

Teacher Leaders' Participation in School-Based Decision-Making: Evidence from Chinese Primary Schools

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the perceptions of teacher leaders regarding their participation in school-based decision-making during the contemporary Chinese curriculum reform. A qualitative study was conducted through interviewing with ten teacher leaders in ten Chinese primary schools. The data suggest that teacher leaders were involved in decisions about personnel, staff development, school-based curricular and instruction, general administration, school vision, and school culture. It was significant that much of teacher leaders' decision-making reflected the notion of parallel leadership. Teacher leaders were closely aligning their working goals in conjunction with the decision-making of their principals and working at a different level to achieve the school development goals. Two significant characteristics of parallel leadership, namely mutual trust and shared purpose, explained the process of teacher leaders' involvement in decision-making. Findings have important implications for principals and teacher leaders in China to reflect on their beliefs and practices.

Keywords: teacher leaders; decision-making; parallel leadership; curriculum reform

1. Introduction

The current Chinese curriculum reform calls for 'quality education' which refers to the all-round development of students (e.g. moral quality, intellectual ability, and physical fitness), instead of the previous emphasis on "instilling" and "training" (Zhong, 2006). As the largest curriculum reform in the educational history of China, this initiative has led to systematic curriculum changes such as the development of new curriculum concepts (e.g. student-centred pedagogy), new curriculum objectives (e.g. the all-round development of student), and a three-level curriculum management system (i.e. the levels of State, localities, and schools) (Jin, 2003). The combined model of a top-down and bottom-up approach has been adopted to ensure the new curriculum is fully implemented. Meanwhile, the implementation of the new education reform brought out the decentralisation of national education system as well as the development of School-Based Management in primary and secondary schools.

Under this new system, principals were delegated increased power and responsibilities in school affairs and school decision-making, but executing the orders from the Ministry of Education is no longer the main requirement for principals. Because of the increasing workload of leading and managing schools that principals experience under educational restructuring, it is impossible for one principal to effectively assume all the leadership functions in school (Vickers & Zeng, 2017). In order to adapt to the new curriculum reform, teachers are also expected to become “leaders in curriculum, instruction, school restructuring and professional development” (Chen, 2007, p. III). Similar findings in the Western academic community are identified on the shared nature of decision-making. Therefore, principals increasingly empowered some aspects of school-based decision-making to teacher leaders on both a macro and a micro level in order to deal with the volume of work (Harris, 2013). Teacher leaders are intended to be more active and show initiative in leading their schools in the fields of curriculum development, vision, and school culture to bring about reform (cf. Goh, 2009). This emphasises the significance of the devolution of decision-making to teacher leaders who are empowered to work with their principals in schools to achieve desired policy outcomes.

This transformation of teacher leaders’ roles concerns their change from executors to decision-makers (He, 2002). For example, the policy of three-level curriculum management (i.e. the levels of state, localities, and schools) encourages teacher leaders as decision-makers in curriculum development to participate in the design, development and implementation of school-based curriculum. Additionally, the diversity, flexibility and variation of new curriculum are seen to enable teacher leaders to become decision makers who need to creatively implement curriculum according to specific contexts. Thus, the new responsibilities in the curriculum reform encourage teacher leaders to be involved in decision-making more actively and creatively.

The research on teacher leadership has developed over the last two decades. To date, there have indeed been many studies undertaken that have focused on the participation of teacher leaders in school-based decision-making in Western countries. Yet a dearth of research has been conducted to explore this topic in China. Hence, this study seeks to identify and understand the nature of teacher leaders’ roles in decision-making within the current Chinese education system. A qualitative study that utilised interviews with ten teacher leaders from primary schools in China was undertaken to explore one question. That is, what are teacher leaders’ perceptions of their leadership role in school-based decision-making under the Chinese current educational reform?

2. Literature review

2.1 The role of teacher leaders in decision-making

Participation in decision-making is a critical element of teacher leadership that has emerged in the literature. Teacher leadership was categorised as comprising three characteristics by Katzenmeyer & Moller (2001) and Smylie & Eckert (2018), in which encouraging teachers to actively engage in decision-making is highlighted as one of the dimensions of participation. Similarly, based on their qualitative study that explored teacher leadership across ten primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom, Muijs and Harris (2006) found that teacher leadership was exercised when teachers engage with shared decision-making on important school work in order to affect school change and improvement. In this process, teachers were provided with responsibilities and power to undertake school developmental tasks. After reviewing the research literature, Wenner and Campbell (2017) extracted five major themes that represent teacher leadership, one of which was identified as teacher leaders’ involvement in decision-making at some level. In order to measure teacher leadership, teacher leadership scale (TLS) with four factors (Wang & Xia, 2020) and teacher leadership inventory (TLI) with five factors (Chen, 2020) were respectively developed in the Chinese context. Most notably, engaging in school-wide decision-making was recognised as a key dimension in both two instruments.

