

## The Role of School Leadership in Implementing National Education Goals: A Theoretical Perspective from the Chinese Context

Xue Pengfei , Li Meng

Dezhou University, No. 566, West University Road, Decheng District, Dezhou City 253026,  
Shandong Province, China

corresponding emails: [limeng@dzu.edu.cn](mailto:limeng@dzu.edu.cn), [595634890@qq.com](mailto:595634890@qq.com)

### Abstract

School leadership is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of educational reform and policy implementation worldwide. In China, where national education goals are shaped by centralized planning but executed at the local level, school leaders play a pivotal intermediary role. This paper explores how school leadership contributes to the realization of national education goals such as equity, quality, and modernization through a theoretical lens grounded in the Chinese educational context. Adopting a theoretical and conceptual analysis approach, the study draws upon established leadership frameworks including instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership, applying them to the unique structure and culture of the Chinese education system. A targeted review of relevant Chinese education policies and academic literature informs the interpretation and contextualization of these models. The analysis reveals that while Chinese school leaders are increasingly expected to act as agents of change, their roles are often constrained by hierarchical bureaucratic structures, top-down accountability mechanisms, and limited autonomy. Nevertheless, emerging practices, particularly those incorporating distributed and instructional leadership strategies, show promise in aligning school-level initiatives with national priorities. The findings suggest that effective school leadership in China requires both systemic support and cultural adaptation of global leadership models. Enhancing the capacity of school leaders to interpret, adapt, and implement national education goals is essential for the success of ongoing reforms. This paper offers a conceptual foundation for understanding the leadership-policy nexus in centralized education systems and provides implications for leadership development and policy alignment in China and similar contexts.

**Keywords:** School leadership, Education policy implementation, National education goals, Chinese education system, Instructional and transformational leadership.

Received on 20 Aug. 2025, Accepted on 25 Oct. 2025, Published on 12 Nov. 2025.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, school leadership has gained increasing global recognition as a key factor influencing the quality, equity, and effectiveness of education systems (Leithwood, 2021). As countries pursue large-scale reforms aimed at meeting national development goals, the role of school leaders has expanded from administrative oversight to strategic actors capable of shaping instructional quality, professional culture, and policy implementation at the school level (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006, Leithwood and Slegers, 2006)OECD, 2020). This shift is particularly relevant in centralized education systems, where national education goals are often formulated at the ministerial level but require adaptation and enactment within diverse local contexts (Dimmock et al., 2021, Chisholm and Fuller, 1996).

In China, education reform has become a central policy agenda as the country seeks to build a modern, equitable, and high-performing education system aligned with its long-term socioeconomic development strategies (Zhang and Muhammad, 2025)(Ministry of Education, 2019). National initiatives such as the Education Modernization 2035 Plan, the Double Reduction Policy, and the New Curriculum Reform outline ambitious goals related to student well-being, balanced workloads, digital innovation, and improved teaching quality (Hou, 2025, Hesse et al., 2022). However, the successful realization of these goals depends heavily on school leaders' ability to translate policy into practice while navigating structural constraints, institutional hierarchies, and local complexities.

Although China's education reforms have emphasized the importance of school leadership, much of the existing literature focuses on leadership roles in operational management, with limited attention to how leaders function as policy mediators or change agents in implementing top-down goals (Liu and Hallinger, 2024, Liu et al., 2025, Chen and Zhang, 2024, Tsang et al., 2022, Jiazhi and Batool, 2024). Furthermore, there is a need to better understand how international leadership theories such as instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership interact with China's unique cultural, administrative, and political context (Printy and Liu, 2021, Liu and Abd Rani, 2025).

This paper addresses this gap by offering a theoretical perspective on the role of school leadership in implementing national education goals in China. It does so by (1) reviewing key leadership frameworks relevant to policy implementation, (2) contextualizing these models within the Chinese education system, and (3) discussing the enabling and constraining factors

that shape how school leaders interpret and enact national mandates. The aim is to contribute to the conceptual understanding of leadership-policy dynamics in centralized systems and to inform future strategies for leadership development and reform sustainability in China and comparable contexts.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Effective implementation of national education goals requires school leaders to function not only as managers but as mediators of policy, instructional leaders, and catalysts of organizational change. This paper draws on three major leadership theories instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership to frame the analysis of how Chinese school leaders interpret and enact national mandates. These frameworks are widely applied in international contexts and offer useful conceptual tools for examining leadership within centralized education systems.

### **2.1 Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership emphasizes the principal's role in improving teaching and learning outcomes by setting clear academic goals, monitoring instruction, and fostering a culture of high expectations (Hallinger, 2005). In this model, school leaders are directly engaged in curriculum planning, professional development, and instructional supervision.

