



THE PROFILE OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

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Gathering information on the performance of school principals and acting on the information about their effectiveness as leaders is an essential part of improving school performance. This paper reports part of the findings from an initiative conducted to sustain and improve management quality at secondary schools in Vietnam. An evaluation tool was developed based on Vietnam's professional standards for school leaders and was used by school principals and teachers to provide more insight into their professional practices and training needs. 593 principals and 1647 teachers from 16 provinces across the eight regions of the country participated in the survey and 110 follow-up interviews were conducted. The results indicated that there were certain socio-cultural factors that conditioned the practices of Vietnamese school leaders, including demanding them to be politically, ethically and professionally fit, and to assume many peripheral roles. School principals in Vietnam generally met state standards in terms of qualifications and management expertise, and were perceived to have adequate competencies in handling school management, especially in promoting teachers' teaching capacity and ensuring educational quality. However, Vietnamese school principals found it challenging to manage school resources and assets and to instruct teachers on leadership; areas that they have hitherto received little training in.

Contribution/Originality: This study provides insight into the professional practices and training needs of school principals in Vietnam. There were certain socio-cultural factors that influenced their practices. Generally, they met state standards in qualifications and management expertise. However, they found it challenging to manage school resources and assets.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of education in advancing social, economic, and individual development is recognised in international literature and in policy documents and the strategic planning done by countries and intergovernmental agencies. Education plays an even more critical role for the developing and under-developed world in their fight against poverty, illiteracy, inequalities, injustice, health problems and environmental degradation (Ki-Moon, 2012; UNESCO, 2014). Success in education requires multi-faceted actions, including strong school leadership due to its

capacity to influence performance at community, school, classroom, teacher and student levels. A review of school systems done by Barber and Mourshed (2007) revealed that in addition to teacher quality, instruction and extensive support to every learner, top-performing schools recruit and train excellent school leaders. School principals are seen to stay at the heart of school leadership, contributing to the improvement of outcomes by guiding, supporting, directing and sustaining improvements in whole-of-school practices (Firestone and Riehl, 2005; Marzano *et al.*, 2005; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007; The Wallace Foundation, 2009; Commonwealth of Australia, 2012).

As a country that has recently emerged from the aftermaths of wars and started the industrialisation and modernisation of its economy, Vietnam places education and training among its prioritised agendas (The Government of Vietnam, 2003; The National Assembly, 2005;2016; The Prime Minister, 2014; McAleavy *et al.*, 2018). The country has made extensive investments in universalising education and upholding educational quality (Dang and Glewwe, 2017) with the aim of creating a skilled and competitive workforce capable of driving socio-economic changes. Improving leadership has been among high-frequency themes in government policies for dealing with the issue of upholding the quality of educational provision (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, 2009;2011a;2009b;2012). However, it has been noted that the country has a very limited formal and quality knowledge base in school leadership (Hallinger and Bryant, 2013; Hallinger and Truong, 2014; Nguyen, 2016).

Gathering information on the performance of school principals and acting on the information about their effectiveness as leaders is an essential part of improving school effectiveness. The identification of the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the training needs of school principals empowers them in improving their performance and is conducive to system-wide improvements. However, it has been noted that current practices of assessing school principals are not closely tied to leadership standards and opportunities for professional growth, and rarely undergo scrutiny for validity and reliability (Hallinger, 1983; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; TWF, 2009). The instructional aspects of school principals are considered not to have been adequately attended, with most focus on principalship in the literature on personality traits and school environment issues (TWF, 2009). Apart from that, research into principals' leadership has mostly relied on principals themselves as the primary source of evidence (Gurr *et al.*, 2006). The identified issues in the evaluation of the quality of school managers are persistent in the case of Vietnam, urging the need for validated frameworks and tools to enable school principals to have professional development and continuous improvement.

This paper reports part of the findings from a cross-country initiative conducted to sustain and improve management quality at secondary schools in Vietnam. The paper details an evaluation tool for use by school principals and teachers regarding their perceptions of the leadership performance of school principals. The paper casts light on the current professional standards and training needs of school principals from their own self-evaluation. It also uses the perspectives of teachers as an additional source of information.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Professional Standards for School Principals in Selected Countries

