INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR IMPROVING TEACHING QUALITY IN CHINESE SCHOOLS

Yijun HE[1], Thada SITHTHADA[1] and Suttipong BOONPHADUNG[1]
1 Department of Educational Administration, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand; s69584951015@ssru.ac.th

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ABSTRACT
Improving teaching quality is central to China's pursuit of a high-quality and equitable education system, yet policy standards alone cannot ensure strong classroom practice. Using a structured conceptual review, this academic article examines how instructional leadership can strengthen teaching quality in Chinese primary and secondary schools. It synthesizes foundational theory, international evidence, Chinese empirical studies, and national policy directions. Instructional leadership is interpreted as a context-responsive process through which principals, middle leaders, and teacher leaders establish learning priorities, coordinate curriculum and assessment, develop professional capability, and create conditions for continuous instructional improvement. The analysis shows that leadership influences teaching mainly through indirect and relational pathways, including teacher self-efficacy, trust, collegiality, professional learning communities, feedback, and strategic resource use. In China, these pathways are shaped by centralized policy expectations, teaching-research traditions, hierarchical relationships, examination pressure, regional inequality, and expanding digital infrastructure. The article argues that effective principals should move beyond administrative compliance and episodic classroom inspection toward collective inquiry focused on students' learning experiences. Based on the synthesis, it proposes the TEACH Quality Framework: Translate educational purpose into learning priorities, Examine evidence from teaching and learning, Advance teacher expertise through job-embedded development, Coordinate collective leadership and instructional resources, and Harmonize accountability with trust, equity, and continuous improvement. Applied with contextual judgment, it can help Chinese schools align national goals with local needs, improve pedagogy, strengthen teacher professionalism, and sustain educational quality without reducing teaching to test performance or procedural conformity.
Keywords: Instructional Leadership, Teaching Quality, Chinese Schools

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching quality is the point at which educational policy becomes student experience. A large synthesis of two decades of evidence concluded that principals contribute to student achievement, attendance, teacher retention, and school climate, with the strongest leaders maintaining a persistent focus on instruction while building productive organizations (Grissom et al., 2021). Meta-analytic evidence also connects principal behavior with teacher instructional practice and organizational health, although much of the evidence is observational and should not be interpreted as simple causation (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). At the international level, UNESCO (2024) identifies four interconnected leadership dimensions: setting expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration, and developing people. Later scholarship broadened this principal-centered conception into leadership for learning, emphasizing that effective influence is distributed across formal leaders, teacher leaders, professional teams, and external support networks (Hallinger, 2011). The national blueprint for building a strong education system by 2035 calls for a high-quality education system, balanced basic education, stronger teacher capacity, and the comprehensive development of students (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2025). The revised compulsory education curriculum and standards similarly emphasize core competencies, interdisciplinary learning, quality requirements, and improved guidance for teaching and evaluation (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2022). Walker and Qian (2022) found that Chinese principals enact instructional leadership through practices that reflect both widely recognized leadership domains and the social, political, and cultural conditions of Chinese schooling. They need better-quality leadership processes that connect curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, professional learning, teacher motivation, student needs, and organizational improvement.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a structured conceptual review design to synthesize foundational instructional-leadership theory, international evidence, Chinese empirical studies, and national policy. The purpose is to identify defensible administrative mechanisms linking leadership to teaching quality and to explain how those mechanisms should be contextualized in Chinese primary and secondary schools. The article is not a meta-analysis and does not claim that the TEACH framework has already been validated as a complete causal model. The source-selection protocol prioritized peer-reviewed studies retrievable through Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and CNKI, together with UNESCO, OECD, Ministry of Education, and State Council sources. Searches concentrated on 2015-2026 empirical and review studies while retaining earlier seminal instructional-leadership research when theoretically necessary. Search terms combined instructional leadership, leadership for learning, teaching quality, classroom observation, teacher efficacy, professional learning community, teacher leadership, school principal, China, Chinese schools, 教学领导力, 教学质量, 校长领导, 教研组, 教师效能, and 专业学习共同体. Sources were included when they supplied empirical findings, systematic or integrative synthesis, major theoretical concepts, or authoritative policy directly relevant to leadership influence on curriculum, teaching, assessment, teacher learning, professional trust, resource use, or accountability. Duplicates, commentary without an identifiable leadership mechanism, studies outside educational settings, and sources focused only on student outcomes without information about leadership or teaching processes were excluded from the core synthesis. Thematic analysis proceeded by coding evidence for direct, indirect, and distributed leadership practices and then grouping recurrent mechanisms around instructional direction, evidence use, teacher expertise, collective leadership, resources, trust, accountability, and equity. The five TEACH domains were derived by consolidating these themes and checking their fit against Chinese structures such as teaching-research groups, centralized curriculum expectations, examination pressures, and regional variation.

3. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

3.1 From Instructional Management to Leadership for Learning

Instructional leadership emerged from effective-schools research that drew attention to principals who protected instructional time, maintained high expectations, coordinated curriculum, monitored student progress, and made teaching a visible organizational priority. Robinson et al. (2008) found that leadership practices closely connected to teaching and teacher learning showed stronger associations with student outcomes than more general transformational leadership.

3.2 Teaching Quality as a Multidimensional Administrative Goal

Teaching quality is often inferred from examination results, but student scores represent only one outcome and are influenced by prior attainment, family resources, peer composition, curriculum alignment, and opportunity to learn. These findings reinforce a mediated-effects theory: leadership matters when it changes what teachers believe they can accomplish, what they learn together, and how organizational routines support their classroom decisions.

3.3 Integrating Direct, Indirect, and Distributed Influence

Direct instructional leadership includes classroom observation, curriculum discussion, feedback, demonstration, coaching, and analysis of student work. Teacher coaching research indicates meaningful average effects on instructional practice and smaller but positive effects on student achievement, while also warning that effectiveness can weaken when programs are scaled without adequate expertise and support (Kraft et al., 2018). Distributed leadership expands expertise, ownership, and reach.

4. PATHWAYS FROM INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TO TEACHING QUALITY

4.1 Direction, Coherence, and High-Quality Expectations

The first pathway is the creation of coherent instructional direction. Leaders must clarify what students should understand and be able to do, which teaching practices require development, and how progress will be recognized. For example, a mathematics improvement priority may include conceptual understanding, student explanation, formative assessment, participation by lower-attaining students, and teacher collaboration on common misconceptions.

4.2 Classroom Observation, Feedback, and Professional Dialogue

The second pathway is disciplined attention to classroom practice. In Chinese schools, classroom observation is already embedded in policy and professional routines, but Chai et al. (2026) note that the quality and contextual enactment of observation and feedback remain underexplored. Chen and Guo (2020) found that principals' emotional intelligence and instructional leadership were related to teachers' instructional strategies in Chinese primary schools.

4.3 Teacher Efficacy, Trust, and Collegiality

The third pathway operates through teachers' beliefs and relationships. In a large Chinese study, Liu and Hallinger (2018) found that teacher self-efficacy mediated part of the relationship between principal instructional leadership and teacher professional learning. Liu and Hallinger (2024) found that the positive effects of instructional leadership on professional learning communities were strengthened when teachers perceived a fair procedural climate.

4.4 Professional Learning Communities and Job-Embedded Development

The fourth pathway is sustained professional learning. Job-embedded learning connects development to curriculum, student work, lesson design, classroom evidence, and recurring problems of practice. Research on a Chinese Master Teacher Studio also shows how teacher leaders can combine shared values, structured collaboration, scaffolding, resource allocation, external networks, and role modeling to sustain development across schools (Zheng & Ye, 2024).

4.5 Curriculum, Assessment, and Strategic Resource Use

The fifth pathway is alignment of the instructional system. A large urban school may need stronger middle leadership and information routines to prevent fragmentation. Instructional leadership is therefore inseparable from organizational management. The issue is not whether principals should manage or lead instruction; it is whether management decisions create the capacity for better instruction.

5. INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE CHINESE SCHOOL CONTEXT

5.1 Policy Direction and the Meaning of Quality

Instructional leadership in China is enacted within a strongly coordinated policy environment. The 2024-2035 national blueprint links educational quality with moral development, talent cultivation, equity, innovation, modernization, and national development (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2025). A balanced quality narrative should integrate academic mastery, moral and civic development, physical and mental health, creativity, collaboration, and equitable participation.

