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Research Brief

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Principal Leadership in a Chinese Public-Private Partnership (PPP) School: A Case Study

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PPP PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

Introduction

This study was performed to explore how a nationally renowned Chinese principal managed a new reformed school based on a unique public-private partnership (PPP). The investigation was focused on how the principal interacted with key stakeholders and managed the ongoing development of this new school. School M is a unique example of PPP in education, in that it has the status and receives the associated benefits of a public school, but is managed by an entrusted philanthropic educational foundation. The school is co-sponsored and operated as a joint partnership between the local education authority and a prestigious private company.



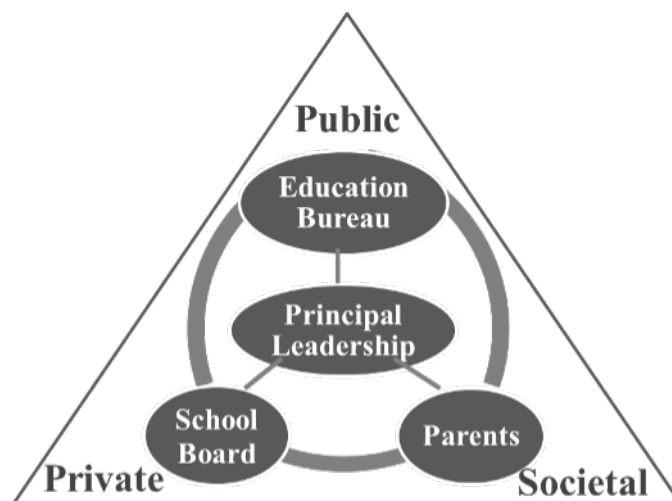
M e t h o d o l o g y

Qualitative and interpretive case analysis was used as the research framework. The data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 20 informants (four school leaders, six teachers, two private managers, four governmental officials, and four parents), representing the main stakeholders of the school. Data were also collected through participant observation, reflective field notes, and archival research at the school. The data were analysed using analytical codes and thematic clustering.

Key Stakeholders Influencing the Principalship

The following figure illustrates the position of school leadership between the three types of external forces (public, private, and societal forces), each representing a different stakeholder influencing principal leadership.

Figure 1. How Principal Leadership is Constructed and Influenced at School M



Amid the interwoven complexity of principal leadership and the principal's interaction with multiple stakeholders, the results revealed discrepancies in understanding, disagreements in communication, and differences in resolved actions. These differences are representative of the huge difference between the ideal objective of School M to find a third way for basic education, and its real management in a modern city in contemporary China.

Although the principal dreamed of full autonomy and was, indeed, promised more autonomy by taking the direction of School M as an educational initiative, most interviewees pointed to a downward trend in autonomy alongside the development of the school. The variation in the expectations of the three parties in terms of principal leadership is, therefore, not surprising. As a result, the principal had to adjust his leadership style and some of his behaviours in an attempt to meet various expectations. This leadership strategy can be contextual and task specific.



Significant Findings

The results of the study highlighted the complexity of the PPP in School M. During the six-years of the principalship, the partnership brought both leadership opportunities and challenges. These were sorted into five categories: institutional innovation, goal planning, resource allocation, principal appointment, and flat management structure. A discussion is provided on the different roles of the stakeholders, namely the government, the private company, vice-principals, middle leaders, teachers, and parents. The results also revealed the broad range of leadership strategies (see Table 1 below) used by the principal to respond to multiple accountabilities.

The following table provides a summary of the principal’s leadership strategies:

Table 1. A Summary of Leadership Strategies of the Principal

Leadership Strategies of the Principal	
<p>Government <i>from an invisible supporter to a visible supervisor</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading as an agent of change • Having a high moral purpose • Using professional authority to challenge administrative authorities
<p>Company <i>from a strong supporter of the school to an ally of the government</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing the same value with the company of “making a difference” in improving education • Showing strong charisma • Adopting a persuasive and coercive communicative approach
<p>Vice-Principals <i>hard-working team members of the principal turning the school’s vision into educational practices</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting a broad and noble vision • Strengthening curriculum leadership among the vice-principals • Empowering with scaffolding support • Increasing expectations
<p>Teachers and Middle Leaders <i>fighters for efficient teaching on the battlefield of education</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charisma • Intellectual stimulation • Instilling a sense of commitment and pride • Modeling and empowering • Gradually establishing a stereotypical job protocol
<p>Parents <i>pragmatic decision-makers striving for the future of their children</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fame and charisma • Cultural bond • Communication, communication, communication



Implications

The study depicted the practical operation of leading a restructuring school with public status and private engagement in the contemporary setting of Chinese society. It revealed a dynamic and ever-changing status of school development under effective principal leadership, initiated in a united district-wide impetus for education reform in the Asia-Pacific region.

The findings of this study confirmed Moos's (2005) integrated model of five types of accountability, and highlighted the declining but crucial aspect of managerial accountability in the reality of China. Accordingly, education reform requiring decentralisation will not be fully realised in the cultural context of Chinese society. Methods of balancing the conflicting forces of managerial accountability and other types of accountability will determine the far-reaching effect of principal leadership.

This finding has implications for educational practitioners about the ongoing process of leading a school and managing a bilateral partnership between the public and private sectors. It will also be useful for providing policymakers with more evidence-based accounts for future improvement and amendment. The government should use the results of empirical research such as this study to reposition itself in the field of educational administration, and it is essential that principals strive for mutual agreement produced through constant communication and occasional compromise. The diplomatic skills of a principal are necessary to ease tensions between different parties and lead to a win-win prospect.

From an organisational perspective, the findings of this study provide a snapshot to explore and clarify advanced leadership in different situations or occurrences. The identification of an optimal way forward from the perspective of organisational development need be determined in future research.

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Link for the thesis:

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