The Impact of Principal Leadership on School Governance: A Parent Involvement Perspective in China

Yaoru Ning
University of Warwick, UK

Abstract

This research investigates the complex dynamics of the relationship between school managers and parents in School M context by exploring how the school principal employs his leadership practices to promote collaboration and understanding. Using in-depth interviews, the study is concerned with how head teachers effectively use their professional status and personal charisma to create a cultural tie that links home and school as a matter of common values and responsibilities. The research sheds light on the nuanced strategies employed by the principal, emphasizing the cultivation of a normative framework for parental involvement in non-instructional governance matters while delineating clear boundaries. Additionally, the study elucidates the continual communication efforts undertaken to seek consensus, ultimately garnering support and affirmation from the parental community. Moreover, the analysis also describes continuous communication efforts that are aimed at finding consensus within a parental community thereby receiving support from it. This underscores the necessity for principals to navigate diverse and conflicting expectations within the competitive educational landscape, requiring discernment to establish a prioritized developmental sequence. Overall, the findings contribute to understanding the multifaceted role of principals in building collaborative partnerships with parents and adapting to evolving market-oriented educational landscapes.

Keywords: Parent Involvement, Home-school relationship, School Government, School Leadership

1 Introduction

The past century has witnessed the evolution of the concept of educational leadership from its Western origins to global prevalence (Walker et al., 2012). To date, extensive research has underscored the crucial role of principal leadership in the success of educational institutions (Portin & Shen, 1999). Alongside the sweeping wave of foundational educational reforms worldwide, domestic educational changes in China have also aimed at redefining the role and responsibilities of school principals. Since the 1990s, China has implemented various

measures, such as "义务教育学校校长专业标准 (Professional Standards for Principals in Compulsory Education Schools)" (Ministry of Education, 2013), which delineates standardized and professional pathways for shaping leadership. These initiatives have gradually elevated the expectations for the professional competence of principals. The scope of a principal's responsibilities has expanded from internal school management to adaptation to the external social environment.

Simultaneously, parental involvement in school governance has gradually garnered widespread attention in recent years (Mncube & Du Plessis, 2011; Ntuli & Mncube, 2020; Wing Ng, 2013). Previous research has predominantly focused on theoretical exploration, and more recently, surveys have been incorporated to understand the current status of parental involvement in school education (Haisraeli & Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2023; Olivar & Naparan, 2023; Wei & Ni, 2023). Generally, primary and secondary schools primarily ensure real-time connection and organized communication between home and school by establishing parent committees, parent-teacher associations, and similar organizations (Bacchus, 2014; Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022; Wairimu, 2022). However, in practical implementation, the effectiveness of parental involvement is often unclear due to the influence and constraints of multiple factors (Wilder, 2014). Existing literature points out the challenges in the process of parental involvement in school governance (Bouakaz, 2007; Wing Ng, 2013), citing issues such as the unequal nature of the parent-school relationship (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022), insufficient parental resources and capabilities (Ikechukwu, 2017), as well as the deficiencies in participation mechanisms and operational measures (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), which collectively hinder effective parental participation.

The "中国教育现代化 2035 (2035 Modernization of Chinese Education)"(General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2019) includes the overarching objective of "establishing a new pattern of education governance with the collective participation of the entire society." The vision for 2035 envisions "establishing a legal framework for government, schools, and society to collectively participate in education governance, thereby achieving the modernization of educational governance." The "国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和 2035 年远景目标纲要 (Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035)" also mentions "improving the mechanism for the coordinated development of education by schools, families, and society," explicitly highlighting the significance of collaborative education between schools and families in the process of achieving high-quality development in education.

In this regard, investigating how school principals can guide parental involvement in school governance through effective leadership strategies, further fostering collaborative efforts between schools and families, contributes to enriching the current understanding of the field of school-home collaboration. This research provides practical models and theoretical references for the establishment of feasible mechanisms for school-home collaboration.

