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Teaching Research Group Leaders' Engagement in Curriculum Leadership: The Principals' Perspective

Yiming Shan

School of Foreign Languages, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China
Email: symhelen@126.com

Abstract

Schools and teachers have been empowered with greater autonomy to make instructional decisions following decentralisation in education, both internationally and in the Chinese context. Thus, it is important to examine how teachers are involved in curriculum decision-making. Being the stakeholders who empowered teachers with autonomy, this study explored principals' perspectives of how teaching research group (TRG) leaders are empowered to take on a curriculum leadership (CL) role in secondary schools in China. A qualitative approach was employed and involved interviewing 10 principals and collecting the job descriptions of TRG leaders in 10 secondary schools in Taiyuan City, China. The NCR was pioneered in 2001 in 38 experimental areas (e.g., provinces, autonomous districts and municipalities) selected by the MoE, which aimed at prompting the implementation of NCR. Taiyuan City is one of the experimental areas (MoE, 2001). The findings demonstrated the necessity for empowering TRG leaders, as they were found to be less empowered and exhibited less awareness of enacting the CL role, especially for the national curriculum. In terms of the theoretical contribution of this study, it explicates the involvement of teacher leaders in CL at four levels (i.e., the school level, the classroom level, the social relationship level, and the personal level). This provides a reference for an in-depth understanding of teacher leaders' initiatives. In practice, the research findings are informative for entailing teachers with greater autonomy. This will ultimately prompt school development and thus broaden and add to the international body of knowledge on teachers' engagement in CL.

Keywords

Curriculum Leadership, TRG Leader, Qualitative, China

1. Introduction

Global education reforms have focused on the implementation of decentralisation, which entails delegating more authority, responsibilities, and tasks to schools and even teachers in recent decades (Law et al., 2010). The decentralisation enables teachers to have a more democratic involvement in decision-making on school and curriculum matters (Ho, 2005).

Since the 1990s, international studies on leadership have begun to explore schooling issues by reviewing curriculum implementation and development (Macpherson et al., 1998). Although substantial evidence exists concerning the conception of curriculum leadership (CL), most studies have focused on the principals' CL rather than teachers' CL (e.g., Elliott et al., 1999; Hu and Gu, 2012). Particularly, examining the teacher as the leader in CL has often been underplayed in research on curriculum decentralisation (e.g., Jenkins and Pfeifer, 2012; Law et al., 2007).

In China, influenced by the implementation of the new curriculum reform (NCR) and the three-level (national, provincial, and school level) curriculum management policy initiated in 2001, the patterns of management have changed (Huang & Zhu, 2015). Consequently, teachers have assumed the roles of designer, developer, and leader in curriculum development and have been granted more authority in curriculum decision-making (Guo, 2013). In Chinese context, teaching research group (TRG) leaders are the front-line teachers (Li, 2013) who assumed the role of CL and are in charge of both teaching and research activities (Qian & Walker, 2013). Actually, their autonomy in decision-making is constrained and rather limited (Chang & Li, 2007), which is in contrast to the original intention of the three-level curriculum management policy (Li & Huang, 2012).

An increasing number of studies have examined CL in the Chinese context (e.g., Chen, 2009; Lu, 2011). However, most of the relevant research on CL has focused on examining principals' CL, whilst there is a lack of empirical investigation into teachers' engagement in CL (e.g., Hu & Gu, 2012; Wang & Kang, 2013). To address aforementioned research gap, this research focuses on TRG leaders' engagement in CL to explore how teachers enact the CL role and the challenges they face in so doing. The study's contribution to the literature is that the principals' perspectives of TRG leaders' engagement in CL are provided.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of CL

CL is defined as a shared phenomenon that involves taking initiatives at both macro-levels (e.g., school level) and micro-levels (e.g., classroom level) (Macpherson et al., 1998). It is composed of three constructs: "the images of curriculum held by people, the organisational arrangements and the social relationships among people" (Macpherson and Brooker, 2000: p. 70). In general, it can be de-

fined and depicted at the organisational level, classroom level, personal level, and social relationship level through integrating the above claims.