Teacher leaders are stimulated to make decisions concerning diverse school affairs in order to enhance school development. Smylie and Denny (1990) conducted an empirical study to identify teacher leadership roles through interviews with 13 teacher leaders and a survey of 56 teacher leaders in primary and secondary schools in the USA. The results showed that decision-making was categorised as the main teacher leadership role consuming most of teacher leaders’ time, and this role included activities such as developing curricula, instructional programs and materials, as well as planning staff development activities. Likewise, Barth (2001) introduced ten roles in decision-making which are crucial to teacher leadership for keeping schools healthy. The list consisted of deciding upon instructional materials selection, curriculum development, student behaviour standards, student tracking, staff development programs, promotion and retention policies, school budgets, teacher performance

assessment, new staff hire, and new administrators' selection. Sebastian et al. (2017) measured teacher leadership through six aspects of teachers' participation in school-based decision-making, including hire new professional personnel, plan the appropriation of school funds, determine books and other instructional materials used in classrooms, establish the curriculum and instructional programmes; determine the content of in-service programmes, and set standards for student behaviour.

In the current study, four dimensions of participation in decision-making are used following Smylie's (1992) research in which they are organised as a relatively comprehensive structure suitable for the Chinese context. This structure of decision-making embraces personnel decisions (e.g., selecting staff members, evaluating teacher performance), staff development decisions (e.g., evaluating staff development needs, designing staff development programs), curricular and instructional decisions (e.g., developing curriculum, choosing instructional materials), and general administrative decisions (e.g., determining budget, setting staff work schedules).

2.2 Theoretical perspective: parallel leadership

The notion of parallel leadership, proposed by Crowther, Ferguson, and Ham (2009) from Australia, is of particular interest to the concerns of this research into how teacher leaders participate in school-based decision-making during unprecedented education reform in China. Whilst related to notions of shared or distributed leadership, parallel leadership is distinct in that it proposes that while the leadership of principals and teachers varies in method and form, it is similar in significance. Moreover, according to Crowther et al. (2009), parallel leadership includes three unique characteristics, namely mutual trust, shared purpose, and allowance for individual expression. In this context, mutual trust embodies values such as respect, nurturing and care. Other researchers have referred to this as relational trust where an environment is created in which "individuals share a moral commitment to act in the interests of the collectivity, and this ethical basis for individual action constitutes a moral resource that the institution can draw on to initiate and sustain change" (Bryk & Schneider cited in Fleming & Leo, 2000, p. 4). Ghamrawi (2011) argues that the development of trust is highly significant to schools working for change and that building confidence and connectedness in teachers is important for this process.

The second characteristic of parallel leadership articulated by Crowther and his colleagues is 'shared purpose', which encapsulates the alignment between what is stated and what is enacted. Researchers investigating this characteristic in leadership studies look for the convergence when principals and teacher leaders enact their leadership at different levels and in different degrees to achieve common stated goal. Some researchers refer to this as a form of collaboration that over time becomes part of a school's leadership culture. According to Cowan (2006), this notion of collaboration "fosters a clear sense of purpose and helps to define roles and responsibilities" (p. 602).

Allowance for individual expression, the third characteristic of Crowther et al.'s (2009) notion of parallel leadership, refers to principal-teacher leadership relationships that enable individualism and conviction. Principals and teacher leaders displaying this quality of parallel leadership recognise their individuality and autonomy and interact in a collaborative style. Crowther et al. (2009) also argue that allowance for individual expression is most effective in enacting leadership for school reform. For example, the researchers noted in their case studies that two key leaders had strong personal belief and self-confidence, as well as high ability to adapt to the values and environments of others.