In the Chinese context, where academic achievement and examination results remain central to school accountability, instructional leadership aligns closely with national education priorities focused on quality improvement, teacher effectiveness, and student performance (Liu and Hallinger, 2024, Zhang and Liu, 2025). However, the model's success depends on principals having the time, autonomy, and pedagogical expertise to influence classroom practices conditions that are not always present due to administrative burdens and hierarchical oversight from education bureaus.

### **2.2 Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership focuses on visionary change, staff motivation, and organizational innovation. Leaders operating under this model aim to transform school culture by building trust, inspiring commitment to shared goals, and encouraging professional growth (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006, Leithwood and Slegers, 2006, Leithwood, 2021). This approach is particularly relevant in times of policy transition, such as the implementation of China's New Curriculum Reform or the Double Reduction Policy, which require schools to shift focus from rote learning to student well-being, critical thinking, and reduced academic

pressure. Transformational leadership encourages the mindset and relationship-building needed to facilitate these cultural shifts.

In China, however, deeply rooted bureaucratic traditions and risk-averse organizational cultures may inhibit the emergence of visionary, bottom-up leadership. Principals are often constrained by rigid accountability systems and a lack of autonomy to drive transformative initiatives (Tu, 2026, Li et al., 2025).

### **2.3 Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership emphasizes the collective and shared nature of leadership, where authority and responsibility are distributed among teachers, department heads, and other stakeholders (Spillane, 2006, Spillane and Camburn, 2006). This model promotes collaboration, participatory decision-making, and the development of leadership capacity throughout the school.

As Chinese schools face increasing complexity in implementing national reforms, distributed leadership offers a pathway to shared responsibility and collective sensemaking at the school level. Pilot projects in provinces such as Shanghai and Zhejiang have shown that distributed leadership can support innovation and professional learning communities, especially in high-performing schools (Tsang et al., 2022, Jiazhi and Batool, 2024). However, this model challenges traditional notions of hierarchical authority that dominate Chinese school governance. Effective implementation of distributed leadership requires cultural adaptation, trust-building, and a supportive institutional environment.

### **2.4 Integration and Application**

Taken together, the three leadership frameworks instructional, transformational, and distributed offer a comprehensive and multidimensional lens for analyzing the role of school leadership in implementing national education goals (Nadeem, 2024). Instructional leadership prioritizes academic outcomes by focusing on teaching quality, curriculum alignment, and student performance. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision-building, staff motivation, and cultural change within schools, particularly during periods of major policy reform. Distributed leadership, meanwhile, underlines the importance of collaboration, shared decision-making, and the development of leadership capacity across all levels of the school organization (Nadeem, 2024).

Applying these models to the Chinese educational context requires a nuanced understanding of the broader cultural and institutional landscape. Culturally, leadership practices are shaped

by Confucian values that prioritize hierarchy, authority, and face-saving, which can influence communication, decision-making, and leadership dynamics (Tang et al., 2024). Institutionally, school leaders often operate within tightly controlled bureaucratic structures characterized by limited autonomy and performance-driven accountability systems, which constrain their capacity to lead transformative change. Furthermore, the complexity of China's education reform agenda including rapid, large-scale initiatives such as curriculum modernization and the Double Reduction policy necessitates adaptive leadership approaches capable of interpreting abstract policy goals and translating them into contextually appropriate school-level actions. Integrating these three leadership perspectives allows for a more holistic understanding of how school leaders in centralized systems navigate the tension between top-down policy compliance and the need for localized, context-sensitive implementation. This theoretical synthesis highlights the importance of leadership flexibility, cultural awareness, and system-level support in enabling school leaders to function effectively as policy mediators.

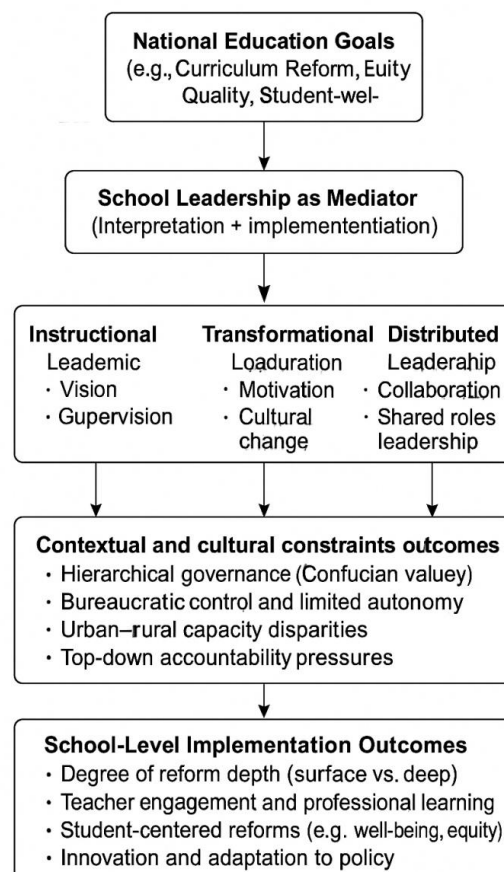


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: School Leadership Mediating National Education Goals in China