Schools are increasingly expected to respond to new challenges and the demands of the knowledge economy and globalization. The shift from content-based to outcome-based and learner-centred curriculum and pedagogies has brought about significant and positive transformation for individual learners (Spady, 1994): Such changes mean school principals need to adapt their leadership and management to provide a school environment conducive to students' success. It has been identified in the literature that an effective school environment is characterised by a strong focus on developing students' competencies, an active encouragement of collaborative work cultures, the sharing and distribution of leadership, the development of teachers' competencies, and the establishment of supportive, positive relationships with the wider community (Murphy and Hallinger, 1988; Sammons *et al.*, 1995; OECD, 2008b; Gu *et al.*, 2018). There is a considerable amount of evidence from country practices and academic research regarding the development of core domains of practice for school principals so that they can perform at

their best. There are different approaches to the development of professional standards for school principals. These are either based on the specific duties assumed by them; the competencies and personal qualities required to manage school activities and relationships; and the criteria for evaluating school performance and achievements, or school grade levels. Despite the differences in terminology and models of practice, the general consensus in the literature and across educational systems is that student outcomes lie at the heart of school leadership and principals need to promote the success of individual students to contribute to individual, community, national and international development (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2008; Watson, 2009; Kaplan and Owings, 2013; OECD, 2013). It has been found that principals of successful schools aim for high performance by their students, generally beyond the comparative level of other schools of similar standards and circumstances (OECD, 2008b; CoA, 2012; Kaplan and Owings, 2013). Another shared agreement in the literature is that school principals draw on the same set of professional and personality qualities to help the school achieve desirable outcomes (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2008; OECD, 2013). The central task of school principals is to improve teachers' performance so that students' learning outcomes can be improved (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008). The five main professional domains, often referred to as effective leadership practices, as reviewed by OECD from standards for school principals across different member countries (OECD, 2013) Table 1 comprises building visions and establishing goals and expectations; resourcing school activities; managing teaching and the curriculum; promoting teacher development; and creating a supportive environment. These areas and their identifiable functions need to be accompanied by many qualities, such as effective planning, communication skills, the ability to link theories to practice, the valuing of diversity and democracy, and also flexibility and adaptability (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2008; CoA, 2012; OECD, 2013). While the exhaustive list of professional and personal qualities expected of school principals makes it debatable that these are the functions assumed by one particular individual (OECD, 2008a; 2013; TWF, 2009); Nguyen *et al.*, (2018) argues that school principals are responsible for ensuring the existence of those functions.

Understanding school principalship plays a crucial role in informing professional growth for school leaders. However, the practices of assessing principals' leadership have been criticised for overtly focusing on the marginal concerns of school principals' daily management (Hallinger, 1983; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008; TWF, 2009). There is a call for more attention to the instructional role of school principals as it is seen to have the most significant impact on students' learning outcomes (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Leithwood *et al.*, 2008; TWF, 2009; Hallinger and Wang, 2015).

Principals can no longer simply be administrators and managers. They must be instructional leaders focused on improving student achievement. They must be the force that creates collaboration and cohesion around school learning goals and the commitment to achieve those goals (NAESP, 2008).

Instructional leadership refers to the defining and communicating of school missions; the management of instructional programmes, including coordinating the curriculum, supervising and evaluating instruction, monitoring students' progress, and the development of the school learning environment by providing incentives for teaching, learning and professional development (Hallinger and Wang, 2015). Leithwood *et al.* (2008). Hallinger and Wang (2015) claim that with strong instructional leadership capacity, school leaders can positively influence teachers' motivations and commitment, which contributes to improving their teaching practices, and in turn raises students' learning outcomes Figure 1. Many recently developed instruments and frameworks, such as the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VALED) (TWF, 2009) or the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) (Hallinger, 1983; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Hallinger and Wang, 2015) have given more attention to the instructional functions to be assumed by school principals.

Table-1. Professional standards for school principals in selected countries.

Domains	Functions	Australia	England	Germany	Korea	New Zealand	US
Building visions and setting directions.	Formulating school missions and visions.	x	x			x	x
	Translating the mission into concrete goals, standards, expectations and objectives.	x	x				x
	Aligning individual interests with the school's missions.	x	x				
	Promoting excellence.	x	x				x
Resourcing school activities.	Aligning resource selections and allocation to the school's missions and priority goals.	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Involving families and communities in the educational process and school culture.	x	x	x		x	x
	Promoting the culture of improvement and collaboration.	x	x			x	x
Managing teaching and the curriculum.	Overseeing school-wide curriculum.		x	x	x		x
	Supervise teaching.	x	x	x		x	x
	Analysing information for improvements.	x	x			x	x
	Spreading good practices and technologies for teaching.	x	x			x	x
Promoting teacher development.	Motivating teachers intellectually and promoting their professional development.	x	x	x		x	x
	Acknowledging individual and collective contributions and achievements.	x	x				
	Guiding human resources' management according to defined criteria of quality.	x	x	x		x	
	Developing leadership capacity in others.	x				x	x
Creating a supportive environment.	Facilitating a safe, healthy, intellectually stimulating and supportive environment for teaching and learning.	x				x	x
	Ensuring the fulfilment of norms.			x	x		
	Addressing the special needs of students and the community.		x			x	x

Source: OECD (2013).