3. Research method

Qualitative methods were adopted to explore teacher leaders' thoughts and beliefs about their participation in school-based decision-making. Qualitative research focuses on participants' views (Merriam, 2002) so that this study aims to understand teacher leaders' experiences in school-based decision-making and how they make sense of them. In this study, teacher leaders were targeted as formal teacher leaders, that is teachers with officially designated positions within the school hierarchy, such as director of moral education, director of teaching affairs in Chinese schools. Stratified purposeful sampling (Gall et al., 2007) was utilised to invite ten teacher leaders from ten public primary schools located in the middle (Z city) and east (W city) of Shandong province, China. The schools ranged from 860 students to 1800 students in size. One teacher leader was chosen in each school depending on varying characteristics (e.g., gender, positions, years of service). The details of ten teacher leaders are displayed in Table 1.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used and the interview strategy addressed the ‘what’ questions regarding teacher leaders’ perceptions of their leadership role in school-based decision-making. The interview questions employed in the interviewing process for this study were developed with reference to the findings of the literature review. One example of research questions is “How do you perceive teacher leaders participating in personnel decision-making?” Although the interview schedule and questions were redesigned by the researcher, the participants were given freedom to express their opinions and feelings without constraint from researchers’ viewpoints and previous research results. Each interview took between 45–105 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the first author in Chinese and were audio-taped and transcribed. Documents, particularly the School Annual Reports, were collected to complement and triangulate the interviews. Each of the teacher leaders and documents (i.e., the Annual Reports) was assigned a designation (e.g., T01...T10; AR01...AR10).

Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the interview data in this research (Howitt & Cramer, 2014). The coding process followed Creswell and Guetterman’s (2019) model of qualitative data analysis to generate themes which are the keys to identify teacher leaders’ participation in decision-making. The ten teacher leaders’ interview transcripts and documents were first read through several times to gain a general sense about the data. Following this, transcripts and documents were broken into segments and each segment was labelled with a code word. After coding all the data, all codes were grouped with similar code words to eliminate overlap and redundancy among codes. This led to fewer and broader themes in this research, such as ‘personnel decisions’, ‘staff development decisions’.

4. Findings

4.1 The way of teacher leaders’ participation in decision-making

All of the teacher leaders stressed that they contributed to important decisions within their schools. They acknowledged their participation in decision-making was valued by school principals whose energy and time was limited due to many other commitments. These teacher leaders pointed out that their respective principals provided them with opportunities to engage in a range of decisions impacting upon different aspects of the schools’ operations. For example, one experienced teacher leader (the Director of Teaching Affairs) provided the following comment,

In my school, the principal empowered teacher leaders to undertake more tasks and improve abilities in the process. For instance, as the principal is very busy and cannot cover things comprehensively enough, we are required to supplement and improve our principal’s ideas in school meetings. (T06)

The ten teacher leaders stated that all major school-based decisions were discussed during school meetings, particularly the regular weekly school leadership team meeting chaired by the school principal. At these meetings, the principal usually leads the agenda by proposing an idea or theme for discussion and teacher leaders are expected to provide feedback on these proposals. Teacher leaders noted that they considered carefully how to develop a detailed plan in their different working areas, such as teaching affairs and moral education, so that it will be rigorous and effective. To ensure this, teacher leaders sought guidance from their principals as well as input from other teacher leaders. The outcomes of weekly meetings include, for example, preliminary drafts of school policies, such as a school activity planning document. An experienced teacher leader (the Director of Teaching Affairs) summarised her school-based work in decision-making,

The principal first put forward his idea and then each teacher leader was expected to express views to make a precise draft and further revision. After that, teacher leaders divided the work to make it process smoothly. (T07)

The interviewed teacher leaders indicated that it was their responsibility to hold subsequent meetings with all teachers in the school to discuss the preliminary plan and include teachers’ comments and suggestions. A newly appointed teacher leader (the Director of Teaching Affairs) reflected “*it was important to include fellow teachers’ reflections on the plan in order to achieve the best possible result*” (T02). When the principal approved the final version of the plan, all teacher leaders were then required to indicate how this would be implemented in stages. Teacher leaders unanimously commented on the value and significance of this kind of decision-making, and indicated that it provided opportunities to fully exercise everyone’s potential to contribute to decision-making.

4.2 The fields of teacher leaders' participation in decision-making

In this research, six different kinds of school-based decision-making were employed by teacher leaders and these embrace decisions about personnel, staff development, school-based curricular and instruction, general administration, the development of a school vision and strategic plans, and a school culture. Each of them is now discussed.