This theoretical (figure 1) triangulation allows for a nuanced understanding of how Chinese school leaders balance policy compliance with local adaptation, and administrative accountability with instructional and relational leadership. Table 1, shows summary of theoretical frameworks for school leadership in implementing national education goals in china

**Table 1.** Summary of Theoretical Frameworks for School Leadership in Implementing National Education Goals in China

Leadership Model	Core Focus	Relevance to Chinese Context	Challenges in Application
Instructional Leadership	Improving teaching and learning through goal-setting, instructional supervision, and academic focus (Hallinger, 2005).	Aligns with national priorities on academic achievement, teacher effectiveness, and curriculum quality (Liu & Hallinger, 2021).	Limited principal autonomy, heavy administrative workloads, and hierarchical oversight restrict deep engagement with classroom practices.
Transformational Leadership	Inspiring shared vision, motivating staff, fostering innovation and cultural change (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).	Crucial during reforms like New Curriculum Reform and the Double Reduction Policy that demand shifts in school culture and pedagogy.	Bureaucratic culture, rigid accountability systems, and risk-aversion limit bottom-up leadership and innovative initiatives (Chen, 2020).
Distributed Leadership	Sharing leadership responsibilities across staff to promote collaboration and collective capacity (Spillane, 2006).	Supports local reform implementation through collaboration and teacher leadership; shown to work in innovative pilot regions like Shanghai and Zhejiang (Yuan & Leithwood, 2020).	Conflicts with hierarchical norms; requires trust, cultural adaptation, and supportive school conditions.
Integrated Application	Combining all three models provides a holistic understanding of leadership as both compliance-driven and adaptive.	Offers a multidimensional approach to analyze leadership in centralized systems. Emphasizes balance between national mandates and localized, culturally informed practice.	Effectiveness depends on navigating cultural values (e.g., hierarchy, face-saving), institutional constraints (e.g., limited autonomy), and policy complexity.

### 3. Literature Review

School leadership has long been recognized as a crucial factor in school improvement, teacher effectiveness, and student learning outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008, Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006, Leithwood and Slegers, 2006). As national education systems pursue ambitious reforms, attention has increasingly turned to how school leaders act as policy implementers, translating abstract policy goals into meaningful school-level practices (Fullan, 2007). In the Chinese context, the challenge of aligning school leadership with national education priorities is both complex and urgent, given the centralized policy structure and the scale of ongoing reforms.

### **3.1 School Leadership and Education Reform: Global Insights**

International research emphasizes that school leaders are critical for bridging the gap between policy formulation and classroom practice. Robinson et al. (2008) found that leadership focused on instructional quality has a significant impact on student outcomes. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2020) argue that transformational leadership contributes to successful school change by motivating teachers and fostering organizational commitment.

The growing body of research on policy enactment (Ball, 2012) suggests that school leaders are not passive implementers but active interpreters of policy. They make sense of, prioritize, and adapt reform goals in response to local conditions, teacher readiness, and institutional constraints. This sense-making function is particularly important in systems undergoing rapid or top-down reform.

### **3.2 Leadership in Centralized and Hierarchical Systems**

In contrast to Western education systems where decentralization and school autonomy are more common, countries like China, Singapore, and South Korea operate within centralized education structures. In these systems, school leaders are typically positioned as both administrators and agents of compliance (Ng, 2008).

In China, the centralized nature of policymaking means that reform initiatives are introduced rapidly and often uniformly, with expectations for immediate implementation at the school level (Tan, 2012). School leaders are required to interpret and apply national policies such as the New Curriculum Reform, the Double Reduction Policy, and the Education Modernization 2035 Plan, often with limited flexibility. As a result, leadership becomes a balancing act between fulfilling policy mandates and addressing local realities (Chen, 2020).

Studies have shown that Chinese principals experience significant tension between their instructional roles and administrative responsibilities. For example, Liu and Hallinger (2021)

highlight how school leaders in China often serve as "middle-level leaders," translating central mandates into school-level actions while navigating bureaucratic oversight.