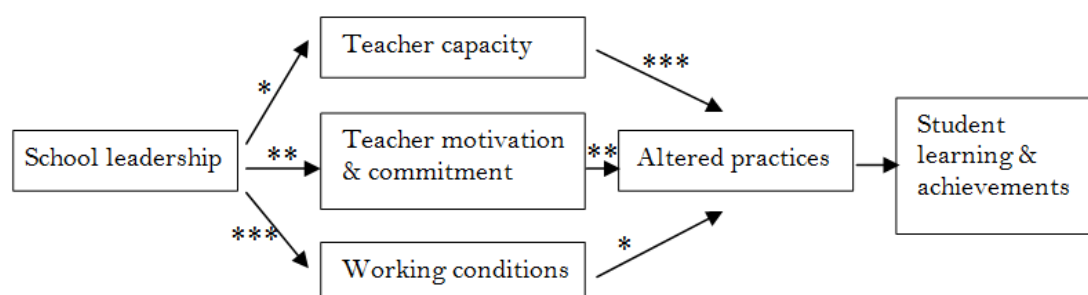


Figure-1. School leadership benefits teachers' practices and students' learning outcomes (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008) * = weak impact; ** = moderate impact; ***=strong impact.

Source: Leithwood *et al.* (2008).

2.2. School Principals in the Vietnamese Context

Vietnam's approach to educational improvement since its radical and comprehensive Doi Moi reform generally embraces the role of school leaders. School charters issued by MOET formally recognise school principals as the key figures in charge of internal management and educational quality (VMET, 2009). Under the Financial Management reform 2001, school principals are given greater autonomy and powers in terms of managing revenues and expenditure accounts; using alternative revenue sources; and making decisions regarding staffing levels and remuneration, which include staff restructuring and pay adjustment (UNESCO, 2007). The recent introduction of the national standards for school principals is also among important steps to improve leadership qualities for school leaders (Gian, 2012). This has been operationalized with a large number of school principals receiving training under the Educational Leadership Programme for Vietnam, totalling around 30,000 as at 2010 (Gian, 2012). A review of the country's success in recent international benchmarks, including the Programme for International

Student Assessment (PISA), has also revealed that the high levels of accountability assumed by Vietnamese school principals are among contributing factors (McAleavy *et al.*, 2018). Compared with OECD countries, Vietnam has an above-average reporting of school principals using planned and unannounced visits to classrooms to observe teachers' teaching, and of school principals regularly receiving individual teachers' reports about their performance (McAleavy *et al.*, 2018). This again heightens the key role of school principals in the in-school monitoring process.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main research instrument is an evaluation tool for use by school principals and teachers, the Rating Scale of School Principalship (RSSP Principal Form and Teacher Form), to gain more insight into the professional practices of Vietnamese school principals. The RSSP is developed based on MOET's standards (VMET, 2009) and refers to best practice and professional standards for school principals around the world (e.g. (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2000; Florida Department of Education, 2011; Illinois Principals Association & Illinois Association of School Administrators, 2012; OECD, 2013; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018)) including the instructional leadership role of school principals (Hallinger, 1983; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Hallinger and Wang, 2015). The instrument consists of nine areas of professional competencies Table 3, each area being detailed into four-to-six indicators which are scored on a five-point Likert scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The participating school principals and teachers used the RSSP forms to express their agreement with different statements regarding the professional practices of school principals. The instrument also uncovered the training needs of school principals regarding eight training topics that can help them improve their professional knowledge and skills Table 2. School principals were asked to self-assess their training needs using a five-point Likert scale, where one represents the least necessary topics and five the most necessary ones. Opinions of teachers were also sought regarding those areas that they believed their school principals would need to improve.

Table-2. Training topics for school principals.

Knowledge/ skills
1. Skills in planning school development activities.
2. Organisational, monitoring and decision-making skills.
3. Skills of change management.
4. Communication, persuasion and negotiation skills.
5. Ability to teach and organize educational activities.
6. Skills of mobilizing resources from outside of the school.
7. Skills of training teachers on teaching methods and assessments.
8. Strategies for developing self and others.
9. Skills and knowledge in relation to quality assurance.

