TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND INNOVATION IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT
China's pursuit of educational modernization requires institutions to translate ambitious national reforms into changes in teaching, professional culture, governance, and student learning. Using a structured conceptual review, this academic article examines transformational leadership as a context-responsive approach for advancing educational reform and innovation across Chinese educational institutions. It synthesizes theory, Chinese and international scholarship, and national policy to clarify how leaders influence change through vision, moral modeling, intellectual stimulation, individualized support, organizational redesign, and collective professional agency. The analysis argues that transformational leadership affects educational outcomes through mediated pathways, including teacher efficacy, commitment, recognition, trust, professional learning communities, teacher leadership, and an organizational climate that supports disciplined experimentation. In China, these mechanisms reflect centralized policy direction, principal and Party leadership arrangements, high power distance, collectivist traditions, examination pressures, regional inequality, and established teaching-research structures. Transformational leadership must therefore be culturally interpreted rather than mechanically imported. Based on the synthesis, it proposes the REFORM Leadership Framework: Reframe policy as shared educational purpose, Empower people and distributed expertise, Foster trust, learning, and professional agency, Organize disciplined innovation and evidence, Redesign structures and resources, and Monitor equity, learning, and sustainable scaling. The framework positions educational leaders as architects of collective capacity who connect national direction with local knowledge. Applied with ethical judgment and instructional focus, transformational leadership can help Chinese educational institutions convert reform mandates into equitable, sustainable, and learning-centered innovation.
Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Educational Reform, Educational Innovation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational reform in China is both a national project and an institutional process. The 2024-2035 blueprint for building a strong education system integrates education, science, technology, and talent development while emphasizing moral education, equity, innovation, and high-quality construction (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2025), and the 2022 compulsory education curriculum reform requires interdisciplinary learning, stronger competency expectations, and improved teaching and evaluation guidance (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Burns (1978) distinguished transforming leadership from exchange-based leadership by emphasizing elevated motivation and moral purpose. School leadership is associated with important organizational and educational outcomes, but its effects are usually indirect and context-contingent (Tan et al., 2022). Transformational leadership relates to commitment, readiness for change, creativity, and innovative practice, yet these depend on trust, professional capacity, organizational culture, and implementation credibility (Koh, 2019; Peng et al., 2021). It becomes educationally meaningful when integrated with instructional leadership, evidence use, professional learning, and sustained attention to classroom practice (Kwan, 2020; Li & Karanxha, 2024). A review of transformational school leadership research in China found generally positive associations but also a narrow empirical base dominated by quantitative perception studies (Li, 2022).

2. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a structured conceptual review design to integrate transformational-leadership theory, empirical research, and Chinese reform policy, aiming to explain mechanisms and administrative implications rather than estimate pooled causal effects. Sources were prioritized from Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and CNKI, plus official Chinese policy documents. Searches focused on 2015-2026 empirical and review studies, while seminal works by Burns, Bass and Riggio, and other foundational scholarship were retained regardless of date. Search terms combined transformational leadership, educational leadership, school reform, educational innovation, teacher efficacy, teacher leadership, professional learning community, teacher agency, China, and Chinese education. Included sources had to contribute empirical evidence, synthesis, theory, or authoritative policy relevant to at least one leadership-to-reform mechanism: shared purpose, professional agency, trust and learning, disciplined innovation, organizational redesign, or monitoring and scaling. Duplicates, non-educational studies without transferable mechanisms, purely descriptive commentary, and studies not informing an administrative pathway were excluded. Retained literature was coded for leadership mechanism, mediator, organizational condition, reform pressure, cultural condition, outcome, and implementation risk. The six REFORM domains emerged by consolidating recurrent themes across this coding and testing their fit against the Chinese governance context.

3. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Burns (1978) conceptualized leadership as a relationship in which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and moral purpose, and Leithwood et al. (2020) argue that successful school leaders draw from a common repertoire while responding sensitively to context. Educational reform refers to intentional change in policies, structures, curriculum, practice, resource allocation, or governance; UNESCO (2024) emphasizes that leadership should be oriented toward learning and supported by coherent conditions, authority, and professional collaboration. Transformational leadership rarely produces outcomes through a simple direct pathway: Li and Karanxha (2024) report mixed evidence for direct effects on student achievement, and policy centralization may support alignment but constrain local discretion.