At the school level, CL is defined by its functions, which include vision building, culture building, resource allocation, and developing programmes or staff (Lee and Dimmock, 1999). At the classroom level, CL includes any initiative designed to improve teaching performance and learning outcomes (Macpherson et al., 1998). At the social relationship level, it refers to communication and interactions among the stakeholders within and outside schools (Wiles, 2009). Finally, at the individual level, CL reflects personal inherent qualities such as self-awareness, personal beliefs, and the knowledge, values, and attitudes the individual brings to the school context for organisational building (Elliott et al., 2005; Ylimaki, 2011).

Enacting CL is regarded as a key factor for school development, as it improves learning and teaching (DeMatthews, 2014). It also facilitates teacher collaboration and staff development (Copland and Knapp, 2006). In addition, individuals who are given the autonomy to enact CL are required to be competent in professional skills and to possess specialised knowledge thus ultimately enhances the continual professional development of these individuals (Chval et al., 2010).

2.2. The Concept of TRG Leader

The Ministry of Education (MoE) first defined the role of TRG leader (*jiaoyan zuzhang*) in the Secondary School Teaching Research Group Rulebook (draft) in 1957. This emphasised that a TRG leader is not the director of administrative affairs (*xingzheng ganbu*) who is "directly responsible to the president," "in charge of all administration" (Price, 2005: p. 148), and is positioned between the principal, the director of studies (*jiaodao zhuren*), and teachers. TRG leaders are always the backbone (*gugan*) teachers who have both management and leadership skills (Zhang, 2007).

Some scholars have described TRG leaders as TRG heads (i.e., Qian, Walker, & Yang, 2017). To some extent, TRG leaders are "equivalent to heads of department in British schools" (Li and Edwards, 2014) who have formal responsibilities and are accountable for teaching, learning, and staff (Dinham, 2007). However, in the Western context, a head of department (HoD) is regarded as an academic middle manager (Kallenberg, 2007), whereas in China, TRG leaders are not middle-level leaders (Li, 2013). Although TRG leaders are not middle managers, their job includes managing teachers and dealing with the daily affairs of teachers (Li, 2013). Gao and Hu (2016) articulated their roles as follows:

> TRG leaders are outstanding teachers, organisers, and subject leaders. Outstanding teachers mean that TRG leaders set examples for other teachers through their profession and high level researching capability. Organiser means TRG leaders take responsibility for achieving organisational goals and ensuring the running of organisations. Subject leaders mean TRG leaders are in charge of promoting teachers continual professional development

through their expertise.

In sum, TRG leaders are backbone teachers whose roles are to maintain relations between the school and teachers and to take responsibility for teaching practice, team management, and leading group members.

2.3. Teacher Engagement in CL

Under curriculum decentralisation, the locus of CL has recently been transferred from traditional managerial roles to teachers (Koh et al., 2014). Specifically, teachers are empowered with the authority to make both administrative and instructional decisions at the school level, such as planning goals (DeMatthews, 2014), creating a shared vision (Nashashibi & Watters, 2003), building the school climate (Ylimaki & Brunner, 2011), and allocating resources (Lin & Lee, 2013). At the classroom level, teachers are responsible for taking instructional initiatives that involve setting goals for curriculum development (Handler, 2010), tailoring teaching resources (Wiles, 2009), organising instructional activities and maintaining management in the classroom (Macpherson & Brooker, 2000), and conducting assessments of teaching quality and academic outcomes (Wiles, 2009). At the social relationship level, teachers take responsibilities of maintaining relations with stakeholders (e.g., superiors, subordinates, parents, students, other schools, or the local community) inside and outside schools (Cummings, 2011). At the personal level, enacting CL reflects teachers' professional identities, such as their feelings of empowerment (Macpherson et al., 1996) and awareness of the need for ongoing professional development (Cummings, 2011). Moreover, teachers who take on the CL role have substantial skills and knowledge of teaching and research (Handler, 2010), and they are equipped with communication skills and management experience (Wiles, 2009). They should also exhibit professional ethics, such as open mindedness, willingness to take on responsibilities and high levels of commitment (Norris et al., 2002).

