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## Changing policy, legislation and its effects on pedagogic leadership in China

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### Abstract

The relationship between school development and changing policy is in constant flux which adds to the complexity of school leadership. Based on investigation of the theories surrounding pedagogical leadership, the main purpose of this study explores the development of pedagogic leadership in schools providing compulsory education under current policies. A semi-structured interview was used on 30 head teachers from Sichuan Province in China who participated in this study. Results show that the current educational policies in China are supportive of the development of pedagogic leadership, and four dimensions of pedagogic leadership are significantly affected by changing policies. Despite that, the education policy implementation processes do not always support school development. The picture that emerges is beginning to show the distinct concept of Chinese education policy. However, as there still exist gaps to access supportive pedagogic leadership in China, there is a growing need to pay more attention to its effective and sustainable development.

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## **1. Introduction**

The relationship between school development and the changing policy has become critical in modern times, adding to the complexity of school leadership, particularly since China's National Middle and Long Term Talents Development Plan Outline (2010-2020) came into effect. Although there is a significant and growing body of research on school development and educational policy work in compulsory education, the methodology of many recent studies in schools in China is reliant on the relationship between educational input and students' achievement (Li, 2013). Nevertheless, these studies have not offered deep insights into the relationship between changing policy and pedagogic leadership. In contrast, studies have shown that pedagogic leadership is associated with school culture (MacNeill & Cavanagh, 2007), curriculum (Robinson et al, 2009; Their & Aarnitukia, 1994), and engaged learning and teaching and school outcomes (Bush & Glover, 2003; Mulford, 2008; Krüger & Scheerens, 2012). In this respect, educational researchers and policymakers in China have increasingly recognized the crucial role of pedagogic leadership in the compulsory school education system especially in improving teaching and learning as well as ensuring that high quality education reaches the classroom. Every proposal for educational reform and every plan for school improvement have emphasized high quality leadership. The importance of head teachers in attaining high quality leadership is unquestionable. However, few can dispute the fact that 21st century school leaders are finding it difficult to keep up with the pressures inherent in their profession. Therefore, focusing on pedagogic leadership is integral to the development of high quality education in China.

## **2. Purpose and significance of study**

This study considers the research status of pedagogical leadership, including the various viewpoints of conceptualizing pedagogical leadership and its improvement in China. Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to explore the status of the development of pedagogic leadership in schools providing compulsory education under current educational policies and the relationship between pedagogic leadership and current educational policies. To achieve this purpose, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- i) What is the status of pedagogic leadership in compulsory education in China?

ii) What is the relationship between pedagogic leadership and current educational policy since China's National Middle and Long Term Talents Development Plan Outline (2010-2020) came into effect?

iii) Which dimensions of pedagogic leadership are affected by current educational policy in China?

### **3. Literature review**

Most contemporary theories of leadership suggest that leadership cannot be separated from the context in which it is exerted (Leithwood, 2003). Pedagogical leadership applies in situations where there is a synergy between management and the pedagogical touch (Their & Aarnitukia, 1994). All aspects of pedagogical leadership can be distinguished as individual areas of inquiry having inherited theory, instruments and approaches from both research paradigms. However, the research on pedagogic leadership is clearly the stepchild of school education and school management research.

#### *3.1 Conceptual background on pedagogical leadership*

Delineating a body of concepts of pedagogic leadership requires a more thorough and precise specification of the construct. According to different perspectives, pedagogic leadership can be divided into three categories. The first category considers pedagogic leadership as a learning-centered leadership that supports the development of teachers and students. For instance, researchers have stated that pedagogical leadership could be seen as a blend of supervision, staff development and curriculum development with the aim of improved learning (Their & Aarnitukia, 1994). In addition to this, Sergiovanni (1998) pointed to "pedagogical leadership as an alternative concept of leadership that aims to develop the human capital of schools, involving both teachers and learners" (p.37). Besides that, pedagogic leadership has been defined as a mutually transformative, learning relationship that improves both teachers and principals' repertoires of pedagogic practices within a culture of school improvement, which results in improved student learning (MacNeill & Cavanagh, 2007). The second perspective sees pedagogical practice as the focus of pedagogic leadership. For instance, Andrews (2009) pointed out that pedagogical leadership is concerned with leading and informing pedagogical practice. Similarly, Heikka's study (2014) posited that pedagogical leadership also consists of strategic elements, which involve a