2 Method

Case studies possess the advantage of "observing the effects of phenomena (or events) in a real-life context" (Cohen et al., 2002), enabling a more focused exploration of "how" and "why" a phenomenon or event occurs (Yin, 2009). In order to comprehend the experiences and perspectives of parents participating in school governance and to reveal how school principals actively influence parental involvement through leadership strategies, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 participants. Each interview lasted for 1 to 1.5 hours, and

the participants included a principal, 3 vice-principals, mid-level leaders, 2 teachers, and 4 parents of students (with 2 each from elementary and middle school).

The city S, situated within the Greater Bay Area of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao, is a prefecture-level city characterized by robust economic development potential and a socially inclusive culture. In recent years, the city has been actively promoting reforms and innovations in the field of basic education. In September 2013, against the backdrop of national policies encouraging and regulating the participation of social forces in the development of educational undertakings, the School M was established in the central urban area of the city. This institution adopted a model wherein a public school entrusts the management to social forces, providing a nine-year consistent education service.

The school established a board of directors, recruited a principal, and the principal formed a management team, proposed a school development plan, and implemented day-to-day administration. Upon assuming the role, the principal set the goal of cultivating well-rounded individuals, further creating and improving modern school systems. The school operates autonomously in accordance with the law, adopts democratic management, and relies on expert governance. The involvement of the school, parents, and the community is emphasized. School M implements small-class, with each class accommodating no more than 40 students. Teachers do not have official positions but instead sign work contracts with the school to clarify responsibilities and rights. In the case of unsatisfactory performance, the school has the authority to dismiss teachers. To ensure a correlation between outstanding performance and compensation, the school independently designs a salary-performance system and provides welfare benefits. Consequently, the actual remuneration for teachers is slightly higher than that of teachers in ordinary public schools in the district.

3   Results and Findings

Through the analysis of interview data from the 13 participants, it becomes evident that parents assume the role of pragmatic decision-makers, striving to secure a promising future development for their children. In fact, these parents' express discontent with the drawbacks of the public education system and hold optimistic aspirations for the educational reform instituted by the entrusted management model at the School M. On one hand, they are reluctant to see their children passively subjected to a purely exam-oriented educational approach known as "rote learning". On the other hand, they hope their children's exam performance surpasses that of their peers. They actively engage in monitoring the trends in the development of basic education reform.

During earlier events such as school open days, they attentively listen to the principal's descriptions of the school's educational vision. They also inquire about the principal's professional background and career through various channels. On multiple occasions, the principal has shared his educational reform philosophy with potential parent groups and the public. He advocates for "respecting the individuality of children" and fostering future-oriented individuals with "broad perspectives, positive mindsets, strong collaborative abilities, and physical and mental well-being." Remarkably, these ideals align seamlessly with the parents' pursuit of "quality education," resonating with their own aspirations.

Regarding the education their children receive at the school, the interviewed parents exhibit an overall satisfaction. When providing a comprehensive assessment of the school, they first mention the advantageous conditions of small-class at School M. They are well aware that, under comparable conditions, small-class implies that teachers can tailor their teaching methods, offering personalized guidance to students, which can consequently lead to a higher

quality of education. Secondly, the school is actively advancing curriculum reform, constructing a high-quality school-based curriculum system. The diverse, high-quality, and well-structured elective courses undoubtedly provide abundant opportunities for each student's personalized development and strengths-based education, enabling students to enjoy high-quality education while attending school. Additionally, the school offers competitive salaries to attract outstanding graduates from domestic and international universities. Simultaneously, it has established a sound teacher selection and evaluation mechanism to ensure that the teachers retained for long-term service are individuals passionate about the education industry and adept at teaching and research.

As children gradually grow older, reaching sixth or ninth grade, the interviewed parents exhibit hesitation about whether to continue choosing School M. Since its establishment, the educational effectiveness of School M has not undergone a comprehensive evaluation by an independent third party. When discussing the qualifications of graduates, parents feel there is a lack of precise comparative examples for reference. Concerns arise about whether their children have received sufficient preparation to confidently face the challenges of further education when they reach the higher grades. During the holiday after the completion of fifth grade, one parent transferred their child to an ordinary public school in the district. Due to the closer proximity to the new school, she believed that it would provide her child with a more regular and comfortable lunchtime experience. Simultaneously, she strategically planned suitable pathways for her child's transition to the next educational level. Another parent, candidly expressing their expectations, hopes for the school to offer more exam-oriented skill training. In their view, ensuring a smooth transition to high school through successful completion of the junior high school entrance examination is currently the most urgent and critical task for their child in ninth grade.

