Preschool Veteran Principals’ Perceptions of Leadership

In Hong Kong Early Childhood Education

A doctoral thesis presented

by

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to

The School of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

March 2018
Abstract

This doctoral thesis explored six preschool principals’ perceptions of leadership in early childhood education in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government implemented a series of educational reforms in 2000, introduced the Pre-Primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) during the 2007-2008 school term, and planned to implement a free kindergarten education policy beginning in 2017-2018. Since 2000, the Education Bureau (EDB) has been executing a Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) to assess the current quality of preschool services. Some researchers point out that Hong Kong preschool educators are struggling with a heavy workload as they try to meet the QAI requirements (M. N. C. Wong & Li, 2010). In addition, market choice ideas stemming from the PEVS are leading some parents to view themselves as consumers; this will create inequality of choice among parents (W. K. G. Yuen, 2007). The primary research question for this study was: How do experienced principals in early childhood education in Hong Kong perceive their role as preschool leaders? A qualitative study using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was conducted to explore six preschool principals’ perceptions of leadership. Four superordinate themes, Difficult decisions as leaders, Concerns about early childhood education quality, Working with parents, and Characteristics of preschool principals, were identified. The findings revealed that the participants’ leadership behaviors were aligned with Bass’ (1998) transformational leadership theory and that preschool principals encountered challenges from stakeholders in society.

Keywords: Leadership, early childhood education, preschool, preschool principal, transformational leadership
Acknowledgment

The pursuit of this doctorate has been a long journey in my academic life. It would have been impossible to complete this mission without certain people’s support, assistance, and guidance. Foremost of all, I would like to give thanks to God for His mercy and grace that gave me the health and perseverance to step through this commitment. Besides that, thank you God for giving me wisdom and patience when I didn't know how continue to write.

I also thank the professors at Northeastern University, Dr. Sandy Nickel, Dr. Margaret Gorman, and Dr. Kelly Conn, for their guidance and comments on my doctoral proposal and thesis. I especially give big thanks to Dr. Nickel, my academic mentor, who has given me valuable knowledge from her expertise on aspects of leadership. She always offered patience, encouragement, and suggestions about how to link the findings to theory: she guided my work in a clear direction. I am deeply thankful that I could receive her support again when she returned from her sick leave. I have received support throughout this entire study.

I wish to thank my lovely sisters and colleagues, Dr. Grace Lam, Dr. Dorothy Hui, Dr. Elaine Cheng, Dr. Joyce Ho, Dr. Sunnan Yueng, Ms. Etta Chaing, and Ms. Ann Ly. We met and became best friends at the Education University of Hong Kong. Some of them are also pursuing doctoral degrees. We had learned about exchanging academic professional experiences, got together to learn to go through different kinds of theoretical frameworks and methodologies, and also supported each other to never give up the study. Now, some of them already achieved their doctorate. It is so meaningful that we could strive together for that.

I am also grateful to work with a group of survivors, Dr. Holly Chung, Dr. Daya Choy, Dr. Rebecca Ong, Dr Forrest Chan, Dr Benz Choklap, Dr. Miguel, and Mr. David Best: we were
the first Hong Kong cohort at NEU. After we finished our coursework at the same time, we tried our best to have a gathering every year, we shared our thesis progression, we shared our changes in these years, and we encouraged each other to be successful in this survival game. I am so glad to have this group of classmates. We always felt wonderful when one of us could succeed on the oral defense.

Last but not least, I thank my husband Benny and my sons Long Ching and Long In, for their understanding, patience, and encouragement -- especially Long In, who helped me by taking up our household work when he was 9 years old during my first year of study. He is 14 years old now. I am blessed with them, despite the challenges of changing my job and moving from Hong Kong to Sydney this year. I have deep thanks for my family’s love and care during my thesis final stage. This study experience has widened my knowledge, revealed my limitations, and led me to know how to contribute to the early childhood education field.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Hong Kong early childhood education has changed significantly in recent years. In 2000 the Hong Kong Government promoted a series of education reforms, then the Pre-Primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) was introduced, and currently a free kindergarten education policy is being launched. These educational reforms sought to enhance preschool by providing a curriculum framework so they could implement a child-centered approach for learning (Education Commission, 2010). The education reforms would lead preschool principals to be aware of how their school could promote a high-quality environment for young children. On the other hand, some researchers revealed that preschool educators are facing a dilemma between promoting quality early childhood service to meet the government requirements and satisfying parents’ needs with academic programs for young children (Fung, 2009; Rao & Li, 2009).

Do the preschool principals apply any leadership or strategies to meet the educational change? There are few research studies that examine preschool principals’ leadership in early childhood education in Hong Kong (C. W. Chan, 2014; Ho, 2012; K. S. T. Wong, 2006). How do Hong Kong preschool principals interpret their leadership, and what kinds of leadership styles exist within their community? The statement of problem and significance, positionality statement, purpose and research question, and the theoretical framework of transformational leadership are discussed in this chapter.

Definition of Terms

Preschool. Preschool is a place that provides early childhood education for children aged from 0 to 8. It may be called a child care center, day care center, kindergarten, or prekindergarten and may provide different arrangements and services for children of those ages
in different countries (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2014). In Hong Kong, the terms used for preschool include half-day or whole-day kindergarten for children from 3-6, whole-day preschool and nursery for children from 2-6, and crèches for children from 0-2.

**Preschool principal.** A preschool principal is a head, deputy, director, or supervisor of a school in the early childhood setting (Carr, Johnson, & Corkwell, 2009). In Hong Kong, a preschool principal is the head of a preschool. He or she must have earned a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and a certificate in kindergarten principalship. She or he can supervise preschools such as kindergartens, whole-day preschools, and nurseries as well as crèches.

**Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS).** The Hong Kong government introduced PEVS during the 2007-2008 school year. PEVS provides a voucher to parents of children from 3 to 6 years old that subsidizes part of their preschool fees (Education Bureau, 2017a). In the 2017-2018 school year, a new free quality kindergarten education policy will supersede PEVS (Education Bureau, 2017b).

**Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI).** QAI is a mechanism the Education Bureau uses to ensure preschools provide quality services. It includes school self-evaluations, external inspections, and finally the release of the preschool’s report to the public (Education Bureau, 2017c). As part of the QAI, preschools also need to implement a Quality Review (QR) each year (Education Bureau, 2017d).
Statement of Problem and Significance

Over the last few decades, preschool services in the Hong Kong educational system have been perceived as ineffective and in need of improvement. Some of these negative reports include: the curriculum was too structured, the curriculum was too intensely academic, and the majority of teachers and principals lacked professional training (Rao & Li, 2009). In 2006, the Hong Kong government introduced the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) to the field of early childhood education, which aims to help reduce the financial burden on parents, support professional development for teachers, and improve overall quality in education (W. K. G. Yuen, 2007). This educational reform also sought to enhance preschool to provide a curriculum framework so preschools could implement a child-centered approach for learning (Education Commission, 2010). Thus, many preschools have tried to change their school management and to upgrade preschool teachers’ qualifications. However, Fung (2009) indicated that preschool principals in Hong Kong are encountering a conflict between their attempts at educational reform and their satisfaction with parental choice, as parents are eager to acquire academic programs for their children.

Given the decades of deficiencies in preschool services (M. N. C. Wong & Li, 2010), the Hong Kong Government implemented a series of educational reforms beginning in 2000. For example, the Education Bureau published a comprehensive set of performance indicators in 2002 in order to provide a common standard for assessing early childhood education through the Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) in Hong Kong (Rao & Li, 2009). Morris and Williamson (2000) noted that in Hong Kong, “Kindergartens do not require their teacher to reach high academic standards or to be trained” (p. 59). The PEVS educational initiative implemented in
2007-2008 encouraged preschool principals to be aware of how their school could promote a higher quality environment for young children and their families. Under the PEVS reform, preschool teachers were required to upgrade from the Qualified Kindergarten Teacher Education Course certificate to the Early Childhood Education qualification, and preschool principals were required to upgrade their qualification from a certificate to a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education by the end of the 2011-2012 school year. Preschool principals were also required to finish the Principalship Certification Course (Education Bureau, 2007).

The majority of Hong Kong preschools not only have to fulfill the upgraded professional development requirements of the PEVS, but they also have to maintain their school quality. For example, QAI has increased transparency of the preschools’ quality, as the inspection results from each school are now uploaded to the Education Department’s website each year. These reveal the quality of the school and can be reviewed by the public (Education Bureau, 2017c). Hence, parents can understand the schools’ relative quality and then can choose the best preschool for their child.

In order to avoid failures being revealed to the community that would harm the school’s image, most of the preschools strive to provide appropriate development practices for children. However, M. N. C. Wong and Li (2010) found that preschools “had some uncertainties about the requirements of the QAI exercise” and that the “heavy workload that arose from the external evaluation posed great difficulties for all kindergartens” (p. 224). Additionally, M. N. C. Wong and Li (2010) indicated, “Staffs were nervous and worried because of the psychological burdens brought about by the QAI” (p. 224).
Hong Kong preschool principals face a number of impediments to providing improved educational opportunities for their students. One issue identified by Fung (2009) is the demand by parents and other external forces for a focus on an academic curriculum in preschools. Hong Kong parents are affected by high competition among potential students for entrance into primary schools, and they are eager for preschools to provide academic programs for their children that attest to their child’s academic abilities (Rao & Li, 2009).

Another issue that limits implementation of appropriate pedagogy in Hong Kong’s preschools is the attitude of many parents and teachers towards using playtime as an instructional tool. Research found that the perceptions of both adults and teachers about free-play and outdoor play has influenced children’s opportunity for physical play (Ashiabil, 2007). Indeed, preschool is a place where children learn through play, and is an important environment where they can enhance socialization skills. However, both Cheng (2004) and Leung (2011) found that most teachers and parents misunderstand how play assists the development of young children. Some teachers view play as a reward or a time for children to relax when they have finished the teacher-directed learning (Cheng, 2004).

The principal’s leadership is essential to student achievement (Bulris, 2009; Clark, 2009; Leithwood & Massey, 2010). Bulris (2009) found that a principal’s behavior and his or her positive perception of the school environment influences the school culture, as well as motivates teachers’ professional commitment. Successful educational leadership can improve school development by focusing on goals, motivating teachers’ work, and enhancing students’ learning (Leithwood & Massey, 2010). Carr et al. (2009) noted that the preschool principal supervises all aspects of the school and is directly involved in teachers’ classroom teaching. They also have
observed that preschool principals need to focus on promoting a school’s vision and achieving curriculum goals through supervising staff attitudes and skills to ensure quality service for young children. Without such practices, principals may have a negative effect on their school and staff.

Zeng and Zeng (2005) have indicated that poorly qualified administrators, including principals, may implement inappropriate practices in preschool programs. In addition, Ho (2010b) found that “more preschool teachers feel deprived in the process of curriculum and pedagogical decision making” and would show more willingness to involve themselves in school decision-making processes if they found their principals were more open minded in accepting their opinions (p. 619).

In both Western and Eastern countries, there are few research studies that examine preschool principals’ leadership in early childhood education (Aubrey, Godfrey, & Harris, 2013; CW Chan, 2014; K. S. T. Wong (2006) stated that research focusing on preschool principals’ leadership is limited and that there is “a long history of societal neglect of the importance of kindergarten education” (p. 192). Whitebook, Kipnis, Sakai, and Austin (2012) also mentioned that in the United States “only a few states articulate leadership competencies for early childhood educators that include engagement with the broader field and policy development and analysis” (p. 2). Leadership in early childhood education has been minimally researched around the world, and there is room for more exploration.

The studies that have been conducted consider topics such as the kinds of control principals exert and types of professional development for principals. Ho (2011) indicated that most Hong Kong preschool principals tend to control teachers’ behaviors, such as their dress code and tone of voice in teaching. In contrast CW Chan (2014) found that Hong Kong
preschool teachers think that their principals’ management styles encourage more empowerment and participation. Ng and Chan (2012) have stated that higher education institutions that partner with preschools for collaborative sharing, reflection, and research have had a positive effect on professional development and educational reform. Ng and Chan (2012) stated that Hong Kong preschool principals might change their views about leadership after professional training. An important question to consider is how do Hong Kong’s preschool principals describe their approaches to leadership and the actions they take?

In Hong Kong, there are 100 to 200 children enrolled in each preschool (Rao & Li, 2009). The preschools rarely set up middle management or subject teams so most of the preschool principals need to be in charge of the entire management of the school. Cahill (2009) stated that the role of the principal has a great impact on early childhood education quality. Waldron, McLeskey, and Redd (2011) stated that most principals play a key role in supporting school improvement activities and teacher development. Thus, the principal’s professional standards are crucial to helping lead staff to provide a quality preschool environment. At the same time, preschool needs to satisfy the requirements of the stakeholders, such as the school committees, parents, children, and the public, which is not an easy task for a principal. Thus, principals need to employ effective leadership to solve the conflicting requirements between providing quality service in preschool and the restrictions imposed by the community.

In recent years, British and Australian leaders in early childhood education have advised building relationships with stakeholders through empowering practitioner participation and knowledge sharing to improve quality standards (Murray & Clark, 2013). In Hong Kong, the Education Bureau published a very comprehensive set of Performance Indicators (PIs) to provide
a common standard for assessing early childhood education (Rao & Li, 2009). The PIs require school leaders to “work closely with staff, parents, and the community, and to establish an open and transparent management system to bring about continuous improvement and progress” (Education Bureau, 2002, p. 5). Therefore, many preschool principals have become aware of how to delegate leadership to their staff and encourage parents to join in school development. Recently a survey conducted by CW Chan (2014) found that over 40 percent of preschool teachers believe their school leaders have adopted empowerment and participation as leadership styles.

Research has found that cultural, social, and political contexts widely influence leaders’ values and beliefs, affecting how they lead their schools (K. S. T. Wong, 2006; Shin, Recchia, Lee, Lee, & Mullarkey, 2004; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). For instance, Ho (2012) stated, “Leaders in Chinese early childhood settings experience conflict over leadership roles, holding the traditional view that a leader should take responsibility” (p. 264). Ho (2012) also mentioned that some preschool principals still exert power and control while limiting teachers’ authority on decision-making in their teaching.

Indeed, research on leadership in preschool is still limited around the world (Aubrey et al., 2013; CW Chan 2014; Whitebook et al., 2012). This study interviewed a group of preschool principals to seek their views on their own leadership roles in Hong Kong early childhood education. The study will be beneficial to preschool principals in understanding possibilities for improving their leadership styles. The data and analyses may also have an impact on the public’s awareness of how vital leadership is in early childhood education. Finally, this study may
provide an opportunity for the stakeholders to review leadership in early childhood education through a research-based study.

**Positionality Statement**

According to Maher and Tetreault (1993, as cited in Parsons, 2008), “Positionality is a concept that acknowledges the complex and relational roles of race, class, gender, and socially constructed identifiers in being” (p. 1129). The purpose of this positionality statement is to present how my background has influenced my perspectives and biases in investigating leadership in early childhood education.

I was born and raised in Hong Kong and I had an opportunity to study for two years to be a Quality Kindergarten Teacher at Grantham College in 1992. The course was provided by the Hong Kong Education Department, which was the only organization providing preschool teacher training at that time. After that, I took a course in child care worker training at a vocational institution in order to fulfill the registration requirements of the Hong Kong Social Department. Then I went to Australia for further study and obtained a Bachelor of Education Studies (Early Childhood) degree from Southern Queensland in 2000 and a Master’s Degree in Early Childhood Education from Macquarie University in 2002.

In 2002-2016, I worked as a senior teaching fellow in the Department of Early Childhood Education at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd). Then the HKIEd was renamed the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) in June 2016, and my job title was changed to senior lecturer in 2017. Over the course of my work at HKIEd, I was seconded to take up the principalship of a lab preschool from 2007 to 2009. My responsibilities included center management, staff training, curriculum promotion, parent liaison, and supporting the pre-service
teachers’ practicum. Promotion of quality early childhood education was showcased through visits from local and overseas organizations. In 2009-2011, I participated in a government-funded project (University School Partnership Project) as a project consultant to help preschools improve their school-based curriculum.

During this time, I was a preschool principal and worked alongside three other principals in the government-funded University School Partnership Project. I discovered that preschool principals have different leadership characteristics and teachers are more-or-less influenced by the principals’ leadership to implement changes in teaching. My experiences have also offered insight into different leadership and communication strategies, as well as concern for different school cultures. Thus, my study was intended to gain a better understanding of preschool principals’ awareness of their leadership role in the development of their schools. My position is that if a preschool leader wants to provide quality programs, she or he must consider how to adopt leadership strategies that inspire teachers’ teaching skills and enhance children’s learning and development.

In addition, early childhood educators are currently striving to meet the PEVS requirements. One important consideration is how preschool principals can lead their subordinates to move forward to meet these quality standards. I investigated how early education principals perceive their role as leaders and how they describe the leadership actions they engage in.

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore preschool principals’ perceptions of leadership in early childhood education in Hong Kong. The central research question aimed to explore
preschool principals’ views on what leadership looks like in early childhood education in Hong Kong. More specifically, this study considered how principals see their own role as leaders in the PEVS educational reform. The research question is: How do experienced principals in early childhood education in Hong Kong describe their role as school leaders?

**Theoretical Framework**

James MacGregor Burns, an American historian and political scientist, presented the concept of transformational leadership in 1978. Following Burns, Bernard Bass conducted several empirical studies and then formulated the theory of transformational leadership in 1985 (Yukl, 2010). Bass (1998) defined transformational leaders by describing their impact on subordinates:

Who raised their awareness about issues of consequence, shifted them to higher-level needs, influenced them to transcend their own self-interests for the goal of the group or organization, and encouraged them to work harder than they originally had expected they would. (p. 29)

Transformational leadership emphasizes how to enhance subordinates’ awareness of the value of work and how to motivate them to assume more responsibility in achieving organizational goals (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Most preschool principals tend to be transformational leaders (Brownlee, Nailon, & Tickle, 2010; CW Chan 2014).

Under the PEVS educational reform beginning in 2007, it has been mandated that preschool principals and their staff provide quality services to young children (CW Chan, 2014). In fact, most preschool principals are willing to enhance teachers’ ability through providing in-house training and encouraging teachers to attend (Ng & Chan, 2012). This training not only
improves teachers’ capacity to provide quality services to children but professional development also might inspire teachers to achieve the school’s goals. For instance, C. W. Chan (2014) revealed that most preschool teachers found it beneficial to take a more active role in school affairs. As C. W. Chan (2014) pointed out, “Kindergarten principals have become more aware of the value of having shared visions, enhancing teachers’ self-efficacy, and promoting teacher collaboration and team-working in managing their schools” (p. 34).

Bass (1998) observed that one of the transformational leadership strategies is to “enhance follower commitment, and at the same time, serve to reduce employees’ feeling of stress” (p. 27). Yukl (2010) also noted that transformational leadership emphasizes that “emotional processes are as important as rational processes and symbolic action as important as instrumental behaviors” (p. 294). In recent years, many teachers have suffered under a heavy workload to meet the requirements for QAI and from attempts to provide a more child-centered curriculum (M. N. C. Wong & Li, 2010).