wider set of stakeholders in pedagogical improvement. The third category of pedagogic leadership emphasizes the roles of the head teacher and their professional development. For instance, according to some researchers, “Pedagogic leadership is about the principals’ pedagogic presence in classrooms and pedagogic credibility” (Wortham, 2006, p.70) which supports the stand that “A focus on pedagogical leadership is also essential to encourage school leaders to take direct responsibility for the quality of learning and teaching in their school” (OECD, 2013, p. 553). Bottoms (2003) forwarded “A theory which suggests educational leaders must have an understanding and working knowledge of research-based curriculum and instruction, instructional practices, organization of schools for greater school learning, and supplying teachers with opportunities for growth and development” (p. 30).

Pedagogic leadership offers teachers and school leaders the opportunity to rethink the way in which they work and learn. Meanwhile, school leaders do face challenges to move towards a more pedagogic leadership style (OECD, 2013). Considering the need to strengthen pedagogic leadership in schools, a detailed analysis of the dimensions of pedagogic leadership is important. In an extensive literature review, MacNeill (2007) proposed a model comprising 11 dimensions of pedagogic leadership. Robinson (2007) developed a similar categorization framework to describe five dimensions of effective pedagogic leadership in school while Fonsén (2013) outlined the dimensions that influence the success of the pedagogic leadership from four aspects. Based on diverse factors found in these different models, four main dimensions of pedagogic leadership are highlighted: direction setting, developing teachers and students, developing schools, and professional development of head teachers. According to Zhang (2006), pedagogic leadership is manifested in various forms and with different aims on three levels: school level, teacher level, and student level. His research also revealed that pedagogic leadership has two working styles: direct and indirect. The direct style refers to head teachers who get directly involved in the curriculum construction, teaching program or student learning. On the other hand, the indirect style refers to providing administrative support or supportive working conditions to fulfill the head teachers’ pedagogic leadership.

### *3.2 Pedagogic leadership in schools providing compulsory education in China*

The National Middle and Long Term Talents Development Plan Outline (2010-2020) came into effect in 2010, and the contents of this policy are divided into four parts. As an important educational policy, the new tasks and missions of compulsory education are highlighted in the

second part. In Sichuan province, the education administration department is responsible for determining the local educational policies and direction of the local educational system. According to the data of National Bureau of Statistics in 2013, in the compulsory education stage (6 years primary school and 3 years lower secondary school), there were 7,976,700 students and 508,300 teachers which translates to a heavier responsibility for the head teachers and local education administrative department. Therefore, to ensure a high quality compulsory education, studies on pedagogic leadership in this context are both important and necessary.

Based on the China Integrated Knowledge Resources Database (CNKI), previous research has established that pedagogic leadership in China is considered an important part of head teachers' leadership. According to the research content, the related studies in China can be divided into three categories. The first category of research focused on the conceptualization of pedagogic leadership. Some researchers for instance, stated that pedagogic leadership is the ability to influence teachers and students to achieve their common goals (Zhang, 2015; Zhao & Song, 2014). Zhao (2009) believe that pedagogic leadership is based on the professional knowledge of head teachers. As a practitioner of education, they are responsible for the instruction of teachers on the aspects of educational knowledge and skills. The second category of studies highlights the head teachers' pedagogic leadership in some specific area. For instance, in Li's study (2009), pedagogic leadership in the area of curriculum reform and administrative ability was emphasized. The third category of research is related to how to improve pedagogic leadership in China. For instance, Zhu (2008) put forward three suggestions for head teachers which were that they had to be intelligent and thoughtful, adhere to the school system, and insist on the right values.