4.2.1 Personnel decisions

Teacher leaders indicated that decisions about appointing new teachers to a school were outside the realm of Chinese primary principals and teacher leaders. Currently in China, Education Bureaus in each district appoint staff. Accordingly, District Education Bureaus recruit and assign new teachers to satisfy the staffing requirements of each primary school in the district every year. This process contrasts with staffing processes in some Western nations, for as Barth (2001) suggest, teacher leaders in some countries are responsible for selecting staff members, such as new teachers and new administrators, and this is viewed as a significant aspect of teacher leadership. It must be noted that teacher leaders in China are constrained from acting in this role given the official processes for staffing schools.

However, once teachers were appointed to the Chinese school, teacher leaders, in consultation with the principal, were able to make some decisions regarding the work duties that teachers would undertake. For example, a very experienced teacher leader (the Director of Teaching Affairs) summarised, *“at the beginning of the first semester each year, we teacher leaders discussed with principals how to assign new teachers to different job positions”* (T04). All teacher leaders stated that at first teachers were allowed to apply for their preferred job positions in any grade and subject consistent with their working capability. Based on the quality of teachers' applications, the principal, vice-principals, and teacher leaders discussed and then together decided which teacher was qualified to teach a subject or act as a form teacher. These teacher leaders asserted that this democratic process met teachers' needs and would be of benefit to teachers' future career development. This process of decision-making also reflects Sheppard's (2020) findings that teacher leadership is exemplified via their active participation in school decision-making.

4.2.2 Staff development decisions

All of the teacher leaders claimed that they helped principals to design professional development programs for staff in their schools, such as school-based training and external training. This finding is consistent with the research which emphasises that teacher leaders are largely involved in deciding staff development activities or programs (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Sarafidou & Chatziioannidis, 2013). These teacher leaders indicated that decisions based on professional development were first discussed and then made through the school leadership team meetings. During this process, the principal oversaw and maintained the strategic direction of school programs, while the teacher leaders and vice-principals were empowered to design specific professional development programs. The nature of this iterative decision-making between the school principal and their designated teacher leaders is highly significant in terms of understanding the ways in which their roles and interactions are evolving during this period of education reform in China.

With reference to the design of professional development programs for staff, following the endorsement of the school principal, teacher leaders sought the input and advice of other teachers. These teacher leaders agreed this was an effective way to plan and prepare programs tailored to both development of the school and the needs of teachers. One teacher leader (the Director of Teaching Affairs) with years of experience expressed her views on this process, *“we never carried out a new professional development program immediately until we discussed it and pooled the wisdom of the masses [other teachers]. This way helped me to progress the program smoothly”* (T08). Every teacher leader in the interviews emphasised that their work involved preparing teachers' learning opportunities. They noted that in each semester, all of the members of the leadership team discussed the development of professional development programs on the specific topics that teachers indicated they wished to learn more about. With reference to one semester program, a new teacher leader (the Director of Teaching Affairs) observed *“I and the vice principal developed a program to improve teachers' abilities on different levels with the support of excellent teachers in the school”* (T03). This was also verified in the School Annual Report (AR03) which list several forms of teacher professional development programs, such as internal training, external training, and constant reading.

4.2.3 School-based curricular and instructional decisions

Teacher leaders in the interviews indicated that prior to the current education reforms, schools in China were given only limited opportunities to negotiate the curriculum and design special classes for students. They emphasised that as China had a highly centralised system of education, most of the work of teachers was prescribed by the government and curriculum was standardised before the current education reform. For example, one teacher leader with long working experience as the Director of Teaching Affairs specified that “*curriculum programs, textbooks, and the number of lessons for each subject, were all prescribed by the Ministry of Education or local Education Bureau*” (T04). However, since the *Guidelines on the Curriculum Reform of Basic Education (Trial version)* were issued by the Ministry of Education in 2001, the power of curriculum management has been distributed from the central level to three levels in terms of state, locality, and school. Therefore, the participating teacher leaders stated that they were provided with full responsibility to develop courses derived from school-based curriculum which was recognised as an effective way to foster the all-round development of students. In broad terms, the interviews indicated that teacher leaders identified three factors influencing the nature of their school-based decision-making in curriculum development. These are the expertise of the school staff including principals, teacher leaders and teachers, the nature of the school’s specific features, and finally, the school’s vision. This focus on school-based curriculum development reflects global trends in education reform, as teacher leaders in Western countries are also increasingly engaged in leading curriculum change (Woodhouse & Pedder, 2017) and deciding upon curriculum development and instructional materials selection (Smith et al. 2017).