In the QAI, government inspectors employ a comprehensive set of PIs to evaluate a preschool’s quality (Ho, 2012). The evaluation includes interviewing the school’s stakeholders, like children, parents, and teachers. The teachers are encouraged to be involved in the school’s development, such as decision-making, planning, and implementation. Eventually, the school would receive the results of the performance description: excellent, good, acceptable, or unsatisfactory (M. N. C. Wong & Li 2010). The principals may need to engage in the styles of transformational leadership to inspire teachers’ teaching skills and to motivate teachers to perform at the highest standards in order to meet the Education Department’s QAI requirements. From the theoretical perspective of transformational leadership, a key question to consider is
whether Hong Kong preschool principals employ the four transformational leadership behaviors as they lead their teachers to provide appropriate programs to young children and to achieve a quality standard to meet the Government’s requirement.

Bass (1998) described the four transformational leadership behaviors as follows:

**Idealized influence (charismatic leadership).** Transformational leaders behave in ways that result in their being role models for their followers. The leaders are admired, respected, and trusted.

**Inspirational motivation.** Transformational leaders behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers’ work. Team spirit is aroused.

**Intellectual stimulation.** Transformational leaders inspire their followers to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways. Creativity is encouraged.

**Individualized consideration.** Transformational leaders pay special attention to each individual follower’s needs for achievement and growth by acting as a coach or mentor. Followers and colleagues are developed to successively higher levels of potential (pp. 5-6).

The above four behaviors are important to Hong Kong preschool principals as they cope with educational reform. With respect to the idealized influence behavior, Fung (2009) has mentioned that teachers encounter difficulties with parental expectations in implementing play-based curriculum. Principals may need to foster knowledge, attitudes, and skills by being a role model to support staff. That might help teachers acquire appropriate skills and confidence in teaching.
With respect to the inspirational motivation behavior, teamwork is essential in preschool. In particular, teachers are encouraged to implement the school development plan under the QAI (Ho, 2012).

With respect to the intellectual stimulation behavior, preschools need to plan how to deploy child-centered curriculum as an explicit arrangement to match the PEVS requirement (Cheng, 2006). Preschools may need to review and reframe their school’s curriculum each year. Therefore, it is necessary to empower teachers to be innovative and creative.

Last but not least, with respect to the individualized consideration behavior, teachers are under pressure to both implement quality curriculum and to face the QAI. Many preschool teachers are struggling with a heavy workload while they try to pass the QAI (L. H. Yuen, 2012). Preschool principals might also be finding it difficult but necessary to inspire teachers’ beliefs and emotional commitment as they cope with the drastic changes involved in educational reform.

Transformational leadership considers how leaders empower subordinates to become more aware of their own roles and responsibilities and how leaders foster a willingness by subordinates to involve themselves in organizational change. Brownlee et al. (2010) stated that the more leaders in preschool organizations empower staff to perform beyond expectations, the more likely they are to employ transformational leadership practices. Özaralli (2003) added that transformational leaders empower their subordinates and thereby enhance team members’ effectiveness and positive relationships in an organization.

Transformational leadership will provide a framework for this investigation of how principals are leading during the educational reform of preschools in Hong Kong.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is a very important service for young children’s development and their future learning (Brownlee et al., 2010). When childcare centers or kindergartens (preschools) are established, they should fulfill all the requirements and regulations provided by their local government.

A principal in preschool should lead the staff to develop appropriate cultural contexts, learning processes, and professional experiences for teachers in order to help children achieve lifelong learning. Preschool leaders ought to provide a quality program that takes into account the ways both the internal and external environment might affect their early childhood settings.

The literature shows that the role of preschool principal is complicated and that preschool principals face challenges both inside the school and outside from society (CW Chan, 2014; Whitebook et al., 2012). For instance, educational reform has created the QAI to assess the quality of preschools in Hong Kong. The results of the investigation of each preschool are posted on the Education Department's website (Education Bureau, 2015b), which allows parents more opportunities to understand each school’s standards. In other words, the requirements brought by educational reforms, parent expectations, and the Hong Kong cultural context can provide more specific or specially tailored educational settings for young children. Studies have found that cultural, social, and political contexts influence school leaders’ values and beliefs concerning the role of their leadership (Shin et al., 2004; K. S. T. Wong, 2006; Woodrow & Busch, 2008).

In considering early childhood education in Hong Kong, the following topics will be discussed in this literature review: early childhood education development in Hong Kong, recent
reform of early childhood education, quality early childhood education, Hong Kong preschool culture and parental expectations, and leadership and school principals.

**Early Childhood Education Development in Hong Kong**

Between roughly 1950 and 1990, parents enrolled their children in preschools as a means to pass qualifying examinations in order to gain admission to primary schools (Rao & Li, 2009). Rao and Koong (2000) stated that “The authority to determine, monitor and enforce standards in preschool services has rested with the government; the standards reflect minimum criteria for initial and continued registration of childcare centers and kindergartens” (p. 5).

During this time, the quality of preschool services was uneven and the salary for early childhood educators was low. This contributed to a poor public image of social services for decades. According to Cheng (2006), Hong Kong preschool programs are becoming too structured and are overloaded with paper work. In addition, preschools do not receive subsidies from the government for teacher salaries, thus greatly affecting the financial stability of these schools. As a result, principals are compelled to skimp on purchasing teaching materials and to hire less experienced staff at a lower salary or reduce the salary of experienced staff (W. K. G. Yuen, 2007). The teachers also lack professional training, resulting in a low percentage of qualified teachers who reach the preschool standards that are appropriate for the 21st century (Cheng, 2006; Fung, 2009; K. S. T. Wong, 2006).

Preschool services in Hong Kong have suffered for many years. However, since 2000, the Hong Kong Government has implemented a series of educational reforms. For instance, the Education Bureau published a very comprehensive set of performance indicators to provide a common standard for assessing early childhood education in Hong Kong (S. P. Chan & Wong,
The Hong Kong Education Department also tried to improve the ratio of teachers to students, planning to lower the ratio from 1:30 to 1:15 by 2004. (Rao & Li, 2009). B. Chan, Lee, and Choy (2009) also stated that the Hong Kong Education Department required all preschools to employ qualified teachers – those who finished a Certificate of Early Childhood Education – by the 2003 school year.

In 2006, the Government published the second edition of the *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum in Hong Kong*, which provided a curriculum framework so preschools could implement a child-centered approach (Education Commission, 2010). In the 2007-2008 school year, the government introduced the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS), which aims to subsidize parents for their children’s school fees as well as enhance teachers’ professional development to improve preschool quality (L. H. Yuen, 2012). The PEVS provides a subsidy of HK$16,000 per student per annum in 2007-2008 and up to HK$17,500 per student per annum in 2013-2014 (Education Bureau, 2015a), which can ease the financial burden on many families and give parents the opportunity to choose schools within their budget.

Under the PEVS, preschool teachers were required to upgrade their qualifications by earning a Certificate in Early Childhood Education by the end of the 2011-12 school year (Education Bureau, 2009). Early childhood principals were required to complete the Certificate of Early Childhood Education by 2005 and encouraged to complete a Bachelor’s of Early Childhood Education by 2012 (B. Chan et al., 2009).

Britto, Boller, and Yoshikawa (2011) stated that economic evidence highlights particularly high returns to early investment in human capital. The government’s increased involvement aims to enrich the quality of preschool education, and the efforts to improve the
professionalism of preschool education are appreciated by the community. However, preschool organizations are facing various challenges from the community as they cope with the PEVS requirements for quality improvement in their schools.

One purpose of the PEVS is to encourage schools to provide a child-centered curriculum that guides children to learn through play. In Hong Kong about 95 percent of children from 3 to 6 years old attend preschool programs (Rao & Li, 2009), and many parents are eager for their children to acquire language training, such as writing and speaking English in preschool (Cheng, 2006; Fung, 2009; Ho, 2010b). If a preschool wants to provide a more child-centered curriculum, it may need to reduce academic training to children. As a result, parents may not want to choose that preschool. Thus, W. K. G. Yuen (2007) had cautioned that the PEVS emphasis on market choice was leading some parents to view themselves as consumers. Therefore, parents’ expectations for what their children are learning also affects preschool principals’ leadership in Hong Kong.

Recent Educational Reform of Early Childhood Education

Both the PEVS and the QAI in Hong Kong are educational reforms that aim to improve preschool services by providing clearer guidance, direction, and strategy on what constitutes good quality early childhood education. The implementation of the PEVS has changed early childhood curriculum design and the professional development of early childhood teachers. Once the PEVS was introduced, preschools needed to decide how to deploy child-centered curricula as an explicit arrangement (Ho, 2010b).

M. N. C. Wong and Li (2010) found that the goal of the QAI for preschools was to ensure preschools’ quality would be achieved through a child-centered model, providing guidelines for
how to teach the preschoolers. The QAI results for each school are uploaded to the Education Department’s website each year, meaning that the public can review the QAI results. Therefore, S. P. Chan and Wong’s (2010) study indicated that most of the preschool principals strove to provide the appropriate development practices for children in order to avoid damaging the school’s image in the community.

In response to the school development and quality assurance initiatives, many preschool leaders seek advice from experts on how to improve their preschools’ teaching practices (Y. L. Li, 2010). Preschool leaders work to encourage staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning through the integration of research, theory, and practice for young children. According to H. Li, Ming, and Wong (2008), some preschool principals have changed the culture at their schools, such as by conducting more in-house teacher training and hiring substitute teachers in order to release teachers for professional training. Ng and Chan (2012) explained that higher education institutions have become important for professional development and educational reform by collaborating with preschools to create plans for sharing, reflection, and research.

Even though there has been professional support, preschool teachers have faced great challenges implementing the QAI (S. P. Chan & Wong, 2010). M. N. C. Wong and Li (2010) found that preschools “had some uncertainties about the requirements of the QAI exercise” (p. 224). They noted that the “heavy workload that arose from the external evaluation posed great difficulties for all three kindergartens,” and that “staff were nervous and worried because of the psychological burdens brought about by the QAI” (p. 227).

In addition, the PEVS changed the teachers’ pay scale to be based on market forces. This was a major setback and affected teacher income security (H. Li et al., 2008). Many issues were
made public, such as teacher pay-scale delinking, whole-day classes, parents feeling the amount of their subsidies was unfair, and heavy workloads threatening preschools (S. P. Chan & Wong, 2010). Due to the significant changes brought on by the PEVS, reactions have come from parents and the community as well as teachers. First, most recognize that the PEVS enhances teacher and principal qualifications by upgrading their professional development (H. Li et al., 2008). Second, many preschools have struggled with a heavy workload while attempting to pass the QAI (L. H. Yuen, 2012). A few years after the implementation of PEVS, some senior teachers quit their jobs. Thus schools lost experienced teachers who could implement a quality curriculum, and several preschools applied to withdraw from the scheme (2000 parents, 2011). This finding echoes M. N. C. Wong and Li’s (2010) study, which found staff at “kindergartens were nervous and worried because of the psychological burdens brought about by the QAI” (M. N. C. Wong & Li, 2010). This research revealed that most preschools were struggling with the government’s QAI, and preschool principals reacted by taking on larger leadership roles to help balance teaching workloads with administrative tasks to help teachers cope with the inspection.

Quality Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is a very important service for young children. In 2006, the government published the second edition of the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum in Hong Kong*, which provided a curriculum framework so preschools could implement a child-centered approach and learning through play (Education Commission, 2010). The *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* indicated that a quality early childhood curriculum should integrate all development areas, such as physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, to foster childhood creativity and learning motivation and help children face social problems in the future.
(Curriculum Development Council, 2006). It also advocated that preschools should create a safe and rich environment that allows children to explore independently and provides opportunities for their social development (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). Cheng (2006) stated that Hong Kong preschools should consider an appropriate level of adult-child interaction, a well-designed curriculum, and a learning environment that allows children to play with others, as well as maintaining good communication with parents as the foundation for socialization skills.

The quality of teachers is also important for implementing the appropriate programs for young children. Cheng (2006) found that many teachers have become more confident about implementing the child-centered curriculum and have learned through professional training how to observe children’s development. Rao and Li (2009) reported that many preschools exceeded the Hong Kong government’s requirements for the quality of the physical environment, health and safety, staff qualification, and staff-to-child ratio. It might be that the PEVS has helped the schools implement a child-centered curriculum (Rao & Li, 2009).

A play-based curriculum emphasis can foster children’s life-long development in learning through play (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). Similarly, Montessori also pointed out that providing a peaceful context, an appropriate learning process, and encouragement can help children achieve lifelong learning skills (Cossentino & Whitcomb, 2007). Children are also given the opportunity to learn self-control, respect others, and solve problems while learning autonomy. Other researchers revealed that many preschool educators have appreciated the value of learning autonomy and are hoping that children enjoy learning; nevertheless, their curricula do not reflect this attitude because of outside pressure (Cheng, 2006; Ho, 2010a; Y. L. Li, 2010).
Parents are receiving a variety of messages from magazines, media, and school conferences. Some parents will access the internet to search for information that teaches how to foster children’s development (Ginsburg et al., 2007). However, in Hong Kong, parents are also concerned about their children’s academic studies.

**Hong Kong Preschool Culture and Parental Expectations**

Currently, preschools are still viewed as stepping-stones for children to enter prestigious primary schools (Fung, 2009). External pressure from parental expectations affects how preschool leaders provide an autonomous learning environment for children. Indeed, all Hong Kong preschools are operated privately, and school income primarily comes from tuition fees. Many parents believe that if their children enter a formal academic curriculum preschool that they can then enter a primary and a secondary school that is more academically oriented, allowing their children more opportunity to enter a university eventually (Fung, 2009).

Because of greater competition for enrollment and increased consideration of parents’ preferences, many preschools have adopted a formal academic curriculum (Ho, 2012). Hence, many researchers have found that Hong Kong’s young children are becoming too structured and intensely academic, being overloaded with paperwork in preschool (Cheng, 2006, Fung, 2009; Ho, 2010a). Some parents are even eager to enroll their children in preschools that provide computer activities (Ho, 2010a). In addition, the majority of preschools are highlighting their English programs as they try to increase enrollment (Fung, 2009). Indeed, children are usually busy during a 3-hour learning session in Hong Kong’s preschools. For instance, students normally have to be involved in whole class activity rather than in small group activity, including music, English, and Putonghua lessons. Children might only have 5 to 10 minutes of free play.
after they finish several tasks (mainly academic worksheets or hand writing exercises) in small groups (Cheng, 2006).

Play enhances all domains of children’s development and provides a natural way of integrating physical, cognitive, language, emotional, and creative growth. However, parents and teachers in Hong Kong view play as a non-learning opportunity (Ashiabil, 2007; Leung, 2011). Children can construct and learn through play because they are gaining understanding of the sociocultural context in which the play occurs (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Furthermore, Ginsburg et al. (2007) suggested that play offers wonderful opportunities for parents and children to build a close relationship that also leads children to understand their living area. If a parent can introduce traditional games to their offspring, children may not only receive play skills but may also learn about their culture and living environment.

It is beneficial for parents to gain an understanding of their children and to offer nurturing guidance to them (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Moreover, Berk (2012) claimed that preschool leaders should be aware of the value of play and its educational philosophy in early childhood education, and advocate for it to both children and families. In fact, Ashiabil (2007) pointed out that most parents are eager to see more academic tasks being delivered in early childhood classrooms. In Hong Kong, “Play was subtly treated as free-play with no learning intention” (Cheng, 2004, p. 343). This description is similar to Leung’s (2011) research; he found that the perceptions of Hong Kong preschool teachers about children’s learning still focused on academic achievement.

**Leadership and School Principals**

There are various terms and views related to the definition of leadership (Yukl, 2010). Yukl (2010) discussed four kinds of leadership:
• Ethical leadership is described as a “honest, trustworthy, altruistic, fair and identified aspect of behavior involving attempts to influence behaviors of others” (p. 334).

• Servant leadership is “helping others to accomplish shared objectives by facilitating individual development, empowerment, and collective work that is with the health and long-term welfare of followers” (p. 340).

• Spiritual leadership “can enhance the intrinsic motivation of followers by creating conditions that increase their sense of spiritual meaning in the work.” (p. 342).

• Authentic leadership consists of “positive leader values, leader self-awareness, and a trusting relationship with followers” (p. 344).

These four kinds of leadership have similar behaviors: the leaders exhibit honesty, altruism, kindness, compassion, empathy, fairness, gratitude, humility, courage, optimism, and resilience. They depend on social context and focus on the interpersonal relationship between leaders and followers. They can enhance the meaningfulness of the work by linking it to followers’ values and self-identities.

The four styles of leadership not only apply to leading in an organization, but also are part of the principals’ role as they “disciplined students, classified them, and enforced rules designed to protect students’ health and morals” (Pierce, 1935, cited in Velasco, Edmonson, & Slate, 2012, p. 317). Yukl (2010) found most individuals view leadership as “traits, behaviors, influence, interaction patterns, role relationships, and administrative positions” (p. 20) and define “a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization” (p. 21). Hard (2006) investigated
leadership behavior in early childhood education and care; the research reported that leadership should take the role of coaching and mentoring, and building and supporting community.

Hallinger (2011) indicated that leadership schools emphasized the importance of school outcomes and improved students’ learning. Research on transformational leadership, instructional leadership, distributed leadership, and shared leadership has been conducted in education for decades (Hallinger, 2011). Sun and Leithwood (2015) added, “Both transformational and instructional models have garnered the bulk of research aimed at demonstrating leadership influence on student learning” (p. 499). According to Hallinger (2011), school principals are responsible for a school’s daily operations, such as staffing and resource allocation, decision making, and problem solving, as well as students’ learning achievements. Thus, Hallinger (2011) stated that the “leadership for learning approach” (p. 126), which subsumes the features of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and shared leadership, can investigate leadership’s contribution to learning and school improvement. The results revealed that principals are valued leaders and that their leadership has mutual influence on the culture, work processes, and individuals around them (Hallinger, 2011).

In the early childhood education context, “leadership can be grounded in the common professional motivation to make a difference and work for the well-being and education of young children” (Murray & Clark, 2013, p. 292). According to Seplocha (1998), a school leader in a high-quality preschool has knowledge of early childhood development, has experience with resource allocation, is able to supervise program implementation, focuses on the school’s vision and staff development, participates in professional communities, hires collaborative and appreciative staff, possesses an ethic of care, and can be sensitive to parents. That finding is
similar to recent studies that reveal that kindergarten or preschool principals always play a significant role in school development (Carr et al., 2009; Ho, 2011; K. S. T. Wong, 2006).