The RSSP Principal Form and Teacher Form were validated using subject matter expert judgements and trialled for reliability and validity on 30 school principals and 50 teachers in six provinces in Vietnam. The RSSP achieved a high reliability coefficient, with a whole-scale Cronbach's α reliability estimate of 0.792 for the Principal Form and an estimate of 0.972 for the Teacher Form (see Table 3). Each domain of professional practices received a Cronbach's α of 0.7 and above for the Teacher Form and the reliability estimates for individual domains in the Principal Form were lower, but still within the acceptable range. Subject matter expert judgements and statistical analyses agreed on the usefulness and contribution of individual competencies in the RSSP to the professional practices of school principals. The RSSP was then distributed to school principals and teachers across the country to gather data regarding the professional practices of school principals as well as their training needs. Valid data were collected from 593 principals (426 males and 167 females, 71.8 percent and 28.2 percent respectively) and 1,647 teachers from 16 provinces. The study originally aimed for a representative sample from each of the country's 63 localities from eight regions and equal

representation of urban and rural areas and principal gender. However, this was challenged by the inaccessibility of certain remote and mountainous areas. A total of 110 in-depth interviews were conducted with school principals and teachers to follow up their responses on the RSSP.

Table-3. Reliability coefficients for RSSP principal form and RSSP teacher form.

Professional areas in the RSSP	Principal self-report data		Teacher data	
	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
1. Developing self.	5	0.641	5	0.841
2. Establishing and operating the school regulatory mechanism.	4	0.645	4	0.916
3. Creating supportive and positive school environment and culture.	4	0.693	4	0.857
4. Developing teachers' competencies.	5	0.789	6	0.934
5. Developing the school's educational plans.	5	0.604	6	0.911
6. Ensuring educational quality.	6	0.820	5	0.813
7. Managing school inventories and assets.	5	0.625	5	0.847
8. Mobilizing resources for school development.	5	0.642	5	0.722
9. Empowering teachers' leadership.	5	0.578	5	0.934
Total	44	0.792	45	0.972

4. RESULTS

4.1. Demographic Information

A snapshot of the demographic data in [Figure 2](#) shows that a majority of the surveyed school principals met the state's requirements for qualifications, with 95 percent having a bachelor's degree or above. 88.1 percent of the school principals had undertaken short training courses on school management as required by law. On average, most school principals were in their early 40s and had been in a school management position for 17 years. For the surveyed teachers in [Figure 3](#), the majority had an undergraduate or a postgraduate qualification. The teachers had an average of 11.7 years of teaching experience and 100 percent taught a subject area that they had been trained in. The teacher sample reflects the weight given to the subject areas in the curriculum, with more teacher respondents reporting to teach mathematics, literature, foreign languages, and natural science subjects than arts, physical education or information technology.

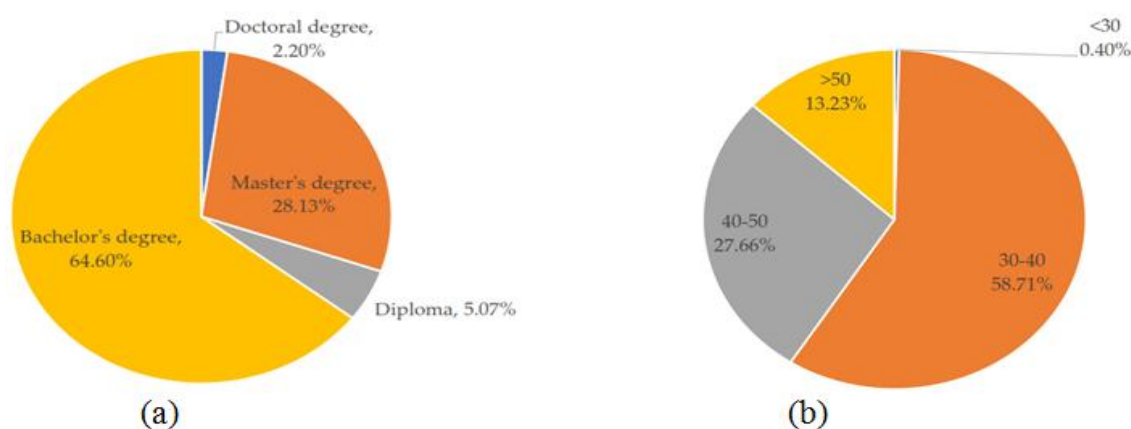


Figure-2. Demographic information of school principals: (a) by qualification types; (b) by age.