These teacher leaders also highlighted the importance of monitoring the classroom instruction in order to enhance their school-based curriculum development. For example, data from interviews and School Annual Reports in all ten schools revealed that one lesson was set aside per week in the school curriculum to develop students’ broader interests such as dancing, singing, and drawing. Teacher leaders indicated that they monitored the effectiveness of these classes in order to ensure the implementation of a school-based curriculum that met a wide range of student needs. This strategy is indicative of one of the ways in which schools are attempting to foster a more holistic approach to the education of children in the primary years of schooling, as required by the current reforms. With specific reference to strategies used to monitor staff instructional performance, teacher leaders explained that principals, teacher leaders, and other leaders in charge of different subjects attended different teachers’ classes, commented on their performance, and provided feedback for their improvement. One teacher leader who had been appointed as the Director of Teaching Affairs for nearly ten years exemplified the nature of school-based curriculum development in her school in terms of the following:

We have developed more than 30 school-based programs in our school to target the needs of different students. Students from the same grade are organised to participate in their interested classes together. Such as dancing class, aerobics class, chess class, musical instrument playing class. Students in these classes can do what they really like and learn from each other in order to reach the goal of making all students successful with difference. School leaders [principals and teacher leaders] also regularly monitor the classrooms to improve teaching quality. (T04)

4.2.4 General administrative decisions

All of the teacher leaders indicated that they participated in some general administrative decisions in schools. They detailed various strategies that were employed at the beginning of each semester, for example, the Directors of Teaching Affairs indicated they “*developed a curriculum schedule*” (T04), “*guided teachers to develop teaching programs*” (T05), “*planned the teaching calendar according to the duration of each semester*” (T06), and “*arranged leaders of teaching and research groups to help teachers to plan teaching syllabus throughout the semester*” (T08). These findings on teacher leaders’ participation in general administrative decisions is also reflected in the research on this aspect of teacher leadership in Western schools (Smylie, 1992).

It is worth noting that whilst teacher leaders in Western contexts were entitled to determine school budgets (Sebastian et al., 2017), the teacher leaders in this study, however, indicated that they did not have responsibility for school finance management. Schools in China follow the central policy established by the Principal Responsibility System and this, together with the influence of the Chinese traditional hierarchical system, means that the school-based financial power is always controlled by principals as they hold highest level of authority in schools.

4.2.5 School vision decisions

Most teacher leaders (eight of ten) indicated they were involved in the process of developing their school's vision and plan. China's push for education reform, notably through the *Decisions on Deepening Education Reform and Holistically Implementing Quality Education*, emphasises the development of a school's 'vision' that encompasses overarching aspiration goals and school development planning. Teacher leaders' perceptions as reported in interviews indicated that principals gradually accepted their insights and contributions to the discussion on vision decisions for their schools. Accordingly, teacher leaders reflected that they did have the opportunity to contribute to the school strategic vision, school development plans (such as the annual school development plan, three-year or five-year school development plan), and personal development plans for themselves and other teachers.

The interviewees indicated that the process of planning a school vision involved various stages. First, principals collected their ideas and suggestions and presented these in the school planning meeting to discuss a draft of vision and plan. Second, teacher leaders prepared the final document based on principals' guidance. Significantly, four teacher leaders noted their responsibility for developing school plans, based on their initiative, instead of waiting for a principal's initiative or directive. One experienced teacher leader (the Director of Moral Education) explained the process of decision-making about the school's vision as follows: "*When we made the annual school plan, first the principal required us to write up ideas related to respective working area. Then a plan was integrated and revised based on the exchange of ideas and other leaders' suggestions.*" (T01) A School Annual Report (AR07) also provided evidence that the school development plan was built and carried out in their school. Eight of the teacher leaders noted that not only did they participate in planning the strategic school vision and school development plan, but they also developed an individual development plan and assisted teachers to develop their own long-term and short-term professional development plans. A new teacher leader (the Director of Moral Education) observed "*During this process, teachers were required to analyse their own conditions and characteristics for well designing suitable development plan*" (T10). Similarly, in one's School Annual Report (AR01), it stated that teachers' individual development plans were formulated in keeping with the school's vision and development plans.