5.2 Contextualizing International Models

Instructional leadership models developed internationally offer useful concepts, but their practices cannot be transferred without examining context. Hierarchy is one contextual influence. This does not imply that Chinese schools should imitate low-hierarchy cultures. Recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that cultural dimensions moderate the relationship between instructional leadership and teacher efficacy, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive interpretation (Hallinger et al., 2025).

5.3 Teaching-Research Traditions as an Improvement Infrastructure

Chinese teaching-research groups provide an unusually strong institutional base for instructional leadership. The Excellent Primary and Secondary School Teacher and Principal Training Program for 2024-2027 explicitly supports exemplary educators, regional capacity building, digital integration, and assistance to underprivileged areas (MOE, 2024). School leaders can use these policy-supported networks strategically, but external models should be adapted through local testing rather than adopted for prestige.

5.4 Centralized Accountability, Examinations, and Professional Agency

Chinese principals operate under strong performance expectations from authorities, families, and communities. They should use performance data diagnostically, disaggregate results, and combine scores with classroom and student evidence. They should also distinguish productive consistency from rigid uniformity. Liu and Yin (2023) found that ethical leadership was linked with professional learning communities through teacher obligation and that participation in decision-making strengthened these relationships.

5.5 Diversity Across Schools and Regions

There is no single Chinese school context. The same leadership practice may therefore produce different consequences. Stronger schools can share teacher leaders, lesson resources, and professional networks; district authorities can allocate teaching researchers and development opportunities toward areas of need; and school leaders can use local knowledge to identify barriers hidden by aggregate indicators.

6. ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Role Overload and the Quality of Instructional Time

Principals frequently face tension between administrative compliance and instructional leadership. Internationally, principals report limited time for curriculum- and teaching-related work even when they value instructional leadership (OECD, 2020). Vice principals and office staff can protect scheduled time for classroom evidence, curriculum review, and teacher learning. District

authorities also influence this problem through reporting demands and the quality of principal supervision.

6.2 Expertise, Observation Quality, and Feedback Credibility

A principal may be an experienced educator yet lack current expertise in every subject. Observers require development in evidence collection, curriculum, pedagogy, feedback, bias, and coaching. Teachers should also understand the purposes and criteria of observation. Leadership credibility grows when feedback is accurate, specific, feasible, connected to student learning, and followed by relevant support.

6.3 Compliance, Data Reductionism, and Unintended Consequences

Central coordination can generate extensive indicators, but the visibility of a measure can exceed its educational importance. Before introducing a new monitoring requirement, administrators should specify its purpose, data quality, interpretation, burden, and possible unintended effects. A proportionate system collects only evidence that is likely to improve decisions and protects teachers and students from unnecessary surveillance.

6.4 Trust, Voice, and Responsible Accountability

Improvement requires teachers to make uncertainty visible. They must be able to say that a lesson failed, a concept remains unclear, a student group is not participating, or a mandated approach is producing unintended effects. Serious misconduct or persistent failure must still be addressed, but most instructional development depends on an environment in which teachers can learn before problems become entrenched.

6.5 Digitalization, Artificial Intelligence, and Human Judgment

Digital platforms can expand access to curriculum resources, professional networks, lesson exemplars, assessment information, and feedback. Digital evidence should inform rather than replace professional observation and student voice. The central question is whether technology strengthens teachers' capacity to understand and respond to learning, not whether a school can demonstrate high levels of platform activity.

7. A CONTEXT-RESPONSIVE TEACH QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR CHINESE SCHOOLS

Based on the preceding synthesis, this article proposes the TEACH Quality Framework as an administrative guide for Chinese primary and secondary schools. The framework is cyclical rather than linear. The framework does not claim that every school should adopt identical practices. It identifies questions and organizational functions that each school must address in context. The principal remains accountable for coherence, fairness, and educational purpose.

7.1 Translate Educational Purpose into Learning Priorities

The first domain converts national policy, curriculum standards, school mission, student needs, and community expectations into a limited set of instructional priorities. A priority should specify the learning problem, the desired improvement, the students concerned, and the evidence that will indicate progress. The output of this domain is a short, shared instructional agenda connected explicitly to national goals and local evidence.