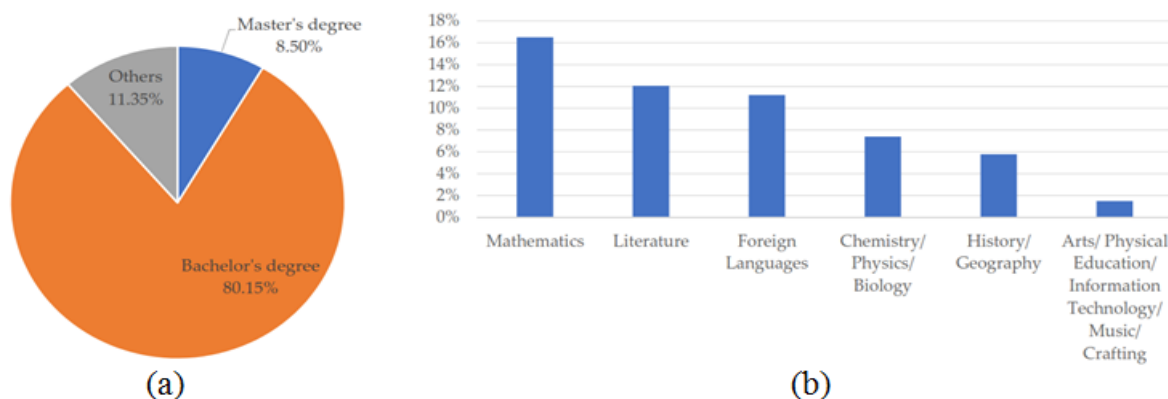


Figure-3. Demographic information of teachers (a) by qualification types; (b) by subject areas.

4.2. Professional Competencies of School Principals from Principals' and Teachers' Perspectives

The survey of teachers and principals regarding their perceptions of school principals' leadership competencies provided an insight into the research area (see Table 4). Vietnamese school principals generally self-perceived and were perceived to have the competencies expected of them in order to function across the nine professional areas. The mean scores for individual competencies in principals' self-reported data ranged between 2.79 and 4.42 while teachers gave a higher mean score range of 4.89 to 4.30. School principals were ranked highly both in self-evaluation and by teachers in terms of developing self and others, developing school's educational plans, and ensuring the quality of educational provision. However, school principals felt that they were less competent and confident in establishing and operating the school's mechanisms, managing the school' inventories and assets, mobilising resources for school development, and empowering teachers' leadership. A closer look at the survey data and the in-depth interviews conducted with school principals reveals the following noteworthy insights.

Table-4. Descriptive statistics from principal self-report data and teacher data.

Professional areas in the RSSP	Principal self-report (n=593)		Teacher rating (n=1647)		Mean diff.	Mean average
	M	SD	M	SD		
1. Developing self.	4.34	0.96	4.30	0.92	-0.04	4.32
2. Establishing and operating the school regulatory mechanism.	3.78	1.14	4.18	0.76	0.4	3.98
3. Creating supportive and positive school environment and culture.	4.21	0.82	4.14	0.96	-0.07	4.18
4. Developing teachers' competencies.	4.51	0.73	4.27	0.89	-0.24	4.39
5. Developing the school's educational plans.	4.18	0.87	4.22	0.73	0.04	4.20
6. Ensuring educational quality.	4.42	0.77	4.30	0.99	-0.12	4.36
7. Managing school inventories and assets.	3.19	1.18	4.27	0.95	1.08	3.73
8. Mobilising resources for school development.	3.34	1.14	3.97	0.97	0.63	3.66
9. Empowering teachers' leadership.	2.78	1.19	3.89	0.76	1.11	3.34

Self-management and self-development were perceived to be one noticeable strength of Vietnamese school principals. In the first place, school leaders attributed this to having received professional training in educational management as required by the government and having conformed to professional ethics. They reported having constantly used their management experience and professional knowledge to identify areas for self-improvement, support their colleagues, and create positive changes for the school. School principals also claimed to have received recognition from colleagues and supervising agencies, and the surveyed teachers generally agreed. However, some school leaders commented that they still preferred to rely on personal experience in managing school issues and

seldom sought training opportunities in relation to information technology, especially the use of information technology to improve leadership.

The ability of school leaders in supporting teachers and developing teachers' teaching capacity were ranked high in both self-reporting and teacher data (see Figure 4). School principals all agreed on the crucial role of teachers in the quality of education and students' learning outcomes, and therefore had paid special attention to supporting, training, and monitoring teachers. Professional development activities, including training new teachers and retraining existing teachers on teaching pedagogies and subject matter knowledge were reported to be regularly organised. Teachers were assigned to their subject units where they had weekly and monthly meetings to exchange knowledge and experience, and to discuss weekly and monthly teaching plans. Subject heads then reported these to school principals who then advised on further actions. School principals believed that they were very supportive of teachers' professional development plans, such as pursuing a higher degree or attending external training courses or workshops, and they created all possible favourable conditions for teachers such as reducing teaching workload and arranging flexible teaching options.