In the perception of the interviewed parents, ideal education and the reality of education emerge as opposing entities. Subconsciously, they do not believe that ideal education should encompass training in exam-oriented skills. Transforming into pragmatic decision-makers, they continuously navigate between the ideal and the real, crafting tailored educational development plans for their children at different stages of growth. In many aspects, parents consciously or unconsciously draw multifaceted comparisons between School M and ordinary public schools they are familiar with, utilizing the social resources at their disposal. At times, this comparison revolves around the quantity and quality of school-based extracurricular activities, while at other times, it concerns whether the school effectively nurtures their child's learning abilities and whether their child receives as much personalized attention from teachers as possible.

They often find themselves in a dilemma: on one hand, acknowledging the school's "young and capable teachers," and on the other hand, contemplating transferring their child to another school. They ponder whether their child could benefit from experiencing "teachers of different ages" and receiving guidance from educators who are "more experienced" and "more patient." The parents grapple with this ambivalence, wondering if their child could have a more positive and proactive learning experience under different circumstances. This anxiety and uncertainty persist throughout their parenting journey, perhaps only finding relief when their child graduates from university.

According to different interviewees, the principal has demonstrated effective leadership, skilfully applied different strategies, and continued to maintain positive interactions with parent groups.

Strategy 1: Inspire parents with reputation and charisma

Without exception, the interviewed parents uniformly mentioned that, starting from their initial exploration of the school, they were drawn to the reputation and charisma of the principal. The principal's manner of speech, behaviour, and interpersonal skills impressed them deeply and fuelled high expectations for School M. Despite a lack of a clearly visible vision for the future direction of the school, they quickly made the decision to enrol their children in this institution, firmly believing that "a good principal can lead a good school".

> *Back in 2015, when we initially visited, it was largely driven by the principal. Yes, this principal is undoubtedly an excellent one. I strongly agree with the notion that a good principal can lead a good school; it's a statement I firmly endorse. (Parent 2)*

> *We attended a presentation by the principal at the school... It turns out he has managed so many schools, even served as the director of education; he has considerable experience. (Parent 3)*

> *We were the same. At that time, we did appreciate his charismatic personality and his philosophy. However, the closer we got to higher grades, the more uneasy we felt. When it comes to junior high school and the need for admission to prestigious schools, we wanted our child to be with a better, more excellent group. That's why we eventually transferred. (Parent 1)*

The principal's charisma, professional background and qualifications, as well as the industry reputation established thereby, have become the first business card to gain approval from parents, and are also the principal's primary leadership strategy for parents.

Strategy 2: Build cultural ties

The principal has authored several educational management monographs and, on numerous occasions, advocated the school's educational philosophy, emphasizing the cultivation of individuals with "a profound Chinese cultural heritage and a globally perspective." Through adept symbolic communication, the principal has forged a cultural bond that closely collaborates between the school and parents, consistently strengthening parental identification with various aspects of the school's operations, thereby gaining widespread support. Initially, parents' understanding and acceptance of the school motto were confined to its literal meaning. However, they subsequently began interpreting and comprehending it from their own perspectives. Every day, parents acquire information about the school's stories and their children's academic lives through various channels such as the school's official social media platform, media coverage, parent-teacher meetings, and open days. They recall the principal's preached philosophy and gradually perceive the earnest implementation of the advocated educational principles. As a result, their understanding of the school's educational objectives deepens, fostering a stronger sense of identification. This shared understanding forms a common cultural bond, establishing more pervasive and intimate connections within the parent community. Parents also frequently engage in communication with the school, actively seeking ways to contribute their efforts to support the school and the children.