4. HOW TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS REFORM AND INNOVATION

The first pathway constructs shared educational purpose. Teachers, middle leaders, and community partners possess knowledge that senior administrators do not; Peng et al. (2021) found transformational leadership associated with readiness for change, but active support is not automatic. The second pathway develops people as agents of reform: Zhang (2024) found teacher recognition mediated transformational leadership and professionalism, and E et al. (2025) found early-career teachers' professional agency positively associated with transformational leadership vision. The third pathway creates relational and collaborative infrastructure, as Zhang, Huang, and Ye (2023) showed that shared purpose, collective focus on student learning, and reflective dialogue mediated relationships between leadership practices and collective efficacy.

The fourth pathway is intellectual stimulation: Bao (2024) found principal transformational leadership associated with teacher innovative behavior through meaning at work in Chinese primary and secondary schools. The fifth pathway integrates transformation with the instructional core: Wang (2021) demonstrated that teacher quality and effective teaching mediate between transformational leadership and student outcomes, and Kwan (2020) argues for an integrated relationship between transformational and instructional leadership.

5. TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE CHINESE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

China's education system combines strong national direction with substantial local variation. The 2019 modernization plan and 2025 blueprint provide long-term coherence (State Council, 2019, 2025), but transformational leadership should not personalize institutional purpose around one charismatic individual. Transformational leadership was developed largely in Western scholarship, but Chinese research identifies culturally distinctive emphases: Li's (2022) review notes the salience of moral modeling, articulated vision, individualized consideration, and charisma; Liu et al. (2020) found transformational leadership positively related to collective teacher efficacy in Chinese primary schools, yet the hierarchical context means consensus can easily tip into conformity. Transformational leaders must therefore distinguish goal consensus from uniformity of thought.

Chinese institutions possess established reform infrastructure. Li and Liu (2022) show why teacher leadership matters within this infrastructure, and Zhang et al. (2022) and Zhang, Huang, and Ye (2023) demonstrate the importance of collaborative learning and reflective dialogue. There is no single Chinese educational context: reform evaluation should disaggregate evidence by region, student background, disability, and institutional type, while authorities differentiate support without lowering common quality expectations.

Differentiated Application Across Educational Tiers

Transformational leadership cannot be implemented identically across China's educational tiers because authority, autonomy, accountability, and external relationships differ. High power distance and collectivist traditions interact with each tier's bureaucratic structures in distinct ways (Li, 2022; Tian & Virtanen, 2020; Fang & Yu, 2023).

In primary and secondary schools, principals exercise concentrated authority within a hierarchical chain. Tian and Virtanen (2020) found most teachers in Shanghai schools perceived pyramid or spider's-web structures with a single power center; high power distance accelerates alignment but suppresses voice, while collectivist traditions support teaching-research groups as vehicles for shared purpose (Zhang, Huang, & Ye, 2023). Transformational leaders must use these collective structures to create voice through dialogue and teacher leader roles, and Monitor must protect teacher well-being against reform overload (Tsang, Du, & Teng, 2021).

In vocational colleges, leaders coordinate departments, enterprises, skills standards, and regional priorities. Research on Shandong vocational colleges found transformational and participative leadership associated with better performance, particularly in curriculum-industry alignment (Tong, Abdullah, & Ma, 2021), while a qualitative study identified authoritarian leadership and insufficient industry involvement as key barriers (Chen, 2019). High power distance may leave department heads unable to negotiate with industry, while collectivism can facilitate or constrain cross-department collaboration; university-industry collaboration partially mediates quality culture and student employability (Li, Khattak, & Shamim, 2024). Transformational leadership requires Reframing purpose around employability, Empowering discipline heads, and Redesigning governance to include enterprise partners.

In application-oriented universities, leaders balance teaching, applied research, and community engagement. A study of Chinese private universities found transformational leadership predicted teacher work performance, with idealized influence especially important in resource-constrained settings (Yu & Jiang, 2024), and research on Shanxi application-oriented university students found leadership skills developed through social practice, reflecting collectivist orientations (Li & Merritt, 2023). High power distance discourages faculty challenge, while collectivism supports interdisciplinary programs. Transformational leaders should Reframe identity around applied problem-solving and Monitor employability rather than research output alone.