### **3.3 Chinese Perspectives on School Leadership**

The concept of school leadership in China is evolving. Traditionally shaped by Confucian values emphasizing hierarchy, authority, and collectivism leadership was largely administrative and compliance-oriented (Walker & Qian, 2012). However, as policy reforms require deeper changes in pedagogy, curriculum, and student well-being, more progressive models of leadership are gaining traction.

Research by Yuan and Leithwood (2020) on high-performing Chinese schools shows increasing adoption of instructional leadership and distributed leadership practices, particularly in urban regions with stronger reform support and training infrastructure. These schools often establish internal leadership teams, promote teacher collaboration, and invest in professional learning practices aligned with international best practice. Nonetheless, these innovations are not yet widespread. In many less-resourced areas, principals continue to operate under highly centralized control, with limited opportunities for innovation or shared leadership (Zhao, 2020, Zhao and Gearin, Zhao and Zhong, 2025).

### **3.4 Leadership and Policy Implementation in China**

Policy implementation in China is shaped by what some scholars describe as "fragmented authoritarianism," where power is formally centralized but informally dispersed across various bureaucratic levels (Heberer and Schubert, 2012). In this context, school leaders must navigate not only the policy directives from above but also resource limitations, institutional inertia, and community expectations.

Implementation challenges are well documented. Liu (2018) found that lack of training, unclear expectations, and weak feedback mechanisms frequently result in superficial or symbolic compliance with reform policies. Tan (2020) notes that excessive focus on performance data can divert attention from meaningful instructional improvement. As such, effective policy implementation depends not only on policy quality but also on leadership interpretation, school culture, and the institutional capacity to absorb and enact change.

### **3.5 Gaps in the Literature**

While numerous studies examine school leadership in China, few explicitly analyze how leadership theories apply to the implementation of national education goals. Most existing research either focuses on school management practices or discusses policy reforms without

examining leadership as a mediating variable. Moreover, much of the Chinese literature emphasizes case studies and descriptive research, with limited theoretical engagement or comparative insight.

This paper seeks to address this gap by synthesizing leadership theory with policy implementation literature and applying it to the Chinese education system. In doing so, it provides a theoretical basis for understanding how school leaders can function as effective agents of reform, despite operating within centralized, hierarchical structures.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

This section synthesizes the literature through the lens of the theoretical framework and discusses how different leadership models support or are constrained by the structures and expectations of China's centralized education system. The analysis is organized into four major themes, each connected to the role of leadership in translating national education goals into school-level implementation.

##### **4.1 School Leaders as Policy Interpreters**

In centralized systems like China, national education goals are typically formulated by top-level authorities and disseminated downward for implementation. However, research shows that school leaders play an active role in interpreting, adapting, and sometimes reframing policy directives based on their local realities (Ball et al., 2012; Liu & Hallinger, 2021).

While Chinese principals are often expected to comply with national mandates, they also engage in "policy sense-making," adjusting implementation strategies in response to student needs, staff capacity, and school culture. For instance, the Double Reduction Policy, which seeks to reduce academic pressure on students, may be interpreted differently in urban versus rural schools, depending on local parental expectations and exam pressures. Leadership development programs should include policy literacy and interpretation skills, enabling principals to bridge the gap between policy intent and practical school realities.

##### **4.2 Instructional Leadership and Curriculum Alignment**

Instructional leadership is highly relevant to China's national education goals, particularly in areas such as curriculum reform, quality teaching, and student-centered learning (Ministry of Education, 2019). The literature shows that school leaders who prioritize teaching quality, set academic expectations, and invest in teacher development are better positioned to align school practices with reform mandates (Hallinger, 2005; Yuan & Leithwood, 2020).

However, principals often face competing demands that limit their instructional leadership role. Administrative overload, frequent reporting requirements, and a performance-driven accountability culture can shift their focus toward managerial tasks rather than instructional guidance (Tan, 2020). To strengthen instructional leadership, China must reduce managerial burden on principals and establish distributed leadership teams that support pedagogical development.

### **4.3 Transformational Leadership in a Hierarchical System**

China's education reforms increasingly require cultural change at the school level moving from test-driven models to more holistic, student-centered approaches. Transformational leadership, which promotes vision, innovation, and collective engagement, is essential for this transition (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

However, the application of transformational leadership in Chinese schools is constrained by organizational culture and hierarchical norms. Principals may hesitate to challenge tradition or initiate deep change for fear of conflict with upper-level authorities or disrupting existing structures (Walker & Qian, 2012).

Nonetheless, there is evidence that some high-performing schools in reform-oriented cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen are cultivating visionary leaders who successfully implement new curricula and foster teacher collaboration (Chen, 2020). Transformational leadership has strong potential but must be culturally adapted to China's hierarchical governance model. Trust-building and support from district authorities are key enabling factors.

