese patriarchy; career pathways

Introduction

Recent studies on women and educational leadership identifying various barriers impeding the career development of female leaders have been enriched by analyses of national case studies, especially those from non-western contexts. By contextualising women’s career development, these latter studies have highlighted the various ways that patriarchal culture mediates policies and shapes women’s career pathways, the commonalities and differences of barriers among countries and the need to examine the complex interplay of multiple factors in diverse cultural contexts. Not only have these new sensitivities enhanced our understanding of how culture
shapes women’s access to leadership positions, they have also facilitated cross-cultural comparisons and widened the knowledge base of educational leadership that has been dominated by Anglo-American-Australian experiences. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the current discussions with a close examination of the career pathways of eight female primary school principals in Hong Kong — a patriarchal Chinese society where a steady increase of women primary school leaders has been noted. In the following, we shall first review the fields of gender and educational leadership and highlight some salient concerns that have informed this paper. Then the background and methodology of the study will be outlined before the elucidation and evaluation of the factors that have contributed to women’s career progression in Hong Kong. The conclusion will draw out the significance of this study to the field of educational leadership.

**Barriers, cultural and contextual specificities and the complex interplay of multiple factors**

Women’s limited access to school leadership has been an important concern in the field of educational management and leadership. In the past, studies tended to blame women’s deficiencies and orientation for their underrepresentation (Hoyle 1969; Tropp 1959) or women were said to lack confidence, self-esteem, role models, aspiration and career planning. They were found to be more family- than career-oriented or to prefer teaching and interacting with children to leading and managing.

However, a closer scrutiny of the norms, values and practices of school organisations indicates that barriers are not a problem inherent to women, but can be institutional, organisational and discursive (Bell and Chase 1995; Boulton and Coldron 1998; Fennell 2008; McLay 2008; Shakeshaft 1987). When gender norms in society prescribe different, and often inferior, roles to women, these shape not only their career orientations but also the way schools are organised and the social perception of leadership. Sexism tends to prevail when the school management or selection committee is dominated by men, who are more likely to hire and promote other men who look, think and act like them (Cushman 2009; Shakeshaft 2006; Smulyan 2000). Furthermore, strong and competent school leaders are usually expected to be goal-oriented, instrumental, competitive, assertive and totally committed to their work — all stereotypes that favour men and masculinity, devalue qualities associated with femininity and marginalise those who have family responsibilities (Blackmore 1999; Chisholm 2001; Deem 2003; Smulyan 2000).

When these insights are applied to some cultural contexts, they reveal the contradictions between policy changes and cultural beliefs about gender and leadership and help explain why women’s career progression is halted. For instance, studies on China (Zhang 2010), South Africa (Chisholm 2001), Sweden (Davis and Joansson 2005) and Uganda (Sperandio and
Kagoda (2008) have shown that despite social and policy changes, women continue to experience limited access to leadership positions since a cultural bias towards men or masculine forms of leadership persists. They show that even though modernisation and industrialisation are in place, or girls’ schooling and gender equity policies have been introduced to improve the educational and employment opportunities for girls and women, female leaders are still not preferred or are evaluated less positively in selection and promotion processes.

While a concern about common barriers can be useful, growing numbers of researchers since the 1990s have also recognised the significance of cultural and contextual specificities in shaping educational leadership. Some began to compare the similar and dissimilar barriers, or the inhibiting and enabling factors, faced by aspiring and practicing female school leaders in different countries (Collard and Reynolds 2005; Cubillo and Brown 2003; Dimmock and Walker 2006; Sobehart 2009). This new cognisance also alerted researchers to the scant attention given to the career experiences and subjective voices of women from developing and non-western countries. Oplatka (2006), for example, asserts the need to include more national case studies other than those generated from Anglo-American-Australian experiences in order to expand the current knowledge base on educational leadership. In fact, some illuminating studies have already been undertaken in this direction, two examples of which are described below.

Luke’s study (2002) on women in higher education management in southeast Asia, namely Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, usefully revealed the culture-specific dimensions of limiting and enabling factors that influenced women’s career mobility in these countries. By contextualising women’s career pathways, which means ‘by reference to local sites, socio-political and cultural contexts and histories’ (Luke 1998, 56), she identified cultural impediments to women leaders unique to these Asian contexts. Asia-specific barriers include the codes of feminine propriety, filial responsibility, the politics of face and, not least, the ethos of patronage (Luke 2002).