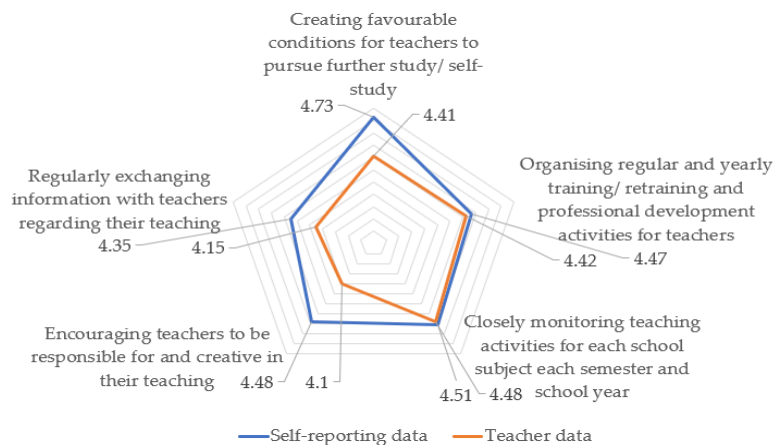


Figure-4. The competence of school principals in developing teachers' capacity from principals' self-reporting and teacher data.

The competency of developing educational plans was another strong point in the professional profile of Vietnamese school principals. The preparations for and implementation of educational plans were reported to be in place in all the schools surveyed, and school principals generally took an active role in this process. Often, the school management board identified educational objectives and specific teaching and learning activities for each school year and sought feedback on these plans from all the staff. Teachers then made their personal teaching plan for each term, including specific strategies and activities to achieve their teaching objectives, and were generally encouraged to aim for high goals and expectations for their students each year. It was interesting to note that while teachers rated high on the ability to flexibly adjust their plans according to their teaching contexts, school principals rated this much lower. Interviews with some teachers and principals revealed that flexibility, as perceived by teachers, means operating within individual constraints while for school principals, this referred more to broader, structural constraints, including resource and curricular restrictions. Principals felt that teachers were more likely to deal with pedagogical and instructional flexibility, but not often in terms of learning content, materials, assessments, or broader school issues.

Ensuring educational quality demands multi-faceted actions and school leaders generally perceived themselves or were perceived to be competent in this regard. Nearly half of the principal respondents selected the highest rating for each indicator under this competency. School principals reported that they frequently reviewed students' assessment results, compared these with the school's educational objectives, and made timely decisions to address any concerns or issues. This included celebrating students' and teachers' achievements and discussing with teachers

and parents about low-performing students. The monitoring of teaching and learning was also conducted frequently as school principals visited classrooms, observed teachers, and provided feedback for teachers to improve their teaching.

The professional duty that was most challenging for school principals was the management of financial resources and assets. This was the area that school leaders claimed not to have received formal training in. Managing school budgets and assets, as stated in the government's documents and as experienced by school leaders, involved both operational and capital budgeting, such as:

- Making financial plans for each year and each stage of the school's development and ensuring their suitability and relevance to the school's missions, development plans and priorities.
- Ensuring the school's use of funds and assets meets the state's requirements and laws.
- Reviewing and evaluating the use of funds and assets and making timely adjustments.
- Developing internal spending regulations and policies for the school and ensuring that this considered the opinions of all staff while helping them to understand financial accountability.

In practice, it was noted that Vietnamese schools relied heavily on state funding to operate and run educational activities. This included the payment of teachers' salaries and for maintaining and upgrading school infrastructure, educational facilities and learning resources. Aside from the lack of adequate training, this was seen as a contributing factor to the low perception of school principals in performing their financial management function. School principals particularly felt least confident in developing their school's internal spending policies and regulations ($M=1.92$) using the budget effectively and according to the law ($M=2.36$), and contributing mostly to inadequate training. It was self-perceived that they did not have adequate competence in attracting financial investments to support teaching in general, and teachers in particular. This situation was most noticeable among schools in disadvantaged areas such as the northwest provinces which are characterised by a scattered, itinerant population, poor economic development, low intellectual standards, and a diverse range of ethnic minorities (Nguyen *et al.*, 2012; Nguyen *et al.*, 2017). School principals from the northwest region who were interviewed for this study particularly commented on the difficulties in managing the school and upholding teachers' standards due to their school's geographical inaccessibility, a lack of facilities and funding, the large number of ethnic minority students, and a young and inexperienced teaching staff, many of whom also belonged to an ethnic minority group. Meanwhile, many school principals and teachers commented that the issue of attracting financial resources to support teachers was a challenge for secondary schools countrywide, as sponsors were generally not interested in investing in teachers and secondary schools.