#### **4. Methodology**

All research is interpretive and is grounded on a set of beliefs about the world and how it should be understood and studied (Denzin, 2006). The main purpose of this study is to explore the status of development of pedagogic leadership in schools providing compulsory education under current educational policies and the relationship between pedagogic leadership and current educational policies in China. Therefore, in the present study, two different strategies have been used: descriptive and qualitative. The descriptive strategy attempts to capture "the trend, attitudes or opinions of a population" (Creswell, 2009, p.13) since it is a research strategy that enables the researcher to describe the occurrence of variables, the underlying dimensions in a set of variables,

or the relationship between or among variables (Heppner et al., 1999). As pedagogic leadership hinges on the personal behaviour and attitude of a person, qualitative research was used as well as it allows an in-depth approach to the studied phenomenon in order to understand it more thoroughly for a greater awareness of the perspectives of program participants (Weiss, 1998). In this study, the empirical data was collected using semi-structured interviews with the head teachers and his/her deputies.

An initial conceptual framework was used to guide the research and this conceptual framework was guided by the research objectives, research questions and literature study on pedagogic leadership. Thereafter, a set of predetermined questions was formulated and captured on an interview schedule and piloted with two school head teachers to ensure the interview questions were clearly structured and in logical sequence. The interview was guided rather than dictated by the interview schedule.

The semi-structured interviews which were divided into three sections, lasted between 30-40 minutes. In the first section, questions were focused on a general orientation towards changing policies and setting aims for school development. The respondents were asked what aims they set for their school. They also indicated which level of school management was more effective for the school development from their perspective. The final question referred to the support from policies and legislations. The second section comprised questions regarding topic or themes related to how head teachers supported their teachers and students. Regarding questions pertaining to working experience, participants were asked to describe one of the most effective strategies that they had used to support teachers' development. The third and last section of the semi-structured interviews included questions on the professional development of head teachers within the changing policies and challenges they faced.

The participants of the study were purposively selected to fit the study criteria. The selected 30 head teachers represented a population that acted as the spokespersons for the topic of enquiry. To provide for various perspectives on how changing policy effects pedagogic leadership, the following two inclusion criteria were applied:

- a. A minimum of 5 years experience in compulsory education (primary school or lower secondary school) as a head teacher or deputy head teacher;
- b. School type and its location: public school in the normal second-tier cities (similar economic condition).

Findings from the interviews are not considered to be generalizable to the whole population of head teachers in Sichuan province or any other province in China. 30 head teachers were invited to participate in this study and all head teachers (male:18; female:12) agreed to be interviewed through the semi-structured interview. All the interviews were conducted and tape-recorded in a location chosen by the participants to ensure that the physical environment was conducive. The first two interviews were conducted as a pilot test, using the interview schedule to determine whether the topic and questions were clearly understood and used appropriately. This contributed to the reliability of the interview as a data gathering tool (Struwig & Stead, 2001). The interview schedule was handed out to the participants prior to the actual interview so that they could prepare themselves before the actual interview sessions and to ensure informed responses.

The interview data were analysed in line with the procedure for analysing qualitative data set out by Kember and Kwan (2000). First, the data corpus was searched broadly for important themes and categories related to the effects of changing policy by the two researchers. The developed categories/dimensions were then sent to participants to validate the findings, particularly for “cases in which there was uncertainty in categorisation, or where there was lack of agreement, were re-examined by the researchers separately again, followed by a further discussion until agreement could be reached” (Kember & Kwan, 2000, p.474). This process had potential limitations (associated with the set categories/dimensions etc.), and, in order to increase the validity of the process, the researchers left a one-month gap between re-examining the data summaries and analysing the results to ensure the responses to the interview questions were accurate approximations of the participants’ feedback.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

Using the main dimensions of pedagogic leadership as an analysis framework, the data obtained from this semi-structured interview transcript was examined. Some significant responses from the participants are presented here to support the discussion. Results show that the four dimensions of pedagogic leadership are affected by the changing educational policies: direction setting, development of school, developing teachers and students, and head teachers' professional development. It appears that the effects on the last two dimensions are most significant of all the dimensions studied.