Empowering teachers to enact CL plays a pivotal role in enhancing school culture and maintaining security and stability (Ylimaki & Brunner, 2011), which contributes more broadly to school development (Ho, 2010). Second, involving teachers in CL implementation plays a crucial role in improving teaching quality (Cummings, 2011), academic achievement (Xiong & Lim, 2015) and even the implementation of educational reform (Wan & Wong, 2006). Third, teachers' engagement in CL strengthens relations with key stakeholders, thus helping to build a positive school climate (Gabriel & Farmer, 2009). Finally, teachers who are empowered are afforded respect and are recognised when they exhibit professionalism, expertise, competence, personal qualities and professional values (Patterson & Patterson, 2004).

However, in China, there is a low level of participation for taking on the CL role (Wang, 2008). At the school and classroom levels, teacher's autonomy has been restricted by the three-level curriculum management policy (Hu & Gu, 2012). At the social relationship level, there is less collaboration between teach-

ers and their peers (Fu & Yu, 2014). At the personal level, some teachers have a low level of responsibility when taking CL initiatives (Lin & Feng, 2007). This results in an inactive and uncooperative work environment that hinders the implementation of CL.

In sum, although research on CL in the Chinese context exists, very few studies focus on TRG leaders' CL role and provide empirical data (Li, 2010; Wang & Kang, 2013). Most importantly, scholars have identified that earlier Chinese studies have only critically evaluated findings from Western studies rather than provide their own authentic data (Hu & Gu, 2012). Building upon these findings, this project is designed to understand principals' perspectives of TRG leaders' engagement in CL in mainland China. Two research questions (RQs) addressed are as follows:

RQ1: What is principals' understanding of TRG leaders' engagement in CL?
RQ2: What challenges arise when empowering TRG leaders?

3. Methods

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study investigating principals' conceptions of TRG leaders' engagement in CL in secondary schools in China. To answer the two RQs, a qualitative study was conducted since it is appropriate for examining phenomena in depth in the real-life context (Taylor et al., 2016).

3.1. Sample

In the pilot study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two principals from two target secondary schools (included in the 10 target secondary schools in the main study) in Taiyuan City, China, in 2016.

In the main study, 10 interviews were conducted with principals and aimed to provide a deeper understanding of TRG leaders' engagement in CL. The principals were selected from 10 schools which represent the current pattern of education facilities in China (see Table 1).

A sample size of 10 is usually considered sufficient for yielding fruitful and applicable results among a homogenous population (Sandelowski, 1995). All principals had previously served as a TRG leader. Without any consideration of gender, background or academic results, principals agreed to participate in the interviews after accepting an open invitation (see Table 2).

Table 1. Classification of school and the participants.

School Characteristics			School Code	Principal
State-run Schools	Key Schools	Provincial Key School	S1	P1
		City/Local Key Schools	S2, S3, S4, S5	P2, P3, P4, P5
	Non-key Schools	Ordinary schools	S6, S7, S8, S9	P6, P7, P8, P9
Private School			S10	P10
Note. S = School, P-Principal				

Table 2. Principals' demographic information.

Code	School	Gender		Experience of Being TRG Leader			Qualification	
		Male	Female	>10 years	5 - 10 years	<5 years	Master	Bachelor
P1	S1		√	√				√
P2	S2		√		√			√
P3	S3		√			√		√
P4	S4		√		√			√
P5	S5		√			√	√	
P6	S6	√		√				√
P7	S7		√		√			√
P8	S8		√			√	√	
P9	S9	√		√				√
P10	S10	√		√				√
n	10	3	7	4	3	3	2	8

Note. P = Principal; S = School.