Close examination of the promotion practices in some Asian countries by Sperandio (2010) is illuminating too, as it successfully underscores the complex interplay of the culture- and gender-mediated factors in shaping women’s access to educational leadership. Patriarchal practices in schools and at home that appear to disadvantage women could be mitigated, as in the case of India, by the strong cultural values placed on education, child-care support from family members and the availability of low-waged household labour. As Sperandio rightly argues, ‘any variables can, in different cultural situations, act as facilitators or barriers and be of major or minor importance in influencing aspirations and access to leadership’ (722).

In short, the increase of national case studies in the current literature on gender and school leadership has helped widen the analysis from a focus on
barriers against women to a close examination of the complex interplay of multiple factors in diverse cultural contexts. Clearly, this new sensitivity necessitates more grounded, contextual, holistic case studies, especially those from non-western contexts – an insight that has informed the analysis of this paper. By contextualising the career pathways of eight women primary school principals in Hong Kong, this paper aims to reveal the cultural specificities and evaluate the multiple factors that have facilitated women’s access to school leadership in a (patriarchal) society that has not been active in promoting gender equity.

**Background and methodology**

Hong Kong used to be a patriarchal Confucian society that placed lower value on girls than on boys. While Chinese society had a high regard for education, daughters, especially elder ones, were expected to sacrifice their own schooling to support their brothers’ study or make financial contributions to their families (Salaff 1995).

However, women’s social status has changed significantly in recent decades. According to the 2011 population census, the percentages of women aged 50 to 54 and 20 to 24 who had received no education or primary education were 41% and 2%, respectively. Almost 40% of women in the latter group had received a tertiary education (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2011). Significant improvements have also been observed where primary school teaching is concerned. Primary school teaching was once a male-dominated occupation but, since the 1950s, has become dominated by women (Chan 2012). The percentage of female teachers has risen steadily over the years, and stabilised at 78.6% in 2011 (Education Bureau 2012). More importantly, the male-dominated teaching hierarchy has also been transformed in the past decade, as the number of female principals in primary schools has risen. The percentage of female principals rose from 29.4% in 1991/1992 to 50.6% in 2003/2004, and to 61.8% in 2011/2012 (Education and Manpower Bureau 1992, 2004; Education Bureau 2012).

Steady growth in female school leadership is also observed in other countries, and government policies have been identified as an important contributing factor. For instance, in developed countries such as England, Norway and Sweden (Coleman 2007; Davis and Johansson 2005; Moller 2005), the rise is partly the result of equal-opportunity legislation and family-friendly policies. In developing countries, the growth can be attributed to the provision of schooling for girls and the active recruitment of female teachers in response to international calls for the promotion of gender equity (Sperandio 2010).

Where Hong Kong is concerned, the government has not played an active role in promoting gender equity, either in the colonial or post-colonial
period (Chan 2012; Lee 2003; Pearson and Leung 1995). It was not until 1996 and 2000 that the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Women’s Commission were established, respectively. While the government introduced compulsory free primary schooling (1971) and junior secondary schooling (1978), and has significantly improved women’s access to basic education and thereafter their educational attainment in a patriarchal society, the policy of mass education was not designed to address gender inequality (Mak 2009). Nor did it benefit women principals born before 1965, such as our interviewees. In the absence of active and positive gender equity policies, how women teachers managed to develop their career in a once patriarchal Chinese society remains a puzzle. These specificities actually make Hong Kong an interesting and rare case for the fields of gender and school leadership in at least two aspects. First, while the government policy is often seen as an important driving force in improving gender equity in the current literature, there has been less discussion of the other factors that could also facilitate the career progression and significant rise of women principals. Can the Hong Kong experience be a case for celebration and even emulation? Secondly, current studies on Chinese women teachers and leaders usually identify traditional Chinese culture – patriarchy – as a determining and persistent barrier to their career progress (e.g., Zhang 2010). How patriarchy operated and was circumvented in this Chinese society will certainly illuminate its complex nature. These issues will be addressed in the remaining sections of the paper.