### 5.1 The effects on direction setting

During the interview, all participants mentioned the national policies and said they went to special meetings or classes sponsored by the higher authorities to learn about the latest national policies. Subsequently, they called a special meeting for this purpose at their own school. However, when talking about the effects of the national level policy, one participant explained:

*"It's a good policy for leading the direction of my work, at least we know that our country already highlights the compulsory school education...the most important benefit from it is for the hardware construction of the school, it has specific demands for the hardware, such as the number of multimedia rooms, sports and facilities...if we can't live up to the standards, the government will provide special funds for it...but it's not easy to apply to daily work, it's a "huge" direction for the whole country,...does not fit the situation of every school... "*

Nevertheless, one participant thought:

*"I have to say the national level policy is supportive to my work any way. Because of this policy, my school gets more financial support and more autonomous rights...even though it give me lots of additional administrative work...I need to pay enough attention to it, as it's the official direction..."*

These responses reflect that the changing national policy does indeed affect the macro level of establishing school goals and expectations. It gives direction to the school and the main challenge is related to the financial situation. In Sichuan province though, the educational policies are diverse between the geographical areas. For instance, one participant from the Tibetan area in Sichuan, proposed that:

*"Local educational department offers a favourable policy to our area, for example, in my school, there are 9 grades, and every student can get a living allowance to support their studies...for our teachers, the (local) educational department established the mechanism of training and exchanging that covers all-round improvement, to improve the level of all the teachers continuously..."*

Similarly, another participant felt that province or city level policies are more practical and realistic. This participant agreed that the changes on policies on compulsory education in recent

years are supportive to the direction setting of the school. According to this participant:

*"For the directions or aims of my school, the local policy is supportive, and provides lots of chances to the teachers, students. I know what I should do in the near future. Moreover, it gives me a kind of educational notion..."*

Generally, from the perception of head teachers, the current educational policies seem to have more positive effects on setting schools' direction and aims. The national level policy provides the 'big picture' direction and the local policy decides on the practical steps. However, establishing a shared vision and a sense of mission for a school is inseparable from the head teachers' professionalism.

### *5.2 The effects on school development*

When speaking about their experience of school development under the changing educational policy, participants focused on the school facilities construction and school climate:

*"From some aspects, my school is a "new" school. It's not about the history; it's about the teaching and about the thoughts of teachers and students. The educational policies require education for all-around development, but for my school, half a year before, another primary school merged with our school, and so, we built a new identity...the most important thing for me is, I think, the unification of the school climate, to let the teachers and students accept new circumstances..."*

The improvement of the quality of education, especially with regard to the students' outcomes in lower secondary school was mentioned too:

*"The most important thing I faced in my work is how to improve the passion of teachers and students, for better grades in the unified examination...I know that the best school education develops people, puts their needs as an utmost priority. But nowadays it seems to me that the best school means developing grades of students in the exam. Because, the exam is important to students, and to their family..."*

The educational policies do affect the attitude of head teacher, teachers, students and parents with regard to the exams as well. Under the current educational policy, a single exam can decide which university a student will be admitted to and which level of education he/she will receive.

Hence, pedagogical leadership is also predicated on stakeholders such as parents' expectations as to the academic achievement of their children.

### 5.3 Effects on the development of teachers and students

In this study, the researchers focused primarily on the effects on developing teachers' expertise under the changing educational policies. The four categories of responses found in this study are listed below:

- Exchange of learning
- Specialist seminar
- Peer learning
- Reward system

Under the changing educational policies, teachers have expanded opportunities for learning. According to the participants' responses, on average, 20-30 teachers in a school have opportunities to go on study exchange trips. Most of the study exchange trips last 2-3 weeks, while some can last one academic year, and these trips depend on the teachers' willingness and their workload. When they have completed their exchange and have returned to their own school, there will be a specific meeting for sharing their experiences. Teachers who participated in the exchange will share their feelings, and useful information with their colleagues. Thanks to the better financial support along with the changing policy, more and more specialist seminars are held in compulsory stage schools. Generally speaking, 2-3 specialist seminars are held in one academic year for a school. In such specialist seminars, teachers receive teaching theory training and they can ask questions about their daily work. One participant said:

*"As an important part of my work, I spend a long time to deal with the development of teachers. In my school, teachers can get training in the school and outside of school. There are special training programs for teachers of educational departments, and detailed evaluation system...everyone can get a chance to improve themselves...and I thought, they can resolve their questions... timely and effectively, it's a kind of inspiration for them..."*