One aspect of school leadership that was most noticeably conditioned by the country's socio-cultural factors concerned the distribution of leadership and power within school staff. Around 40 percent of school principals believed that major decision-making in relation to the school's development had to be done by the school's management board, including themselves. Some school principals claimed they were reluctant to grant power and authority to their subordinates due to concerns about the passive nature of their staff. Some further revealed that they were used to the hierarchical norms where their decisions would often need no further justification, and they would be least likely to listen to the recommendations from younger, less experienced teachers. Regarding the limited involvement of Vietnamese teaching staff in a school's decision-making process, it has been found that the Confucian norm and high-power-distance feature of Vietnam's cultural contexts often cause teachers to be reluctant to contribute their voice or question their managers' authority (Truong, 2013; Truong *et al.*, 2017). Employees with longer service records are also often seen to have more experience and expertise, and younger employees tend to be humble and modest in showing their skills. School principals in this study felt that they would be more inclined to nurture leadership qualities only for subject heads whose professional expertise had been attested to, and who had higher chances of being promoted to a management position.

4.3. Training Needs of School Principals

When asked about areas where school principals would benefit from further training, teachers generally agreed with the topics being identified, but attached slightly more significance to three aspects, namely: mobilising resources from outside of the school to support teaching and learning; training teachers on teaching methods and assessments; and developing the school's educational plans. Survey data from school principals, meanwhile, showed that 68 to 82 percent of school principals (Figure 5) identified their most essential training needs to be instructional leadership, planning and communication skills, and the ability to mobilise resources to support teaching and school activities. It can be seen that teachers tended to expect improved performance from school principals on areas that could have more direct benefits to their teaching practices. For example, attracting external investment, especially social partnerships, to finance school infrastructure and teaching practices, was regarded as being essential given public funding on educational development was both untimely and inadequate. In consequence, many teachers felt that their school management board should be trained to more effectively promote school-community and school-organisation partnerships, and to socialise educational provision. Meanwhile, school principals generally believed that educational outcomes could be further enhanced by better communicating the school's educational objectives to teachers, parents and communities. Principals of schools from poorer localities in particular were concerned that parents assumed the education of their child to be the sole responsibility of the school, and felt the need to be able to more effectively communicate with and persuade parents and teachers. Instructional leadership was the area where both school principals and teachers felt there should be more training provided. It was noted that many upskill workshops for teachers were dependent on the plans from local departments of education and from MOET. Many principals themselves admitted that being involved primarily in administrative roles somehow made them feel less confident in assisting teachers with teaching methodologies or assessing learning outcomes. Regarding the upskilling of school principals, many neighbouring countries such as China and Thailand have successfully developed training programmes that target the leadership needs of school principals in specific localities, such as those populated by ethnic minority groups or where competencies in using information technology and foreign language skills were low. Vietnam should consider these factors, and focus more on the practical needs of school management personnel rather than offering overly theoretical training.

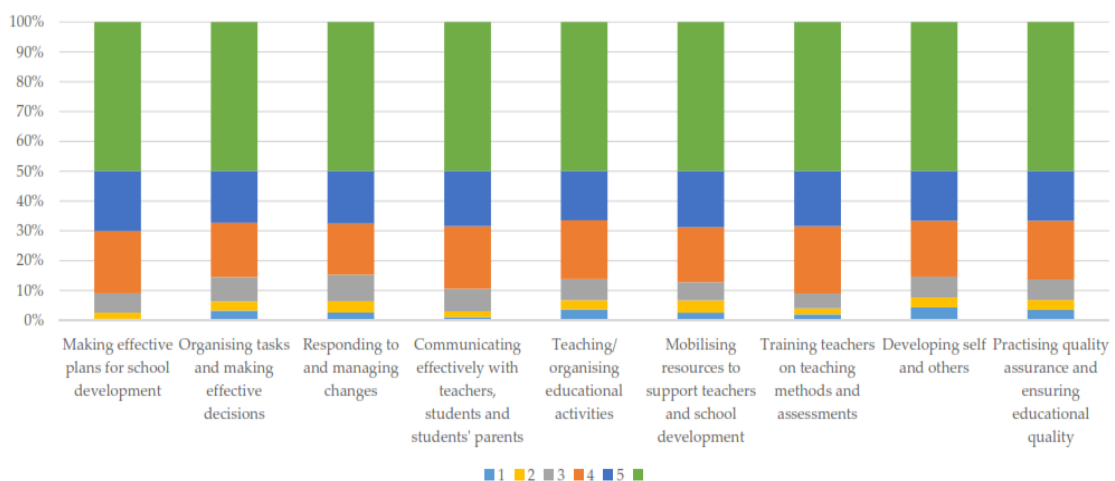


Figure-5. School principals' training needs.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