This paper is based on the career and leadership experiences of eight women who are part of a wider research project that examines the life histories of primary school principals in Hong Kong. Life history has been chosen as the method of investigation because of its ability to capture a more holistic, comprehensive and culturally specific understanding of the values, experiences and practices of school principals (Carter 1993; Evetts 1994; Goodson 2005; Hall 1996; Tomlinson, Gunter, and Smith 1999). As the investigation is qualitative, exploratory and interpretive in nature, the selection of principals was purposive rather than representative (Goodson and Sikes 2001). We purposely looked for experienced and successful female primary principals with more than five years of headship experience and whose schools have been commended by the Education Bureau as excellent/high-quality primary schools in official evaluation exercises or who have earned a good reputation in the primary sector.

The eight women principals interviewed are all ethnically Chinese and grew up in Hong Kong. When the first interviews were conducted in 2010, their ages ranged from 46 to 59. Six were married, one divorced and one single. Seven were mothers and they had 14 children between them, the youngest of whom was 16. Their experience as a principal ranged from 9 to 24 years, while the age at which they became school head ranged from 34 to 46, and on average it took almost 16 years for them to become principal.
As such, our sample is consistent with similar research in which women tend to be much more experienced teachers than men when they assume a headship (Bell and Chase 1995; Hoff and Mitchell 2008; Young and McLeod 2001).

We interviewed each woman at least twice, and the topics ranged from their biography, career trajectories and leadership practices, to their work-life balance. Before the first interview, a short questionnaire was sent to collect some basic biographical and social data, such as marital status, educational background, average working hours and professional membership. Most of the interviews were conducted in their offices or school meeting rooms and tape-recorded with their consent; the recordings were later transcribed and translated.

We employed NVivo for coding and analysis. By contextualisation and constant comparison, we identified the historical moments for the individual, as well as the larger discursive, cultural, economic and organisational contexts and the range of gender scripts that have framed the evaluations and career experiences of these school leaders (Bloom and Munro 1995; Goodson and Sikes 2001; Hatch and Wisniewski 1995). In the following, our discussion will focus on delineating and assessing the specific cultural and contextual factors that have facilitated the career pathways of women principals. To protect the anonymity of our interviewees, all the names used in this article are pseudonyms and some personal details have been altered.

Promotion opportunities and historical contingencies

Historically, primary teaching was considered a ‘dead-end’ job in Hong Kong (Chan 2012). Its status, pay and job prospects were much poorer than those of secondary teaching and the main justification for this was that primary teachers were not university graduates but certificated teachers. The promotion structure was slightly improved in the 1970s, after the introduction of compulsory primary schooling, in which a teacher could be promoted to the position of Assistant Master/Mistress (a senior administrative position, AM hereafter) after five years of teaching experience. In reality, chances of promotion remained scarce and were based on a teacher’s longevity and loyalty in a school (Lai, Ko, and Cheung 2005). Once the senior positions, not more than three to four places in a school, were occupied, eligible teachers had to wait until the incumbents left or retired. Women teachers’ promotion chances could be further hampered as some schools preferred promoting males, physical education teachers in particular, for their perceived ability to discipline students and their ‘better’ job performance (Chan 2011).

However, two historical contingencies have mediated these barriers. First, a woman teacher’s chances of promotion could be improved if she moved to a tougher working environment – such as a new school in a
newly developed area. New town development is an urban planning strategy that aims to relocate residents from the overcrowded urban districts to distant rural regions.\textsuperscript{2} The infrastructure and physical conditions of schools in new towns were usually suboptimal in their early operation stage, yet they offered much better promotion opportunities than established schools as more senior positions were created when more residents moved in and the number of classes expanded. While limited mobility has been identified as a common barrier to women’s career advancement (Evetts 1994), six of our eight women principals had worked in at least one new town school in their careers and found their promotion prospects greatly enhanced. For instance, Hannah Ho was quickly promoted to the position of acting AM, two years after entering teaching:

My first job offer was in Shatin [a new town in the 1970s] and it was a new school. The principal hired seven new teachers and I was one of them. I remember I spent the first few days mopping the school floors while the principal scrubbed the toilets! … The first few years were very tough indeed, as the school was still under construction, so we teachers had to help out as auxiliaries … I was also asked to organize extra-curricular activities in my second year, but on the plus side, I was promoted to be acting AM a year later.

By comparison, the career path of Bonnie Chu was not so smooth. She became a principal after teaching for more than 25 years, and one main reason was that she was ‘stuck’. Earlier in her career, she was almost promoted in an established urban school that suffered from the problem of class retrenchment and the senior post that she applied for was scrapped. She remained in the same school until the mid-1990s, when it was closed down. Very soon after she had transferred to a new school, her career trajectory accelerated:

I went to a new school in Ma On Shan [a new town developed in the late 1980s] in 1995, and in the first year I was still a CM [certificate master/mistress, a junior teaching position, CM hereafter], but was immediately promoted to AM next year, then vice-principal and even acting principal in the following two years. I finally became a principal in my fourth year.