On the other hand, cultural, social, and political contexts can also influence leadership in preschool (Hard, 2006). The terms of principal-centered leadership, instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and pedagogical leadership have emerged in the early childhood education fields (Brownlee et al., 2010; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Ho, 2011; Waldron et al., 2011; K. S. T. Wong, 2006). Hard (2006) found that preschool leaders try to implement different kinds of leadership as they face challenges from external and internal culture change.

**Principal-centered leadership.** According to Carr et al. (2009), the principal-centered leadership approach is an effective model in preschool fields as “leaders administer for change, have followers, focus on long-term vision, set direction, and are oriented towards inspiring people to achieve results” (p. 25). Carr et al. (2009) also recommended that the principal’s leadership in preschool should focus on the following aspects. First, the preschool principal should promote the school’s vision and the curriculum’s goal. Second, the principal needs to enhance the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of teachers and supporting staff members to ensure that they provide quality services for young children. Thus, some principals will allocate new workload assignments to each staff member, review the teaching plan and daily diet with staff members, and supervise each staff member. Third, the principal undertakes the external and internal management and communication of the organization. Thus, the study stated that principal-centered leadership includes the following characteristics: “Responsibility and initiative, vision and values, integrity and execution, mutual respect and benefit, mutual understanding, creative cooperation, and renewal” (Carr et al., 2009, p. 26).
The above aspects of leadership reveal the important role of the preschool leader, who is responsible for organizing a productive educational paradigm for early childhood care and education. In contrast, Armstrong, Kinney, and Clayton (2009) interviewed 12 teachers and 12 preschool administrators and found that the mentor relationship is beneficial to both the teacher and to the administrator because mentoring helps teachers more easily step into leadership roles. Armstrong et al. (2009) claimed that effective administrators should provide opportunities for teachers to become leaders in their schools.

**Transformational leadership.** In contrast to principal-centered leadership, transformational leadership inspires followers through an awareness of the importance and value of their job (Bass, 1998). The “transformational leaders can be found in any organization at any level, and this type of leadership is universally relevant for all types of situations” (Yukl, 2010, p. 288). A study found that school principals have demonstrated that the four components of transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation) enhance teachers’ commitment to achieve the school vision (Balyer, 2012).

Balyer (2012) added that female principals showed more intellectual stimulation behaviors than male principals. Similarly, in early the childhood setting, Brownlee et al. (2010) interviewed 15 preschool principals and found that all of them demonstrated transformational leadership characteristics. In addition, school leaders are willing to empower followers with more responsibility and provide support whenever they encounter difficulty. Thus, transformational leadership should be a benefit for relationships between preschool principals
and teachers. Transformational leadership also can facilitate followers to be future leaders and maintain long-term development in their preschools.

**Instructional leadership.** The concept of instructional leadership emerged in the early 1980s. It aims for school improvement by emphasizing management of curriculum with training and instruction offered to each school member (Hallinger, 2003). Armstrong et al. (2009) and Ho (2010a) found that instructional leadership is widely applied in the field of educational leadership, and instructional leadership behaviors can directly impact classroom instruction. In Hong Kong, all preschool principals have studied early childhood education and their professional experience is supported by the belief that there is value in implementing an appropriate early childhood program. For instance, a preschool principal must complete the Certificate in Kindergarten Education or an equivalent course in Hong Kong, after which the preschool principal was required to upgrade her or his professional status to the degree level by 2012 (Rao & Li, 2009; W. K. G. Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009). As a consequence, instructional leadership may become more common among preschool principals. As Y. L. Li (2010) stated, “It seems to be taken-for-granted that school principal / leaders are instruction leaders who are to steer towards curriculum and instruction innovations” (p. 28).

In addition, instructional leaders may raise teachers’ self-efficacy. Lunn and Bishop (2002) suggested that many preschool teachers see themselves as leaders. Their investigation revealed that teachers were willing to be involved with purchasing equipment, creating an appropriate learning environment, and designing and planning for children’s needs based on the school’s philosophy of child development. Those teachers were more confident because of the principal’s distributed instructional leadership (Ho, 2011). However, Y. L. Li (2010) argued that
in Hong Kong, preschool “principals were committed to the learning experiences for teachers but were not yet instructional leaders at this stage” (p. 26) as they still exercised too much control in their leadership. On the other hand, it would benefit school development if school members could be nurtured or trained to become leaders (Hallinger, 2003).

Stayer (1990) stated that in order to empower others, the leader needs to understand the culture, systems, structure, and needs of an organization. Whitaker and Fiore (2013) added that the principal’s behavior and positive perceptions could affect the school culture. Thus, if the principal can inspire teachers’ commitment to teaching, that may help improve the school’s educational mission and administrative goals.

**Pedagogical leadership.** Early childhood education, in general, and a school’s curriculum, specifically, should be based on knowledge of how children develop and learn in order to provide an appropriate program for young children. According to Roopnarine and Johnson’s (2013), there are various pedagogy, such as Head Start Program, Creative Curriculum, High Scope Model, Vygotskian Approach, Developmental-Interaction Approach, The Project Approach, Reggio Emilia Approach, Montessori Method, Waldorf Approach, etc., in current early childhood education. Therefore, Heikka and Waiganayake (2011) found that “pedagogical leadership means taking responsibility for the shared understanding of the aims and methods of learning and teaching young children from birth to 8 years” (p. 510) and that “pedagogical leadership is connected with not only children’s learning, but also the capacity building of the early childhood profession” (p. 510). In a similar finding by Male and Palaiologou (2012), pedagogical leadership should consider collaboration with teachers in order to enhance teachers’ ability and to develop a better direction for the school. Armstrong et al. (2009) suggested that
pedagogical leadership may help contribute to teacher professionalism and improve educational practices locally and regionally. More specifically, Stamopoulos (2012) stated that the early childhood profession’s focus must be on pedagogical leadership that connects to practice, builds professional capacity and capability, and recognizes the importance of relationship building and quality infrastructure. Thus, if a preschool has a unique teaching approach, pedagogical leaders should help instruct teachers in the teaching approach and ensure that a quality program is delivered to children.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, a high-quality preschool relies on the quality of its leadership and management (Carr et al., 2009). Hong Kong’s societal and political contexts, preschool culture, and parental expectations influence schools’ program implementation. Indeed, school principals are the key person to implement leadership in schools (Hallinger, 2011; Hard, 2006). Research studies have found that the role of leadership is utilizing either transformational or instructional leadership strategies to support quality programs and to foster students’ development (Armstrong et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2003; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Indeed, research concerning leadership in preschool is still limited around the world (Aubrey et al., 2013; CW Chan, 2014). In other words, there are few research studies that examine preschool principals’ leadership in Asia, especially leadership in early childhood education in Hong Kong. Thus, there is room for a professional research-based study of leadership in early childhood education.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Research Question

This study explored preschool principals’ views on leadership in early childhood education. More specifically, this study considered how principals see their own role as leaders under the PEVS educational reforms. Thus, the research question for this study was: How do experienced principals in early childhood education in Hong Kong describe their role as school leaders?

Research Paradigm

This study employed the constructive-interpretive paradigm, as it sought to “understand the very basis and source of social reality” (Burrel & Morgan, 1979, p. 31), drew upon “interactive researcher-participant dialogue” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129), and explored “a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). The researcher chose this paradigm because the qualitative approach allows a researcher to ask broad, general, and emerging questions in order to understand the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2012).

Qualitative Research Study

This qualitative research study explored how six preschool principals described their experience and perceptions on leadership in early childhood education in the Hong Kong context. According to Creswell (2012), the qualitative approach emphasizes uncovering the themes that emerge from delineating the perspectives of research participants. In addition, the qualitative method seeks to understand how “the meaning of the process or experience constitutes the knowledge to be gained from the inductive, hypothesis- or theory-generating mode of inquiry” (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). Thus, this qualitative study adopted the inductive
perspective (Creswell, 2013) to reveal the linkages between principals’ self-perceptions of their own leadership and the role of leadership in developing quality programs at Hong Kong preschools.

**Research Tradition: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

This study employed the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, aiming to collect insights from principals’ experience and perceptions on leadership through their everyday working experience in Hong Kong preschools. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) stated, “Like Husserl, we see phenomenological research as systemically and attentively reflecting on everyday lived experience” (p. 33). Since all of the six principals chosen for this study were part of the early childhood educational field, the process of sharing their experiences may contribute to greater understanding of the phenomenon of leadership in Hong Kong preschools. This study may provide key insights into how preschool principals make sense of their leadership style and how their leadership has the potential to realize the requirements of the recent Hong Kong pre-primary education reforms.

Smith et al. (2009) reported, “IPA is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (e.g., an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (p. 29). In the qualitative approach, researchers may often ask broad, general, or emerging questions to understand the participants’ experiences, and they may reflect on their “own biases, values, and assumptions and actively write them into the research” (Creswell, 2012, p. 18). Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, and Hendry (2011) mentioned that IPA “tends to interpret belief and accept participants’ stories, albeit in a questioning way” (p. 21). Therefore, IPA can provide more flexibility for creativity
and freedom than other approaches when an “unusual group, situation, or means of data collection is being contemplated” (p. 22). In addition, the researcher also had frontline experience in preschool, which helped her understand, analyze, and interpret the participants’ perceptions and experiences, as shared during in-depth interviews.

**Key Theorists**

IPA is increasingly used in qualitative methodology (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was first introduced and developed by Jonathan Smith in the mid-1990s (Smith, 1996), but it has a long philosophical history (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl developed his phenomenological philosophy in 1927, and he advocated a “phenomenological inquiry focused on that which is experienced in the consciousness of the individuals” (as cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 13). Following Husserl, Heidegger (1962) suggested that “the meaning of a phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation” (p. 37). Hence, this study was an attempt to discover a group of preschool principals’ leadership experiences through phenomenological description, and the researcher interpreted the participants’ points of view.

Lived experience, hermeneutics, and ideography are the underpinnings of IPA (Shinebourne, 2011). *Lived experience* refers to exploring how individuals describe their experience and “the meanings which people attribute to their experience” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 18). Drawing from Heidegger’s perspective on the phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity, Smith et al. (2009) suggested that participants are related to the “shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world” and that “which aims to describe this relatedness and account for our ability to communicate with, and make sense of, each other” (p. 17). Moran (2000) described the term *hermeneutics* as suggesting a
phenomenology that desires the uncovering of meaning that is obscured by the phenomenon’s mode of appearing. Similarly, Smith (2004) contended that hermeneutic engagement can comprehensively understand the participant’s lived experiences and recognizes “the role of the researcher in making sense of the experience of participants” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 20). The researcher explored the principals’ lived experience leading their school and focused on interpretation of the detailed description they provided.

With respect to ideography, Smith et al. (2009) proposed that individuals can offer a unique perspective on their engagement with phenomena. Therefore, IPA can use a small, purposively selected and carefully situated sample, and even single case analyses, to understand “particular people, in particular contexts” (p. 29). In this study, the IPA method helped to understand and interpret a group of preschool principals’ own perceptions on leadership in their working contexts.

Participants

Smith et al. (2009) recommended that a sample size of around three to six participants is appropriate for a student project, and four to 10 is appropriate for doctoral research in the IPA approach. Smith et al. (2009) also noted that the sample should be a purposive and homogeneous group for whom the “research question will be meaningful” (p. 49). The focus on homogeneity helped refine research questions, as the participants came from similar kinds of schools. For this PEVS study, the researcher used a purposive sampling strategy to select a homogenous group of participants. The selection of preschool principals used the following criteria:

- Participant has at least 10 years’ experience at the position of preschool principal in Hong Kong.
• Participant’s workplace (preschool) has joined the PEVS since 2007.
• Participant has obtained the bachelor’s degree qualification in early childhood education.

Thus, the sampling strategy was to invite six principals from preschools in Hong Kong that have joined the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme since 2007. Under the PEVS, preschool principals were required to upgrade their qualification to a bachelor’s degree level before 2011. Thus, all of the participants had worked in the field for over 10 years and had obtained a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education. Their sharing of experiences provided certain information and rich knowledge about preschool leadership during the change to the PEVS. Thus, under the selection criteria on the participant, the researcher had interviewed a group of experienced preschool principals.

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher was working as a teaching fellow at the Hong Kong Institute of Education in the Early Childhood Education Department and met many preschool principals at supervised preservice students’ practicums each year. The potential participants were invited to participate over the telephone. Further, some selected participants referred others who wanted to participate in this study to the researcher (Merriam, 1998). An invitation letter and consent form were sent to the interested participants to explain the aim, data collection procedures, analysis methods, and the methods of confidentiality for the study. All the participants were involved as volunteers, as incentives were not offered in this study. The researcher and the participants signed an informed consent form. The participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time. The study recruited around six participants in case of withdrawals.

**Data Collection**
In an IPA study, data collection typically involves interviewing individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon (Seidman, 2013). In order to gain insight into the nature of each preschool principal’s lived experience, semi-structured, open-ended, one-on-one, in-depth interviews of around 60-90 minutes are recommended in IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

This study employed two separate one-on-one interviews that allowed the researcher to focus on the interview questions, providing more comprehensive insights into the state of the principals’ perceptions of leadership and the leadership skills they employed in preschools. This interaction between interviewees and researcher within a living context provided vital insights into the participants’ perceptions. The focuses of the two separate interviews included the following:

- The first interview focused on the life history of the preschool principal’s leadership experience, such as professional background, perceptions, and opinion about the impact of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. According to Smith et al. (2009), rich data is required in an IPA study, “to understand a person’s experience from their point of view” (Seidman, 2013, p. 17) and acquire the true essence of a participant’s experience. This interview encouraged the principal to speak freely about leading a school every day and allow the “participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experience” (p. 17). Open-ended questions for this interview round are appended (see Appendix D).

- The second interview emphasized the details of experience and participants’ views on preschool leadership in Hong Kong context. This interview concentrated “on the concrete details of the participant’s present lived experience in the topic area of the study” (Seidman, 2013, p. 21). This interview also focused on leadership strategies to improve a
school’s quality for children and how principals described their leadership style. The interview collected details of the participants’ views on current leadership in the early childhood education setting and more details of their job experience. This interview also prompted the “participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience” in preschool leadership (p. 22). Open-ended questions for this interview round are appended (see Appendix D).

The two individual interviews took place at the participants’ workplace in order to let the participants feel more comfortable and flexible. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), each interview was conducted with audio recording to ensure complete transcripts for data analysis. The researcher also used reflective memos to capture insights. Patton (2002) recommended using field notes to help researchers reflect on the conversation and ideas for directing future interviews. Field notes were taken to record any observed events, interactions, reflections, or interpretations in order to gain the most comprehensive interviews possible.

**Data Storage**

Regarding the need to protect participants and maintain data confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. All of the transcriptions were stored electronically and password protected in the researcher’s personal computer. All hardcopies of materials and recorded interviews were stored and kept in a locker that was only available to the researcher. All data will be destroyed after the completion of the study.

**Data Analysis**

The process of analyzing the data was conducted according to the step-by-step method (Smith et al., 2009) in the following way:
1. Reading and re-reading interview video and audio records. The information was transcribed and coded, and the transcript was repeatedly reviewed to analyze what categories were immersed in the data. At the first step, the researcher got initial impressions from the interviews.

2. Taking initial notes to focus on the participant’s explicit meaning. The researcher conducted a close analysis of the transcript to develop a “descriptive core of comments, which have a clear phenomenological focus, and stay close to the participant’s explicit meaning” (p. 83).

3. Developing emergent themes. The initial notes only provided raw data to understand the participants’ views. Identifying emergent themes was a synergistic process to find connection, description, and interpretation within the interviews.

4. Searching for connections across emergent themes to develop charting or mapping of how the researcher thought the themes fit together.

5. Moving to the next case in keeping with IPA’s ideographical commitment to the possibility of writing up a study report.

6. Looking for patterns across cases.

This IPA study invited preschool principals to share their experience of the meaning of “leadership” in their working contexts. Smith et al. (2009) pointed out that IPA is “attempting to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant, but recognizes that this inevitably becomes an interpretative endeavor for both participant and researcher” (p. 37). In addition, IPA encourages researchers “to think in terms of theoretical transferability rather than
empirical generalizability" (Pringle et al., 2011, p. 21). Thus, IPA emphasizes interpretative analysis from inductive research methods.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is related to how researchers collect, analyze, and report data with credibility and accuracy (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) described four general types of trustworthiness: credibility as a form of internal validity (p. 296), transferability as a form of external validity (p. 297), dependability as a form of reliability (p. 299), and confirmability as a form of objectivity (p. 300). To minimize biased data collection and reporting, bracketing, member checking, and thick, rich description were all utilized.

**Credibility.** Member checking involves testing data, analytical categories, interpretations, and conclusions with members of the stakeholder groups from which the data were collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Smith et al. (2009) indicated that IPA researchers need to demonstrate sensitivity to context while initiating a study. Thus, all analysis and coding interpretation was sent to the participants to review any missing or inaccurate data. The processes also allowed participants to execute judgment about the overall credibility of this study.

**Transferability.** Rich, thick description “provides detail when describing a case or when writing about a theme” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). It is a critical element as it provides transparency of the entire study for the reader. The study provided a wide range of information that can be carefully selected and possibly transferred to an external party.

**Dependability.** Commitment and rigor are expected in IPA (Smith et al., 2009), which requires researchers to demonstrate reasonable care during the study. The researcher selected
appropriate participants “quite carefully to match the research questions” (Smith et al., 2009, p181). Additionally, the researcher ensured participants felt comfortable during the interview.

**Confirmability.** Bracketing or noting researcher biases refers to how a researcher clarifies her or his position and the biases of experience between participants (Merriam, 2009). Miles and Huberman (1994) elaborated that the “typical research experience is full of dilemmas” and “there is often a conflict between the demands of validity versus avoiding harm” (p. 295). Thus, a researcher should be aware of his or her role during interview and observation, and also during the data analysis process and data reporting so as to reduce bias in the entire study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Preschool principals were invited to participate in the study voluntarily. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent form with clear expectations about time commitments and activities in which they would be engaged. The following areas were clearly documented: the right of participants to withdraw from the study at any time, their right to understand the purpose of the study, and the process of data collection (Creswell, 2013). During the interview and observations, participants were identified by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Also, the researcher’s personal computer (rather than a public, workplace computer) was used, which allowed for protection of the collected data, and all data will be destroyed after completion of the study (Butin, 2010). This is a vital strategy in protecting the confidentiality of the participants’ information and the research data.

**Conclusion**

This doctoral thesis studied an educational reform relating to change in preschool leadership within Hong Kong. The implementation of the Pre-primary Education Voucher
Scheme (PEVS) to maintain quality services in preschool, to meet parental expectations, and to enhance early childhood teachers professional development has challenged preschool principals’ leadership. The literature review demonstrated that there are several leadership models in the education field, with transformational leadership being particularly applicable to the early childhood sector. Yet, there is still limited research on early childhood education leadership around the world.

This research employed the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to collect preschool principals’ experience and perceptions on leadership through their everyday working experiences in Hong Kong. The research question considered how principals see their own role as leaders in the educational reforms under the PEVS.