> *Yes, the principal's initial focus is on this kind of traditional culture, including moral and spiritual cultivation. Another aspect is relatively more modern and Western. So, you see, it's both Chinese and Western, both traditional and modern. The principal influences others, including his subordinates and all the teachers, to collectively create this cultural atmosphere. We can feel it. When parents share a consistent understanding, it forms a connecting link. (Parent 2)*

The first is the curriculum. The second, I think, is the aspect of culture, or rather, the principal's cultural leadership. I believe we can still sense this influence. Every parent meeting, he preaches his ideas, and parents understand his philosophy. He keeps preaching to batches of parents. All the teachers continuously comprehend his ideas through his preaching, so everyone has a unified understanding. In reality, parents, in terms of perspective, are also relatively unified. (Parent 3)

Furthermore, this cultural bond formed by a common sense of identity also shapes students' behaviour. Students in School M have their own unique characteristics compared to students in other schools.

Observing the children at School M, I feel that their demeanour is different compared to children from similar schools. The children seem to have a unique radiance on their faces. They willingly go to school every day, giving off a sunny feeling. In terms of a child truly imprinting the school's identity, you can easily spot it in School M's children. Yes, they themselves feel that they are distinctive. (Parent 3)

When we visited the school to understand the principal's philosophy, there were presentations and various activities, which also serve as part of the curriculum. I felt that it was somewhat different from regular schools. The school consistently conducts extended courses during the afternoon, even during the seventh and eighth periods. For example, there are classes every afternoon from Monday to Thursday, covering grades seven to nine. These extension classes are integrated into the timetable, offered for free, and maintain a very high quality. (Parent 4)

Strategy 3: Standardize parent participation mechanism and clarify boundaries

The school, through a standardized selection mechanism, supports and ensures the participation of parents willing to serve in class or school affairs in the Parent-Teacher Association or School Committee. The selection process is fair, transparent, just, and reasonable, and parents generally express understanding and support.

I think their Parent-Teacher Association is relatively standardized... For example, every year, there is a regular voluntary registration of parents, an open competitive speech, and within the class, there is a standardized procedure, a formal voting process to select the representatives. (Parent 2)

Regarding the boundaries of parental involvement in school governance, the school clearly delineates that it primarily involves "non-teaching" affairs—consistent with the principal's consistent emphasis on "letting professionals handle professional matters." The School Committee and Class Committee have well-defined responsibilities, each performing its role. The decision-making process follows democratic voting principles, allowing every parent to fully express their intentions. Ultimately, the "majority rule" is applied to determine the optimal solution.

The School Committee is involved in the cafeteria tendering process, and the school doesn't interfere; it's entirely handed over to the parents. There is a democratic vote on matters such as student fees and timing, with all details outlined. For example, for the upcoming autumn outing, the entire eighth grade, with input from the Parent-Teacher Association, designed four different plans through investigation, and then everyone made their choices. The plan with the most support through the relay process in WeChat was adopted, following the principle of majority rule. (Parent 4)

In response to the current situation that young teachers account for a large proportion, the school can make full use of the extensive resources and resourcefulness of the parent group, guide parents to actively participate in various school affairs, and effectively make up for the lack of experience of young teachers.

> *In other words, there are not many experienced teachers; the majority are young teachers. The activities are diverse every year and are constantly changing, but I feel that it seems to be more driven by the parent community's active participation. This is because parents, even more than teachers, care deeply about it, have a strong sense of class pride, and possess various resources. (Parent 1)*

At the same time, parents are generally able to think differently, consider realistic factors, pay long-term attention to their children's physical and mental development and social experience, and provide necessary guidance.