New town development aside, political uncertainties and the resultant repercussions on primary teaching since the 1980s have also facilitated women’s career pathways. In the 1980s, Hong Kong experienced successive waves of emigration because of public misgivings over the ‘1997 issue’. The brain-drain struck the primary teaching sector particularly hard, as it constituted 24% of the wastage rate in 1990 (Education Commission 1992, 12).

To rescue the sector from this ‘crisis’, the Hong Kong government began to professionalise the teaching occupation with several measures. First, the once limited career structure of primary teaching was improved and the
ratio of senior teachers to the number of classes was lowered from 1:6 to 1:4 or 1:3. Secondly, the academic qualification of primary teachers was upgraded to a degree level, first among school principals, then in-service or pre-service teachers. Thirdly, in response to the improved qualification, a better pay scale for primary graduate teachers was created. The exodus of (male) primary school principals and the improved promotion chances caused by the political uncertainties of the territory unexpectedly benefited women teachers. Six women interviewed took up headships left open by the exit of male principals who emigrated. For example, Carina Lo became a school head in 1986 when the incumbent male principal emigrated to Canada. Hannah Ho was promoted as the principal of the afternoon section in 1993 and then to the morning section in 1995 when the incumbent heads emigrated in succession. The interplay between new town development, social and political changes and individual career trajectory is best demonstrated by the experience of Evelyn Ma. She is the youngest woman in our sample, promoted to principalship when she was in her mid-30s, 10 years after she had joined the teaching profession. She first became a teacher in Shatin, then sought promotion and moved to another new town, Tseng Kwan O and finally became a principal in 1996. She admitted that the headship came much earlier than she expected, because ‘the year that I was promoted, there was a serious brain drain problem. There were lots of vacancies for principalship, so my former head encouraged me to apply.’

**Strong values on education and training**

Nevertheless, improved promotion chances would not benefit women if they were not qualified enough. In our interviews, we found that these women who were able to seize the chances when they arose placed a strong value on education.

Education is a ‘positional good’ and a highly valued social resource in Hong Kong (Choi 1995). However, in the past, most patriarchal families in this Chinese society were more willing to invest in their sons’ education than their daughters’, except those who were younger sisters. At a time when education was still not free and the manufacturing economy was booming, it was not uncommon for elder daughters to give up schooling to provide for their families or their brother’s education (Choi 2010). Those who managed to stay on in school were unusually determined and strove to do well. The experiences of our women principals bear this out clearly.

Although Fiona Lee and her family valued education, most resources went to the only son. Having an elder brother and a much younger sister, Fiona strove to be a top student as she knew only outstanding academic performance could save her from joining the factory after primary six:
We were very poor and had a very difficult life. No matter how hard I studied, mum would occasionally say, ‘Don’t bother with your study. You’d better join the factory earlier.’ However, I was not happy with this [destination], so I studied very hard and always got very good results.

When she planned her post-secondary schooling, she settled for a two-year course at the College of Education mainly because of financial and family considerations:

My results at the public examination were rather good. … My parents had no savings to support me, so I had to earn my school fees. I also needed to support my brother and sister. When I was at college, I took up four part-time jobs and more than half of my income went to support my brother’s overseas study … at that time I felt that it was my duty to support him. I probably shared the traditional view that he was the only heir in my family.

Evelyn Ma was the fourth of seven siblings. When talking about her educational experience, she clearly indicated the importance of sibling order and her dedication to pursuing her education:

My two elder sisters quitted school to support my family, but I was in the middle and was very luckily spared … I have an elder brother and naturally my parents expected him to at least finish secondary school. … My mum at that time was an outworker of a plastic flower factory, who expected me to help out. I didn’t mind doing the flowers, but in the examination period I refused and this caused friction. I can still remember vividly how I argued with her because I wanted to study. I might earn a few more cents but shouldn’t I value my precious chance to study for my examinations? I stood very firm on this.

Grace Yau has nine siblings and she is the second youngest. Born to a poor and broken family, she and her siblings were very determined to leave poverty behind and saw education as the only path: ‘When we were young we naively thought that mum left us because of poverty. We all shared one simple idea – we did not want to be poor any more. To leave poverty, we had to study very hard.’

