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The Changing Landscape of Leadership in Early Childhood Education in China

Dora Ho, Mo Wang and Pan He

Abstract

This chapter aims to offer a theoretical discussion on the changing landscape of leadership and explores the emerging practice of teacher leadership in ECE in China. In 2010, the central government of China introduced several waves of policies relating to teacher professional development to improve and promote the quality of ECE. The global discourses mainly developed in the West have indicated that school leadership plays an important role in promoting teachers' professional development and the quality of education. These discourses have influenced the agenda for educational reform in China as reflected in the recent strategies formulated for the development of school leadership in ECE. Historically, ECE teachers have been viewed as babysitters rather than as educators, and preschool principals have been considered policy implementers and school managers rather than school leaders of innovation and change. This chapter discusses the changing landscape of school leadership in China's ECE and how it is influenced by a hierarchical culture. It is argued that the practices of school leadership have been largely centralised in the hands of preschool principals, alongside of which there has been an emergence of teacher leadership co-exercised with principalship in home-school networks and teaching research groups.

Keywords: China, early childhood education, education policy, leadership, quality education

1. Introduction

Research on the relationship between the quality of early childhood education (ECE) and child outcomes has shown that government policy and management have been important influencing factors [1]. Government support is necessary to ensure high-quality education for young children [2, 3]. The positive impacts arising from government support for better student outcomes include the acquisition of pre-literacy skills [4], improved socio-emotionality [5], academic performance, language skills and classroom behaviour [3]. High-quality ECE has also been proven to benefit the family and society as a whole. In terms of family development, high-quality ECE can raise female employment rates. It can also promote positive parenthood and relieve mothers' stress. In terms of social capital development, the results of the Perry Preschool Project indicated that the rate of return on investment for ECE is 1:7.16 by the time a child reaches 27 years of age [6]. With growing

awareness of ECE's importance, the Chinese central government has focused on its development in the past decade [7]. The year 2010 is considered the 'New Spring Time' of ECE. The State Council issued two policy documents: *Compendium for China's Mid- and Long-Term Education Development (2010–2020)* and *State Council's Several Suggestions Regarding Developing ECE*, both addressing ECE as the foundation of basic education. In these two documents, the central government set out its plans to achieve universal ECE by 2020. As a result, there has been a rapid increase in the number of students enrolled in ECE. In 2009, 51% of children of preschool age were enrolled in ECE. This increased to 80% in 2017. As a result of concern over the rapidly growing number of pre-schoolers, researchers have urged the central government to pay attention to the impact of the implementation of universal ECE on the overall quality of ECE [8, 9]. Since 2010, most local governments have initiated comprehensive reforms for ECE by establishing political authorities, increasing financial input, and supporting teacher training programmes [10]. Among these reforms, the teacher professional development policy has been widely considered to be the key factor in promoting the quality of ECE [11]. Under the policy, teachers are regarded as catalysts for educational reform [12] and the guardians of sustainable development in schools [13]. In particular, the notion of teacher leadership in promoting teachers' professional development has received considerable attention [14–19]. However, under the influence of a hierarchical culture in China, ECE leadership is largely centralised in the hands of preschool principals. There have thus been questions about how teachers can take on leadership roles in school change and development as advocated by the central government. This chapter aims to offer a theoretical discussion on the changing landscape of leadership and explores the emerging practice of teacher leadership in ECE in China.

2. Early childhood education in China

Since the late 1970s, China has engaged in an open-door policy to reform its economic system. The central government has regarded education as a force driving China to prosper, enhancing its national strength. As a result, ECE has been one of the priorities of the reform agenda. ECE in China broadly refers to the care and education of children from birth to 6 years old [20]. Preschool refers to ECE institutions that are run by different service providers. There are two main types of preschool: government and non-government organisations. In terms of school governance, all preschools in China are macro-controlled by the central government and micro-regulated by the local government of each province.

2.1 The governance of ECE

In 1978, the central government established the Department of ECE and Special Education in the General Education Division [21], signifying the beginning of the comprehensive reform of ECE. In 1979, the State Council established the 'Leading Children's Caring Work Team ECE', consisting of teams from 13 departments, including the Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the Federation of Trade Unions [22]. Local governments, including provincial governments, city governments and the governments of the autonomous regions, followed the policy of the central government and set up ECE departments to govern and lead local preschools. In the same year, the MOE (1979) published *Urban Preschool Work Regulations* to guide local governments' work on ECE. In 1985, a policy document, *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of Education System* was issued [23]. In the

document, the central government stated that authority and power had been given to local governments to regulate ECE in their own provinces and it gave autonomy to preschool principals for school-based management and innovation. To decentralise school governance, the central government issued a series of policy documents to provide guidance for ECE institutions. These policy documents covered areas such as the distribution of autonomy to principals, the development agendas for ECE, improvement of teachers' professional development and financial subsidies to preschools and children.