This study will be beneficial to principals when they are made aware of the relationship between their leadership styles and preschool development. The stakeholders of preschool sectors, such as the community, parents, and teachers, will gain by understanding how the leadership style of principals may influence the school’s development.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

This qualitative study explored preschool principals’ perceptions of what leadership looks like in early childhood education in Hong Kong. The sampling strategy for participants was purposeful, and six participants agreed to complete the interviews.

The interviews took place in the participants’ workplaces for their convenience and to ensure that they felt comfortable during the interviews. The six participants understood that the researcher would assign them pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The participants answered a set of interview questions (see Appendix D). The results of the interviews generated four superordinate themes and 11 subthemes. The superordinate themes and their subthemes are as follows:

1. Difficult decisions as leaders
   1.1 Dealing with emotional individuals
   1.2 Staff performance and reappointment
   1.3 Stress due to preschool children’s enrollment
2. Concerns about early childhood education quality
   2.1 Quality Assurance Inspection and Quality Review
   2.2 Teachers’ professional development and enhancing the preschool curriculum
   2.3 Preschool vision and culture
3. Working with parents
   3.1 Children’s safety
   3.2 Helplessness and loneliness due to parents’ complaints
   3.3 Happiness and comfort regarding the parent and school partnership
4 Characteristics of preschool principals

4.1 Teamwork and good communication

4.2 Passion for early childhood education

Each of the superordinate themes and subthemes emerged from at least three of the six interviews. This chapter presents the participant descriptions and an analysis of the four superordinate themes and 11 subthemes that emerged among the participants.

Participant Descriptions

Principal A. Principal A had been working as a preschool principal for over 16 years. The preschool operated in a whole-day nursery mode, and it joined the Pre-Primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) in 2007. The preschool provided care and education services for children from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. daily, and it enrolled around 110 children from 2-6 years old. The preschool also provided occasional child care, which is a short-term (2-hour) daily service for those who temporarily cannot take care of their young children. The preschool also provided an integrated child program for the training and care of children with mild disabilities to facilitate their future integration into mainstream education and society. The preschool was in Kowloon, and a Buddhist organization established it. Since 2015, Principal A had also supervised another preschool established by the same organization. The new school’s enrollment capability was 480. Children in both preschools mainly came from lower-income families, as the preschools were on a public estate.

Principal A completed a business course after high school, and then she became a secretary for one year. She found that she did not enjoy secretarial work, so she changed careers and went to work in a preschool. Eventually, she found that teaching young children was more
interesting than her previous job. She worked as a preschool teacher for several years until 1996, when she started working in a crèche. Later she took on an administrative post, and then became a principal. During those years working in the early childhood sector, she studied for a child care work certificate at a vocational institution, then finished a diploma in early childhood education, and then obtained a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education. Finally, she obtained a master’s degree in early childhood education in 2011. To comply with the voucher scheme requirements, she took a preschool principal course in 2008. Principal A had been working in the early childhood education field for nearly 30 years, and she was in her 50s.

**Principal B.** Principal B had been working as a preschool principal for over 30 years, most recently in a Christian organization, where she had been for over 17 years. She supervised two preschools that were in the same community. The preschools provided both half-day and whole-day programs for 330 and 215 children, respectively, from 2-6 years old. On the main campus, most children were from the middle to lower classes, but most of them were more middle class. On the branch campus, children mainly came from lower class families, with some relying on government subsidies. The preschools joined the PEVS in 2007.

Principal B recalled that she likes to teach and thinks that teaching younger children is easier, particularly in preschools. Hence, she went straight into a preschool after graduating from secondary school. At that time, preschool teachers’ salary was unattractive, and she saw most of her colleagues change jobs every two or three months. However, Principal B was able to carry on working at the same school and the school founder did not want her to leave her job, so he supported Principal B in gaining a Qualified Kindergarten Teacher Certificate (QKT); she became principal in 1985. She related:
I remember that it was when I had worked there for a year or two that the boss said that if I wanted to study for a QKT, I could get a study place sooner if I was a principal or head teacher. I enjoyed studying quite a lot.

After that, she took up a principal’s role and then completed a bachelor’s degree in education in 2000. Finally, she finished a master’s degree in early childhood education in 2011. During the implementation of the PEVS, she took a kindergarten principal course in 2007.

Principal B had been working in the early childhood education field for over 30 years, and she was around 55.

Principal C. Principal C had been working as a preschool principal for 10 years. The preschool was located on a public estate, near the border area, and a Christian church had established it. It provided a half-day service for 220 children, most of whom were from the public estate, with one-third from other districts and around 10 percent from Mainland China, called cross-boundary students (Education Bureau, 2015a). The cross-boundary children usually used the Cross-Boundary School Coach Service, and it took them an hour or more to travel from China to Hong Kong daily.

Principal C said that when she was young, she loved children but found it difficult to teach them. She worked as a teacher’s assistant when she graduated from her secondary school. Principal C registered as a preschool teacher in 1998, and then she took a QKT course before studying for a Certificate of Education in Early Childhood in 2006. During the implementation of the PEVS, she took a preschool principal course in 2009, and then she obtained a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education in 2012. Principal C had been working in the early childhood education field for around 20 years, and she was in her 50s.
**Principal D.** Principal D had been working as a preschool principal for over 30 years. She had been working at this preschool for over 18 years. The preschool was in Kowloon, and it provided a half-day service for 470 children. The children came from middle-class families; most of their parents were professionals. The preschool had operated as a private school in its early years, but the school encountered insufficient enrollments, especially during the period of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Many children had to stay at home and stopped school as part of the control measures announced by the EDB, such as compulsory isolation and surveillance of contacts. Many preschools received no school fees for over 3 months that year. Thus, some private preschools closed. After the government announced the PEVS, Principal D’s preschool joined the scheme in 2007.

Principal D stated that she wanted to carry on studying when she finished high school, and she found that the requirements to be a preschool teacher were low. Therefore, she applied for a preschool teacher post, which was her first job. When she was working in her fourth year, the preschool principal felt that Principal D had leadership ability and recommended that she apply for an administrative post. After a year, she became a principal and worked in a brand-new preschool. Principal D took a QKT course in 1989, finished a preschool education administration and management course in the same year, and gained a certificate of education in early childhood in 2001. Eventually, she earned a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education in 2010. Principal D had been working in the early childhood education field for over 30 years, and she was around 55.

**Principal E.** Principal E had been working as a principal for 12 years in a preschool established by a Christian organization. The preschool provided both half-day and whole-day
programs for 306 and 106 children respectively. It was in the New Territories near many private estates, with around 50 percent of the children coming from middle-class families, around 30 percent from the lower classes, and 20 percent being cross-boundary students. The preschool joined the PEVS in 2007.

Principal E replied that being a teacher was her dream job and that she loved children very much. She recalled that she met a very good high school teacher who influenced her career direction. Hence, she applied for a preschool teacher post when she graduated from high school, and she asked the high school teacher to be her referee. During her teaching career, Principal E had taken the QKT course, then a Higher Diploma in early childhood, and then a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education before 2007. During the implementation of the PEVS, she took a preschool principal course in 2008. Principal E had been working in the early childhood education field for nearly 25 years, and she was around 45.

**Principal F.** Principal F had been working as a principal for 24 years. She now was working in a charity organization that provided comprehensive and diverse educational services from preschool to higher education. She was working at a preschool that provided half-day and whole-day services for 100 and 109 children respectively. The preschool was on a public estate; children mainly came from lower class families. The preschool joined the PEVS in 2007.

Principal F said that when she was young, she always helped her mother care for her nieces. There were many young children in her living environment, and she loves children. When she graduated from high school, she found there was no professional requirement for a preschool teacher, so she applied and started working. She undertook in-service training as a QKT at Graham College for 2 years and taught for several years. Then she received a promotion
to an administrative post. She realized that she would get a promotion to become a principal soon, but she found it to be a hard and discouraging time, because she needed to deal with many financial tasks. After a year, she started acting as a principal and she finished the preschool education administration and management course in the same year, and the Certificate of Education in Early Childhood in 2003. Finally, she obtained a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education in 2009. Principal F had been working in the early childhood education field for over 30 years, and she was in her 50s.

**Findings and Analysis**

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the interview data. The themes emerged from the six principals’ experience and perceptions of what leadership looks like in early childhood education in the Hong Kong context. Table 1 shows the superordinate themes and subthemes.

Table 1

*Superordinate Themes and Subthemes*

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<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
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<td>1 Difficult decisions as leaders</td>
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<td>4.2 Passion for early childhood education</td>
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Difficult decisions as leaders. This first superordinate theme is comprised of six principals’ perceptions of what they felt were the most surprising experiences as a leader in a preschool. They all said that they had some puzzling experiences that reminded them to be aware of emotional individuals. In addition, the participants shared that when working as principals in preschools, they often had to make difficult decisions. They knew that teachers and staff always rely on principals’ final decisions and that principals need to bear the responsibility for their decisions. Three subthemes emerged from the data analysis: Dealing with emotional individuals, Staff performance and reappointment, and Stress due to preschool children’s enrollment.

Dealing with emotional individuals. All of the participants experienced difficulties when they interacted with emotional people in their preschools. Three participants had been deeply affected by emotional individuals. They thought that emotional individuals may be harmful for children’s safety and health. Principal D reported that she had terminated the employment of a male English teacher instantly because she wanted to ensure other teachers’ and children’s mental and physical safety. Principal D recalled that:

I had received some teachers’ complaints about the English teacher’s emotions being bad and then I observed his teaching. I found he easily became angry toward other teachers and children. Then, I talked to him and found he also showed anger toward me on that day. He even pushed my office door strangely and made a lot of noise after the talk. After the talk, I fired him immediately and he was surprised by my action.
After that, Principal D informed all parents that the she had fired the English teacher, but the parents seemed eager for their children to learn English from a foreigner. Principal D replied:

I told the parents that the quality of teachers was most important for our children. Although it was difficult to hire an English teacher at that time, I would rather have no English teacher temporarily. Meanwhile, our staff and local teachers admired my action and my efficient leadership.

Principal D repeated, “It was lucky that I could easily deal with emotional teachers within the school and the school’s teachers admired my action.” However, she had another experience similar to those of Principal A and Principal B, who could not handle emotional parents easily. Principal D recalled an experience with a parent who was always complaining. That year, she received many phone calls from the EDB regarding investigations of the parent’s complaints. She felt distressed, and even the EDB inspector agreed that the parent had emotional problems. Principal D observed, “I had no choice in that period, and I also needed to take care of the child more carefully. Otherwise, the complaints would be nonstop. I suffered a lot until the child graduated.”

Similarly, Principal A had also received a parent’s complaints for a whole year. She emphasized that when you meet an emotional parent, it means you cannot predict what the parent will do and what will happen next. She stated:

I had received a parent’s request for occasional child care service and her child had only used the service a few times. After that, I received a complaint report from the Social Welfare Department (SWD). The department reported that the complaint was as long as
80 pages of A4 paper. The parent kept on complaining by phone and letter to SWD. I had to reply to all the questions from the complainant, and even the department agreed that my answers were reasonable. However, the parent was not satisfied with the SWD’s action and then she complained to another government department about the SWD.

Principal A recalled that she was not very experienced as a principal at that time. She had insomnia many times and felt exhausted that year. Finally, the government department and the SWD decided to reject the complaint; she felt relaxed about that result.

Likewise, Principal B shared that she met a parent who seemed to have emotional problems. Principal B believed that she needed to keep the teachers and children away from this emotional person. Principal B indicated:

Firstly, I received a parent’s message that she wanted to withdraw her child. Then, the parent started to complain, and I discovered that the parent had showed enmity towards one of my teachers and she lived near the school. I observed the parent walking around the school, still being unfriendly toward our staff for over a week. Therefore, I was scared for my school children’s and teachers’ safety and I reported the case to the police. Principal B felt grateful that the police came to investigate. A month later, the parent had not taken any further action and had stopped showing up around the school.

The participants had been deeply affected and had suffered significantly when dealing with emotional individuals. They mentioned that they must consider how to protect the children’s safety in a preschool while dealing with emotional individuals.

Staff performance and reappointment. When asked about making difficult decisions, the participants’ responses to the situation depended on their relationships with their staff. They
all replied that they cared about their staff members’ emotions and that they believed the staff are valuable resources in a preschool. Therefore, when they discovered that some staff members were not performing well, they found it difficult to terminate the contracts or stop reappointment. Principals A, D, and F shared their experience with considering how to terminate the employment of a staff member. They felt that the process was difficult, but that they still needed to handle the situation. As Principal A described it:

I hired a teacher for 2 years but decided to reject her reappointment before the third year’s contract. She was young and inexperienced when I employed her, but I told her that she could learn from experienced teachers in our preschool. When she was working in the first year, she showed willingness to learn, loved the children, and cooperated with others. However, I found she displayed a different attitude in the early part of the second year: she was impatient with the children and even blamed them. I had been worried that the teacher might find it hard to find a job, but I love the children, and I did not want the children to suffer from her blaming.

Principal F also experienced a difficult decision on whether to terminate a clerical staff member. Finally, the staff member resigned. Principal F displayed real sadness regarding the experience and said, “It was so difficult to punish a staff member as she had contributed well and worked for a long time in the preschool, and I was so sad to receive the staff member’s resignation letter.” Principal F continued:

The clerical staff member had worked in our preschool for over 10 years. She was helpful and even did lots of management tasks like a principal’s assistant. However, she made a big mistake and I needed to report the case to the school committee. I held
several consultations with her and tried to help her to solve the problem. I really cared about her, but she decided to leave, as she preferred to resign.

Principal D experienced a similar situation regarding a staff reappointment decision a few days before this study’s interview. Principal D said that she was still struggling because a senior teacher was exhibiting stress on the job, but the teacher’s work performance was very good. Principal D appreciated the teacher’s constant hard work, but the teacher’s emotions had been fluctuating recently. She had seen the teacher crying every morning before class in recent weeks. Principal D stated:

I discovered the teacher was having to handle many things at the same time, causing her a lot of pressure. At the same, the staff appraisal was due around this time, and thus the teacher wanted to resign from her job. I wanted to help her and I proposed several options to give her time to reconsider her reappointment. I did not want to push her to decide quickly, and I really wanted to calm her down emotionally when she felt stressed.

Principal D repeated:

She is a good teacher, so I wanted to give her more time to consider her job opportunities. I understand the teacher has a lot of pressure, but at the same time, I wanted her to recover rather than pushing her to decide to stay at or leave our preschool so soon.

As these accounts show, these three participants experienced difficult decisions regarding staff termination and reappointment. The participants understood that they needed to lead teachers to provide a quality service to the children. On the other hand, they found it difficult to decide to end some teachers’ employment, especially when they discovered the reasons for the teachers’ difficulties.
Stress due to preschool children’s enrollment. In addition, the participants felt that teachers experience stress from working. This stress was worst during the heavy workload of ensuring sufficient enrollment. They emphasized that all of their preschools’ income came from enrollments. Thus, preschools needed to adopt various strategies to attract parents’ attention and to build their trust so that they would send their children there. Four participants (Principals B, C, D, and E) mentioned that they had dealt with difficult decisions regarding enrollment. To increase the opportunities for enrollment, three of them had applied for external funding to implement a project, increase extra-curricular activities, or enroll children with special needs even if the teachers did not have the relevant training. Principal B described an example:

Our preschool had applied for the government’s Quality Education Fund (QEF) and the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) program. The funding and the program can enhance a school’s quality by providing extra resources, and it can facilitate teachers’ professional development. Most parents see this as good for their children. If a preschool can gain such funding, it can attract parents’ attention to the school.

Principal C’s preschool was providing an extra free-of-charge program called Sunny Baby once a week in a bid to increase enrollment. Principal C recalled that a few years ago, she noticed enrollment was decreasing slightly after some brand-new schools had opened in the surrounding area. She discussed with some experienced teachers how to develop an extra activity like a playgroup for new parents and new children who were willing to enroll in the preschool. In the first year, the teachers felt that it was successful, as the activity could attract new parents and help increase enrollment.
However, both Principals B and C found that their attempts to enhance enrollment placed a lot of work and pressure on teachers. Both principals also noted that some of these teachers had resigned rather than continuing to work in a stressful environment. They had difficulty deciding how to reduce the workload while still keeping up the school’s quality and maintaining enrollment. Principal B commented:

I struggled with the SCOLAR kindergarten English language program a few years ago. SCOLAR invited our school to join the program, which aims to strengthen teachers’ capacity to provide quality English language exposure for young children. However, my schoolteachers’ English standard was not high, and they were afraid to be involved in the training. I tried very hard to encourage teachers to join the program, but I could only persuade two teachers to attend the training in the first year.

Principal B emphasized that the SCOLAR program is good for enhancing teachers’ English language ability, and she considered the parents’ viewpoint about the English program in preschool. The school did not want to stop the SCOLAR program, because parents wanted their children to learn English.

Principal C also noticed that teachers were becoming stressed and were not willing to implement the Sunny Baby program. She said:

My school really needs to increase its enrollment and I know my teachers have really tried their best to design programs for newcomers. At the same time, I find some teachers are willing to carry on working on that because they put in extra time to design the program. Moreover, they need to be on duty on Saturdays, which is extra work in teaching.
Principal C noted that she was still worried about enrollment and she felt that some teachers did not understand that the extra program could bolster the school’s enrollment and could thus maintain their job status and income. Hence, Principal C decided to reduce the teachers’ workload. Principal C observed that some experienced teachers liked to be mentors by helping less-experienced teachers implement the program. She gave the experienced teachers an opportunity to work as leaders and the inexperienced ones were able to learn more skills for teaching younger children. Principal C said, “I felt in luck that the teachers enjoy teaching the extra program and show their love for teaching younger kids.” Principal C repeated several times that she felt that God had blessed her and that she was lucky to have such teachers. She also encouraged the teachers to persist with the good teaching plan and to reuse it the following year.

Principal E also had experienced a difficult decision regarding the enrollment of a special educational need (SEN) child. Principal E reported, “this year, our school had a SEN child who graduated from our preschool. That means I enrolled a SEN case three years ago.” Principal E explained why she found it difficult to decide on that enrollment:

In 2013, I was serving two preschools, Preschool A and this preschool, both belonging to the same organization. Preschool A would accept all applicants, because the school was having difficulties in enrollment. In 2014, Preschool A employed a new principal, so I did not need to serve two schools. However, the parents knew I was going to return to this school, so they also asked me to transfer their child’s enrollment to this school. Meanwhile, I really found it difficult to decide how to reply to them at that time.
Principal E understood that she should not reject the child’s enrollment but she was worried about the child’s emotions and teacher workload. Thus she felt a dilemma about this enrollment. As Principal E stated, “I really worry that the child’s emotions may be different from when in Preschool A, as the child needs to face a different environment and teachers.” Principal E emphasized that all teachers are patient with children, but two particular teachers showed a willingness to try to teach the SEN child. As a result, Principal E said that the child could graduate from this school. “I really thanked the parents for their trust in my teachers and my ability.” On the other hand, Principal E also appreciated the two teachers’ patience with and care for the child. Principal E repeated that she really struggled when she received the parents’ request, but she could not deny the child the chance to enter her school. However, she was concerned about the teacher-to-child ratio, the teachers’ ability to teach a SEN child, and the child’s adaptability to a new teacher and new school. Thus, Principal E felt that this was a difficult decision for her to make.