As for peer learning, participants agreed that in various forms, it played an important role in their school:

*"We have peer learning every week, there are three forms in my school. Firstly, the peer learning in same subject and same grade (for instance: Math, Grade 2). Teachers can prepare and share their teaching plans together...they know their students, and they can tell which teaching plan can work better in the class...Secondly, the peer learning in the whole school, there is a meeting in my school every Friday afternoon, every teacher will share his/her teaching skills and experience with the set problems...the third form of peer learning is quite wide. We have three cooperation schools, we share the internal network together. In this way, teacher can upload his/her teaching plan and another teacher who is interested in this plan can comment on it in this internal network..."*

However, when talking about the reward system, participants have different opinions:

*"We are updating our reward system with new policies, I think the most important reward to teachers is the chance to go to study in a better school and get more teaching or training experiences, in that case, the rewards for teachers in my school is a long exchange study...but it not work well when teachers don't have passion to learn..."*

*"In my school, we will give more salary to teachers as a reward. Besides, there will be a ceremony for them, and parents of students will be invited. The point is within the current policies, students are the subjects of our education, they have rights to choose the teachers, class. etc. I need to help teachers to build their reputation..."*

#### *5.4 Effects on head teachers' professional development*

The responses reveal that the participants are quite satisfied with the assistance that the policy gives them to improve on their leadership skills:

*"Since the new educational policy came into effect, I got more chances to get professional training. 1 min. training per year and every training lasts 1-2 months. This kind of training is always before the summer holiday...it's a big class, 50-100 head teachers will participate in this class. We study together and share experiences together.... it's really a nice time... however, I still need to deal with the administrative work for my school during the training. People keep sending messages and emails to me...I have a headache about that..."*

*"I really appreciate that I have a good mentor in the beginning of my work. It's the policy from the educational department, I can ask help from them... I still get chance to develop myself, I mean in addition to the "official" training, I can visit good quality schools and I can get enough resources via internet. But all of this happens in my personal time, I'm too busy when I am at school, I can't find time to study... only during the holiday or weekend..."*

On the basis of the interview data of the 30 head teachers, two changes are obvious under the new educational policies: more professional training and more administrative work. Some of the responses are related to the system associated with education:

*"I do know that the current policy is supportive to our development, and I can feel that. But everyone knows that relationship is important in our system... I think I'm a good head teacher but it's not enough, I need the affirmation from the upper educational department...it's not good in some aspect...but I can consider it as a task to develop my interpersonal skills, not only for the educational department but also for the parents of students...I participated in the training, but I also tried my best to be a good head teacher, it really means a lot..."*

The role of head teachers, as well as their professional development in pedagogic leadership building was emphasized. The change of educational policy contributes to seeking ways to be better head teachers, providing different approaches to improve pedagogic leadership. The situation for now is still not ideal, as it is clear that the policies not only bring new opportunities, but also new challenges. As such, the development of head teachers and teachers seems to be a never-ending story. However, despite the challenges, the participants have clearly highlighted that the policy does have its benefits. But being educational practitioners, they have demonstrated that they recognise their responsibility to their students and have *"tried my best to be a good head teacher,..."* because *"...it really means a lot..."*

## **6. Conclusion**

This study has investigated the effects of changing educational policy and legislation on pedagogic leadership in China. The purpose of the study was to explore the status of development of pedagogic leadership in compulsory stage schools under current policies and their relationship.. The data provides evidence to answer the research questions posed at the beginning of the paper. The results suggest that the current educational policies and legislations in China are supportive of

the development of pedagogic leadership and dimensions of pedagogic leadership are indeed affected by the changing policies. While everyday practice in school development is not always supported by the policy implementation processes of education, the picture that emerges is beginning to show the distinct concept of Chinese education policies. However, there still remains the need to reflect on and study more of the issues related current educational policies, especially with regard to head teachers' self-development, for as Creighton (2005) aptly put it, "Never in the history of our educational enterprise has the school leader been faced with such complex responsibilities and so many change forces, both internal and external" (p. 77).

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