Since 1989, the management system of Chinese preschools has fallen under the domain of the *Preschool Director's Responsibility* [24]. Under this system, preschool principals are responsible for handling all vital concerns and decisions, such as the school's mission, training schemes and teacher employment; teachers rarely take on leadership roles. In China, the organisational structure of a preschool is generally hierarchical [25]. Liu described the typical organisational structure in China [26] (see **Figure 1**).

In general, the principal has the central administrative and managerial power to operate the preschool. The principal is the legal representative of the preschool and the chief administrative officer, empowered by law to exercise decision-making, administrative command, human resource management and financial management [27]. Since 1989, the principal's responsibilities have changed from passively managing the preschool to actively directing it. Preschools have shifted from being externally controlled by the central and local governments to being internally controlled by the principal. Autonomy has been given to the principals for school-based management, and they are also accountable for the quality of the service provision. As a result, there has been a quest by principals to learn how to exercise their power and authority to lead daily operations within a decentralised system.

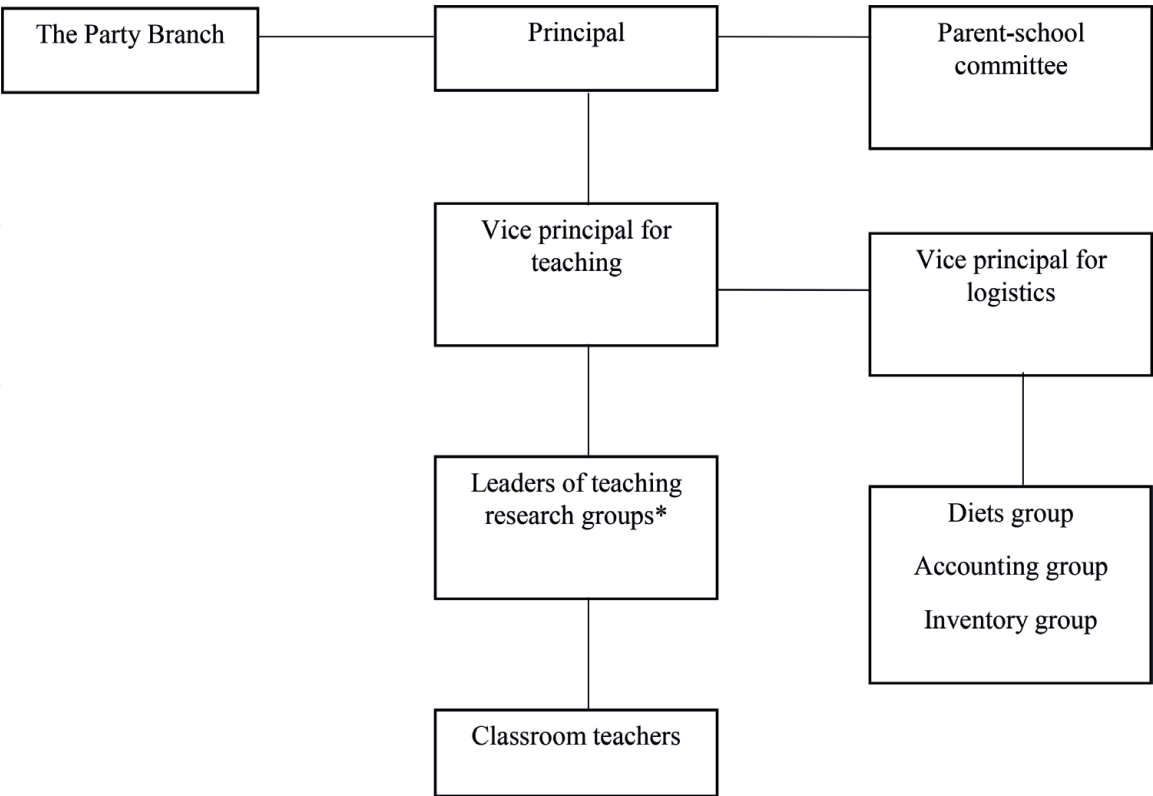


Figure 1. The typical organisational structure of a preschool in China (Liu, 2015; [26]). (* A teaching research group (TRG) is a type of a professional learning community in a preschool that provides a platform for teachers to work together on curriculum innovation and pedagogy.