Principal D shared her experience with the reappointment of teachers, which was also stressful for her as a leader because the decision would be related to enrollment. She repeated that her boss is a businessperson; she needed to run the preschool under a business model, meaning that a surplus was vital for the preschool’s survival. Hence, she felt pressure to increase or maintain the enrollment rate and the school’s income. Accordingly, she was challenged when enrollment was lower than in the previous year: this could reduce the school’s income, and then she may have to lay off employees. On the other hand, Principal D observed:

I treasure all teachers and staff and they make a great contribution to my preschool. I am really not willing to cut everyone. Recent years have been much better, and I am an
experienced principal, so I can solve the problem and I understand how to plan to enhance my preschool’s quality of service and also to enhance teachers’ professional development, which is a way to increase enrollments.

Principal E also experienced pressure over children’s enrollment each year. However, she felt grateful that her organization could gather another six affiliated preschool principals who have regular meetings each month. They share their problems and strategies for tackling the challenge.

Overall, the first superordinate theme captured the participants’ experience of Difficult decisions as leaders. The participants shared their experience of difficult decisions while working as leaders of preschools. They stated that preschool principals are always the ones who make the final decisions on teachers’ appointments, school enrollment, and parents’ requirements. The participants responded that they must consider many situations from different perspectives, taking account of different persons, and they must care about the image of the school.

Concerns about early childhood education quality. The second superordinate theme came from the participants’ experience of enhancing teacher development to improve the curriculum and to lead staff members in achieving the preschool’s vision. All of the participants responded that a preschool principal is responsible for providing quality education to young children. The principals shared that they aim to provide an appropriate curriculum and learning environment for young children. Besides, they shared that they had tried various teacher development methods and wanted to nurture teachers’ leadership abilities in curriculum development, which will benefit school development. In addition, all of the participants were
working in preschools that had joined the PEVS. The participants reported that they needed to lead all schoolteachers to fulfill the PEVS requirements to ensure their preschool reached the quality standard. In addition to meeting the PEVS requirements, the participants shared that they were concerned about the preschool vision and they would consider how to lead the school to achieve its goals and vision. There were a few similar views among the participants. This superordinate theme concerns the quality of early childhood education, and three subthemes emerged from the data analysis: Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) and Quality Review (QR), Teachers’ professional development and enhancing the preschool curriculum, and Preschool vision and culture.

**Quality Assurance Inspection and Quality Review.** This subtheme addresses the participants’ experience with the QAI and the QR at their preschools. The Hong Kong Education Department has implemented QAI, which is a very comprehensive set of performance indicators, to provide a common standard for assessing the quality of both half-day and whole-day preschools. The QAI result for each school is available from the Education Department’s website (Education Bureau, 2015b). The QR is a school self-evaluation process, and all preschools are required to conduct the QR school report and school annual plan each year (Education Bureau, 2015b). The participants had experienced both QAI and QR during their 10 years working as principals. There was a perception among the participants that preschool principals were key persons to lead preschools in providing a quality service for young children. It became clear that most of the participants (four out of six) viewed the QR as bringing advantages that enhance a preschool’s quality curriculum development. On the other hand, they
realized that they have struggled and suffered with the preparation for the QAI and have even faced queries from stakeholders regarding their progress with the QR.

Principal B reported that her preschool had just finished the second round of QAI and received some good comments from the inspectors. She replied that because of the QAI, she encouraged teachers to stop the writing homework for all 3-year-old children. Her view was that because of the QAI, there was a better rationale supporting her to push the teachers to promote a more child-centered curriculum. She explained:

Now all teachers need to participate in the process of the QAI, such as collecting other teachers’ views, evaluating teaching and school planning, and reporting the implementation. After the first inspection, the EDB inspector indicated some issues such as the teaching method needing to adopt more elements of play. Therefore, teachers had no excuse for rejecting implementing new teaching methods in more playful ways. Then, they would attempt to achieve the goal.

Principal C shared that teachers had been stressed a few years ago; however, she now found that the teachers felt more confident about facing the challenges. Principal C stated:

In the previous years, for the QAI, all teachers felt stressed, as we needed to evaluate the school’s curriculum each year, and then we prepared school documents and reports for the EDB inspection. In recent years, our school had tried to review the free-play time and to adopt a play-based curriculum. Now our children have more time to enjoy school activities. Two inspectors inspected our school this year; they made many positive comments on children learning. This was a meaningful encouragement for all the teachers.
Principal D’s school adopted an academic curriculum for young children before joining the PEVS. During the interview, Principal D mentioned several times, “Our school’s curriculum had been too tough, with too much paperwork, not appropriate for kids. I felt sorry for them, but parents wanted that.” When the school joined the PEVS and needed to do QR every year as part of the preparation of the QAI, the school’s curriculum underwent a slight change. Principal D stated:

Our parents were happy to hear that the preschool had joined the PEVS, as it can reduce some of the burden due to school fees. For me, I have a standpoint to reduce some paperwork and reduce the quantity of homework for young children. However, some parents complained about this change. When I explained that the change was based on the PEVS requirements, some parents stopped criticizing it. Hence, on the first QAI, all the schoolteachers and I were very fearful about that experience. We were worried that the curriculum would not meet the EDB’s requirements. Luckily, we passed the QAI, even though we were informed that we had room to improve. Then, we felt less pressure during the second inspection.

Principal E’s report was similar to that of Principal D. She found that the QAI could encourage a preschool to provide more appropriate programs for young children. At the same time, Principal E also received questions from parents, as did Principal D. Principal E explained that the QAI only took place once every five years, but the preschool was continuing to do the QR each year. Thus, the QR could enhance teachers’ reflective abilities regarding their lesson design and implementation. She continued by explaining that it not only enhances teachers’ ability, but it also helps improve the whole school’s quality:
According to the QR, our school needed to review its quality standard regarding management, curriculum design, child development, and parental support. In relation to parental support, we had used a survey to collect parents’ ideas, to understand parents’ needs and concerns pertaining to children’s learning. We had adjusted the curriculum and parent and child activities based on the survey results.

However, Principal E had received complaints from parents when her teachers were implementing a child-centered curriculum. She related:

To provide a more child-centered curriculum, our school canceled homework for two weeks when implementing the Project Approach Curriculum. However, some parents could not accept no homework for children, some parents still disagreed with no homework, some parents wanted to send their children to other schools. On the other hand, they understood that our school has a high-quality environment and good teachers, which made it a hard decision for them to withdraw their children from our school.

All of the participants had experienced both QAI and QR progression and had led schoolteachers to attempt the QAI requirements, such as changing their school’s curriculum, reducing homework for young children, and preparing a school plan and evaluation report each year. Most of them responded that many teachers felt stressed during the preparation for the QAI. In addition, they have faced the challenge of dealing with parents’ demands for change. On the other hand, the QR requires preschools to evaluate, implement, and plan each year for their preschools. The participants expressed similar views that the QR is a good opportunity to lead teachers in improving the school’s quality, and it might be a chance for their preschool to bring a more appropriate curriculum to young children.
Teachers’ professional development and enhancing the preschool curriculum. This subtheme addresses the participants’ views on an appropriate curriculum for young children and their experience with teachers’ professional development. The participants showed enthusiasm as they shared their views on what they had done to provide a quality program in school. All of the participants responded that they had tried to increase teachers’ professional development and had adjusted their preschool’s curriculum to be more child-centered to meet the PEVS requirements. They viewed these changes as beneficial to children’s learning.

Principal A responded that under the PEVS requirements, her preschool’s teachers applied for funding to study for diplomas and bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education. She emphasized that the school had some special needs children; thus, she had invited some clinical psychologists from the Social Welfare Department to conduct in-house teacher training. She discovered that the teachers appreciated that training and agreed that it could enrich their knowledge about taking care of children. Principal A also believed that teachers should open their minds, learn various teaching methods, and exchange experiences with other regions. She described an experience with professional training a few months ago:

Recently, I visited two preschools in Mainland China. I found the school settings and the teachers’ teaching were well organized. Then I planned an exchange visit for my schoolteachers, and all the teachers joined the visit. The teachers compiled a reflective report after the visit. Through their reflection, I found that they had learned a lot regarding both teaching methods and designing curricula.

Principal A believed that Hong Kong preschools should have their own characteristics. On the other hand, she found that the different external visits and exchange experiences with different
countries were beneficial to her preschool teachers. She discovered that the teachers gained insights that inspired them to improve curriculum development.

Principal B had experience leading teachers to implement an English project for young children, and she found that she could not start the curriculum by herself. She recalled that she had applied for a project from SCOLAR. However, she found that some teachers did not want to join it, as they worried that their English ability was not sufficient to teach children. Principal B led two senior teachers and herself to implement the project in three classes. She described the results:

In the first year, I found it was difficult to find the right teacher to initiate the project.

Hence, I tried to work it out by myself. I think this was a way to convince the teachers to implement a new curriculum. Besides, we could get support from SCOLAR, and after that year, teachers observed that the children liked the activities. Now, teachers understood that it was a good project; children could learn in a fun way and they could enhance their teaching skills, too.

Principal B added that she had learned a valuable experience from this teacher development. She stated:

I knew that if we applied a new project … it might benefit the children and teacher development. Now, I would collect at least five teachers’ views before applying for any funding to implement a new curriculum. I think compelling teachers to implement a new curriculum is not good for either children or teachers without getting teachers’ support.

Principal C also believed that she could not implement a new curriculum on her own. She recognized that a preschool must maintain the coherence of the learning content from lower
class to upper class children, which requires teamwork. She shared an experience of how to work out a moral curriculum in these 5 years:

Five years ago, I held an in-depth discussion with teachers and wanted to clarify our school curriculum’s strengths and weaknesses. All the teachers thought the moral curriculum was more important than others for young children. Thus, we teamed up a group of teachers in each grade and found some experts to train our teachers to gain knowledge and teaching skills regarding this issue. Now, more teachers are showing confidence in teaching this activity.

Principal C thought that teachers’ modeling was vital for young children. She found that the new curriculum not only affected children’s behavior, but also changed teachers’ lives. She stated, “When a teacher’s moral life is positive and she has passion, she must have her own way to lead children to learn in a pleasurable way.” Principal C added that she had received supportive feedback on this moral curriculum from many parents; she stated, “the feedback is like an encouragement and recognition of us, and it supports teachers to carry on this curriculum development.”

Both Principal D and Principal F said that they liked to try challenging new things. They had also tried to enhance teachers’ professional development, aiming to promote music in their preschool. Principal D described how she would like to add a new activity for children to try each year:

I do not like to follow the current trend, but I would like to consider what is good for the children to enjoy learning. I used to plan a year of in-house training for teacher development before starting a new activity.
She added,

For example, if I intended to add an activity with drums for the children next year, I would plan to conduct two in-house training sessions before that. The training may include enhancing teachers’ knowledge of playing drums. Training and practice should enable teachers to feel more confident when conducting the new activity in the coming year.

Principal D repeated that her preschool’s curriculum was not very appropriate for young children; some paperwork and homework were too academic to meet parents’ needs. Thus, she would like to add some extra activities such as music and drama activity that may let children have a fun way to learn to enjoy school life.

Like Principal D, Principal F said that she was keen to learn new things before starting teacher training. Principal F would like to lead all teachers as they learn and implement new things at the same time. She believed that it was not effective if all teachers had to understand the new curriculum before implementation. She believed that children are active learners and that various types of learning can help children’s development. Thus, she would like to adopt different kinds of programs in preschools; however, she would tailor the programs to suit her children. Principal F shared a successful experience promoting the Orff Approach in her preschool music activity:

I remember that a few years ago, I wanted to implement the Orff Approach. I was hoping that it would inspire children to be interested in music. I planned to adopt part of the approach and to incorporate it into the Putonghua lesson, which meant using music activity to learn Putonghua. At the same time, I hired a Putonghua teacher who already
had that training. As a result, I found our teachers admired the Putonghua teacher’s teaching skill, and some of them tried to adopt some of the approach in their regular music activities.

Principal F observed that a preschool principal needs to be sensitive to the current trends in early childhood education. She said she understands that all preschool teachers are busy teaching and that all principals are busy too. She considered that a principal is responsible for overseeing curriculum development and ought to lead the teachers’ professional development. She added that she knows that teachers may have views different than hers, but she believes a principal ought to understand the advantages of the curriculum and how it can benefit children’s learning before introducing it to teachers.

Unlike those participants’ successful experiences, Principal E had a tough experience with teacher development and the implementation of a drama curriculum two years ago. The challenges during the implementation inspired her to consider how to support teachers while starting a new curriculum development. She observed:

I think every school wants to enhance teachers’ professional training, as it will eventually benefit children’s learning. Two years ago, we joined a drama integration curriculum from a university. In the first year, there was teacher training for the whole year. In the second year, teachers could integrate some drama elements into their teaching and activities. I recalled that in the second year’s implementation, we had been frustrated. I remember I selected an experienced teacher to be a leader of this training, and I was also involved in all the training. After the training, the lead teacher was supposed to lead other teachers to implement the curriculum in the second year. However, the lead teacher
became stressed, quit the job, and left us. Finally, I took up the leader’s role and then continued the second year’s implementation. I found it was a hard time because another three teachers also felt stressed. I tried to encourage them, and luckily, we finished the implementation.

Principal E described this as a failure, but it inspired her to consider how to support teachers while trying to develop new curriculum. She believed that teachers may feel the desire to learn new things that can enrich their professionalism. However, she believed it is vital to find suitable teachers to be leaders or mentors who can lead or implement the curriculum.

The participants had the same sense that enhancing teachers’ professional development can benefit curriculum development. The principals believed that one cannot rely only on the school principal to implement a new curriculum, but also could draw upon teachers’ professional abilities. Five participants shared their successful experience in both teachers’ professional development and enhancing preschool curriculum; one principal shared a failure that inspired her to consider the relationship between teachers’ professional development and enhancing preschool curriculum.

Preschool vision and culture. This subtheme captures the participants’ views on how to develop a preschool’s vision and culture. They shared that a principal is the key person to lead all staff to achieve the preschool’s vision. Thus, the participants thought that they should go through the preschool’s vision and lead teachers to develop the preschool’s culture. For instance, some preschools have adopted the philosophy of Taoism and Buddhism into their schooling, and some of them have integrated moral education by using traditional stories and rhymes to teach children the value of obeying parents, taking care of siblings, honesty, courage, and empathy.
Christian organizations have also set up preschools, and these schools have embedded Western moral and religious values in the form of Bible stories (Education Bureau, 2015b). Principal A responded that she had worked in a Buddhist organization for over 15 years, so she understood its vision, religion, and culture, as she had the same beliefs. However, beginning in 2015, she needed to supervise another preschool, and she studied the new school’s vision and thought about how to lead teachers to understand it. She believed that a principal ought to admire her school’s vision and want to achieve its goals, stating:

I knew our school board had discussed the preschool vision in depth, because it is on an estate, which has its own characteristics of environmental protection. Thus, our school had to fit this characteristic. I went through the preschool’s mission. I considered the teachers’ views on environmental protection when hiring them. I believed that this might benefit the development of the preschool’s culture easily. After that, I invited some experts from related domains to enrich our teachers’ knowledge about that. I hoped it might support teachers to understand the meaning of environmental protection.

Another three participants were Christians working in Christian organizations. They believed that principals who have the same religion can meet the school’s basic beliefs and can be more motivated to carry out the school’s vision. These principals had various experiences with developing their preschool’s vision. Principal B responded that she did not change the school’s vision, as she already admired it when she started to work there. However, she shared that sometimes it is not easy to lead teachers to reach the goals of the vision. She recalled:

I remember that when I came to this school, all the teachers had already worked there for at least 5 to 10 years. They should have understood the school’s vision even better than I
did at that time. I was eager to try some new ways to achieve this school’s vision. Previously you said vision, through a child-centered approach. However, I found that some of these teachers always worked in the same way and did not want to learn something new. Thus, I persisted under a principle of fairness, and then all the teachers rotated through trying new teaching methods bit by bit.

Principal B replied that she wanted all the teachers to understand that to achieve a preschool’s vision and culture, all the teachers’ collaboration is necessary. She collected all teachers’ ideas, whether they were experienced or not, when she reviewed the school’s vision and culture each year.

Principal E had also collected teachers’ feedback while reviewing the preschool’s performance and examining its vision. In addition, she collected parents’ feedback via surveys each year. She commented that principals should persist in carrying out the preschool’s vision, but she did not want to pressure teachers. She recalled that after she failed regarding a teacher’s professional development, she reflected in depth on how to lead teachers to improve the school’s development. She commented:

I think that a principal should lead teachers to match the school’s vision to provide services for children, and I have been working here for over 20 years, so I should do my best. One of my school’s visions aims to provide a child-centered learning environment. Last year, I proposed a free-play time in the whole school every Friday. First, I encouraged teachers to think how to let children enjoy play and to persuade them to try thinking of different kinds of activity in each classroom. Over a year, I found the children enjoyed play and had more curiosity to explore different classrooms. I knew
that some teachers felt stressed in the first month due to lack of manpower, so I had a really good discussion and invited some parents to get involved as volunteers in the activities. Eventually, the parents gave their support and became eager to help the teachers in the classrooms activities.

Principal E repeated that she did not want to pressure teachers or increase their workload. She had increased the number of parent volunteers and she believed that parental involvement was helping to achieve the school’s vision.

Principal C was similar to Principal E in that she liked to collect parents’ views on the schools’ performance. She had received parents’ feedback on increasing homework, and she commented that her school should hire a native English teacher. Principal C also believed that a principal should maintain the preschool’s vision and culture. She shared an experience with parental feedback and how to persevere with the school vision. She stated, “I had received some parents’ feedback regarding why I am only keen on the moral curriculum. The parents agreed that our preschool could inspire children to develop a good attitude.” Principal C said that she also felt grateful for parents’ encouragement and that she also did not want teachers to encounter pressure from parents who always want more homework for their children.

Both Principal F and Principal D worked in preschools that were non-religious organizations. Both thought that principals should not put teachers under too much pressure or heavy workloads to achieve a preschool’s vision. Principal F said that a principal should agree with the school’s vision and culture; otherwise, it would be hard to continue to work there. She said that a principal is vital for nurturing teachers in understanding the mission and leading them in establishing the school’s vision. Principal F believed that not all teachers agreed with her
views, but that she must find a way to inspire their motivation and make them willing to work together to reach the school’s goals. In other words, she did not want teachers to have to work too hard to achieve the school’s vision. She stated, “If I could inspire teachers to enjoy teaching, that would already meet one of the goals, and it would also help to develop a culture that can help children to enjoy learning.”