### **4.4 Distributed Leadership and Collaborative Implementation**

Distributed leadership has emerged in some Chinese schools as a practical solution to the complexity of reform implementation. Empowering department heads, lead teachers, and instructional coaches allows schools to share responsibility and build collective ownership of policy goals (Spillane, 2006; Yuan & Leithwood, 2020).

However, this model is not yet institutionalized in most Chinese schools. Traditional leadership structures, rigid role boundaries, and limited professional autonomy often inhibit collaboration and limit opportunities for shared decision-making (Zhao, 2016). Policymakers and school districts should encourage distributed leadership by formalizing leadership roles beyond the principal and investing in team-based school governance structures.

### **4.5 The Leadership–Policy Gap: Structural and Cultural Constraints**

Although school leaders are increasingly recognized as key agents in the implementation of national education goals, significant structural and cultural constraints continue to limit their effectiveness in centralized systems such as China's. Key barriers include limited autonomy for principals to initiate school-based innovations without higher-level approval, over-centralization of decision-making authority at district and provincial levels, and performance-oriented accountability frameworks that prioritize compliance over creativity. These conditions often discourage local adaptation and risk-taking, especially in rural or under-resourced areas where stakeholder engagement tends to be minimal.

Such constraints contribute to what Fullan (2007) describes as the "implementation dip" a temporary decline in institutional performance as schools attempt to adjust to new policy directives. In the Chinese context, this dip is exacerbated by rapid reform cycles and top-down mandates that leave little time for schools to internalize, interpret, and effectively implement change. However, evidence suggests that successful leadership can emerge in schools where district authorities offer supportive supervision, allocate resources strategically, and grant flexibility in how national goals are translated into school-level practice (Liu & Hallinger, 2021). These conditions enable principals to mediate between policy expectations and local realities more effectively.

### **Toward Systemic and Culturally Aligned Leadership**

Leadership models such as instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership cannot be applied in isolation from the systemic and cultural environments in which they operate. Their success depends heavily on institutional support, professional development infrastructure, and alignment with cultural norms and values. In the Chinese education system, this implies a shift away from purely hierarchical, compliance-driven leadership structures toward models that empower school leaders to exercise professional judgment, engage their communities, and lead adaptive change.

### **A Theoretical Perspective for Centralized Systems**

The Chinese case underscores the importance of contextualizing leadership theory within centralized governance environments. While established models of school leadership offer important conceptual tools, their application must be adapted to the realities of bureaucratic control, institutional inertia, and deeply embedded cultural norms. This paper argues that the role of school leadership in China is best conceptualized through a hybrid theoretical model one that combines elements of compliance with localized agency. Such a model acknowledges the dual role of school principals as both administrative executors of policy

and instructional leaders capable of shaping school culture and practice. Bridging this leadership–policy gap requires not only model adaptation but also systemic reform to enable school-level actors to engage meaningfully with national goals.

### **Conceptual Framework: School Leadership as a Mediator of National Education Goals in Centralized Systems**

This conceptual framework aims to illustrate how school leadership functions as a mediating mechanism between centrally issued education policies and their implementation at the school level, specifically within the context of a highly centralized education system such as China's. By integrating three established leadership models instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership the model captures the hybrid and context-sensitive nature of school leadership practice in policy enactment.

At the foundation of the model are the inputs, defined as national education goals derived from top-down policy directives. These include objectives such as curriculum modernization, enhancement of student well-being (e.g., through the “Double Reduction” policy), promotion of equity and access, improvement of teacher quality, and the advancement of digital education. These goals are articulated through high-level frameworks such as *Education Modernization 2035* and the *New Curriculum Reform*, which provide the strategic direction for local educational practice.

The core mediating layer of the model is school leadership, conceptualized as the primary agent translating national goals into school-level actions. Within this layer, leadership practices are categorized into three overlapping models. *Instructional leadership* focuses on aligning teaching practices with curricular standards, setting academic goals, and improving instructional quality. *Transformational leadership* emphasizes the development of a shared school vision, staff motivation, and leading change initiatives. *Distributed leadership* highlights shared decision-making, delegated responsibilities, and collaborative problem-solving among staff. These leadership modes are not mutually exclusive; rather, effective school leaders strategically integrate elements from each model depending on their local context and institutional capacity.