2.2 Teacher professional development policy

Before 1976, only one institution offered teacher education programmes: Nanjing Normal College (renamed Nanjing Normal University). In 1978, the MOE published the *Opinions on Strengthening and Developing Teacher Education* to require teacher education colleges and universities to establish ECE departments and increase their student intake. In 1980, the MOE issued two policy documents, the *Opinions on Operating Secondary Normal Education* and the *Teaching Plans of Early Childhood Normal Education*. These reiterated the importance of professional education for preschool teachers. As a result, the number of teacher education institutions providing preschool teacher education programmes increased from 1 in 1978 to 21 in 1980. In 1982, the State Council presented the *Government Work Report* to the National People's Congress (NPC), highlighting the importance of ECE development as the top priority. Improving the quality of preschool teacher education programmes offered by those institutions was identified as a strategy for developing ECE. In 1988, the MOE issued the *Opinions on the Further Development of Programmes of Preschool Teachers in Vocational Secondary Schools*. In this document, the government highlighted the importance of teacher education and professional development and stipulated the eligibility requirements for offering preschool teacher training programmes, the specifications for programme structure and content and student enrolment. In 1995, the MOE issued the *Teaching Project for Three-year Programme of Secondary Preschool Teacher Normal Education*. In this document, the government provided the objectives and curriculum models for preschool teacher education. The next year, the MOE (1996) issued *Some Opinions on the Reform and Development of Teacher Education* [28]. In 2003, the State Council issued *Guides of the Reform and Development of Early Childhood Education*. In the latter two documents, the central government stated that preschool teacher education needed to be reformed and suggested that preschool teachers should receive both formal and informal teacher education.

Since 2010, teacher education policies have focused on improving teachers' professional development. Through teacher education, teachers have been equipped with professional knowledge, skills and attitude [29], which has contributed to improving the quality of ECE [30, 31]. There have been three types of training programme: short-term concentrated training, job-transfer training and backbone teacher¹ exchange off-job training. By 2013, a total of 310,000 preschool teachers had participated in these programmes. To further enhance teacher professional development and the quality of ECE, two policy documents, *Preschool Teachers' Professional Standards* (PTPS) and the *Guide for 3–6-Year-Old Children's Learning and Development* (GCLD) were issued by the MOE in 2012. The PTPS highlighted three basic concepts: child-focused teacher ethics, the ability for heavy learning and lifelong learning. There were also three frames of essential content: professional, philosophical and ethical; professional knowledge; and professional competencies. The GCLD aimed to provide preschool teachers with a better understanding of the basic characteristics and milestones of child development. Conforming to the regulations of *The Guidance of ECE (trial version)* issued in 2001, the GCLD divided the content of ECE into five subject areas: health, science, society, language and art. In addition, it provided 87 guidelines on good child-rearing practices for preschool teachers and parents to reference. The GCLD was influenced by Western theories, namely child-centredness, learning through play, school self-evaluation and school-based management. However, these Western theories would have to be

¹ The term 'backbone teachers' refers to those teachers whose performance in teaching and peer professional support is considered excellent in the eyes of other teaching staff.

critically reviewed before they could be successfully adapted to the preschools in China [32–34].

Similarly influenced by Western ideologies on teachers as change agents, developing teacher leadership has recently been recognised as one of the key reform initiatives needed to improve educational quality. In this regard, the MOE issued two policy documents in 2012: *Preschool Teachers' Professional Standards* and *Preschool Job Directive Rules*. The former highlighted four basic concepts for preschool teachers: a morality-first standard, a child-focused approach, an emphasis on teacher competence and the pursuit of lifelong learning. There were also three frames of essential content: professional philosophy and ethics, professional knowledge and professional competencies. The latter addressed the roles of preschool teachers in seven domains: (a) establishing a learning environment, (b) organising and caring for children, (c) support and guidance during play activities, (d) planning and implementation of education activities, (e) evaluation and motivation, (f) communication and collaboration and (g) reflection and development. The *Preschool Job Directive Rules* issued in 2016 highlighted the roles of preschool teachers as follows: (a) providing and implementing an education work plan, (b) establishing the learning environment, (c) guiding and cooperating with childcare workers, (d) keeping in touch with parents, (e) participating in vocational study and research activities on care and education and (f) evaluating the outcomes of child care and education.

The reform initiatives have revealed that although preschool teachers in China have been expected to take on various leadership roles, they have remained confined to classroom teaching. Research has also shown that teachers who assume that leadership roles have a higher level of professionalism are willing to take on roles in promoting curriculum innovation, student learning and organisational development [35]. Therefore, it is imperative that preschool principals empower teachers to take on leadership roles outside the classroom.

2.3 The ECE teaching force

Sustaining ECE in China is dependent on effective management systems, sufficient financial inputs and the quantity and quality of professionally trained teachers [36]. However, there have been issues with the management systems of local governments, including ill-defined functions and responsibilities, mismatched personnel allocation and insufficient financial inputs [37]. In addition, the weak professional identity and the low social status of teachers negatively influence the development of the ECE teaching force in China [38].