3.2. Instrument

The research instrument comprised of an individual semi-structured interview that aimed to elicit in-depth and detailed responses (Turner III, 2010). Each interview lasted for approximately 40 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. The questions were designed based on a theoretical framework related to teachers' engagement in CL and were revised based on the pilot study. There were two sections of interview questions. The first group of questions focused on collecting demographic information from participants (i.e., gender, experience of being a TRG leader and qualification). The second group of questions explored participants' perceptions of TRG leaders' engagement in CL across three categories: 1) general understanding of CL; 2) characteristics of TRG leaders engaging in CL; 3) challenges arising from participating in CL. Field notes were written after the interviews to enable the researcher to understand what had been observed in the first place and elicit further information during the interviews (Emerson et al., 2011).

As a supplementary source of data, 10 pieces of documents comprising job descriptions of TRG leaders were also collected and analysed. These helped verify the convergence of findings from different sources (Bowen, 2009).

3.3. Analysis

An interpretivist paradigm was adopted to guide data analysis and facilitate an understanding of the differences between individuals (Dudovskiy, 2016). To obtain an in-depth meaning, content analysis of the data was conducted (Drisko & Maschi, 2016).

This involved three steps. The first step involved establishing and developing coding categories based on both the relevant literature and the interview and document data. Table 3 shows the categories and sample quotations.

Table 3. Categories and sample quotations.

Coding Category		Sample Quotation
Category	Subcategories	
Enacting CL at the Classroom Level	Characteristics	*TRG leaders are responsible for carefully reading the curriculum requirements.* (*DJD*2)
	Difficulties	*TRG leaders have no autonomy in making any changes to textbook selection for the national curriculum.* (*P4*)

Note. P = Principal; DJD = Document of Job Description.

The second step included testing the accuracy of the coding categories, in which a peer review was conducted by an individual possessing a doctoral degree in educational leadership. A consensus was achieved following a discussion of the coding and categorisation of the themes. The resulting Kappa value of 0.85 can be regarded as satisfactory, as Krippendorff's alpha (Kalpha > .70) is the standard reliability statistic for content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013). In the third step, all the interview data, field notes, and documents were coded. NVivo11 was used to organise, record, interpret and retrieve the categorised data (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). Although the choice of a specific geographic site limited their generalisability, the findings may have implications in other contexts. The primary aim of this research was not to generalise the findings but to provide detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation.

4. Results

4.1. The Conception of CL

Regarding the conception of CL, nine out of ten principals acknowledged that they had heard this term, but they could not define it exactly as it was still new to them. As P3 stated,

> I am not quite familiar with this term, although I have heard it in the teacher training programme in Shanghai two years ago. It is a new term presented in Chinese basic education recently. However, there is less theory related to enacting CL in Chinese context. (P3)

Although participants could not define this term explicitly, it is interesting to notice that all could describe CL when paraphrasing it into the construct 'curriculum matters': namely, taking curriculum initiatives such as setting curriculum goals, conducting curriculum evaluation, or ensuring a high-quality curriculum. P4 described that:

> CL refers to being with the power to lead, guide, and organise curriculum implementation and curriculum development. (P4)

In general, principals' understanding of CL derived not from the theory or the literature but from their own experiences and understanding.

4.2. Initiatives Taken When Enacting CL

Dimension 1: *Make decisions at the school level*

The findings indicated that TRG leaders not only make administrative decisions, but also make instructional decisions at the school level.

In terms of administrative decisions, only three principals indicated that TRG leaders have limited autonomy in relation to school affairs, such as conducting performance appraisals of teachers, or conveying teachers' difficulties to superiors. On the other hand, concerning making instructional decisions, three out of ten principals and the job description documents showed that TRG leaders were responsible for taking instructional initiatives, especially for the school-based curriculum, such as leading the direction of the curriculum and designing a feasible work plan for curriculum development. However, principals acknowledged that the power of TRG leaders was severely constrained. P3 noted that:

> TRG leaders must follow the guidance of the three-level curriculum management system when taking on the CL role, which means they have no power at all. (P3)

In sum, the principals' views demonstrated that TRG leaders are responsible for becoming involved in administrative and instructional affairs but lack power and autonomy in this role.