> *I always tell my son that it's about adapting to others, and you shouldn't try to seek stability by expecting others to adapt to you. When you get a new teacher, you should proactively try to adapt to the teacher's teaching style. It's also a form of learning and an experience, adjusting your mood by yourself. Yes, I've interacted with many parents, and everyone has a relatively broad perspective. People aren't narrow-minded, and everyone actively tends to view these negative factors as positive elements. (Parent 3)*

In terms of standardized selection mechanisms and awareness of participation boundaries, the parent community can generally reach a consensus and maintain an open-minded growth mindset. The annual selection of members for the Parent Teacher Association and School Committee ensures the orderly participation of parental influence. Like a ripple effect, a positive and constructive influence gradually forms within the parent community, becoming an effective force that supports the principal's educational leadership.

Strategy 4: Communication

Continuous communication is the principal's primary strategy for influencing, persuading, and gaining parental support. Through this ongoing communication process, four main functions of active communication interaction between the school and families emerge: vision conveying, needs perceiving, behaviour shaping, and problem solving.

School M established and perfected home-school communication mechanism from the inception. The principal engages parents through various channels such as school open days, parent-teacher meetings, parent committee representative meetings, the official school WeChat platform, the parent volunteer group, and the principal's WeChat public account, ensuring close communication. Parents have heard the principal's "inspirational" speeches on multiple occasions, gradually grasping the school's educational vision and developmental direction.

> *The primary factor is the recognition of his educational philosophy. The entire school consistently adheres to this philosophy, and I have sensed it for many years. It indeed highly values the individual development of each child. (Parent 1)*

The school's educational vision embodies a child-centred educational philosophy aimed at promoting the physical and mental well-being as well as the comprehensive development of children. From the parents' perspective, the vision reflects the integration of traditional cultural essence and the requirements of modern talent. Frequent exchanges and communication contribute to parents understanding and embracing the school's philosophy, leading them to

wholeheartedly endorse and accept the principal's educational thoughts, becoming allies in the school's collaborative efforts.

Communication aids the principal in understanding the recent concerns and specific needs of parents. The school curriculum is designed based on educational objectives, offering rich school-based courses from the first grade to explore students' potential and interests. As children transition from lower grades to middle and high grades, parents express their concerns to the school in various ways, seeking assistance from the school to help their children excel in crucial tests. The school responds by redesigning the curriculum, focusing on enhancing students' overall competence while addressing parents' aspirations for improving their children's test-taking abilities.

> *When we talk about quality education, many people nowadays seem to associate it with the contrast to exam-oriented education. It is as if this school doesn't care about any academic achievements, which is not realistic. (Principal)*

Communication and negotiation serve as powerful tools for the school to shape parental behavior. The school provides various channels for parents to participate in school management and gain insights into various aspects of students' school life. Regarding parental opinions and needs, the school offers attentive listening and respect. However, the principal also judiciously limits excessive parental involvement, stating:

> *One crucial aspect of the parental role is to be in the right place and not overstep boundaries, as once authority is delegated to parents, there is a potential for them to exceed their designated roles. This is a long-term consideration, but if overstepping occurs, constant negotiation becomes necessary. Parents are correct; we can certainly accept and listen. However, if parents are clearly incorrect or represent individual interests, we should take measures to stop such actions.*

When parents, in the course of overseeing the educational process, identify areas that require improvement or optimization, they provide feedback to the school. The optimal strategy for the school is to promptly address and actively negotiate these issues, resolving them at the fastest pace possible. In other words, by focusing on the timely resolution of issues, the principal reinforces the perception among parents that the school is capable and willing to take responsibility. This fosters confidence that the school can swiftly and efficiently address challenges. When issues cannot be immediately resolved, the strategy of continuous communication remains a powerful tool for collaborative efforts between the school and parents.