Another issue is China's shortage of preschool teachers, which is a major challenge to ECE development. **Figure 2** shows that the number of teachers increased from 1,315,634 in 2011 to 2,432,138 in 2017, and the teacher-child ratio gradually improved from 1:26 to 1:19 (**Figure 3**). Nonetheless, a severe shortage of preschool teachers is predicted over the next few years. According to the *Compendium for China's Mid- and Long-Term Education Development (2010–2020)*, there will be a 75% increase in the number of preschool-aged children by 2020. An additional 155,200 preschool teachers will be required by then [39]. The new challenge is tied to the *Two-child Policy*, implemented in 2016. Couples are now permitted to have more children and are expected to do so. It is projected that such population growth will have an impact on ECE development. For example, the shortage of ECE teachers is predicted to reach 2.4 million by 2020 [40]. There are several reasons for this, including teachers' low wages, low social status and job insecurity [13]. In the past, this has led to a high attrition rate and wastage among preschool teachers in China. For example, in Beijing, one out of three teachers in private preschools resigns each year [41].

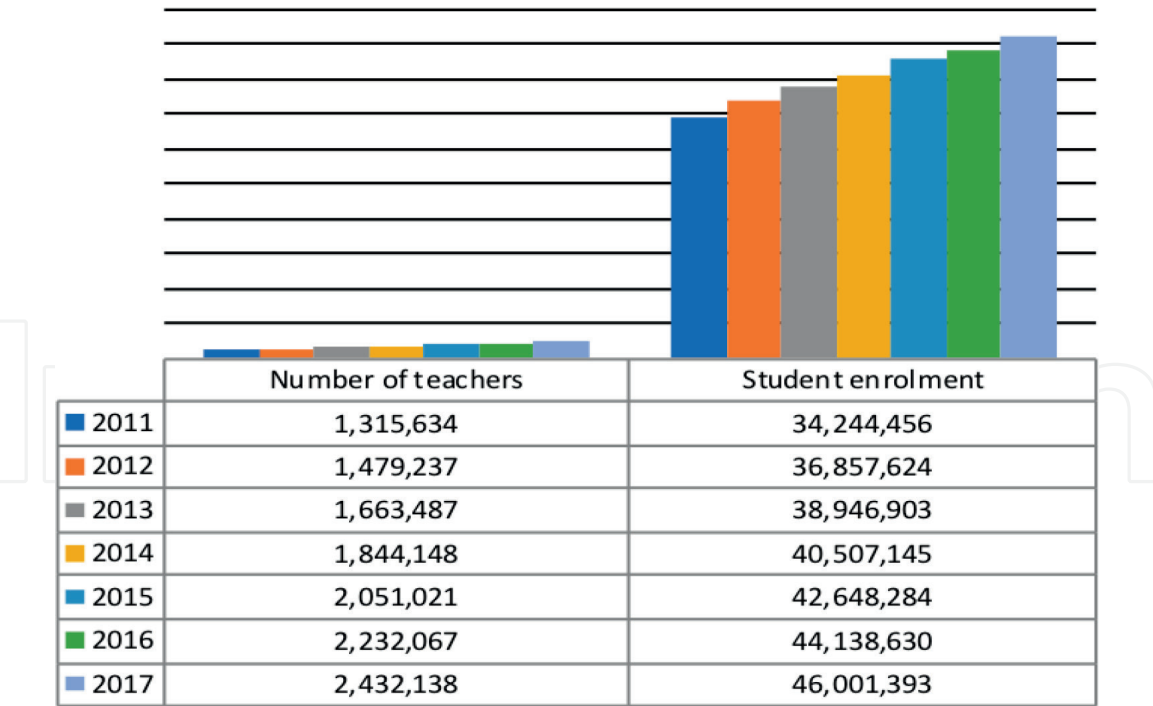


Figure 2.
Number of teachers and student enrolment in 2011–2017.

