

How Does Instructional Leadership Improve Teaching and Learning in Chinese Schools?

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Abstract

Instructional leadership has attracted sustained attention in educational leadership research because of its close links with teaching quality and student learning. Most existing research, however, has been conducted in Western education systems, while less is known about how instructional leadership is understood and practised within China's policy-oriented educational context. This paper presents a critical literature review that examines the development of instructional leadership, its contribution to teaching and learning, and its relevance to the Chinese educational context. The review draws on a range of influential international and Chinese studies to synthesise current knowledge and identify areas of consensus and debate. It shows that instructional leadership has gradually evolved from a principal-centred model towards a more collaborative and context-dependent approach to school improvement. Across the studies reviewed, leadership appears to influence educational improvement mainly through teacher learning, professional collaboration, and organisational processes rather than through leadership authority alone. The review also suggests that the implementation of instructional leadership in China is shaped by policy expectations, hierarchical relationships, and institutional conditions, meaning that Western leadership theories cannot be directly transferred without considering local contexts. Taken together, these findings support a more context-sensitive understanding of instructional leadership and highlight the need for further empirical research across diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Instructional leadership; Educational leadership; Teacher collaboration; School improvement; Chinese education