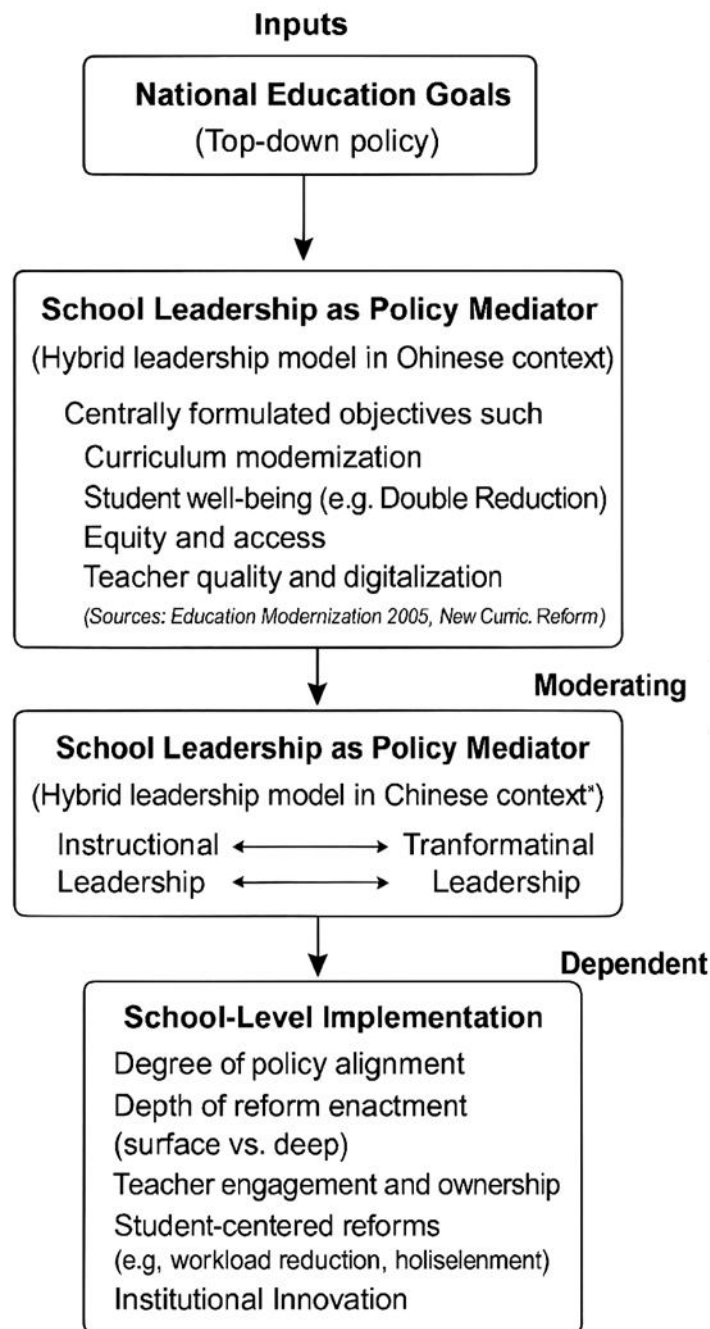
Additionally, school leadership operates as a site of policy interpretation. Leaders must make sense of reform mandates, assess school needs, prioritize initiatives, and translate abstract goals into actionable strategies. The ability to interpret and adapt policy is critical in bridging

the gap between national expectations and localized realities, particularly in systems where prescriptive policy is common but local implementation varies widely.

The relationship between school leadership and policy implementation is moderated by several contextual constraints. These include centralized governance structures and bureaucratic accountability systems that limit school autonomy, as well as cultural factors such as hierarchical norms influenced by Confucian traditions. Other constraints include disparities in local capacity, especially between urban and rural schools, the administrative burden placed on school leaders, and the pressures of performance-based evaluations. These factors either constrain or enable how leadership is enacted and, ultimately, how reforms are implemented.

The outputs of this model are the school-level implementation outcomes, which reflect the degree of alignment between policy intentions and enacted practices. These outcomes may vary in terms of the depth of reform (surface compliance versus meaningful change), levels of teacher engagement and ownership, student-focused innovations (e.g., reduced academic burden, holistic development), and institutional adaptability. Variation across schools and regions is expected, depending on how effectively leadership mediates between national goals and local conditions.

In summary, this conceptual framework provides a theoretically grounded lens to analyze how school leadership acts as a policy mediator in centralized education systems. It is intended to support both empirical research and practical application. Researchers can use this model to frame their analysis of leadership practice in policy implementation, while policymakers and leadership training institutions may use it to design development programs that enhance the policy mediation capacity of school leaders.



**Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of School Leadership as Mediator Between National Education Policy and School-Level Implementation in the Chinese Context**

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how Chinese school leaders mediate the implementation of national education goals within a centralized and hierarchical governance structure by applying three internationally recognized leadership models instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership to the Chinese context. The analysis demonstrates that while these models provide

valuable conceptual frameworks, their effectiveness in China depends largely on contextual adaptation to institutional and cultural realities. Principals often operate under dual pressures: on the one hand, they must ensure compliance with centrally mandated policy targets; on the other, they are expected to lead meaningful instructional and organizational change. Among the three models, instructional and distributed leadership are increasingly visible in practice, reflecting a gradual shift toward collaborative and learning-centered approaches. However, transformational leadership remains constrained by structural rigidity, bureaucratic accountability systems, and limited school-level autonomy. Overall, the findings suggest that Chinese school leaders act not as passive policy implementers but as *policy mediators* who interpret, adapt, and contextualize national reforms to fit their local realities. Their success in aligning national education goals with school-specific conditions depends on their capacity for sensemaking, adaptive leadership, and relational management. Nevertheless, current administrative and policy structures marked by centralized control, compliance-driven evaluation, and restricted stakeholder participation continue to limit the scope and depth of effective school leadership.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the theoretical analysis and the challenges identified in this study, several strategies are proposed to enhance the capacity of school leadership to implement national education reforms in China and comparable centralized education systems. First, it is essential to enhance principal autonomy within clearly defined policy frameworks. While adherence to national goals remains important, educational authorities should grant school leaders greater flexibility to innovate and adapt implementation strategies to their local contexts. Striking a balance between policy compliance and professional autonomy would empower principals to act as instructional leaders rather than merely administrative functionaries.

Second, leadership development programs in China should be redefined to address current limitations. Existing training often emphasizes bureaucratic competence, neglecting the pedagogical, strategic, and transformational dimensions of leadership. Future programs should be redesigned to build school leaders' capacity for policy interpretation and strategic sensemaking, develop instructional leadership and curriculum improvement skills, enhance change management capabilities, and promote distributed leadership practices that foster collaboration and shared responsibility within schools.

Third, reducing the managerial burden on school principals is critical to ensuring a greater instructional focus. Many school leaders are overwhelmed by administrative tasks and

reporting requirements that detract from their ability to lead teaching and learning. Simplifying accountability procedures and streamlining compliance reporting would free up time and resources for principals to concentrate on driving educational improvement aligned with reform priorities.

Fourth, the institutionalization of distributed leadership structures should be prioritized. The complexity of policy implementation demands collaborative leadership models that distribute responsibilities across teacher leaders, department heads, and school-based teams. Formal leadership teams can enhance collective ownership of reforms, encourage professional dialogue, and sustain long-term change. Support from district authorities in the form of guidelines, incentives, and professional learning communities is necessary to ensure that distributed leadership is not only encouraged but effectively practiced.

Fifth, the establishment of policy feedback loops at the school level is crucial for improving policy responsiveness and implementation fidelity. School leaders must be able to communicate real-time challenges and insights back to policymakers to ensure that reforms are adjusted in line with on-the-ground realities. Institutionalizing such two-way communication mechanisms would help close the gap between policy design and enactment, fostering a more adaptive and evidence-informed policy environment.

Finally, international leadership models must be adapted to the Chinese cultural and organizational context. While global frameworks offer valuable principles, their direct application may conflict with local norms of hierarchy, authority, and institutional tradition. Leadership approaches in China must integrate respect for hierarchical structures with strategies that gradually promote trust, collaboration, and professional agency. A hybrid model that combines global best practices with culturally contextualized leadership behaviors offers the most sustainable path forward in navigating reform implementation.

### **5.3 Broader Implications**

Although this study is grounded in the Chinese context, the findings hold broader relevance for other centralized or top-down education systems. The case of China illustrates that school leadership is most effective when situated within a governance framework that balances central policy direction with local adaptability, and administrative control with professional agency. As education systems worldwide grapple with increasingly complex reform agendas, the role of school leaders as mediators—rather than mere implementers—of policy becomes more critical.

Future research should examine how leadership-policy dynamics evolve in similar centralized settings and explore comparative perspectives on how school leaders negotiate the competing demands of compliance and innovation. Understanding how to build leadership capacity that is contextually sensitive, professionally empowered, and strategically adaptive is essential for achieving meaningful and sustained educational reform in both national and global contexts.

Let me know if you'd like this section adapted into a shorter version for a policy brief or executive summary.