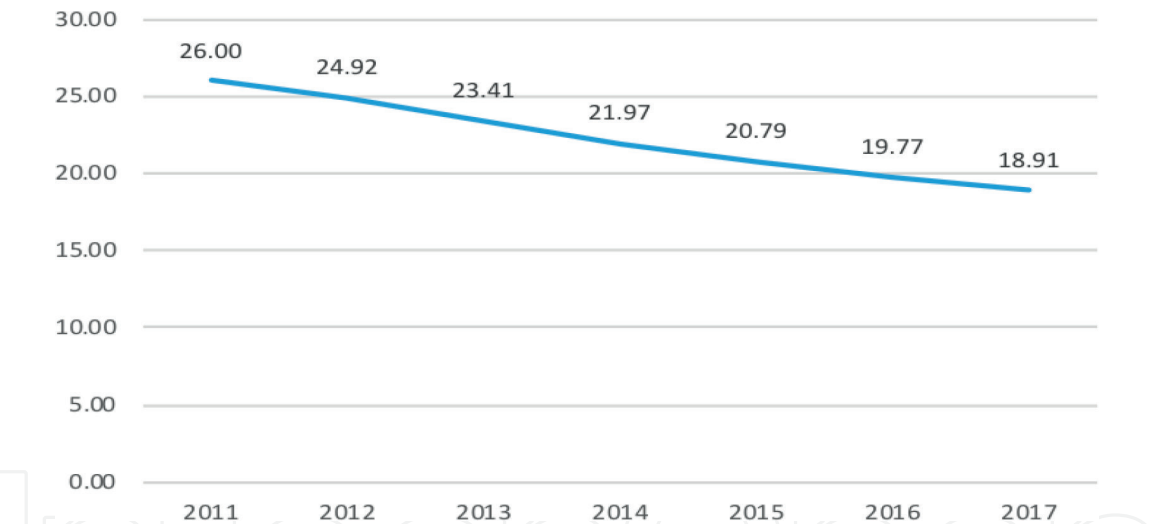


Figure 3.
Preschool teacher-child ratio in 2011–2017.

Due to low professional entry qualifications, preschool teachers’ professional status has not been well recognised in China [42]. As shown in **Figure 4**, the rate of educational attainment (for example, an Associate degree or above) gradually increased from 2011 to 2017, but in 2017, only 21% of preschool teachers had obtained an undergraduate degree or above. This may lead to preschool teachers’ poor self-image and low level of professionalism [42, 43]. Indeed, teachers in Chinese preschools often consider teaching and taking care of children as their sole function. This perception is rooted in the belief that preschool teachers in China are followers who do not take responsibility for anything other than teaching and caring inside the classroom. However, several previous studies have indicated that teachers play a key role as change agents for school development and improvement [32, 44]. Teachers with a strong professional identity perceive themselves to be effective leaders and active participants in decision-making, and *vice versa* [43]. Freidson stated that professionalism enables teachers to cultivate a sense of self-direction, independence and

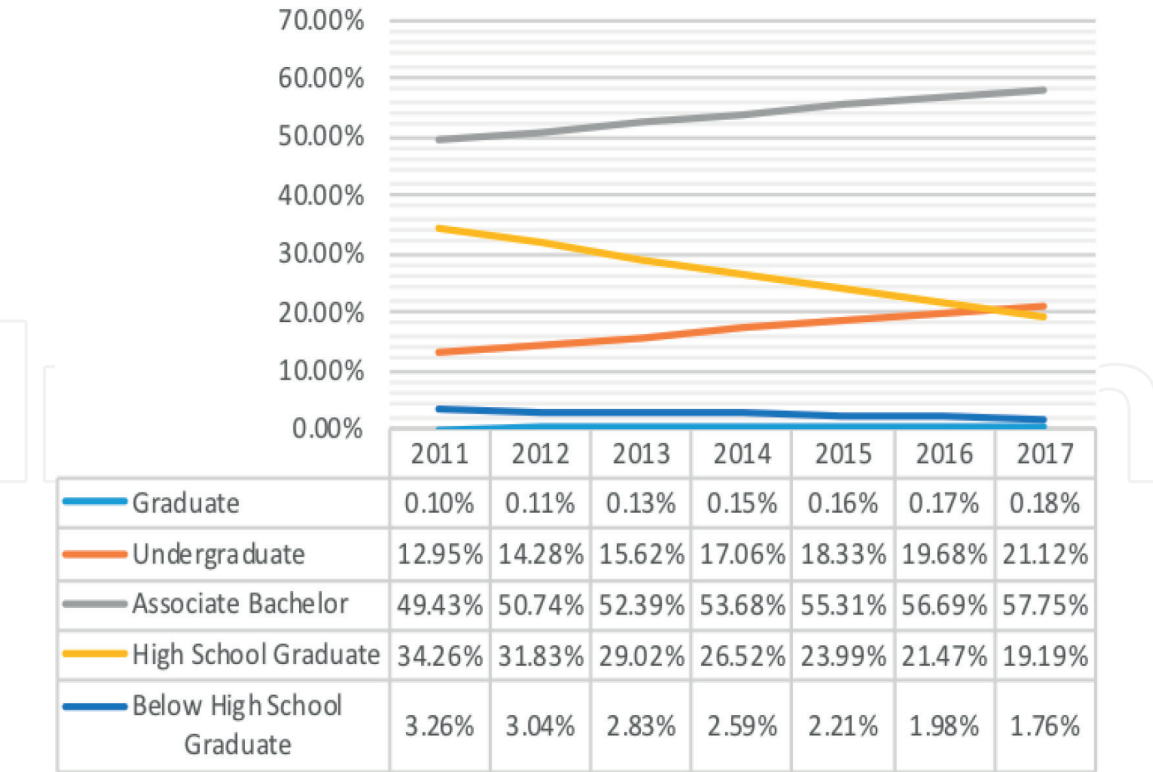


Figure 4.
Educational attainment of ECE teachers in 2011–2017.

autonomy [45]. It is therefore important for the public to openly recognise preschool teachers’ professionalism. This is one of the ways teachers could be influenced to assume leadership roles in school development and improvement.