Principal D shared that her boss was a businessman who did not have any idea about the school’s vision for early childhood education. She added that her boss only required her to maintain a profit each year; however, he gave her lots of autonomy to take on a leadership role for this school. On her first day, she found that all the teachers were loyal and devoted to their jobs. In the first few years, she did not change the culture too much in order to avoid pressuring the teachers. Later, she thought the school should provide better quality early childhood education for children, so she adopted some strategies to lead teachers to achieve this goal for the children. She reflected:

I think a principal should take a standpoint on her leadership, and my view is wanting children to enjoy learning in their early stage. As I said, our school’s curriculum is not so appropriate for young children, and the parents are always eager for more paperwork. This school joined the voucher scheme in 2008, and there were some parents who felt unhappy with such changes, so I decided to reduce some academic tasks to meet the voucher requirements. The teachers may feel pressure regarding enrollments. If no students enroll, their jobs will be threatened and some may want to quit and move to another school that has high enrollment. Thus, I needed to maintain the enrollment rate to maintain the teacher turnover rate and to maintain quality education. Accordingly, I
invited some experts to provide training for teachers to enhance their skills and professionalism. I also hired other experts to set up a well-designed website that can aid parents to understand better what is best for children’s learning.

Principal D stated that she treasured her teachers’ efforts and knew they found it exhausting to meet the voucher requirements, such as upgrading their professional qualifications, while maintaining a quality service for children and parents. Thus, she also adopted some ways to reduce their workload. She related:

I canceled Open Day because teachers devoted too much time to it, and I proposed that teachers do not report for duty during long holidays such as Christmas, Easter, etc. This may help teachers to take breaks or reinvigorate their life. I think this also helps teachers to enjoy life more and it may make them feel more positive about their jobs.

Four participants worked in religious preschools and two participants worked in preschools that belonged to non-religious organizations. Those who worked in religious preschools thought that the principal should have the same beliefs as that religion as motivation to carry out the vision. All the participants said they did not have much experience in developing a new vision for a preschool; they would rather think about how to achieve within the existing vision. They believed that a principal should understand and inspire teachers to meet the vision. All the participants thought that providing a child-centered learning environment is the basis of a preschool’s vision. All the participants said that they did not want to pressure teachers or to increase teachers’ workload simply to achieve the goals of the vision.

**Working with parents.** All the principals agreed that collaboration with parents is vital in early childhood education, as collaboration can help children’s long-term development. They
felt that they were striving to provide an appropriate curriculum for young children, delivered in a well-designed and safe environment. However, they all replied that they had had some shocking experiences with safety issues and had received complaints from parents. On the other hand, they also felt surprise when they received the parents’ support. The third superordinate theme encompassed three subthemes that emerged from the data analysis: *Children’s safety*, *Helplessness and loneliness due to parents’ complaints*, and *Happiness and comfort regarding the parent and school partnership*.

**Children’s safety.** All of the participants responded that they had dealt with children’s accidents and injuries. Four participants added that the experiences still had a deep effect on them. The four participants also responded that when the cases occurred, the first priority was to ensure the children’s safety. For example, Principal A shared an experience when a 3-year-old boy had disappeared for a while from school. As Principal A described it:

> That was the most dismaying moment in my life. I searched everywhere in and out of the school for 10 minutes, and I decided to report the matter to the police station and to continue to look for the child. Luckily, we found the child near the school.

Principal A added:

> Even though I had over 15 years of principal experience at that time, the accident still occurred. I deeply reflected on this accident and understood that several minor mistakes were made at the same time such as there being a new teacher who did not understand the young child, not enough teachers were on standby in front of the school’s gate and many parents came together to pick up their children. Then the little boy could run out of
school without supervision. After the in-depth reflection, I met the parents and the school committee, and I promised to improve the situation.

Principal A felt grateful that the parents forgave her mistake and that they still had a good relationship with each other.

Another three principals reported that they had suffered for a long time and had even broken their relationships with parents over a child’s accident in their preschool. For example, Principal C responded, “One day I received a phone call from a parent, who said her daughter’s shoulder was dislocated when she returned from school. The parent sent the girl to hospital and she was under treatment and recovered quickly.” Principal C thought that the relationship with the girl’s mother was good, so she visited the family to try to understand the situation. However, the girl’s father was so angry that he withdrew the girl from the school. Principal C said she felt regret over this accident, and she went on to explain:

The parents trusted our school in the beginning and we had good communication with each other. This was the biggest challenge to my leadership role and it was our fault. It was no excuse that we did not know that a girl was hurt while she was leaving the school. After that, I always remind myself and teachers that we need to observe children’s health and other needs seriously, because it is easy to lose parents’ trust when their children become hurt at school.

Similarly, both Principal E and Principal F found it hard to deal with parents’ anger over their children’s injury cases. They also agreed that preschools should be safe places for children to learn and play. Both principals not only had to deal with the injured child and parents, but they also had to settle the claims of other stakeholders over accidents. Principal E said:
A parent found her daughter had a little blood mark on her lower thigh. The parent suspected a little boy had sexually abused her daughter in a toilet. Then, the parent was very angry and complained to the EDB and the school board. Thus, I had to deal with many reports to follow up the case for over a month.

Principal E continued:

Our school’s staff and teachers had been following the case in detail. They reviewed the entire situation for the girl and the boy. Both the EDB and the board committee approved of our staff’s performance and the report. The inspection found that the boy did not hurt the girl. Finally, the parents agreed to settle the case, but they sent their child to another school. Now, we do not allow children to go to the toilet alone. We recorded the case for teachers to review and use it in new teacher development on safety issues for in-house training.

Principal E explained that she had to consider all the stakeholders’ emotions and she also wanted to be fair to the child who was suspected in this case. Thus, she had investigated the case in detail. On the other hand, she felt that was a hard time for her as she had only 3 years experience as a principal at that time.

Principal F described a case of a child losing a tooth because the child bumped into a chair in a classroom many years ago. It was the last day of the school term. She recalled that she had handled the entire case: she comforted the child, checked the child’s injury, performed first aid, and calmed down the teacher at the same time. She also called the parent to school instantly; the child’s mother came and saw that it was not so serious, so the mother decided not to send the child to hospital. Later, when the child’s father came, he was angry and asked why
she had not sent his child to a hospital. Principal F stated that she felt a nightmare was starting when the father arrived. Principal F said:

When the child’s father came, he questioned me as to why I had not sent his child to hospital, asking how to make an insurance claim, and the details of handling the accident, etc. The father called the school every day to discuss compensation from the insurance company, and he complained to the EDB, the local district council, and our school board. The teachers and I suffered a lot during the summer holiday.

Principal F repeatedly mentioned that she did not have sufficient knowledge to deal with the insurance issue and the court of law at that time. She had to handle different parties and she did not know the father had used an audio recorder to record all their conversations. She felt both mentally and physically exhausted due to having to deal with the parents and having to calm down the teachers. Luckily, the parents agreed to accept the compensation and settled the case.

The participants made children’s safety their first priority. They have needed to comfort children, teachers, and parents in regard to children’s accidents, and they understood that dealing with parents’ complaints about safety problems is unavoidable.

**Helplessness and loneliness due to parents’ complaints.** The data found that all of the principals had experienced helplessness and loneliness when dealing with parents’ complaints in their first few years as a principal. Principal A explained that she needed to deal with an emotional parent who made her feel helpless and lonely at that time:

When I met an emotional parent, I needed to reply to all the complaint letters to the Social Welfare Department, I needed to report it to my school board myself, and I needed to remind all the teachers to be alert regarding child safety in the school. I was young
with not much administrative experience at that time, so I felt lonely and I suffered from
insomnia. Now, if I encounter a similar situation, I handle it better. Now, I am confident
to seek advice from experts.

Similarly, Principal E expressed that she felt stranded when dealing with stakeholder
enquiries and was busy reporting and documenting parents’ complaints. She also explained:
I had only worked for around three years when I received the parent’s complaint that her
daughter had a little blood mark. I had very little experience to cope with the complaint,
and the other teachers were so young that they could not help me. Thus, I recorded the
case and used it for a teacher training session that would increase all the staff’s ability to
face the challenges of complaints and safety.

Principal B shared that she felt unaided not only by outsiders, but also by disappointed
staff inside the school. She explained, “When I encounter a parent’s complaint, I need to gather
the evidence. Some teachers may have felt this was unfair to them or felt insecure during the
investigation.” Principal B felt that some teachers changed their working attitudes during the
investigation. Thus, Principal B felt alone, as she could not tell other teachers about her feelings
because she did not want to spread bad emotions across the workplace.

Three principals felt lonely and helpless while dealing with parents’ complaints. To deal
with the complaints, the participants shared that they had to consider stakeholders’ requirements,
prepare reports, and conduct the investigation without influencing others’ emotions. Thus, some
participants also felt lonely inside the school while dealing with the complaints. One principal
tried to record the experience as a case study and hoped that it could help other teachers in
similar cases.
Happiness and comfort regarding the parent and school partnership. On the other hand, all of the participants responded that they have always felt contentment from parents’ support, and felt comfort in seeing that some parents were more concerned about their children’s well-being than academic learning. Such experiences made them feel that working in the early childhood education field was a worthy pursuit. Thus, the participants reported that they were always willing to listen to the parents’ voices.

Principals A, B, and D said that they were always willing to listen to parents’ sharing, requests, and even complaints. Principal A stated that if she could help parents solve problems affecting their children, she found it worthwhile serving them and was pleased about that. She had one experience with a parent who had already left her preschool and sent her child to another preschool. However, after a year the parent encountered a problem there and came back to seek her advice. Finally, the parent accepted her comments. Principal A responded, “I felt comfort as the parent viewed me as a trustworthy person. If I can serve the parents, I believe I can help the children, too.”

Principal B thought that parents should be the most important people in their children’s lives. She shared:

If I can change a parent’s mind to educate a child in a good way, I feel happy.

Furthermore, I want parents to believe in Jesus. I had an unforgettable experience a few years ago. A parent was a Baptist in my preschool’s church and I was not that church’s member. However, the parent had written a message, which mentioned I had taught her how to nurture her child. I think maybe my attitude also led her to become interested in this religion. I felt comfortable when I heard her sharing about that.
Principal D replied that she felt comfortable about a group of parents’ supportive actions. Principal D shared that she received an emotional parent’s complaints over a period of a year. It perplexed her because some parents may have been influenced by other parents’ gossip. She said:

A group of parents had formed a Parent and Teacher Association (PTA) at the same time. The parents showed great support and helped to issue some notices to share with other parents. I am still in touch with those parents who supported me a lot.

Both Principal E and Principal F found that they got the most happiness from children who were enjoying their education at their preschools. Furthermore, both also appreciated parent involvement, as it not only advantages children, but also benefits preschools. Principal E said:

I am trying to provide more free choice play activities for children this year. I found that children really enjoy every Friday, and I see some siblings showing excitement as they can find their brothers and sisters playing together. Our preschool had never provided mixed-age activities for children. I thought that the experience would be valuable to young children and to me. Besides, I found parents were willing to devote their time to getting involved in the classrooms every Friday. With the parents’ support, our teachers can develop more activities, because more adults can facilitate our children at playtime.

Principal F believed that curriculum design is at the heart of early childhood education. Principal F said she was always eager to study different teaching methods for young children. Thus, she observed:

When I saw young children enjoying learning and the curriculum, I suggested tailor-making it myself. In addition, I have received the appreciation of many parents for the
new teaching method. I believed that the appreciation was noble, and understand that parents also want their children to learn through play rather than only through writing and homework. I felt encouraged in that it was worth striving for that.

Principal C also said that she would love to see children enjoy learning, parents receive respect, and teachers receive support. Principal C added, “I really remember that a group of parents approached me last year. They said that our preschool should keep on providing the fun learning and moral curriculum, and their sincerity was unforgettable.” Besides, Principal C stated that she had received QAI comments from the EDB that her preschool curriculum was outstanding. Principal C shared:

My happiness came not only from the comments, but also from evidence that supported me to carry on providing more learning through play activities for young children.

Indeed, the inspector had encouraged me to spread our preschool practice to the community. I would consider that point seriously because I want more children to enjoy learning through play and in a good manner.

All the participants experienced blissful and comfortable moments due to parents’ support and admiration. The participants were supportive stakeholders, and children’s enjoyment of their learning encouraged them to work in preschools.

Characteristics of preschool principals. The final superordinate theme dealt with the participants’ experience of working as preschool principals over the years. When asked what advice they would like to give to others who want to be preschool principals, the participants responded that a preschool structure and management seems smaller than a primary school, but a preschool principal also needs to supervise everything in the preschool. All of the participants
felt that a principal is vital to a preschool, but she could not do everything herself. From the participants’ responses, two subthemes emerged, *Teamwork and good communication* and *Passion in early childhood education*.

**Teamwork and good communication.** When asked about the prerequisites for a new principal, most participants believed that teamwork and good communication are significant. Principal A described that a preschool principal should have good coordination with all parties, including good communication skills with the Hong Kong Education Bureau, and maintain a good relationship with parents and teachers as well as young children. She further explained that currently all new preschool principals must undergo some leadership training as required by the Education Bureau, but that a principal cannot handle all the management matters by herself, so teamwork is necessary. On the other hand, Principal A asserted that “a principal should understand that a preschool is smaller than a secondary school and the population is less, too. Thus, parents, children, and even teachers also view a preschool principal as a key person in school.” Principal A shared her experience with some educators who commented on the role of a preschool principal:

I received a secondary school principal’s description of a preschool principal as like a hen looking after her chicks. I agree with him: I love to work with children and I like to enter each class to communicate with them. Besides, a senior teacher told that me I was really like a father in school because I usually lead them to go ahead, but also take care of them.

Principal B stated, “The first priority for a new principal is love and care for young children.” Principal B believed that all new preschool principals must finish a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and they must learn some management skills in the preschool.
principal course. However, Principal B emphasized teamwork as essential for preschool leadership. She explained:

I believe that a preschool principal is vital to a school; however, a principal is not able to do all tasks. Teamwork is of benefit to school development; thus, a principal should learn how to build a team with different subordinates to contribute to the school’s curriculum, collaboration with parents, and other school activities wisely. Besides, I know that different schools have their own religions, so a preschool principal should understand whether her own beliefs match the preschool’s beliefs. Otherwise, the principal will find it hard to meet the school’s vision. This is a kind of teamwork spirit.

Principal C emphasized that individuals who work in the early childhood field should take care of children’s learning, and should design an appropriate curriculum to help children’s development. Principal C noted:

A new principal should take care of children and ensure they have 3 years of happy learning moments in preschool. Besides, the principal should have the ability to lead all team members to improve the curriculum for children as needed.

Principal C repeated her view: “I do not want to see too many academic programs for young children in preschool.”

Principal D made the point that “as a new preschool principal, the first thing to learn is willingness to listen to others and be open minded, and to understand that communication skills form the power of teamwork.” Principal D recalled that 20 years ago, many preschool principals had the ultimate authority to make decisions in school. Most teachers tended to obey the
principal’s orders and follow her decisions. Principal D emphasized that the world is changing and stated:

A preschool principal should always act as a representative to communicate with parents every day to collect parents’ comments and to establish good relations with them. At the same time, a preschool principal needs to collect stakeholders’ comments to improve the school’s development. In addition, teacher and staff feedback are as important as other stakeholders’ comments. Thus, a preschool principal should lead the team to improve a preschool, to learn new pedagogy and curriculum, and to benefit young children.

Principal E stated that a new preschool principal needed to understand the importance of communication skills; thus, stable emotions and good communication are basic elements. In addition, she believed a preschool principal cannot know everything, and needed to be patient and learn how to arrange teamwork among the teachers. Principal E added:

Currently, a preschool principal needs to communicate with lots of people, from those inside the preschool to the community. If a principal’s communication skills are not good enough, she will not run school smoothly or lead teachers to implement the curriculum in a good way. In addition, a new principal needs to adjust her attitude to become a mother in a preschool, because a principal has the responsibility to take care of all the children and staff there.

Principal F observed that almost all of the preschool principals are former senior teachers, and most seemed to believe that senior teachers should understand the running of a preschool. However, she mentioned that there is a big difference between working as a preschool principal and as a teacher. Principal F emphasized that principals should have good communication and
coordination skills with different parties, and she emphasized again that there are many preschool organizations with affiliated schools that are similar to hers. She coordinated various projects and graduation ceremonies with affiliated preschool principals each year. Therefore, these skills are necessary not only for running her own preschool, but also for working with other preschool principals and teachers. At the same time, a principal also needed to consider her own preschool’s needs and to delegate different tasks to senior teachers. Principal F concluded:

I think Hong Kong’s early childhood education still lacks administrative training for senior teachers with even less opportunity for principals to undergo advanced training. I believe that having a senior preschool teacher well trained in management or administration before promotion to a principal may benefit a preschool’s development.

All of the participants thought that good communication and coordination abilities are essential and vital for preschool principals. One participant shared that administrative training may also be important for newcomers before they take up the principal’s role.

**Passion for early childhood education.** When asked what they wanted people to remember them for if they could be an exemplar leader someday, most participants replied that passion for their principal role and loving to work with young children helped them to become preschool principals. They all felt glad to have an opportunity to contribute their abilities to early childhood education.

Principal A said that she felt glad to be a preschool principal and could see the changes in early childhood education in Hong Kong. She had had the opportunity to work in both whole-day and half-day class preschools for more than 20 years, and now she was working for two
preschools at the same time. The experience of working in different kinds of preschools was hard for her, but she felt she had contributed to early childhood education. She stated:

When I entered this field in the early stage, all child care centers, which means whole-day class preschools, were registered under the Child Care Services Ordinance and supervised by the Social Welfare Department. Currently, our whole-day class for children aged 2 to 6 is called a nursery, which is still registered under the Child Care Services Ordinance. Another preschool with children aged from 3 to 6 is registered under the Education Bureau. Thus, I have learned to prepare different documents to fulfill different government departments’ requirements. That was hard for me, and I attempted to meet all the requirements. I found I am not an innovative leader, but I am a good administrator. While doing administrative work, I see taking care of children’s needs as my first priority.

Principal B commented that when she recalls her role working as a preschool principal over the years, she feels blessed that she could work in a church preschool and enjoy working with children. Two years ago, she started a family counseling course because she thought family is of utmost importance to young children. Principal B stated:

I found that parenting styles were changing every decade. I met more family and emotional problems than 10 years ago. I wanted to learn more counseling skills and I hoped that adopting the skills and my early childhood education knowledge would help parents to solve their parenting problems. Indeed, I wanted children to grow up in healthy families.
Principal C said, “I am not like a leader; I am only working diligently and have passion for early childhood education. If children can remember that they felt joyful, confident in their learning, and respected in my preschool, I will be very happy.”