## References

- BALL, S. J. 2012. *Politics and policy making in education: Explorations in sociology*, Routledge.
- CHEN, L. & ZHANG, J. 2024. Exploring the role and practice of teacher leaders in professional learning communities in China: A case study of a Shanghai secondary school. *Educational Studies*, 50, 1034-1052.
- CHISHOLM, L. & FULLER, B. 1996. Remember people's education? Shifting alliances, state-building and South Africa's narrowing policy agenda. *Journal of Education Policy*, 11, 693-716.
- DIMMOCK, C., TAN, C. Y., NGUYEN, D., TRAN, T. A. & DINH, T. T. 2021. Implementing education system reform: Local adaptation in school reform of teaching and learning. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 80, 102302.
- FULLAN, M. 2007. Change theory as a force for school improvement. *Intelligent leadership: Constructs for thinking education leaders*. Springer.
- HALLINGER, P. 2005. Instructional leadership and the school principal: A passing fancy that refuses to fade away. *Leadership and policy in schools*, 4, 221-239.
- HEBERER, T. & SCHUBERT, G. 2012. County and township cadres as a strategic group. A new approach to political agency in China's local state. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 17, 221-249.
- HESSE, F. W., KOBSDA, C., SCHEMMANN, C., GLOBAL LEARNING COUNCIL, G. & DEUTSCHER AKADEMISCHER AUSTAUSCHDIENST EV, D. 2022. Digital Transformation of Higher Education-Global Learning Report 2022.
- HOU, Y. 2025. China's National Education Conference Matters: major education discursive blueprinting in 2024. *ECNU Review of Education*, 8, 395-405.

- JI AZHI, Y. & BATOOL, H. 2024. A qualitative study on the components of teacher leadership based on the perspective of teacher behaviour. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 13, 64.
- LEITHWOOD, K. 2021. A review of evidence about equitable school leadership. *Education sciences*, 11, 377.
- LEITHWOOD, K. & JANTZI, D. 2006. Transformational school leadership for large-scale reform: Effects on students, teachers, and their classroom practices. *School effectiveness and school improvement*, 17, 201-227.
- LEITHWOOD, K. & SLEEGERS, P. 2006. Transformational school leadership: Introduction. *School effectiveness and school improvement*, 17, 143-144.
- LI, C., LAW, E. H.-F., HUANG, Y. & DING, K. 2025. Balancing tradition, reform, and constraints: A study of principal leadership practices in Chinese primary schools. *Education Sciences*, 15, 988.
- LIU, J. & ABD RANI, N. S. 2025. Distributed Leadership in Chinese Secondary Schools: Structures and Outcomes. *Uniglobal Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4, 388-397.
- LIU, P., THIEN, L. M., SONG, H. & WANG, X. 2025. The effects of instructional leadership on teacher well-being: The mediating roles of professional learning community and teacher self-efficacy. *Educational Studies*, 51, 638-660.
- LIU, S. & HALLINGER, P. 2024. The effect of department leadership on teacher professional learning in China: A multilevel moderated mediation model. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 17411432241232541.
- NADEEM, M. 2024. Distributed leadership in educational contexts: A catalyst for school improvement. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 9, 100835.
- NG, P. T. 2008. Educational reform in Singapore: From quantity to quality. *Educational research for policy and practice*, 7, 5-15.
- PRINTY, S. & LIU, Y. 2021. Distributed leadership globally: The interactive nature of principal and teacher leadership in 32 countries. *Educational administration quarterly*, 57, 290-325.
- ROBINSON, V. M., LLOYD, C. A. & ROWE, K. J. 2008. The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational administration quarterly*, 44, 635-674.
- SPILLANE, J. P. 2006. Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Rethinking schooling*. Routledge.

- SPILLANE, J. P. & CAMBURN, E. 2006. The practice of leading and managing: The distribution of responsibility for leadership and management in the schoolhouse. *American Educational Research Association*, 22, 1-38.
- TANG, M., BOONPHADUNG, S. & DONPRASIT, T. Development of Leadership for Educational Management in Chinese Institutes: A Literature Review. Proceedings National & International Conference, 2024. 129-138.
- TSANG, K. K., DU, Y. & TENG, Y. 2022. Transformational leadership, teacher burnout, and psychological empowerment: A mediation analysis. *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, 50, 1-11.
- TU, W. 2026. The Accountability Paradox in the Chinese Bureaucracy. Springer.
- ZHANG, J. & LIU, Z. 2025. How transformational leadership affects teacher collective efficacy? The mediating role of professional learning communities and the moderating role of trust. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 45, 1178-1194.
- ZHANG, K. & MUHAMMAD, M. 2025. Performance Evaluation Systems for School Leaders in China: Policies and Practices. *Uniglobal Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4, 58-65.
- ZHAO, Y. 2020. Two decades of havoc: A synthesis of criticism against PISA. *Journal of Educational Change*, 21, 245-266.
- ZHAO, Y. & GEARIN, B. IMAGINING THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL EDUCATION.
- ZHAO, Y. & ZHONG, R. 2025. From Meritocracy to Human Interdependence: Redefining the Purpose of Education. *ECNU Review of Education*, 20965311251351988.