3. Chinese culture

Fan described culture as ‘the collection of values, beliefs, behaviours, customs and attitudes that distinguish a society’ ([46] p3). Societal culture is a complex and multidimensional concept. It has also been viewed as an important factor influencing leadership practices and how leadership is conceptualised [47].

China is a developing country with 5000 years of history and the largest population in the world. With its long historical development, it is axiomatic that school leadership practices would be affected by Chinese culture. There have been numerous studies on school leadership in the Chinese cultural context. For example, Bush and Qian generalised four types of Chinese culture, representing the different stages of history: traditional culture, socialist culture, enterprise culture and patriarchal culture [48]. Traditional culture is rooted in the pervasive influence of Confucianism for over 2500 years. In the school context, traditional culture is often associated with centralised authority, collectivism and harmony. Socialist culture has become influential since the Chinese Civil War in 1945–1949. This type of culture has politicised the centralised power and authority of school principals in decision-making. Enterprise culture has promoted the importance of marketization in education system since the implementation of Open Door Policy for transforming China’s economy since the late 1970s. Patriarchal culture has influenced how people in Chinese societies understand, perceive and enact the role of men and women in school leadership. In addition, Hofstede identified four dimensions of cultural values: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism and masculinity versus femininity [49]. Some have suggested that Hofstede’s work on individualism versus collectivism and power

distance would have been better defined in terms of loyal involvement and utilitarian involvement, representing varying orientations towards the continuity of group membership, just as conservatism and egalitarian commitment represent different orientations towards the obligations of social relationships [50]. Schwartz undertook detailed work on cultural values, defining six types: conservatism, intellectual and affective autonomy, harmony, egalitarian commitment, mastery and hierarchy [51]. In addition to the dimensions of cultural values mentioned above, Confucianism has commonly been relied on to describe leadership cultures in the Chinese context [32, 52]. Cultural values in China are highly complex. These cultural values are deeply embedded in leadership practices. A plethora of research has focused on school leadership in China. From this, three mainstream Chinese cultural systems have been captured: Confucianism, collectivism and Chinese communism [52]. A study conducted by Ho has found that the leadership practices and collegiality are shaped by the presence of collective, harmonious relationships under the influence of Confucianism [43]. Fu and Tsui depict that 'hard working, devoted, action-oriented, determined, servicing, abide by principles, collectivistic, corruption resistant, democratic, optimistic, relying on followers, self-sacrificing, value driven, and visionary' are unique characteristics of leadership in the Chinese context ([53] p442). These characteristics are perceived as compatible with the communist ideologies. Research on how the moral integrity of school principals is influenced by the Chinese communism has been a focus of educational leadership since the late 1990s [54, 55].

Cultural contexts shape the ways in which leaders enact leadership practices [56]. That is, leadership concepts and behaviours that appear similar can be interpreted differently due to their different socio-cultural contexts [57]. The interpretation of leadership concepts and behaviours in the Chinese context has been influenced by the Chinese culture. Hence, there is a need to understand the practices of school leadership through the lens of the Chinese cultural system rather than solely through Western theoretical perspectives [48].

Since the 1990s, scholars working in the school leadership field have argued that when applying the theories and practices of school leadership across cultures, special attention should be paid to socio-cultural contexts (e.g., [58–60]). Culture influences the thinking and behaviour of various school stakeholders, including students, teachers, principals, administrators, parents and policy makers [59]. However, the recent literature (e.g., [61–63]) has indicated that the cultural factors have not yet been adequately addressed by relevant studies on school leadership [64]. Indeed, school leadership studies conducted in Asia, including China, have been criticised for being full of 'cultural borrowing' [63].

Because leadership is a value-laden concept [65, 66] influenced by social, political, cultural and economic contexts [33, 48], when looking at Chinese schools, it is important to understand the influence of Chinese culture on leadership concepts and behaviours through the lens of cultural values. Numerous studies have attempted to identify the influence of Chinese culture on leadership concepts and practices (e.g., [52, 59]). This must now be extended to include the Chinese educational stakeholders in ECE and how the Chinese culture influences their interpretations of leadership concepts and behaviours.