Principal D stated that the question was quite difficult to answer, but she felt grateful for becoming a principal. She thought that she was good at managing interpersonal relationships. Principal D replied that her character helped her to establish lots of friendships with different individuals, whether children or others, through the job. Principal D repeated:

I have a widespread interpersonal context and network. I joined different committees that are influencing the policy of Hong Kong’s early childhood education. I hope that this is another way to contribute to Hong Kong’s preschool education. Besides, I think I am a kind and cheerful person to everyone; thus, sometimes I find it easy to seek advice from many experts and to use numerous resources that benefit children’s learning. I also want all my teachers and staff to remember all the happy and harmonious experiences working with me.

Principal E shared that her dream was to implement a child-centered curriculum in her preschool. She also felt grateful that she had met many teachers who also viewed the early childhood stage as vital to young children. She repeated, “I am not able to do everything through my own efforts. I would like to thank my team of teachers and even my preschool’s board members who supported me to develop the child-centered curriculum.” Principal E also said that she hoped outsiders knew that early childhood education should provide more activities that are appropriate for children and let children grow up with love and care.
Principal F stated that the curriculum is a core element and it is vital for young children’s development, and she thought that a preschool leader should have good management training. She would feel satisfied if others remembered that she had commitment and had contributed to early childhood education curriculum development. Principal F repeated:

There is still a lack of leadership and management training for early childhood educators in Hong Kong. I was in the first batch of principals to attend the preschool principal course 20 years ago. However, I learned administration, management, and leadership from other people who came from other fields. Presently, I think many experienced preschool principals have enough knowledge and frontline experience to share and even to publish materials for newcomers. I think that this would benefit early childhood education in Hong Kong.

Principal F showed concern for the preschool’s curriculum development and she repeated several times that she was eager to improve the curriculum for young children. In addition, she hoped that some experienced preschool principals could share their leadership experiences in the future.

All the participants viewed good communication skills and acknowledgement of teamwork as beneficial to a new preschool principal. They also stated that passion for, caring for, and loving children motivates them to continue to work in early childhood education.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore preschool principals’ perceptions of what leadership looks like in early childhood education in Hong Kong. Six participants were involved in the interviews, and they all answered the interview questions. They all had experience related
to the questions, and they were willing to express their feelings when they reviewed their experience. The study used interpretative phenomenological analysis, which allows in-depth investigation to gain insight into participants’ experiences and make sense of their perceptions of leadership in preschools.

The analysis resulted in four superordinate themes: (a) Difficult decisions as leaders, (b) Concerns about early childhood education quality, (c) Working with parents and (d) Characteristics of preschool principals. The data were consistent with the previous literature and the theory of transformational leadership. In addition, the participants raised some valuable issues such as preschool safety, dealing with emotional individuals, enhancing teachers’ professional development when working with parents, and management training. The participants viewed these as important issues in preschool leadership.
Chapter 5: Interpretations, Recommendations, Conclusions

The purpose of this research study was to explore preschool principals’ perceptions of leadership in early childhood education in Hong Kong. The researcher employed a qualitative method, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, to collect insights from participants about their perceptions of leadership as experienced in their everyday work. Through this approach, the researcher gained an in-depth understanding from the participants’ points of view, allowing them to make sense of their distinctive experiences with leadership at their preschools.

There were six participants who had at least 10 years’ experience in the position of preschool principal and whose preschool had joined the PEVS in 2007. All of the participants were willing to share their experience with different situations and challenges that they encountered as they led their preschool during those years. The researcher was particularly interested in how participants saw their roles as leaders in educational reform. The theoretical framework of transformational leadership and four behaviors (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation), proposed by Burns (1978) and updated by Bass (1998), guided the development of the research question and the progression of this study. The research question was: How do experienced principals in early childhood education in Hong Kong describe their role as preschool leaders? Four superordinate themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) Difficult decisions as leaders, (b) Concerns about early childhood education quality, (c) Working with parents, and (d) Characteristics of preschool principals.
This chapter discusses the findings and is arranged into three sections. The first section, interpretation of the primary findings, examines the four superordinate themes, including their links with the theoretical framework and the literature review. The second section suggests implications for practice that reflect the participants’ experience with leadership over their 10-year journey as preschool principals. This discussion emphasizes quality of preschool education, care for family needs and parent education, and enhancing curriculum and professional development. The final section uses the participants’ shared experiences to develop new insights on recommendations for practice, further research, early childhood education curriculum development, professional development, and parent education.

**Interpretation of Primary Findings**

**Difficult decisions as leaders.** The first superordinate theme to emerge from the participant interviews was *Difficult decisions as leaders*. Interview question 1 asked participants how they managed a surprise experience when they needed to make a quick decision about difficult issues such as *Dealing with emotional individuals, Staff performance and reappointment*, and *Stress due to preschool children’s enrollment*.

The researcher intentionally chose participants who had worked as principals for over 10 years. The participants shared their lived experience in depth. The study revealed that three participants had been dealing with emotional individuals in order to avoid any potential risk to children’s safety. The participants could not handle emotional people easily, but they needed to take care of the children. In addition, some participants found the cases caused by the emotional individuals to be complicated, and they suffered from the challenge of communicating and preparing many reports for internal and external parties. The participants demonstrated that they
could maintain professional and stable emotions in their work even while tackling difficult situations for a long time. This finding is consistent with Bass (1998), who stated, “Charismatic leaders are able to maintain extraordinary presence of mind in the face of such threats and crises” (p. 28).

Meanwhile, the participants demonstrated the transformational leadership behavior of idealized influence. As described by Bass (1998), “The leaders are willing to take risks and are consistent rather than arbitrary” (p. 5). Examples of this include when Principal D took action against an emotional English teacher and when Principal B reported a case to police. Their actions aimed to keep children and teachers away from the emotional people. Principal A experienced “making self-sacrifices” (Yukl, 2010, p.278) as she completed a report to the external parties by herself. She emphasized that she felt exhausted and had insomnia many times while dealing with an emotional person for a whole year.

Apart from being aware of emotional individuals, the participants shared that they had encountered difficult decisions with staff performance and reappointment. The participants were concerned about their subordinates’ needs because they viewed teachers as vital for providing quality service to young children in a preschool. The participants shared that they had faced dilemmas regarding teachers’ needs, and three of them had been tackling teachers’ performance and reappointment matters in order to provide better quality service (M. N. C. Wong & Li, 2010; L. H. Yuen, 2012). The principals shared that they had talked to a teacher directly when they were concerned about that teacher’s emotional condition. The participants’ behavior was in line with individualized consideration. According to Bass (1998), transformational leadership “is
being aware of individual concerns, and seeing the individual as a whole person rather than as just an employee” (p. 6).

Another area of concern for participants was preschool enrollment. This finding is in keeping with the literature. It is important to understand how preschool principals adopt strategies such as applying external government funding, providing extra free-of-charge programs, and enrolling some SEN children to maintain the enrollment rate. One participant felt pressure to lay off employees in order to keep a balanced budget for the preschool. The principals emphasized that children’s enrollment is the main income for a preschool. Thus, the findings indicated that preschool teachers’ jobs and salary status are both unstable (H. Li et al., 2008) due to changing enrollment. The participants expressed that they have struggled between increasing enrollment and balancing teachers’ workload. The participants demonstrated two transformational leadership behaviors: inspirational motivation and individualized consideration.

With respect to inspirational motivation, the participants “demonstrate commitment to goals” and encourage “team spirit” (Bass, 1998, p. 5) that helps teachers be willing to attempt to implement extra programs that would increase the opportunity for children’s enrollment. In addition, the participants showed individualized consideration by offering support and a chance for two-way communication with their followers (Bass, 1998). Four participants had talked with teachers to listen to their points of view on enrollment strategies.

All six participants had encountered many situations in which they felt it was difficult to make a decision. They believed that as preschool principals they should take action or respond quickly when a circumstance is influencing children’s safety. The participants highlighted a
problem with emotional individuals. They felt these were difficult to handle, yet such cases were becoming more common in the preschool environment. These findings may expand the current literature. With respect to children’s enrollment rate, which influences teachers’ workload and reappointment, the participants replied that they felt stress about enrollment and teachers’ job status. The participants all showed behaviors of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration.

**Concerns about early childhood education quality.** The participants asserted that they were keen to provide an appropriate curriculum and learning environment for young children, and they also needed to cope with external assurance while assessing their preschool quality. Early childhood education quality emerged under the second superordinate theme. The findings identified that the participants needed to lead teachers to tackle QAI and QR, plan teachers’ professional development, enhance preschool curricula, and lead staff to achieve their preschool’s vision and culture. These findings are largely in keeping with Bass’ (1998) transformational leadership theory regarding intellectual stimulation, as discussed below.

Regarding QAI and QR, all of the participants had experienced QAI at least twice during their 10-year principal tenure and they maintained QR for their preschool each year. All of the participants believed that they themselves, as well as all of the teachers, still felt tired and stressed about QAI. These findings are linked to the literature (S. P. Chan & Wong, 2010; M. N. C. Wong & Li, 2010). The participants also suffered from a heavy workload (L. H. Yuen, 2012) as they prepared to meet the QAI requirements. However, this study revealed an experience that was somewhat different from M. N. C. Wong and Li’s (2010) study, which was that some principals showed more confidence about completing the second round of QAI and felt happy to
receive positive comments on it. It may be that the participants gained experience from the first round of QAI: They shared that they knew more during the second round and knew how to lead teachers to cope with it. The participants demonstrated inspirational motivation (Bass, 1998) behavior as they attempted to lead their teachers in coping with the external quality assurance requirement.

In addition, it is interesting that four participants asserted that the QR can bring opportunities to enhance a preschool’s quality curriculum development, promote a child-centered curriculum, reduce homework, and even lead teachers to improve their lesson plans and implementation. These findings contrasted with M. N. C. Wong and Li (2010). On the other hand, the study discovered that the participants had received complaints and questions from parents regarding the reduced formal academic mode. This finding is in keeping with Fung (2009).

Regarding teachers’ professional development and enhancing the preschool curriculum, all of the participants expressed that increasing teachers’ professional development would bring benefits to children’s learning. In fact, as some literature notes, principals’ leadership is essential for student achievement (Bulris, 2009; Clark, 2009; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). The participants had planned in-house training; visited various preschools in Hong Kong, mainland China, and overseas; applied for funding for long-term professional training; and received professional training from higher educational institutions (Ng & Chan, 2012). Their strategies for teacher development can lead to changes in children’s learning, such as those mentioned in the research on instructional leadership by Armstrong et al. (2009), Ho (2010a), and Y. L. Li (2010), and also provide quality programs (Sun & Leithwood, 2015).
The behavior of intellectual stimulation was found in this study when the participants encouraged their teachers “to try new approaches,” “new ideas,” and enhance “creativity” (Bass, 1998, p. 6) through professional development and curriculum development. The principals said they were keen to learn new things and would like to adopt various approaches and teaching methods. For instance, Principal B joined SCOLAR to implement an English teaching method, Principal C implemented a moral curriculum over 5 years, Principal D liked to try a new approach every year (her preschool has implemented drum, music, and drama curriculum this year), Principal E had been trying the Project Approach, and Principal F had a successful experience with the Orff Approach. Their leadership strategies are consistent with the pedagogical leadership described by Heikka and Waiganayake (2011), Armstrong et al. (2009), and Stamopoulos (2012).

The findings revealed that most principals had successful experiences with teachers’ professional training. The findings specifically provide insights into the role of preschool principals that are slightly different from those in Ho (2011), which mentioned that preschools have too much control over teachers. The findings were more similar to those in C. W. Chan (2014), which mentioned that some preschool principals allow teachers more empowerment and participation. The findings revealed that the participants reflected the characteristic of inspirational motivation, in which “the leaders may reframe opportunities so that the environment is transformed from a situation” (Bass, 1998, p. 53). For instance, some participants shared that they would like to find some suitable teachers who could be a leader or mentor, so they would collect teachers’ views before applying for funding to implement a curriculum.
One participant raised a significant viewpoint that Hong Kong’s early childhood education still lacks administrative training for senior teachers, and even less opportunity for principals to undergo advanced training. It is assumed that there is enough training for the senior preschool teachers to equip themselves to become a new principal. Professional development needs to consider this issue.

Most of the participants thought that they did not have enough experience to develop a new vision, so they have attempted to execute their preschools’ existing vision. Regarding a preschool’s vision and culture, Balyer (2012) found that school principals demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors to enhance teachers’ commitment to achieve a school’s vision, such as inspirational motivation (Bass, 1998). All of the participants believed themselves to be key persons in leading their subordinates to achieve their preschools’ vision. Bass (1998) stated, “Inspirational team and organizational leaders need to promote understanding of the team and the organization’s mission and importance” (p. 90). Four principals who worked in a religious preschool believed that when the leaders have the same belief as the preschool, they will be more motivated to carry out the preschool’s vision. In this study, the principals always showed how they matched the preschool’s religion.

In addition, some principals would collect feedback from teachers and parents to see how to promote their preschools’ vision and develop the school’s culture. On the other hand, some participants discovered that not all teachers had the same views and motivation to achieve the preschool’s vision. The participants did not want to pressure teachers too much; they would like to lead them in a positive way (Fiore & Whitaker, 2005). In addition, the participants showed that they wanted to reduce teachers’ turnover rate and maintain the preschool’s quality. The
interviews indicated that the principals’ view of providing a child-centered learning environment is the basic requirement for achieving a preschool’s vision. The participants thought that they have attempted to execute their preschool’s vision rather develop a new vision. The interviews revealed that most of the participants indicated that they had little experience in developing a new vision for a preschool.

The participants expressed that they are willing to implement a different pedagogy, and they believed doing so can enhance both professional development and children’s learning. They shared that they felt more confident about the external quality inspection. On the other hand, they were concerned about teachers’ stress and the heavy workload needed to maintain their preschool’s quality.

The participants showed the behaviors of both intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation with regard to providing an appropriate curriculum and learning environment for young children.

**Working with parents.** The third superordinate theme to emerge was that all the participants experienced both parents’ complaints and appreciation during their 10 years as a preschool principal. All participants mentioned accidents and that they had addressed complaints regarding a child’s injury. In order to solve these problems and protect children’s safety, they had to make quick decisions. Each of the participants described different cases of child injury, such as a child disappearing, broken teeth, a child’s shoulder being dislocated, and suspicion of sexual abuse. The interviews indicated that the participants had been deeply impressed by such cases, even describing in detail how they contacted or dealt with different parties. In addition, the participants recognized that a preschool principal should be the key person to lead all teachers
and staff in providing a safe environment for young children, which is similar to working for the well-being and education of young children (Murray & Clark, 2013).

The participants reflected that they considered child safety to be their first priority, but they were also concerned about other people’s feelings while doing follow-up during the case. The participants felt that they had to take responsibility, show empathy, and be fair with everyone in settling the cases. The participants’ leadership behaviors were consistent with the individualized consideration mentioned in both Bass (1998) and Yukl (2010). Bass (1998) referred to the characteristic of individualized consideration by writing, “transformational leaders pay special attention to each individual follower’ needs, the leader demonstrates acceptance of individual differences, and interactions with followers are personalized” (p. 6).

All of the principals had experienced parents’ complaints. Three of them had encountered emotional parents, while another three participants received complaints due to children being injured. The principals needed to manage all of the complaints and also deal with stakeholders from inside and outside the school. Nevertheless, some principals replied that they were not very experienced at the time, so they suffered while responding to complaints. One participant felt regret regarding a broken relationship with parents, and another felt that she did not have enough insurance and legal knowledge at that time.

Three participants shared that they felt helpless and lonely due to parents’ complaints. One participant shared that she had suffered insomnia and needed to do lots of paperwork for a complaint brought by an emotional parent. Another participant replied that she did not want to spread bad emotions across the workplace and was afraid to put pressure on teachers during the investigation of the complaint; thus, she felt lonely at work. The participants demonstrated the
behavior of idealized influence through their “persistence” and “demonstrated high standards of ethical and moral conduct” (Bass, 1998, p. 5). In addition, a kind of individual consideration behavior (Bass, 1998) emerged because the participants were aware of individuals’ concerns but did not want to put pressure on their subordinates, even though they felt stressed by parents’ complaints.

On the other hand, this finding reflected that preschool principals may need someone’s help or some way to share their pressure and seek mental support to deal with complaints and serious problems. It is a pity that there is not much research on preschool principals’ well-being or emotional stress in the literature.

Some participants expressed that they received parents’ complaints when their preschool decided to reduce some formal academic work and homework. One participant replied that her preschool has assigned no homework while implementing the Project Approach; however, some parents could not accept that arrangement. These findings are similar to the literature in that Hong Kong parents view preschool as a stepping-stone for children before primary education, and they want their children to receive formal education (Fung, 2009; Ho, 2012). Thus, parents may need to understand what curriculum is appropriate for young children. The Education Bureau may need to provide more opportunities for parents to understand young children’s learning needs.

Apart from the complaints, this study found that the principals had experienced happiness and comforting moments in the parent and school partnership. The participants shared their experiences and appreciated that their parents support them in many ways. For example, Principal A felt thankful that parents always showed trust in her and even shared their problems
with her, Principal E leveraged parental support for preschool activities into volunteers, and Principal C remembered an unforgettable experience when some parents approached her preschool to encourage her to continue the fun learning and moral curriculum. In addition, one principal felt grateful to a group of parents who supported her and formed a PTA to clarify many issues and gossip resulting from a year-long parental complaint.

The research found that the participants had many ways to invite parents to get involved in their preschool activities and listen to parents’ voices. Murray and Clark (2013) mentioned that leadership of early childhood education in both England and Australia requires building relationships with stakeholders through empowering practitioner participation. They found that principals viewed parents’ involvement as positive: it improved children’s learning and preschool quality (Murray & Clark, 2013). The participants also shared that they had inspired teachers to design various activities that could entice more parents to get involved. The participants demonstrated the behavior of inspirational motivation to facilitate their teachers’ team spirit and inspire parents’ voluntary motivation. That behavior matched Yukl’s (2010) statement that transformational leaders “have somewhat different effects on explanatory processes such as interpersonal influence and follower attitude and motivation” (p. 280). There is still limited recent research on the benefits of preschool and parent collaboration in Hong Kong or even in the Asia-Pacific region. Further study could obtain more data to investigate that aspect of preschool leadership.

The participants received both complaints and encouragement from parents. The participants believed that avoiding accidents is vital to protecting children’s safety, which can also avoid some complaints. On the other hand, the participants believed preschool and parent
collaboration is valuable and beneficial for children’s learning. The participants presented all four behaviors (idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individual consideration) when working with parents.

**Characteristics of preschool principals.** The last two interview questions sought the participants’ advice for a new principal and their views as if they themselves were exemplary leaders in early childhood education. K. S. T. Wong (2006) and Carr et al. (2009) noted that principals always play a significant role in preschools. According to the findings, the preschool principals’ behavior is in keeping with the intellectual stimulation through which the leader would encourage followers to reframe and approach problems in new way (Bass, 1998). Yukl (2010) also mentioned, “Intellectual stimulation is behavior that increases follower awareness of problems and influences followers to view problems from a new perspective” (p. 278). After analyzing the data in this study, Teamwork and good communication skills as well as Passion for early childhood education emerged as aspects of the final superordinate theme.