7.2 Examine Evidence from Teaching and Learning

The second domain establishes recurring inquiry into the instructional core. Schools should combine classroom observations, student work, formative and summative assessment, curriculum reviews, participation patterns, teacher reflection, and student experience. Records should be concise and useful, documenting the question, evidence, interpretation, decision, and follow-up. The output is a credible diagnosis that guides action while preserving uncertainty where evidence is incomplete.

7.3 Advance Teacher Expertise through Job-Embedded Development

The third domain converts identified needs into professional learning. Development should be connected to teachers' curriculum, students, and actual problems of practice. Leaders participate

by protecting time, locating expertise, asking evidence-focused questions, and learning alongside teachers. Participation increases credibility but should not silence specialist knowledge. Evaluation of professional learning should ask whether teacher knowledge, instructional decisions, classroom practice, and student experience changed.

7.4 Coordinate Collective Leadership and Instructional Resources

The fourth domain builds an organizational architecture for improvement. Students and families contribute evidence about learning experience and access, especially when decisions substantially affect them. Leaders should allocate them according to diagnosed need rather than status or historical entitlement. The output is an instructional leadership system with sufficient reach, expertise, and protected capacity to sustain the agreed priorities.

7.5 Harmonize Accountability with Trust, Equity, and Continuous Improvement

The fifth domain ensures that improvement is ethically and organizationally sustainable. Leaders should recognize collaborative learning and improvement, not only high final scores. They should also monitor workload, student well-being, curriculum breadth, and differential effects across groups. The output is accountable learning: the school demonstrates responsibility by making reasoning visible, examining consequences, and improving its own improvement process.

7.6 Implementing the Framework in Practice

Implementation should begin with one significant but manageable instructional problem. Early implementation should emphasize the quality of the inquiry process: clarity of purpose, diversity of evidence, teacher voice, observation credibility, follow-up, and equity. School leaders can assess progress through balanced indicators. District and provincial authorities can support the framework by reducing duplicative reporting, developing principal and middle-leader expertise, strengthening teaching-research services, enabling interschool networks, and directing resources toward underserved contexts. Principal evaluation should examine how leaders build instructional capacity and improve conditions, not only short-term results. When system expectations and school learning routines reinforce one another, instructional leadership becomes a sustainable capability rather than an individual leader's temporary initiative.

7.7 Empirical Grounding and a Teaching-Research Group Vignette

The TEACH framework is grounded in empirical mechanisms already documented in Chinese and international research, although the five-domain framework itself remains to be tested as a whole. Walker and Qian (2022) show that instructional leadership in China reflects both widely recognized leadership practices and distinctive social, political, and cultural conditions. Liu and Hallinger (2018) connect principal instructional leadership with teacher self-efficacy and professional learning, while Zheng and Ye (2024) illustrate the developmental potential of networked teacher leadership. The group Examines evidence from student work, assessment items, and classroom observation; a Master Teacher Studio or experienced subject leader helps Advance teacher expertise through joint lesson design and coaching; the principal Coordinates timetable space, subject leadership, and digital resources; and the school Harmonizes accountability by keeping coaching evidence separate from punitive appraisal while still reviewing student outcomes.

8. CONCLUSION

Instructional leadership offers Chinese schools a disciplined way to organize administration around teaching and learning. Its value does not arise from increasing supervision alone. It arises from clarifying educational purpose, making classroom practice open to professional inquiry, developing teacher capability, coordinating expertise and resources, and creating a fair environment in which evidence can lead to improvement. These mechanisms are shaped by the Chinese context, including national policy direction, teaching-research traditions, hierarchical relationships, examination pressure, regional diversity, and digital transformation. Effective leadership must therefore be both internationally informed and locally interpreted. The proposed

TEACH Quality Framework provides a practical synthesis: Translate educational purpose, Examine teaching and learning evidence, Advance teacher expertise, Coordinate collective leadership and resources, and Harmonize accountability with trust, equity, and continuous improvement. Chinese schools can improve teaching quality when coherence does not become uniformity, accountability does not become fear, and collaboration does not become ritual. Instructional leadership is effective when it makes those conditions normal, equitable, and sustainable.

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