4. The changing landscape of school leadership

As previously mentioned, since 1989, the management system of preschools in China has fallen under the domain of the *Preschool Director's Responsibility* [24]. Within this domain, preschool principals are responsible for handling all vital concerns and decisions. However, ECE in China has been changing rapidly due to a

number of factors, such as the introduction of universal ECE, changed government policy, increasing student enrolment rates, improved standards regarding teacher qualifications and professional development. In this changing context, the practice of school leadership has been evolving. It has been argued that teacher leadership is a key factor in the success of school change [67, 68]. Teacher leadership in ECE has been emerging in the context of educational reform [69]. Teacher leadership has a close relationship with teachers' professional development [16, 17, 19, 70]. It also leads to higher levels of job satisfaction and teacher retention [71], promotes continuing professional development [72, 73] and drives teachers to exciting endeavours [74]. Hulin and Judge noted that teachers who engage in leading roles have better job satisfaction [75]. This is beneficial to their psychological well-being. Research has found that teachers with greater job satisfaction are more willing to participate in school decision-making [76]. Given that teacher leadership is critical to teachers' job satisfaction and teacher retention, it is important to explore the practices of ECE teacher leadership in China. In this way, a sustainable and high-quality teaching force can be promoted and built. Recent studies on school development have focused on the relationship between teacher leadership and continuing professional development. It has been found that continuing professional development could build a teacher's capacity to lead his or her colleagues to change [19, 77]. This implies that it is important to build teachers' leadership capacity. Through such a process, teachers can develop self-direction, independence and autonomy. To formulate a theoretical framework that can be used in the foreground of research into school leadership in ECE in China, we conceptualise three types of leadership practices: centralised, co-existing and decentralised.

4.1 Centralised leadership

Staff-management has been identified as a key component of school leadership [78]. In ECE in China, it has mainly been the province of preschool principals. They seldom involve their subordinates in staff management. In other words, the exercise of power and authority is largely centralised in the hands of preschool principals and in a form of single leadership.

Under centralised leadership, principals have absolute power and authority over staff management; it is a top-down management approach [79, 80]. This type of leadership practice has been commonly accepted by the subordinates in Chinese preschools who have agreed that 'only the principal has the final say' [69]. In Confucian society, the sovereign-subject relationship required followers to obey their leaders' orders. Based on that tradition, preschool principals in China today are responsible for handling all vital decisions. Teachers rarely assume leadership roles at the organisational level. In this situation, it is common for teachers to perceive themselves as followers and hold passive attitudes towards decision-making in staff management, hesitating to take on leading roles [80].

4.2 Co-existing leadership

In preschool organisational structures, the parent-school committee and party branch are parallel to the principals. By establishing a party branch, the Communist Party ensures its policies are implemented and political education is provided to the faculties and students [81]. Normally, there are two vice principals. One is the leader of the teaching research group (TRG). The other oversees logistics and is the secretary of the party branch [82]. Modelled after the Soviet Union in the 1950s, all schools in China began to establish TRGs as a formal functional group within the organisational structure. The responsibility of the TRGs is to coordinate teachers

so they can implement the educational policies stipulated by local governments, work together on the curriculum and pedagogical innovations and participate in professional development and exchange [83]. Although the central government has defined TRGs as teacher professional learning communities instead of administrative organisations [84], TRGs not only work on teacher professional development and teaching issues, but also address teachers' affairs beyond teaching and learning. For example, they prepare teachers for job promotions, help resolve their personal problems and endeavour to improve their interpersonal skills [85]. To this extent, TRGs partly share the administrative tasks of teacher management [86, 87]. Due to their dual role in leading curriculum development and teacher management, TRGs are able to promote collaborative work among teachers and encourage them to learn from each other, nurturing a democratic, positive, harmonious and open-minded subculture within the group. TRGs harmoniously enact collegiality within the hierarchical and bureaucratic system and provide a countervailing influence to the power of the principals [88].

In ECE, the leaders of TRGs are generally regarded as formal leaders in curriculum development [86]. The roles of TRG leaders in China's preschools vary, depending on their positions within the organisational structure and their responsibilities. A number of studies on TRGS have revealed that their leaders play a key role in facilitating communications between senior leaders and classroom teachers [89–91]. Because they work closely with principals, they are regarded as principals' think tanks and assistants [90]. The leaders of TRGs play multiple roles in school management and leadership. Niu and Liu claimed that TRG leaders act as consultants to principals in school decisions [91]. Further, TRG leaders work as experts on the curriculum, pedagogy and educational research. They are both the coordinators of staff interpersonal relationships and external liaisons. They are managers of school administration and the internal trainers for staff professional development [92]. Shi and Xie found that the roles of TRG leaders had been changing from information conveyers to professional experts, from managers to leaders of learning and research and from teachers to self-reflective practitioners and researchers [93].