Meanwhile, as a daughter, she also knew very well that her chance was less favourable than her brothers’ because:

Dad told us clearly that it was impossible for him to support nine children studying. He would at most support a son till F. 7 [Form 7, equivalent to year 13 in the UK system] and a daughter till F. 5, and thereafter we had to find our own means. Yes, sons clearly had an advantage over daughters … Dad didn’t care if we failed our studies. A failed child had no second chance, but joined the labour market. This was the cruel reality, but it motivated us to study hard as we didn’t want to become shoe-shiners.

If the above narratives indicate that patriarchal values prevailed and limited the educational opportunities of young girls, they also demonstrate clearly
the determination of young girls to use education to transcend their humble backgrounds. In fact, according to a local educational scholar, before the introduction of compulsory education, educational qualifications were more crucial to young women than to young men if they wanted to achieve a higher socio-economic status (Tsang 1993). This probably explains why the women principals interviewed pursued education and training continuously, even before they assumed positions of administration and leadership. All but one attained the certificate of teachers’ training by their early 20s, whether through pre-service or in-service programmes. Six took up or had already obtained a bachelor’s degree before becoming school heads. Five had even completed master’s degrees in the early 2000s – a not insignificant accomplishment given that Hong Kong only began to upgrade the educational requirements of primary teachers to degree level in the late 1980s.

Education, and a higher-level degree, not only rendered these women eligible for promotion, some also found the knowledge and training useful and transformative. Carina Lo, for instance, graduated with a First Class Honours for her bachelor’s degree and received a government scholarship to read a master’s degree in the UK in the mid-1990s. She shared with us how that year abroad broadened her horizons and, more importantly, helped her develop a leadership style that was different from her former principal:

I used to follow the instructional model of my ex-principal, but after my studies I began to develop my own style. I realized that it was not enough to be an instructional leader. One could be an efficient but not effective leader. Good leader need to be caring too.

Bonnie Chu, the ‘late bloomer’ that we mentioned above, also discussed how her education degree was enlightening and sparked great changes in her life. Studying for a part-time degree was not easy for her as she encountered strong resistance from her husband, who was also a student on the same programme:

He discouraged me from studying. He said the programme was too tough for me. … The programme has indeed inspired me to rethink my future direction. I was enlightened and came to know what I really wanted. I used to spend most of my time on my family, taking care of my children … I was still a CM when I was in my first year of study but a lecturer thought I was an AM and told me that I had great potential to be a school leader. … The year I graduated, I applied for a headship and was immediately promoted. These have been the greatest changes in my life.

Professional encouragement and hard work

When we did the interview, Bonnie was divorced. We did not know if her enlightenment and promotion had cost her her marriage, but her experience clearly underlines the importance of encouragement when married women
want to pursue their career progression. Existing studies find that women principals are less likely than men to have formal or informal networks, support and mentors. As they lack information and knowledge about positions and have few structural opportunities to gain the necessary skills and visibility, their career advancement is likely to be affected (Boulton and Coldron 1998; Coleman 2002; Hoff and Mitchell 2008; Shakeshaft 1987; Stufft and Coyne 2009). In Hong Kong, formal mentoring programmes for aspiring and practicing principals were introduced only in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, the women in our study mentioned that they had received some form of mentoring, encouragement and opportunities from their former heads, which aided their career advancement:

My former head really liked me as I was very hardworking. I was only a CM at that time, but she had already assigned me administrative duties. She was the one who promoted me to AM and later deputy principal. I was nervous at each promotion, but she gave me lots of reassurance. She told me that I could turn to her if I had any problems. She really helped me a lot in my career. (Diana Yuen, emphasis added)

I was not bright, but very willing to work hard. I diligently did what I was assigned, so my former head kept grooming me … I was very lucky, very lucky indeed. He also saw my potential in recital and assigned me to coach students for recital competitions. We won some prizes, and because of these, I was promoted rather early. … He was a principal with vision and I learned a lot from him. He is really my mentor. (Hannah Ho, emphasis added)

At that time, my principal knew that I was very hardworking, so one day he told me to develop a school bulletin and asked me to take charge of the project. He knew that I would never say no to him, and every time he gave me an idea, I would help him develop it into an action plan. Even though I was still a junior AM, he trusted me. He gave me chances to perform … (Fiona Lee, emphasis added)

Echoing the discussion on the existing literature, supportive mentors matter a lot to aspiring women teachers. By identifying their potential and entrusting them with administrative responsibilities, some former heads helped nurture women’s skills, leadership and, not least, their self-confidence. The latter is crucial as women are more likely to rely on affirmation than men (Hoff and Mitchell 2008). Even though the support these women received was merely ‘gentle persuasion’ or ‘a tap on the shoulder’, it could boost their confidence in their leadership ability (Young and McLeod 2001).