4.2.6 School culture decisions

Half of the teacher leaders (five of ten) in the study emphasised their vital role in developing their school's culture. The significance of developing a positive school culture was also reported in five School Annual Reports (AR01, AR04, AR05, AR08, and AR09). As the *Decisions on Deepening Education Reform and Holistically Implementing Quality Education* was jointly promulgated by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council, the importance of culture has been gradually highlighted during this current period of education reform. These teacher leaders reported that in order to establish a meaningful and unique school culture their principals utilised the strategy of seeking opinions and views from the school community in order to shape particular aspects of the culture. Concomitantly, teacher leaders were involved in discussions with their principals in the development of a school culture. The interviews revealed that development of a school's culture in China incorporated a wide range of facets of school life which can broadly be classified into three categories: spiritual culture, material culture, and system culture. A spiritual culture incorporates the development of particular values across the school community such as moral values including honesty, kindness, obedience, and a team spirit. The material culture of a school refers to the visible and tangible features of the school such as buildings, school sculptures, and materials displayed on walls and other distinguishing physical features of the school. A school's system culture relates to the policies and rules regulating student and staff behaviour.

Teacher leaders stressed that the formation of the spiritual, material, and system culture in Chinese schools was now regarded as a democratic process, which involved teacher leaders contributing their ideas and insights. Analysis of the interview data indicated that teacher leaders had the opportunity to discuss their suggestions and ideas with their fellow leaders, and to assist principals in integrating a range of ideas about shaping the school's culture. The principals therefore considered a wide range of teacher viewpoints during the decision-making processes for the construction of school culture, and the teacher leaders indicated that this process also incorporated the views of the majority of teachers in schools. One new teacher leader (the Director of Teaching Affairs) elaborated upon her impact in creating a school's culture,

Recently, school culture is being constructed in my school, which is considered as a critical step in school development. Teacher leaders played a significant role in this process. In order to establish a high-quality school culture, I read a lot of books, shared good ideas with other leaders, and provided useful suggestions to push the work progress effectively. (T09)

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this study, participation in school-based decision-making was identified as an important teacher leadership role. As the importance of teacher leaders and the workload of the principal have been increased, teacher leaders have become empowered to engage in a range of decision-making activities regarding nearly all working areas in the school. Six different forms of participation in decision-making were identified in the interviews with teacher leaders and School Annual Reports. These findings echo Smylie's (1992) leadership classification which includes personnel decisions, staff development decisions, school-based curricular and instructional decisions, and general administrative decisions. Notably, two new areas of decision-making emerged from the data, namely school vision decisions, school culture decisions. These findings indicated that teacher leaders in these primary schools were now involved in decision-making, in conjunction with their principals, which concerned the nature of the school's philosophy. For example, teacher leaders spoke at length about their input into decisions that affected the nature of a school's vision and the development of a school culture. It is evident that most types of decision-making identified in this study are consistent with the findings of other researchers (i.e., Barth, 2001; Smylie, 1992).

As have been seen, teacher leaders' perceptions about this sort of decision-making provide insights into the ways in which the current period of education reform in China is impacting upon school-based decision-making. Under the school-based management agenda of the current education reforms, teacher leaders have been empowered to share decision-making with the principals in their schools. It is noteworthy that the current agenda for curriculum reform emphasises the development of school-based curriculum in order to enrich the teaching and delivery of balanced curriculum together with appropriate resources for students. As teacher leaders are regarded as the experts in teaching and learning in their schools, they have been given increased opportunities to demonstrate their leadership in developing school-based curriculum and in choosing relevant text books and other curriculum resources. Moreover, teacher leaders were experiencing more opportunities to determine the nature of school-based strategies to foster and develop teachers' capacities to teach and plan effectively. Teachers' professional development has been considerably strengthened in the context of this education reform in order to achieve the goal of students' all-round development. Most significantly, teacher leaders' involvement in decisions about the development of a school's vision together with the development of the school's culture have emerged as particularly important elements in this investigation of the perceptions of teacher leaders regarding their role under current education reforms in China. Teacher leaders' increased contributions to decisions based on vision and culture reflected a further example of how teacher leaders were engaged to participate in democratic processes in school development planning.