School principalship in Vietnam can be seen to be conditioned by the country's sociocultural and political profile. Gian (2012) notes that Vietnamese school principals assume three roles, namely those of an educator, a leader and a government official. As an educator, school principals are expected to know how to train and educate learners to become successful and happy individuals and workers, while in the role of leader they need to draw on

their leadership skills repertoire to manage and operate school activities in an effective manner. In addition to this, school principals as officials employed by the government need to contribute to the achievement of political objectives in education. The conception of laws and regulations in Vietnam in general and in educational policies, in particular, is linked to Confucianism and Socialist ideologies (George, 2005; Pham, 2005). Confucian culture remains a strong foundation for different expected norms (Borton, 2000; Ralston *et al.*, 2006; Truong, 2013; Truong *et al.*, 2017); whereas government policy is formulated and implemented under the guidance of the Communist Party of Vietnam, and exercised as an administrative instrument of the Party (George, 2005; Truong and Hallinger, 2017). This means while many of the qualities expected of school principals in Vietnam are similar to those found in other educational systems around the world, the practices of Vietnamese school leaders are characterised and influenced by the country's political and cultural orientation. The standards for school principals issued by Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (VMET, 2009; VMET, 2011a; VMET, 2011b; VMET, 2012) reflect this. The standards for principals of secondary and high schools, for example, have three domains, namely political viewpoints and professional ethics; professional competencies and pedagogical expertise; and school leadership competencies. In order to be selected as a school principal, being politically orthodox and professionally ethical is of paramount significance and is given equal weight to academic achievement and professional competence (Hallinger and Truong, 2014; Truong and Hallinger, 2017). The performance of school leaders during their principalship continues to demand political and bureaucratic functions to be performed, and many principals will have to focus more on their political and managerial roles rather than instruction and leadership (Truong and Hallinger, 2017; Truong *et al.*, 2017; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018). These country-specific factors have resulted in many cumbersome duties being demanded of school principals by the state that also constrains their decision-making power (VMET, 2014; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018). While there have been more facilitative regulations from the government that allow for greater autonomy and decision-making power among school leaders, they still must navigate with resource constraints such as state mechanisms for allocating funding and teachers to schools. For example, while school principals have been given more flexibility in hiring experienced and competent teachers, this would also mean they have to reduce spending on other school activities such as providing interventions for students in need, unless they can access external resources. These are not challenges for Vietnam alone, and can be found in schools of different types in many countries (Wise, 2015).

As school leaders, Vietnamese school principals are expected to build within their staff, parents and students a belief that they possess the necessary capacity and resources to support, implement and motivate positive change to school culture, the curriculum and the quality of instruction. In addition to these responsibilities, the school leaders' role has become even more demanding given regulatory, technological, curricular and pedagogical changes. Therefore, the training of school principals needs to take in consideration specific tasks to be completed in the Vietnamese educational context. Vietnamese school principals, despite self-perceiving and being perceived as performing satisfactorily, still need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to deal with changes and changing expectations, and with tools or collaborative networks that they can call upon. For example, school principals in Vietnam have relied on students' assessment data to inform their management and instructional leadership. Yet, in today's world of standardised testing, and especially in a teaching and learning culture that is heavily exam-oriented like Vietnam, students' performance in tests may not reveal the true picture about what works to create an effective learning environment for students, and an effective set of instructional practices for teachers. This highlights the significance of fostering in Vietnamese school principals a deep understanding of teaching and learning and the ability to validate instruction beyond impressive test results. More importantly, school principals need to promote leadership qualities and build the desire for self-improvement among their faculty as well as in their school. Lessons from high-performing schools have shown that teachers are not often motivated by state assessments, community expectations or the desire to please administrators. They are motivated by seeing how their teaching makes a powerful difference to the lives of their students, and improvement in society (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Gurr *et*

al., 2006; Barber and Mourshed, 2007). Vietnamese school leaders are currently reserved in distributing and promoting leadership, but this needs to be changed in order to build teachers' and students' capacity to succeed.

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