Dimension 2: *Implement instructional initiatives at the classroom level*

Regarding implementing initiatives at the classroom level, the findings can be categorised into: making instruction decisions for the national curriculum, implementing initiatives for the school-based curriculum, and undertaking teaching and research activities.

First, regarding making instructional decisions for the national curriculum, all principals affirmed that TRG leaders have no power, as all the curriculum initiatives implemented by TRG leaders must follow the curriculum standards set by the MoE. Specifically, TRG leaders cannot make any change to class hours, teaching content, and textbook selection. P8 added that:

> The MoE makes a list of publishers for the local educational department. Then, the local Bureau of Education selects the textbooks for local schools. Even schools have no rights to tailor the textbooks; how can TRG leaders choose the materials they want? (P8)

Meanwhile, findings from the job description documents showed that TRG leaders are expected to carefully read and familiarise themselves with the instructions stipulated in the national curriculum standards (e.g., DJD4 and DJD7).

Second, regarding TRG leaders' power to make decisions for the school-based curriculum, seven out of ten principals stated that TRG leaders have more autonomy than they do for the national curriculum at the curriculum planning stage. TRG leaders can make instructional plans and select teaching materials in accordance with the learning context. P6 stated that:

TRG leaders are responsible for guiding teachers and the Lesson Preparation Group in designing the teaching schedule, arranging class hour distributions, selecting teaching materials, and organising quizzes or examinations. (P6)

In terms of taking initiatives at the curriculum implementation stage, all principals acknowledged that TRG leaders have substantial autonomy in classroom teaching. P9 stated that:

TRG leaders can decide the teaching content for the school-based curriculum. For example, if teachers have interests in classical literature, they can give lectures on Tao Te Ching. (P9)

In the same vein, the job description documents also demonstrated that TRG leaders have more power for the school-based curriculum. For instance, TRG leaders have autonomy for making instructional plans, adjusting the teaching process, and organising examinations (e.g., DJD4 and DJD7).

Third, TRG leaders have more power when undertaking teaching and research activities such as organising meetings to discuss and solve problems in teaching (P3, P6), holding workshops to share teaching theory or practice (P1, P2), organising peer class observations to evaluate teaching performance (P8, P10). Similarly, findings from all the job description documents demonstrated that TRG leaders are responsible for guiding, organising, and conducting research activities (DJD3and DJD7).

Overall, principals stated that the autonomy of TRG leaders in taking instructional initiatives mainly depends on the type of curriculum. TRG leaders have more power for the school-based curriculum than for the national curriculum.

Dimension 3: *Implement initiatives at the social relationship level*

Enacting CL at the social relationship level involves building and maintaining relations with stakeholders within and outside the school.

First, in terms of relationships with superiors, nine out of ten principals stated that TRG leaders maintain relations with principals, deputy principals, the Teaching and Research Centre, and the Office of Academic Affairs. In particular, TRG leaders primarily communicate with the deputy principals and other administrators rather than the principals. P5 noted that:

TRG leaders always go to the deputy principal who is in charge of curriculum matters. They seldom communicate directly with the principal unless there is something urgent. (P5)

However, the findings from several interviews indicated that there was insufficient support from the superiors, which resulted in TRG leaders becoming more inactive. P2 explained the following:

I am willing to support our TRG leaders. However, my power is also constrained. For example, I seldom encourage teachers to attend teacher training outside the school, since there are many regulations and procedures

that need to be operated. (P2)

Second, regarding relations with subordinates, the findings from all the interviews and job descriptions documents demonstrated that TRG leaders have close relationships with their peer group through mentoring, sharing, and discussing instructional issues. P7 indicated that:

Every month, we hold a meeting and organise teachers to share teaching experiences and to solve problems in teaching. (P7)

However, the findings also indicated that the work environment makes TRG leaders feel unmotivated when enacting CL. P1 stated that:

Although elderly teachers are qualified to take on the CL role or support TRG leaders' work, they do not want to pursue further development and are tired of taking too many responsibilities. (P1)

Third, concerning relations with stakeholders outside the school, findings mainly showed that there are difficulties in building relations with stakeholders. Some principals explained that TRG leaders' initiatives for developing the school-based curriculum are not always supported by parents since they do not accept courses or activities unrelated with the national curriculum (P2, P5, and P7).