Having said so, one assertion in the above narratives is particularly interesting and deserves closer scrutiny. When women principals acknowledged the kindness of their former heads in aiding their careers, equally important is their stress on hard work in gaining encouragement and nurturing. In other words, they seemed to regard their chances to perform and even gain promotion as not so much to do with their ability, but their hard-working
attitude. While we cannot assert the truthfulness of this claim, our women interviewees seemed to act on this belief by overworking, and have burned themselves out. This is most revealing since all our women principals considered themselves hardworking – most reported having worked more than 60 hours a week after they became school heads, and Carina, the most hardworking principal in our study, spent almost 100 hours a week on school and student affairs. These excessively long working hours probably explain why six of the eight women expressed a strong wish to retire early. Carina’s retirement plan is an illustration:

If I could choose again, I would like to spend more time with my children, especially my daughter. She is really talented, but there was a period where she had relationship problems and was frustrated. I was not close enough to her. … This is the area where I felt regretful. I have spent too much time on my students. … Upon retirement I am thinking of raising my two grandchildren for my daughter to help relieve her burden.

**Family support and responsibilities**

Carina’s feelings of guilt about her children also lead us to the issue of women’s domestic or family responsibilities – an oft-cited career obstacle hindering women from taking up leadership positions. Studies have found that women’s career trajectories can be cut short or broken by family responsibilities or husbands’ career moves (Evetts 1994; Grogan 1999; Hoff and Mitchell 2008) or be halted by strong resistance from husbands who did not allow their wives to have a career ahead of them (Oplatka 2006). Where Hong Kong is concerned, family responsibility remains a challenge for working women (Ho 2013). ‘Women should be homemakers’ is still a prevalent public attitude (Women’s Commission 2010) and, regardless of their employment status, wives still take up more family duties than their husbands (Young Women’s Christian Association 2008).

Nevertheless, while we expected our women interviewees to have similar struggles, interestingly, most married women principals, except Bonnie Chu mentioned above, told us that their husbands were supportive of their jobs. Three even remarked that their spouses had been instrumental to their career progression. For instance, Diana Yuen recalled how her husband, who was himself a teacher, persuaded her to apply for promotion and a headship:

My husband was the one who pushed my career forward … I loved teaching and didn’t want to take up administrative duties. However, he said, ‘You really have the ability and you should take up the position [AM]’. … At the time [2001] I was already a deputy head and had just finished my master’s degree, and my husband told me again that I should go further. He said, ‘You are a very capable person. … You have good educational ideals and I believe you could achieve even more.’
Hannah Ho and Grace Yau had similar experiences, as their husbands were also the ones who nudged them towards principalship by affirming their abilities:

I later changed to another school, but that head was very lousy. … It was a very difficult period for me. I worked there nine years, but I spent at least five years crying. My husband knew me very well, so he told me one day, ‘Why don’t you apply for the principalship?’ I thought about it and said, ‘Why not?’ He then immediately prepared an application letter for me to sign. (Hannah Ho)

At that time, some of my peers had already been promoted, but their ability was only so-so. So my husband asked me, ‘Why don’t you try?’ I was not interested in principalship at all, but I thought, ‘Why not? It won’t cost me a cent.’ I was simply curious to know what the Board would ask in an interview, so I applied. But then I got it. (Grace Yau)

Nevertheless, although the husbands of our women principals appear to be supportive of the career progression of their wives, their engagement with family responsibilities is less impressive. A closer probing of the women’s narratives reveals that the help from their spouses was more theoretical than real:

He is very supportive and very family-oriented, but he is not as patient as me when it comes to homework supervision. He didn’t actually do any supervision during those years, but he has played a mediating role between me and the children. Sometimes when I lost my temper over their homework and started yelling, he would walk away. When I turned my anger on him, he would hide himself in the bedroom and would not argue back. He has been very tolerant of my bad temper. (Fiona Lee)