In research-intensive universities, distributed expertise and faculty governance characterize the structure. A survey of 1,498 faculty from 26 Chinese research universities found transformational leadership positively predicted working attitudes, mediated by research self-efficacy and job stress (Wu, Huang, & Zhou, 2022), and a study of 555 Shandong faculty found presidential transformational leadership enhanced well-being through teaching efficacy and job crafting (Sun, Luo, & Yoon, 2024). High power distance is tempered by professional authority but can still suppress dissent; collectivism supports team collaboration but may pressure junior faculty. Transformational leadership requires Empowering research teams, Fostering trust through transparent evaluation, and Monitoring research integrity alongside publication metrics.

6. ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Transformational language signals ambition but can become rhetoric detached from implementation; leaders must attach every reform priority to explicit operational design, including responsible actors, protected time, expertise, resources, milestones, evidence sources, and review arrangements. Charisma dependency also creates succession risks: staff may comply while the leader is present but lack routines to sustain work after transition, so transformational leaders demonstrate success by making improvement less dependent on themselves.

Reform overload threatens teacher well-being, as teachers must learn new content, technologies, and routines while maintaining current responsibilities; motivation cannot compensate indefinitely for insufficient time or staffing, so leaders must treat well-being as an implementation condition. Innovation requires risk, but institutions have responsibilities to students that limit experimentation: pilot proposals should specify purpose, evidence, affected groups, safeguards, and review points, and negative or mixed evidence should be reported rather than hidden. Finally, reform systems often privilege easily counted indicators such as participation, platform logins, documents, and short-term scores; transformational leadership should protect a balanced definition of success including implementation quality, professional learning, student engagement, equity, well-being, and institutional capacity.

7. A CONTEXT-RESPONSIVE REFORM LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK FOR CHINA

Based on the preceding synthesis, this article proposes the REFORM Leadership Framework as an administrative guide for educational reform and innovation in China. The domains are cyclical rather than linear. Evidence from implementation may require leaders to reframe priorities, redistribute expertise, rebuild trust, redesign support, or discontinue an ineffective reform.

7.1 Reframe Policy as Shared Educational Purpose

Leaders translate policy into a clear educational problem and locally meaningful purpose, engaging teachers, middle leaders, students, and partners in examining evidence; the purpose is revisited when conditions change.

7.2 Empower People and Distributed Expertise

This domain builds leadership architecture around the problem: principals set direction and safeguards, middle leaders coordinate, teacher leaders facilitate inquiry, and external partners provide specialized knowledge. Empowerment requires more than delegation.

7.3 Foster Trust, Learning, and Professional Agency

This domain creates relational conditions through job-embedded professional learning, including lesson study, coaching, peer observation, student-work analysis, action inquiry, or industry engagement, differentiated by experience and role.

7.4 Organize Disciplined Innovation and Evidence

This domain converts ideas into testable improvement using multiple evidence forms—student work, observation, assessment, feedback, well-being, and equity patterns—to refine reasoning rather than validate predetermined solutions.

7.5 Redesign Structures and Resources

This domain aligns the organization with reform: protecting collaborative time, reducing reporting, reallocating expertise, integrating committees, strengthening middle leadership, and establishing cross-school networks. Authorities should match expectations with feasible capacity.

7.6 Monitor Equity, Learning, and Sustainable Scaling

This domain reviews whether reform creates sustainable educational value, combining outcome, process, capacity, equity, and well-being indicators. New sites adapt the approach with local evidence while preserving essential principles.

7.7 Empirical Grounding and Illustrative Case

The REFORM mechanisms are supported by Chinese empirical research, though no study has tested the full six-domain framework. Reframe is grounded in evidence that transformational leadership builds commitment when vision connects to locally meaningful problems (Peng et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Empower is supported by Li and Liu's (2022) three-level SEM showing principal transformational leadership leverages teacher leadership as the more proximal predictor of student performance, and by E et al. (2025), who found transformational vision positively associated with professional agency among 779 early-career teachers.

Foster is supported by Zhang, Huang, and Ye (2023) and Zhang and Liu (2025), who found professional learning communities mediate leadership and collective efficacy with trust as moderator (Kılınç et al., 2024). Organize is grounded in Bao (2024), who found meaning at work mediates transformational leadership and teacher innovative behavior, and Koh et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis linking leadership to creativity through structured processes.