In conclusion, TRG leaders have autonomy in maintaining relationships with stakeholders within and outside the school, although this in practice this gives rise to several challenges.

Dimension 4: *Exercise CL at the personal level*

The findings related to teachers' engagement in CL encompass three domains: TRG leaders' awareness in enacting CL, knowledge and skills related to exercising CL, and their professional ethics when enacting CL.

First, in terms of TRG leaders' awareness, six out of ten principals stated that TRG leaders lack awareness and are inactive in implementing CL. P2 indicated that:

Taking on the CL role is seen as a high-paying and low-return job according to some TRG leaders' viewpoints. (P2)

Second, concerning TRG leaders' knowledge and skills in relation to enacting CL, most TRG leaders lack the knowledge or skills (six principals). In particular, some have no or only minimal communication or management skills. P4 opined that:

Our TRG leaders do not know how to communicate with both the subordinates and the superiors effectively. Thus, some important information might be missed during communication. (P4)

Third, regarding the professional ethics of enacting CL, most principals (eight principals) emphasised that TRG leaders need to develop personal qualities such as responsibility, persistence, integrity, accountability, and fairness. Similarly,

the job description document stated that TRG leaders should be responsible and dedicated to taking on the CL role (DJD5, DJD7).

In conclusion, the findings demonstrated that TRG leaders are empowered to be in charge of curriculum matters; however, in practice, their so-called authority is limited.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore principal's perceptions of TRG leaders' engagement in CL. It was found that TRG leaders have limited autonomy and are inactive and incapable of assuming CL roles. The following discussion of the findings will be organised around the two RQs.

The first RQ explored the principals' conception of TRG leaders' engagement in CL. In general, CL is a concept new to principals, who had some understanding of CL only when it was integrated into the term *curriculum matters.* In comparison, the term CL is not new in Western studies, as it was first presented by Passow in 1952, and it has attracted the attention of researchers since 1990 (Yin, 2012).

Specifically, principals' conception comprised four layers. First, concerning TRG leaders' engagement in CL at the school level, the findings showed that TRG leaders' have limited autonomy when making administrative and instructional decisions such as providing suggestions. This partially echoes the findings of previous Chinese studies, which have found that teachers can offer comments and suggestions regarding school development (e.g., Wang & Zheng, 2013). However, the findings are in contrast to the findings of both the Chinese and Western literature describing TRG leaders' administrative responsibilities as school culture building (Chen, 2009; Nashashibi & Watters, 2003), vision building (DeMatthews, 2014; Fu & Yu, 2014), resource allocation (Cummings, 2011; Lin & Lee, 2013), and modifying the school structure (Leithwood et al., 2004). This may be because the findings from earlier Chinese studies were mainly derived from Western studies (Hu & Gu, 2012).

Regarding TRG leaders' engagement in CL at the classroom level, TRG leaders' instructional initiatives therefore depend partly on the type of curriculum, namely, whether the curriculum is the national curriculum or the school-based curriculum. The principals in this study reported that TRG leaders have more autonomy for making decisions for the school-based curriculum, such as making decisions for the syllabus, teaching plans, and textbook selection. This finding partially supports the results of both Chinese and Western studies, which have shown that teachers are in charge of curriculum planning and the selection of teaching sources (Handler, 2010; Wang & Zheng, 2013). Furthermore, the findings indicated that TRG leaders are in charge of implementing teaching and research initiatives. In this regard, both the Chinese and Western literature identified specific evaluation initiatives such as assessing teaching quality (Zheng & Guo, 2010), reviewing learning achievements (Wiles, 2009), and reflecting on curriculum activities (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000).