> *Effective communication and coordination are crucial. It involves listening to their opinions and promptly addressing issues that can be resolved immediately. For matters requiring some time, informing them of the timeline for resolution is equally important. (Principal)*

> *Through promotion and communication with parents, we strive to engage them in the actual management of the school. So, as some individuals enter the school to understand our practices, their comprehension cannot happen overnight. For instance, when the principal gives lectures, some parents may accept his ideas, but it might be merely on a cognitive level. When it comes to actual behaviours and specific school management measures, parents may not necessarily embrace them. Therefore, fine-tuning and adaptation are inevitably part of an ongoing communicative process. (Principal)*

> *When I have a meeting, I listen to everyone's opinions. Don't say other things, I just talk about problems and suggestions. (Principal)*

The school also promptly releases promotional reports on activities, providing timely updates on the current state of education and campus life to the community and parents. Regardless of weather changes, every morning, the principal consistently arrives at the school gate to welcome the students. While these daily routines may seem ordinary at first glance, their unwavering commitment over the years has added a touch of persistence and resilience to the principal's exemplary role in the eyes of parents. In this way, the principal's hands-on approach to "getting things done well," coupled with his professional standing, personal charisma, and adept communication leadership strategies, quickly earned him the trust, affection, and widespread support of the parent community.

4   Conclusion and Suggestions

This study underscores the critical role of effective principal leadership in enhancing parental involvement and fostering a collaborative educational environment. The findings reveal that principals who exhibit charisma and strong interpersonal skills can significantly influence parents' perceptions and decisions regarding their children's education, aligning with previous research that emphasizes the importance of school leadership in shaping parental engagement (Epstein, 2002; Harris & Goodall, 2008). The findings indicate that principals who demonstrate charisma, strong interpersonal skills, and a clear vision for education can significantly shape parents' perceptions and decisions regarding their children's schooling. By establishing cultural ties and shared values, principals can create a sense of community that encourages parents to engage actively in school governance. Moreover, the research reveals that successful principals employ a variety of strategies to communicate effectively with parents, including regular updates on school activities, open forums for discussion, and the promotion of the school's educational philosophy. These efforts not only build trust but also align the school's objectives with the aspirations of parents, thereby enhancing their commitment to the school's mission.

However, the study also sheds light on the complexities and challenges that parents encounter as they navigate the educational landscape, particularly during critical transitions, such as moving to junior high school. Parents often grapple with the dichotomy between their ideal educational practices and the realities imposed by a competitive, exam-oriented system. As Hill and Tyson (2009) suggests, parents' involvement is influenced by their perceptions of the educational system and their children's needs. While parents desire high academic standards, they also seek a holistic approach to their children's development (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). This ambivalence can lead to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety regarding their children's academic futures.

Therefore, it is essential for principals to maintain an ongoing dialogue with parents, addressing their concerns and adapting to their evolving expectations. By doing so, school leaders can create an inclusive environment that not only supports students' academic achievements but also nurtures their overall development. Ultimately, the success of a school is not solely determined by the effectiveness of its leadership but also by the active participation, support, and collaboration of its parent community. This partnership is crucial for navigating the challenges of modern education and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive.

As a learning organization, the school involves key stakeholders such as the principal, community, teachers, parents, and students. The principal should strive to create an open and collaborative environment, correctly guiding and encouraging parental involvement in school governance, ensuring communication to share the school's educational vision and values with

parents. Through communication and interaction, empowering parents to assume responsibilities is essential to effectively promote the further achievement of educational goals.

In the case, the principal demonstrates an ability to actively and effectively establish extensive connections between the school, families, and the community in the practical aspects of educational management. Using shared values and a sense of responsibility as a spiritual bond, the principal strives to unite the parent community, fostering the harmonious growth of students. Specifically, leveraging professional status and personal charisma, the principal builds a cultural bond conducive to mutual understanding and collaboration between families and the school, based on the envisioned goals. The establishment of standardized mechanisms for parental involvement is accompanied by clear delineation of their participation boundaries in governance, particularly in "non-teaching affairs". Throughout the collaborative process between families and the school, the principal consistently engages in communication, seeking consensus to gain the support and affirmation of the parent community.

Simultaneously, parents' prioritization of their children's academic achievements significantly influences the principal's leadership practices, directing them towards a market-oriented value orientation that includes accountability, competition, efficiency, and managerialism. This also indicates that schools exist within a competitive market environment, requiring principals to navigate diverse and conflicting expectations from various publics regarding educational goals, content, practices, and academic achievements. The principals must engage in thoughtful discernment to establish a prioritized development sequence.

Acknowledgment

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