My husband is very understanding as he knows I am very busy, so he won’t ask much at home. I do the cooking, cleaning, and have to look after my son and my husband. Yes, I still do housework, but my standard is not very high, just acceptable [laughs]. … Sometimes I also wonder, ‘What if I were a man? What if I had a supportive wife at home? Would I be able to do more if I could concentrate on my work and didn’t have to spare any energy on housework?’ This is impossible, so I have to be more realistic. I do not attempt to be perfect in every domain. (Evelyn Ma)

Obviously, women are still the main care-providers, even though they have ‘supportive’ and ‘understanding’ husbands. Thankfully, the actual performance of family responsibilities can be rather flexible in this Chinese society, as it is not unusual for women to share their caring duties with kin or contract them out to non-family members. Echoing the findings from some Asian countries (Luke 1998; Sperandio 2010), our women principals were also able to relieve their family duties by soliciting support and help from female family members and even waged household labour. Hannah
Ho had her daughter babysat by a neighbour from Monday to Friday until she was about to enter secondary school. Diana Yuen and Grace Yau hired private tutors and foreign domestic workers to supervise their children’s homework and shoulder household chores when work demands became pressing. Half of the women principals recalled that they counted on their own mothers to accomplish several demanding tasks simultaneously. It is worth looking at the experiences of Fiona and Evelyn again:

Things were easy because I had great support from my family. After my son was born, I sent him to live with my mum and my sister, and only took him home at the weekend. He came back to live with me when he was about to enter kindergarten, but my mum still came to my place every day to take care of him. … I was really grateful to my mum and sister, they took good care of him so I could finish my four-year programme, and continue with another master’s degree. … Furthermore, the educational and curriculum reforms had not started yet, so the school’s demands and tasks were simpler. It was still bi-sectional [see note 4], so I could still attend courses in the evening. (Evelyn Ma)

For a very long time, every day after work, I came home and worked full gear again. I checked [the children’s] homework, supervised their piano practice, and did revision. Every Sunday after church service, I started supervising homework at 3 pm and worked until 11 pm … I was very lucky that the educational reforms had not started yet. I was already AM at that time, but when necessary, I could still get home at 2 pm to supervise homework, as primary schooling was still bi-sectional. I am very grateful to my mother. We only hired a full-time foreign domestic worker in the 1990s, when my third child was born. Before that, I had a part-time helper to do the cooking and my mum lived with me and babysat my two sons. I supervised their homework myself. (Fiona Lee)

Obviously, this extra help explains how these Hong Kong women principals were able to juggle their teaching career and family duties. Extra help aside, their narratives also clearly point to two crucial institutional factors that made their caring responsibilities more manageable – the practice of bi-sectional schooling and the absence of aggressive educational reform. Bi-sectional schooling was an exigent measure introduced in the 1950s to accommodate the rocketing schooling population. Before being phased out in early 2000, this practice, unique to Hong Kong primary schools, was a de facto ‘half-time’ job, which, indeed, facilitated the balancing of full-time paid work and family responsibilities by many married women teachers from the 1950s to the late 1990s. Meanwhile, educational reform, which brought an intensification of work demands (Chan 2004), was not in full swing until the early 2000s.

Therefore, women principals who became mothers in the 1970s and 1980s and assumed school leadership positions preceding the reform, usually remarked that demands at home and at work were agreeable. On the
contrary, two mothers who became principals in the early 2000s, when their children were still relatively young, found it challenging trying to juggle child-caring and their demanding new role. It is not difficult to detect Diana Yuen’s feelings of regret and guilt when she remembered her mothering role, even though she had already sought extra help:

We hired a foreign domestic worker to take care of my two children when they were young; I used to supervise their homework at night. When I was still a teacher and AM, the school was still bi-sectional. Even though I came home around 5 pm, I had ample time with my children. When I became a principal [in 2001], the educational reforms had started and the school became whole-day. I was so busy that I hired a private tutor to help with the children’s homework. … My relationship with my son is good, but not with my younger daughter. When she was a teenager, her behaviour really caused me headaches … I felt bad because I hadn’t had much time for her when she was young …

**Conclusion**

The career progression of women primary school principals in Hong Kong provides an important case to add to the existing body of literature on gender and educational leadership. While most existing discussions focus on the gender-related barriers and the (in)effectiveness of policies in improving women’s access to school leadership, the Hong Kong case is about how and why, in the absence of active and positive gender equity policies, the proportion of women leaders in primary schools is able to rise. By contextualising women’s career pathways with reference to Hong Kong’s socio-political and cultural contexts and histories, we have identified a range of institutional, social and personal factors that help shed light on this puzzle. Factors contributing to the career progression of women school principals include the expansion of promotion opportunities and the improvement of promotion structures; the strong values attached to education and training; encouragement and nurturing from senior supervisors (males included); support and help that women received to relieve their family responsibilities; and, not least, women’s mobility, allowing them to work in new towns, and their strong will, determination and hard work.