Third, regarding enacting CL at the social relationship level, the findings mainly indicated that TRG leaders liaise with the superiors such as deputy principals, and administrators of the Teaching and Research Centre when reflecting on problems and communicating issues related teaching or research. Notably, descriptions of relations with superiors in the current research were more detailed than the depictions in both the Chinese and Western literature. This could be because previous studies primarily focused on examining the factors influencing teachers' enactment of CL rather than exploring the detailed responsibilities (Moreeng & Tshelane, 2014). It was also evident that TRG leaders take more responsibility for building relationships with colleagues, which involves sharing experiences, solving problems, and even supporting the continuing professional development of peers. This finding echoes the results of earlier Chinese and Western studies, which have shown that teacher leaders are devoted to promoting peer collaboration (e.g., Hu & Gu, 2012; Ye & Zhu, 2013). However, in Western studies the detailed responsibilities are disparate from the findings of the current research. For instance, Western studies also found that the responsibilities included encouraging peers, evaluating teachers' performances, and modelling exemplary behaviours or practices for teachers (Britt et al., 2001; Nashashibi & Watters, 2003). The explanation for these differences might lie in contextual factors, as these can affect the perceptions of incumbent leaders (Emrich, 1999).

Finally, regarding leaders enacting CL, TRG leaders were found to be competent in terms of professionalism, as they exhibit foresight regarding curriculum development and possess extensive knowledge and teaching experience. The findings of both Chinese and Western studies are similar, as they show that teachers possess substantial knowledge and instructional skills in relation to curriculum design, curriculum implementation, curriculum evaluation, and research ability (Fu & Yu, 2014; Handler, 2010).

Regarding the second RQ, in terms of the challenges of empowering TRG leaders, there are four issues. First, TRG leaders seldom participate in making administrative decisions at the school level. This echoes the result of Hu and Gu (2012), who found that more than 60% of teachers are not sufficiently empowered to make administrative decisions. A hierarchical management continues to dominate most Chinese school systems; thus, teachers are not given sufficient powers to enact CL (Wang & Zheng, 2013). This situation diverges from that described in Western studies, where teachers are afforded more power in relation to building a school culture (Nashashibi & Watters, 2003), developing a shared vision (DeMatthews, 2014), allocating resources (Cummings, 2011), and modifying the school structure (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Second, TRG leaders still have no/minimal autonomy when making instructional decisions for the national curriculum. Particularly, TRG leaders cannot make any change to the teaching content, instructional plans and textbook selection as these items are regulated according to the national curriculum standards.

This finding is congruent with those of both Chinese studies and Western studies, which have found that principals primarily have the power to make instructional decisions (e.g., Chang & Li, 2007; Elliott et al., 1999). This also echoes Hu and Gu's (2012) statement that there is a compliance with the national curriculum standards in the Chinese basic education context. By contrast, western studies mention compliance with curriculum standards (e.g., Macpherson & Brooker, 2000), they do not specifically state whether they are referring to the national curriculum. Thus, different educational contexts and different educational systems have a clear impact on teachers' perceptions and the implementation of school policies and teaching initiatives (Cummings, 2011).

Third, TRG leaders do not receive sufficient support from their superiors which demotivates them from taking on the CL role. The vertical management system in Chinese schools results in a situation whereby teachers enact the leadership role but with minimal support from principals (Hu & Gu, 2012). Conversely, in the Western context, teachers actively collaborate with administrators across the school, although administrators do not always support teachers (Chval et al., 2010). Furthermore, TRG leaders are also faced with challenges when building relationships with their subordinates, as some teachers, especially elderly teachers, are not motivated to participate in activities and do not want to pursue further development. This finding partially aligns with those of Dong (2008) and Xiong and Zhong (2010), who have found that laziness and a lack of enthusiasm among teachers created an uncooperative atmosphere. However, the reasons for this phenomenon in the current study differ from those identified in previous Chinese studies. By contrast, there is active interaction and collaboration among teachers in the Western literature (e.g., Ritchie et al., 2007), which facilitates professional communication.