Furthermore, as principals used their authority to provide increased opportunities for teacher leaders to make decisions, a form of 'parallel leadership' (Crowther et al., 2009) was emerging. That is, teacher leaders were closely aligning their working goals in conjunction with the decision-making of their principals and working at a different level to achieve the goals identified in the weekly school leadership team meetings. This alignment between the principal and teacher leaders in decision-making is indicative of two characteristics of parallel leadership, including the mutual trust which facilitates the effective implementation of school-based decision and the shared purpose which leads to same outcomes for the school. Following this view, it is necessary for principals to establish a trusting relationship with teacher leaders before distributing leadership and cultivating teacher leaders in schools, as trust is an essential strategy for teacher leaders to follow and support principals' work. To a certain extent, the promotion of trust between principals and teacher leaders is reliant upon principals' communicative and supportive behaviours towards teacher leaders (Szeto & Cheng, 2018). Meanwhile, convergence occurs when principals and teacher leaders enact their leadership at different levels and in different degrees to achieve a common stated goal. Cowan (2006) refers to this as a type of collaboration in which a sense of purpose is established which also assists in defining leadership roles and responsibilities.

Due to the influence of traditional Chinese culture that people are expected to respect and obey those who hold higher status and those people who are authority figures (Dimmock & Walker, 2005), a high degree of individual expression (the third characteristic of parallel leadership) was not found in teacher leaders' interviews. It should be noted that Goh (2009) argues that there are cultural constraints on the application of parallel leadership in the Singaporean context. This might well be the case in China also, because they share the Confucius or Asian culture. As Andrews et al. (2004) indicate, parallel leadership encourages school leaders to express their individual ideas freely in the working interaction. It is in keeping with the Australian ethos that highlights people's freedom of expression as being themselves (Samovar & Potter, 1991), and the respect for equality and fairness (Wierzbicka, 1997). However, different views from the Asian perspective reveal that collectivist societies, such as Singapore and China, emphasise the values of harmony, modesty, fulfilment of others' needs, and equal distribution of reward (Triandis, 1990). Therefore, most principals and teachers are reluctant to show a high degree of individual expression or express their opinions with great caution in China.

Nevertheless, the notion of parallel leadership is particularly useful for purposes of this paper as it accommodates the different decision-making roles that principal and teacher leaders have in schools to achieve the same goals. Cultural differences have been considered when parallel leadership is transferred from Australia to China. This view of leadership also allows for the fact that different individual leaders will give each parallel leadership team a distinctive quality.

Findings of this research have important implications for practitioners (both principals and teacher leaders) in China to reflect on their beliefs and practices. On the one hand, principals are supposed to recognise the valuable effects of teacher leaders in school-based decision-making. Principals and teacher leaders should be able to find out effective ways to make decisions together, to support each other with shared purpose, and to establish a trusted and democracy working environment. On the other hand, it is essential to enhance the professional development of principals and teacher leaders to adapt to the changing and complex policy, curriculum, and pedagogical environment. The promotion of their professional capabilities is conducive to the leading role of principals and the supporting role of teacher leaders so as to achieve reasonable outcomes of decision-making.

There are two main limitations that need to be acknowledged in this research. The first limitation refers to the reliability of interview data. Given the possible consequence of Confucian respect for authority and hierarchy as well as teacher leaders' worry of their comments travelling back to principals, participants may have steered their responses to the more positive aspects of leadership rather than the more contentious. Second, it is not possible to generalise the results of this study due to the small sample population of participants (i.e., ten teacher leaders) and research sites. Further large-scale studies are expected to be conducted in other Chinese provinces.

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Table 1 Details of the interviewees

Designation	Gender	City	School	Position	Years in Similar Positions	Interview Duration
T01	Female	City W	C school	Director of moral education	6.5 years	1 hours 35 minutes
T02	Female	City W	G school	Director of teaching affairs	1.5 years	1 hours 15 minutes
T03	Female	City W	N school	Director of teaching affairs	1.5 years	1 hours 20 minutes
T04	Female	City W	T school	Director of teaching affairs	9.5 years	45 minutes
T05	Female	City W	E school	Director of teaching affairs	2.5 years	45 minutes
T06	Male	City Z	J school	Director of teaching affairs	7.5 years	1 hours 45 minutes
T07	Female	City Z	X school	Director of teaching affairs	5.5 years	1 hours 30 minutes
T08	Female	City Z	R school	Director of teaching affairs	10.5 years	1 hours 10 minutes
T09	Male	City Z	P school	Director of teaching affairs	3.5 years	45 minutes
T10	Female	City Z	W school	Director of moral education	2.5 years	1 hour