Recently, there has been a shift in attention from focusing on the personal traits and characteristics of TRG leaders to emphasising TRG leadership practices. For example, Gu argued that effective TRG leaders should have a sense of risk-taking, an awareness of teamwork and collaboration, an innovative mind-set and a strong commitment and dedication to education quality [94]. Bai asserted that a capable TRG leader is innovative and academically knowledgeable, good at organisational coordination and communication skills and embraced the spirit of teamwork [95]. Wang and Xin concluded that the characteristics of an effective TRG leader can be categorised into three areas [96]:

1. Having high moral standards: clearly know the responsibilities, seek truth from the facts, have integrity in politics; dare to take responsibility, adhere to principles and persist to the bottom line of moral standards; sensibly treat the promotion.
2. Being professional in work: able to lead teaching and research work and be leaders in professional development.
3. Having a clear role identity of a TRG leader and being able to carry out its role and functions.

A study conducted by Guo showed that TRG leaders are good at teaching, communication and self-management. However, they are weak in curriculum planning,

scientific research and coordination [85]. The reason for this is the lack of professional development and empowerment opportunities for TRG leaders.

4.3 Decentralised leadership

In the notion of teacher leadership, the teacher acts as the leader, influencing others to produce better educational practices and student outcomes [97, 98]. In ECE, parents are the key stakeholders. The involvement of parents in home-school committees can be understood as a vehicle for promoting teacher leadership because teachers have to work closely with parents for children's learning and development [99, 100]. As Greenlee argued, teachers are the school personnel who work most closely with parents day-to-day [101]. Teachers are willing to take on a leading role when working with parents for home-school collaboration in order to promote the holistic development of young children.

In China's ECE, the home-school committee is a common form of home-school collaboration. Within the network, the teacher leaders share their professional knowledge and child-rearing methods with parents. In turn, parental involvement plays a key role in school development [102]. Indeed, teacher leaders are expected to assume leadership roles to improve parental involvement [103]. It has been argued that compared with school principals, who are more concerned with administrative duties, classroom teachers have more opportunities to work with parents on the development of preschool children.

A study conducted in China indicated that classroom teachers are given the autonomy to engage in home-school committees, which is recognised as one type of teacher leadership practice [104]. This result reflects the introduction of two national policies, the *Preschool Teachers' Professional Standard* and *Preschool Job Directive Rules*, which have encouraged teachers to become involved in home-school committees and have emphasised that communication with parents is one of the teachers' leadership roles. In this regard, teacher leadership has emerged within China's ECE.

5. Concluding remarks

This chapter aims to offer a theoretical discussion on the changing landscape of leadership and explores the emerging practice of teacher leadership in ECE in China. Since 2010, the Chinese central government has introduced several waves of policies related to teachers' professional development, aimed at improving and promoting the quality of ECE. The global discourses mainly developed in the West have shown that school leadership plays an important role in promoting both teacher professional development and educational quality. These global discourses have influenced the reform agenda of the Chinese central government as reflected in the recent strategies formulated to develop school leadership in ECE. Against this background, the ECE teaching force has been recognised as the key to school improvement and development. Historically, ECE teachers have been viewed as babysitters rather than educators, and principals have been recognised as policy implementers and school managers rather than school leaders of innovation and change. As a result, preschool leadership has been placed as one of the top priorities in the reform agenda of ECE.

As previously discussed, school leadership practices in China's ECE have been influenced by the Chinese hierarchical culture and the management system of *Preschool Director's Responsibility*. To a certain extent, the changing ECE context has indicated that leadership practices are gradually transforming from centralised

to decentralised. In a Chinese hierarchical culture, there are questions about the extent to which principals can delegate power and authority to teachers. It has been argued that preschool principals take control of staff management and rarely distribute power and authority to their subordinates. School principals solely depend on middle-level leaders, or even on themselves. Further, research has indicated that teachers perform teacher leadership practices at the school level based on the premise of principals' power and authority [104]. Therefore, school principals should empower teachers to take on leadership roles at the school level. For example, school principals could empower teachers to provide suggestions on how to improve efficiency in the use of school operating funds, because teachers understand how such expenditures can promote teaching and learning. Doing so contributes to teachers' self-efficacy and morale [105] and flattens the hierarchical structure [106].

To summarise, since the 1970s, the Chinese central government has implemented a comprehensive educational reform to improve various aspects of ECE, such as universal education, school governance, school management, financial resources, teacher education and professional development. Educational reform has been shaping the landscape of school leadership from a centralised to both of a co-existing and a decentralised form. The practice of teacher leadership has been emerging in the area of home-school committees and teaching research groups. This has suggested that the role of ECE in China is changing from babysitting to developmental nurturing. Preschools act as important institutions that help nurture and develop young generations. To conclude, the above discussion has begun to flesh out the fundamental issues of school leadership practices in political and cultural dimensions, providing direction for future leadership inquiry.

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