Fourth, TRG leaders are rather unprofessional when taking on the CL role. Similar to this finding, previous Chinese studies have also indicated that teachers are less enthusiastic about taking on leadership responsibilities, as they view themselves as followers when it comes to decision-making (Lu, 2011). Similarly, Western studies have also shown that teachers have less motivation and interest when it comes to making decisions (e.g., Handler, 2010). Furthermore, TRG leaders are not equipped with communication skills or management experience. This supports the findings of Chang and Li's (2007) that teachers are incapable of enacting CL due to weaknesses in professional ability. By contrast, the Western literature has indicated that teacher leaders have substantial knowledge and skills in curriculum management and personal communication (Wiles, 2009). Considerable research attention has been paid to understanding CL since the 1990s (Elliott et al., 1999), which has enabled teachers to become familiar with the conception and implementation of CL. The findings of the current research also demonstrated that TRG leaders lack professional ethics when taking on the CL role, as they are irresponsible, aggressive, selfish, and lack persistence. This phenomenon aligns with the contention that teachers lack a sense of responsibil-

ity (Lin & Feng, 2007) and are selfish (Ye & Zhu, 2013). By contrast, teacher leaders in the Western context are identified as responsible (Jones & Anderson, 2001), caring, positive (Cummings, 2011), and empathic and responsive (Nashashibi & Watters, 2003). Issues of professional ethics have been discussed and criticised by theorists and practitioners since 1915 in the Western educational context (Campbell, 2000). This partly explains why professional ethics is an immature research area in China and why problems remain in the development of ethics among teachers.

6. Conclusion and Implications

To recapitulate, this study explored 10 principals' perceptions of TRG leaders' engagement in CL. These principals described the characteristics of TRG leaders and the challenges faced in taking on the CL role.

As noted previously, although considerable research attention has been paid to understanding CL, the Western literature primarily focuses on investigating the principals' role rather than the teacher's as the leader in CL (Law et al., 2007). Particularly, few empirical studies of CL in secondary schools in the Asian context have been reported in the Western literature (Lee & Dimmock, 1999). Furthermore, TRG leaders' responsibilities and accountabilities when it comes to teaching, learning, and staff are equivalent to those of HoDs in the Western context. Thus, the findings of this research not only conform to the international trend towards curriculum decentralisation, but also provide an in-depth understanding of teacher leaders or HoDs involvement in CL from the principals' perspective. As Cummings (2011) argued, the conceptualisation of principals has an impact on leadership structures.

However, there is currently insufficient empirical data in Chinese studies concerning how teachers enact CL, as many previous studies offer a critical evaluation of Western studies rather than providing their own authentic data (Hu & Gu, 2012). This empirical research therefore contributes to filling this research gap in earlier Chinese studies. In particular, the findings related to the challenges will direct researchers' attention towards probing issues related to granting teachers greater autonomy. Furthermore, addressing issues from the principals' perspectives will help inform school leaders how to grant such autonomy, encourage them to communicate more with TRG leaders to understand their needs and difficulties in enacting CL, and invite to reconsider the initiatives they use to motivate TRG leaders. The findings regarding the lack of awareness, related knowledge, and skills in enacting CL as well as the low level of professional ethics highlight these as important areas that also need to be addressed. Moreover, in accordance with the NCR policy and the three-level curriculum management policy, which aims to give teachers a greater role in decision-making (Huang & Zhu, 2015), this research will encourage decision makers to refine and improve policies related to teacher empowerment, thus endowing schools, principals, and teachers with greater autonomy and ultimately facilitat-

ing the implementation of NCR.

However, this small-scale study applied a qualitative approach to elicit principals' perceptions. Thus, all the phenomenon relating to TRG leaders' engagement in CL in secondary schools cannot be generalised to the Chinese context. Future research should be conducted with a larger sample of principals and TRG leaders and could also be extended to other districts in China, such as Beijing or Shanghai where educational development is more advanced. Thompson stated various sampling strategies can be adopted to ensure a high degree of representativeness. Therefore, future research could explore the conception of TRG leaders' engagement in CL from other stakeholders, such as the administrators, peer teachers or parents. Moreover, future studies could make a comparison of the autonomy of TRG leaders at both a local level and a global level, which will ultimately contribute to enhancing the current understanding of CL in the international domain.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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