Redesign is supported by Tsang et al. (2021), who found psychological empowerment (meaning, self-determination, competence) mediates transformational leadership and reduced burnout, and by Leithwood et al. (2020) on organizational redesign. Monitor is grounded in Li's (2022) review identifying measurement bias favoring easily counted indicators over equity and well-being. While no single quantitative study has tested all six domains together, the following documented case demonstrates how they operated as an integrated system in practice.

The following case illustrates how the six REFORM domains operated in practice at Beijing National Day School (Beijing No. 11 High School), a public secondary school in Beijing where principal Li Xigui led a comprehensive reform from 2007 onward. The reform was recognized with the First National Teaching Achievement Award by the State Council and was documented by China's Ministry of Education and Guangming Daily (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2014; Guangming Daily, 2014).

Reframe: Upon arriving in 2007, Li spent the first month walking the campus and talking with teachers and students rather than issuing mandates. In summer 2007, the school initiated a two-year, three-round participatory process to draft its Action Framework, approved by 97.4% of faculty and students, redefining the school's purpose as building a respected great school cultivating outstanding talent with lofty aspirations, integrity, disciplined conduct, and active thinking (Ministry of Education, 2014). Empower: The pyramid hierarchy was replaced with a three-layer flat structure (principal, grade department, teacher). Faculty hiring became two-way selection with no principal authority over appointments; the principal could only approve the annual budget and plan curricula, and faced an annual confidence vote. Li described his role as chief service officer. A non-administrative Curriculum Research Institute was established, led by physics teacher Qin Jianyun, and teachers formed their own research teams, including history teacher He Qianhong's Process Evaluation Workshop (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Foster: The school adopted the principle of encouraging the advanced while allowing the lagging. Removing lecterns took more than two years, done one room at a time when teachers were ready; biology teacher Wang Chunyi reported that during a full year of uncertainty, administrators never pressured her. Attendance checks and lesson-plan inspections were eliminated, gaokao scores were decoupled from individual evaluation and replaced with subject-team assessment, and subject-specific classrooms replaced generic teacher offices (Ministry of Education, 2014; Guangming Daily, 2014). Organize: In 2011, graded and categorized courses with course selection were fully implemented in Grade 10 and later school-wide. The curriculum offered over 200 electives across nine domains and 33 career-exploration courses, with mathematics divided into five difficulty levels. With over 4,000 students, the school produced over 4,000 unique timetables. Each midterm, students evaluated teachers on ten professional dimensions, and course selection served as a market signal of teaching quality (Guangming Daily, 2014).

Redesign: Administrative classes and homeroom teachers were abolished, replaced by an advisory system with tutors, counselors, and education consultants. A mini-semester—two fully free weeks per term with no homework—was introduced to build student self-management, and meetings and reporting were reduced (Guangming Daily, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2014). Monitor: Student evaluations, course-selection data, and diagnostic reports combining scores with written feedback replaced single-score accountability. The reform received the State Council's First National Teaching Achievement Award, and scholar Gu Mingyuan noted that 4,000 students have 4,000 timetables (Ministry of Education, 2014). Beijing National Day School thus demonstrates how the six REFORM domains can operate as an integrated system rather than a checklist.

7.8 Implementing the Framework

An institution can begin with one manageable problem over an academic term. A cross-role team completes a REFORM cycle using existing teaching-research or governance structures, asking: Do structures and resources support the desired practice? Such alignment makes transformational leadership a system capability rather than a personal style.

8. CONCLUSION

Transformational leadership offers Chinese institutions a powerful but incomplete approach to reform. Its effects are mainly indirect, operating through teacher efficacy, leadership, trust, recognition, professional learning communities, instructional quality, and evidence use. National policy provides direction, professional traditions provide infrastructure, and moral modeling

resonates culturally, but effective leadership must be culturally grounded, instructionally focused, ethically accountable, and distributed. The REFORM Framework translates this synthesis into six cyclical domains: Reframe, Empower, Foster, Organize, Redesign, and Monitor. It rejects both heroic leadership and passive compliance; transformational leadership is most valuable when it makes these capacities ordinary rather than exceptional.

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