All of the participants believed that teamwork and good communication skills, as well as passion, drove them to carry on as preschool educators and principals. According to Bass (1998, p. 91), “team leaders should promote cooperation and alignments of individual, team, and organization” as part of the inspirational motivation behavior. All of the participants recognized that teamwork and good communication are significant for new principals and all leaders in a preschool. They recognized that a preschool principal needs to communicate with all parties, both insiders and outsiders, and they realized that a principal cannot manage all tasks. Thus, teamwork and good communication skills are vital.
In addition, the participants thought that new principals should show willingness to listen to others, be open-minded, have stable emotions, and be eager to lead the team to learn new pedagogies and improve the curriculum. The participants’ experience is consistent with Carr et al. (2009), who noted that the role of a principal in a preschool is complicated and includes being a positive leader who enhances both teacher development and school curriculum development. One participant responded that there are many preschool organizations affiliated with schools, so new principals need to coordinate with them to implement various activities and projects. Thus, teamwork is not only necessary within her own preschool but also for collaboration with other preschools’ teammates.

The last but most important element, which the participants always mentioned, is their passion to be early childhood educators. All of the participants had been working in preschools for over 20 years and most of them replied that it was the first job in their career. The findings highlight that all the participants showed they love children, and feel grateful and lucky to serve children. Thus, some principals replied that they would try their best to promote an appropriate child-centered curriculum at their preschool. One participant even started a family counseling course when she discovered more and more family and emotional problems among preschoolers’ families. She wanted to help parents and also help children grow up in a healthy family.

Some participants believed that their passion also drove them to fulfill their commitment as a preschool principal and contribute to early childhood education. One principal responded that she always finds it hard to prepare two sets of documents for different government departments for her two preschools. However, she felt pleased that she had the opportunity to serve SEN and other children together. Another participant replied that she felt glad that she had
the opportunity to join different committees in the community, some of which gave her the opportunity to influence and voice the needs of early childhood education. The final participant replied that she felt satisfied if someone could remember her commitment and contribution to early childhood education. Nevertheless, she also wanted more experienced preschool principals to share their valuable insights to help new principals improve their leadership and ability to manage challenges in the future. She believed this also to be a kind of contribution to early childhood education. The participants believed that their contribution could make some improvement to early childhood education quality. This matches Cahill’s (2009) findings that the role of principal has a great impact on the field.

After analysis of the data, it was realized that all of the participants exhibited the four transformational leadership behaviors (Bass, 1998). The behavior of individualized consideration emerged in all aspects of the participants’ experience and their commitment for their preschool. For example, they showed passion through their role, love, and care for children; wanted to collaborate with parents; considered teachers’ needs; attempted to lead teachers to reach their preschool’s vision; and wanted to contribute to early childhood education. The participants also showed the same sense that striving to provide a quality preschool service is the fundamental goal. This behavior matches idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. Their responses also have implications for practice, which are discussed in the following section.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this research provide stakeholders, including the government, higher education institutions, parents, preschool board members, and even preschool teachers, with
insights into the current situation and challenges for preschool principals in Hong Kong. This study relates the feedback from the participants, who shared their experiences after working as preschool principals for over 10 years. Implications and recommendations presented in this section refer to the following areas: quality of preschool education, care for family needs and parent education, and enhance curriculum and professional development.

**Quality of preschool education.** The participants’ perception of preschool leadership is that it ought to provide quality services for young children. The principals stated that the key elements for a quality preschool include children’s safety, satisfying EDB requirements, and maintaining stable teacher job status. All of the principals put child safety as the first priority, and they noted that unstable emotional people would endanger child safety. Currently, the EDB has a manual for preschools to measure children’s safety while setting up a new preschool (Education Bureau, 2015b). However, the manual only mentions, “In case of emergencies, pre-primary institutions should assess the seriousness of the situation and call police for assistance. A record of the incident and the actions taken should be properly recorded after the event” (pp. E3-12). There is no clear recommendation for how preschools should deal with emergencies or children’s injuries. In addition, participants responded that they needed to learn about insurance, calming down emotional parents, and how to follow up on outsiders’ inquiries into children’s injuries.

Thus, the first recommendation for practice is that preschools may need to consider how to prepare comprehensive guidelines to ensure children’s safety and handle children’s injuries. In addition, there is limited research on children’s safety in preschool education in Hong Kong. Even the World Health Organization (2008) mentioned that there are only a few countries that
have complete data on children’s injuries. Other issues are the lack of related research and inefficient professional training on preventing accidents and injuries. Thus, the government may consider providing training and more resources to universities for research in this area.

Second, the principals indicated that satisfying the EDB’s quality requirement is essential to ensuring preschool quality. The principals also mentioned that they could try to plan more quality child-centered curricula during the QR review each year. At the same time, they found all teachers suffer due to preparing lots of documents regarding QAI but showed more confidence when doing so for the second time. Thus, the implication is that principals should understand the quality of their preschool and show willingness to strive for a child-centered curriculum. However, a new education reform affecting preschools is that “the new free quality KG education policy will replace PEVS, effective with the 2017-18 school year” (Education Bureau, 2016, p. 2). Will principals and teachers need to learn new quality assurance criteria under the new policy? Thus, the second recommendation for practice is that preschools may develop networks with other preschools for sharing experiences that may help them be more aware of current changes and trends in the new education reform. The government may simplify the procedures and documentation requirements related to QAI. The EDB may provide more information and transparency for preschool organizations to conduct QAI.

Third, the research findings revealed that the participants believed that maintaining stable experienced teachers can also ensure preschool quality. The principals showed concern for teachers’ needs and treasured teachers’ professionalism, corresponding to W. K. G. Yuen and Grieshaber (2009), who stated that Hong Kong “parents were most concerned about teacher qualities” (p. 271). However, it is significant that a preschool’s income still relies on enrollment.
Some principals in this study said they overcame the challenge of enrollment but indicated that preschool teachers’ jobs and salary status are both unstable. The recommendation for practice is that the government should understand that the quality of teachers influences the quality of preschool service. Currently most preschool teachers have achieved high academic standards, so the government may reconsider the pay scale to maintain quality teachers. This will eventually benefit young children’s development.

**Care for family needs and parent education.** The participants in this study reported that they had both positive and negative experiences while working with parents. Some principals responded that they tried to implement a more child-centered curriculum and reduce the homework set for children, but received complaints suggesting that some parents “still struggle to cope with the fear of what losing an academic curriculum might mean for their children’s future” (W. K. G. Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009, p. 272). In addition, some principals found it shocking and exhausting to deal with parents with unstable emotions and they mentioned that more and more families have emotional problems. The implication for practice notes that family problems are also harmful to children’s development, so preschool organizations may need to be alert to children’s emotions, and be aware of parents’ pressure on children’s learning. Meanwhile, some principals also observed that they lack support for dealing with emotional parents’ complaints. Bass (1998) also mentioned that transformational leadership is “charismatic and inspirational [and] has been shown to reduce feelings and burnout and symptoms of stress in professionals” (p. 28). The recommendation for practice is that emotional support should be provided to preschools, including support for both family and preschool staff. In addition, the government and preschools may provide more parenting education, which might
help parents understand children’s development. However, research on parenting and family pressure on preschool is limited.

On the other hand, the participants also shared some positive experiences with parents’ involvement, as they supported their curriculum and even helped them deal with some emotional parents. It is suggested that both parents and principals view their collaboration as beneficial to school quality and children’s development. The recommendation for practice is for the government to provide more resources to allow more opportunities for preschool and parent collaboration.

*Enhance curriculum and professional development.* The preschool principals revealed the same point of view as Waldron et al. (2011): the majority of principals play a key role in supporting school improvement activities and teacher development. Indeed, the participants showed a willingness to enhance teachers’ professional development, which they believed can improve curriculum development. Preschool organizations are keen on professional training.

In contrast, few preschool principals viewed themselves as leaders, but agreed they are executives trying hard to lead subordinates to achieve the preschool’s vision, develop a preschool plan for QR each year, implement quality services, and meet the requirements of QAI. Principals responded that they have insufficient knowledge to deal with the various problems arising from parents’ complaints, such as dealing with parents in court cases, preparing reports for district councils, and even following up on insurance cases. In addition, the current study raised the significant point that most principals are in their 50s or older. This means that many principals probably are going to retire in the coming 10 years. In other words, the majority of senior
preschool teachers are going to be new preschool principals, but are they well-equipped for this challenge?

The participants in this study were seemingly concerned by the quality and the development of early childhood education in Hong Kong society. As a researcher practitioner, we can use the result of this study to inspire stakeholders to understand that preschool principals are encountering so many complicated work in their preschools. Thus, the result of the study finding can be shared in public, in conferences and to submit to journals, including the recommendations for practice as follows:

- The government may provide various ongoing training programs for current preschool principals to acquire knowledge about new government regulations and legal, insurance, safety, and financial issues. This may help preschool principals be aware of current trends and equip themselves to meet society’s development and change.
- Veteran principals could create Professional Learning Communities / mentoring programs for new principals. Veteran principals should put together a document on their experiences to publish and share with a new preschool principal management. Discussion of the followi topics should be included: issues of child safety, children injury and abuse, how to deal with parents’ complaint, prepare for the QAI and QI, and enhancing quality in preschool. This would be a good reference for any new principal when they encounter some complicated work or similar situations, and it would be beneficial to the field of early childhood education in the future.
- Higher education institutions and the Education Bureau may continue to collaborate with preschools to conduct teacher training and research and share experiences on parenting
and parent-preschool collaboration. As some researchers mentioned, partnerships have had a positive impact on professional development, coping with educational reform (Ng & Chan, 2012), and providing quality service in preschool.

- Preschool organizations and school board members may review their principals’ abilities, acknowledge their contributions to leadership, and empower and encourage them to be leaders in their preschool. In addition, support with crisis management may include addressing principals’ mental and physical needs.

- The Hong Kong government should provide more parent education that helps parents understand children’s learning needs, especially during the early childhood stage. More resources on offering emotional and well-being support to families may benefit children’s development in the long term.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study explored six experienced preschool principals’ working experiences and their perceptions on leadership. There are several implications for future research. The findings indicate that research on preschool principals’ leadership should help us understand the needs of the early childhood education field, as there is still limited research around the world (Aubrey et al., 2013; CW Chan, 2014). This study’s scale was small, so it provided limited data to explore issues and needs in early childhood education. Larger-scale research can identify specific issues in this field.

It seems that principals’ well-being should be examined in future research. The study revealed that preschool principals may encounter overwhelming challenges from stakeholders in society, such as satisfying the EDB’s quality requirements, protecting children’s safety, ensuring
quality curriculum, understanding parents’ needs, and even crisis management. Currently, little research focuses on preschool principals’ well-being or preschool principals’ stress or emotional management strategies. In addition, research on senior preschool teachers’ views on new principals’ leadership may be examined in the future. The current study indicated that participants believe that experienced preschool principals can share their valuable experiences in leadership to help new principals equip themselves with the leadership and management skills they need to face various challenges.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore preschool principals’ perceptions of leadership in early childhood education in Hong Kong. Six veteran principals were involved in the study. The researcher adopted the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, which allows the gathering of in-depth lived experiences from the participants’ working lives and interpreting their sense-making of the phenomena under investigation.

The findings of the study revealed that the participants’ leadership behaviors were generally aligned with Bass’ (1998) transformational leadership. This study may inspire preschool principals to put that theory into practice as a leadership strategy. On the other hand, there is a limitation of Bass as a theoretical framework from this study on principals’ perceptions of leadership in Hong Kong early childhood education. The participants believed that they should be a key person to lead their preschool development, but they were concerned more about relationship building and emotional problems happening in schools. These findings are in line with M. N. C. Wong and Li (2010) and Carr et al. (2009) who provide insight on current school
leaders in areas such as responding to emotional issues or understanding the importance of caregivers.

In addition, the findings also pointed out a need for quality preschool service. The data and analyses may increase the public’s awareness of how vital the leadership role in preschools is. Nevertheless, there is still limited research on the leadership of preschool principals and parent collaboration in Hong Kong or even in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Future research may be conducted to better understand preschool principal leadership and quality early childhood education.
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Appendix A: IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
RENEWAL APPROVAL

Date: May 24, 2017    IRB #: CPS16-04-15
Principal Investigator(s): Sandy Nickel
                        Yuk Lan Leung
Department: Doctor of Education
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
         Northeastern University
Title of Project: Preschool Principals’ Perception of Leadership in Hong Kong
                 Early Childhood Education
Approval Status: Closed to Enrollment – Ongoing Analysis Only
Participating Sites: N/A
Original Protocol Approved: May 26, 2016
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: N/A
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: MAY 23, 2018

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting
   participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be
   reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to
   the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other
   university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: May 26, 2016
IRB #: CPS16-04-15

Principal Investigator(s): Sandy Nickel
Yuk Lan Leung

Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project: Preschool Principals' Perception of Leadership in Hong Kong Early Childhood Education

Participating Sites: N/A

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: MAY 25, 2017

Investigator's Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B: Recruitment Script

Hello [name]. I am working on my doctoral project at Northeastern University and was hoping I could include you in my study. The title of my study is “Investigation of preschool principals’ perceptions of leadership in Hong Kong early childhood education.”

The Principal Investigator for this study is Dr. Sandy Nickel. Dr. Nickel is my advisor at the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. As the student researcher, I have selected you as a participant because you have worked successfully as a principal at a preschool where you have served. Your participation in this study, however, is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to begin the study, you may quit at any time.

I am interested in hearing your stories and making sense of your perceptions and understanding of leadership in Hong Kong early childhood education.
Appendix C: Informed Consent Document

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher whether you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep. This study is investigating preschool principals’ perceptions of leadership in Hong Kong early childhood education. We are asking you to be in this study because you are a preschool principal.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of this study is to explore preschool principals’ views on what leadership looks like in early childhood education in Hong Kong. This study will consider how principals see their own role as leaders in the educational reforms derived from the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in interviews that include up to three contact points with the student researcher. The interviews will be audio recorded and the student researcher will take notes. The recordings will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and coded by the student researcher. You and your preschool will be assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. The first interview will confirm that you meet criteria, get background information, and obtain informed consent and schedule the next face-to-face interview. The second interview will focus on how principals in early childhood education in Hong Kong describe their role as school leaders. The third interview will be a follow-up conversation with the student researcher if additional questions arise as the data is being coded.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview sessions will take place in your office or at a time and place that is convenient for you. The first interview will take around 20-30 minutes; the second interview will take around 45-60 minutes; and the third interview, if necessary, will allow for any follow-up questions and give you an opportunity to review your transcript.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort for individuals participating in this study. You and your school will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Who will see the information about me?
Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known. The student researcher will know that the answers provided during your interviews were provided by you, but nobody else will be able to match your answers to you. You and your preschool will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Audio recordings of each interview will be stored on the student researcher’s laptop with a back-up copy on an external hard drive also owned by the student researcher. These audio recordings will be maintained in these two locations for a period of 3 years following the
conclusion of the study. Handwritten notes taken by the student researcher during the interviews and coding documents will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the student researcher’s office for a period of 3 years following the conclusion of the study. After this time period, audio recordings and electronic documents will be deleted and hard-copy documents will be destroyed.

In rare instances, authorized people may ask to see research information about you and other participants in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research was done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any of the interview questions. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact:

**LEUNG, Yuk Lan, Student Researcher**
B2-1/F-07, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, Hong Kong
852-29488392
leung.yu@husky.neu.edu

**or**

**Dr. Sandy Nickel, Principal Investigator**
Northeastern University
360 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115
617-513-2215
s.nickel@neu.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact:

Nan C. Regina
Director of Human Subject Research Protection
Northeastern University
960 Renaissance Park
Boston, MA 02115
617-373-4588
n.regina@neu.edu

You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will not be paid for participation in this project.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
You will not incur any costs participating in this project.

I agree to take part in this research.

________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part  
________________________________________
Date

__________________________________________
Printed name of person above

________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the  
Participant above and obtained consent  
________________________________________
Date

__________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D: Interview Protocol Form

Interview Protocol

Interviewee (Title and Name):_____________________________________

Interviewer:____________________________________________________

Date and Time:______________________________

Venue:____________________________________

Round 1: Preliminary Interview Objectives (20-30 minutes)

Build rapport, describe the study, answer any questions (under typical circumstances an informed consent form would be reviewed and signed here).

Introduction

Thank you for being available to speak with me today. You have been selected to participate in this research study because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your experience as a preschool principal.

I am a Doctor of Education student at Northeastern University. My dissertation research focuses on how principals in early childhood education in Hong Kong perceive their role as school leaders. Specifically, the study will be beneficial to participants when they are made aware of the relationship between their leadership styles and preschool development.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can ensure you that all responses will be confidential and only pseudonyms will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes, which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirement at the university, you must sign this Informed Consent Form. Essentially, this document states that: (a) all information will be held confidential, (b) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (c) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form?

I have planned this interview to last no longer than 30 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like ask about your professional background and your career journey to become a preschool principal. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?
Round 2: Core interview Objectives (45-60 minutes):

Obtain the participant’s insights, in his or her own words, focusing on leadership strategies in order to improve a school’s quality for children and how principals describe their leadership style.

I have planned for this interview to last no longer than 45-60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. Therefore, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete the line of questioning.

Thank you for meeting me for an interview.

Interview Questions

Round 1: Preliminary Interview
1. How long have you been a preschool principal?
2. What is the background of the preschool where you are working now?
3. Would you please to tell me about your professional background and your career journey to become a preschool principal?
4. When is your availability for the next interview?

Round 2: Core interview (face-to-face)
1. Can you tell me about a time when you as a leader were surprised by something that occurred and you had to make a quick decision?
   Prompts: Tell me more. What issues did you confront? How did you take care of the situation?

2. Can you tell me about a time when you as a leader had to make a difficult decision around issues like the quality of an educator or fiscal needs or student enrollments, etc.?
   Prompts: Tell me more. What issues did you confront? How did you take care of the situation?

3. Can you tell me about a time when you as a leader were working on ideas to enhance teacher development and improve the curriculum?
   Prompts: Tell me more. What issues did you confront? Did you involve other people such as the teachers?

4. Can you tell me about a challenging experience that you have had working with parents?
   Prompts: Tell me more. What issues did you confront? How did you take care of the situation?

5. Can you tell me about a time when you as a leader were developing a new vision for the school? How did you craft that?
   Prompts: Tell me more. What issues did you confront? Did you involve others?
6. Assume it's 5 years from now. What advice would you give to other principles who are thinking about entering this role?

7. Assume it's 10 years from now and you're featured as an Exemplar Leader. What are the things that you hope they write about you?

Round 3 "Follow-up" (via email)

Send participants a copy of their transcript, asking them to confirm their transcript.

Thank them for participating.