Nonetheless, as our discussion clearly demonstrates, there are caveats and costs associated with this particular form of development, which are certainly not a case for celebration or emulation. On the one hand, as some of the factors were products of historical contingency, they may no longer be there to facilitate women’s career development. For instance, the practice of bi-sectional schooling – the once _de facto_ family-friendly policy for teachers with family responsibilities – has already become obsolete. Furthermore, since the political sovereignty of Hong Kong has been settled and the birth rates of local residents continue to drop, it seems less likely that the government will further expand the primary school sector or improve its
promotion opportunities to attract recruits. On the other hand, even though women principals seem to have received various forms of encouragement and support, they were largely informal, familial and personal. The almost total absence of formal institutional support implies that women have to turn to the market and their own means and bear personal costs when pursuing career progression. We have already seen the struggles experienced by these competent women principals, including extremely long working hours, a desire for early retirement and feelings of guilt and inadequacy in managing family responsibilities. These should not be seen as adaptation problems of individual women, as ultimately these may lead to a premature departure of experienced women teachers or a further decline of our decreasing birth rates, and thus incur social costs for society as a whole.

Our grounded and contextual analysis above has also provided a more nuanced understanding of Chinese patriarchy. Our discussion unravels its complex nature, which is clearly not unitary, but dynamic, and has changed and assumed different forms in different domains. Patriarchal values, such as the preference for sons, have certainly restricted the schooling of young girls in Hong Kong. By comparison, the workplace in primary schools appears to be less patriarchal for, when seen to be hard-working enough, women were still given chances by their (male) seniors to take on positions of responsibility and could gradually craft a career for themselves.

Chinese patriarchy appears to be most intriguing where women’s mothering roles are concerned. While family responsibilities and husbands’ resistance can deter Chinese women, and probably other Asian women, from pursuing a career, this is not entirely the case with our women principals. They reported having received help from their spouses in their career development and support and assistance from the waged market and/or family members, including their once conservative mothers, when performing maternal duties, even though, in theory and in reality, they are still held responsible for the well-being of their children.

While we attempt to use critical examination of the Hong Kong experience to underline the importance of rich case studies in diverse cultural contexts to the fields of gender and educational leadership, we are also mindful that our analysis is based on a small cohort of women principals in the sector of primary schools only. A bigger sample with different cohorts of women will certainly be useful to further validate our claims.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the two reviewers for their useful comments and the research support provided by Alison So.
Funding
This paper is part of a research project, Gender and Leadership: Life Histories of Female and Male Primary School Principals in Hong Kong, that was supported by a grant from the Research Grant Council of Hong Kong [grant number HKIED840209].

Notes
1. The Education and Manpower Bureau was restructured and renamed as the Education Bureau in 2007.
2. The New Town Development Programme was first initiated in 1973, when the population in Hong Kong was more than four million. There are thus far nine new towns, which were developed in three main phases: the first (Tsuen Wan, Shatin and Tuen Mun) in the early 1970s, then the second (Tai Po, Fanling/Sheung Shui and Yuen Long) in the latter part of the 1970s and the third (Tsing Kwan O, Tin Shu Wai and Tung Chung) in the 1980s and 1990s (see Civil Engineering and Development Department 2012). Although the government provided infrastructural support and transport links, the new towns were usually remote and inaccessible when they first came into use.
3. The new pay scale was higher than those of the non-graduate grade. However, as some local educators (Lai, Ko, and Cheung 2005) maintain, the new nomenclature did not bring parity between primary and secondary teachers. Even though primary and secondary teachers were all now degree holders with the same amount of teacher training, the status and pay of the former were still lower. In other words, the inequalities between primary and secondary teaching were maintained.
4. Primary schools in Hong Kong used to operate in a bi-sessional mode, in which one school used the premises in the morning and another one in the afternoon. More discussions on this practice will be provided in the later sections.

References


