The Practice of Transformational Leadership in K12 Private Schools in China: Strategies and Insights for Driving Educational Innovation

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Abstract	Article Info
This study aims to explore how principals of K12 private schools in China practice transformational leadership and focuses on schools in the Sichuan-Chongqing region. The study focuses on five dimensions of transformational leadership: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, improving instructional program and related practices. To gain insights into the specific performance of these dimensions, the study adopts qualitative research, combined with case studies, and collected data through observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal 15 specific practices under the five dimensions that provide important support for school development. By analyzing the practices of principals in Chinese K12 private schools, fills a gap in research on the application of transformational leadership in private K12 education in China, and provide new perspectives to deepen the theoretical content. Based on the uniqueness of the Chinese educational context, the findings of this study firstly support the

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culturally adaptive and contextualized application of transformational leadership theory. Second, the study provides concrete transformational leadership practices for Chinese K12 private school principals to help them drive school reform and development more effectively. Finally, the study highlights the typicality of the special education context and sample selection in the Sichuan-Chongqing region, which provides a reference for educational reform in similar contexts. The novelty of this study lies in revealing the specific practices of the five dimensions of transformational leadership and demonstrating how they can support sustainable school development, as well as providing actionable recommendations for private principals.

Cite as:

Introduction

The wave of global education reforms is driving profound changes in school management models, and transformational leadership is becoming increasingly important in education as a leadership style that motivates teachers and optimizes the organizational culture to achieve overall school development and improve teaching quality (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Although transformational leadership has been widely researched globally, the application of its theories in the context of Chinese K12 schools has faced many practical problems. In Chinese K12 private schools, although principals enjoy greater

autonomy in management, they are under pressure from policy constraints, unequal distribution of resources, and conflicting demands from parents and teachers (Wu, 2001). These issues make the implementation of transformational leadership complex and inefficient. In addition, research has shown that principals face the dilemmas of poor role orientation, poor communication with subordinates, and lack of clear leadership strategies when practicing transformational leadership (Li, 2021; Xia, 2014). Some of the leadership styles are disconnected from the actual needs and even lead to stagnation of the change process (Zhang, 2021). More critically, there is a lack of transformational leadership practice frameworks adapted to the Chinese educational context, resulting in a lack of systematic guidance for change implementation (Jiao & Liu, 2017).

Current literature predominantly addresses challenges in educational development and proposes corresponding remedies, yet largely overlooks the status of private K12 education. These issues directly undermine principals' ability to drive school change and improve educational quality, exposing a critical gap in current research: the ways in which transformational leadership is practiced in the Chinese K12 private school context have not yet been adequately researched.

To address this issue, this study aims to answer the research question:

How are the transformational leadership practiced by the principals of Chinese K12 private schools (Setting Directions, Developing People, Redesigning the Organization, Improving the Instructional Program, Related Practices)?

To explore the specific ways in which transformational leadership is practiced in Chinese K12 private schools. By filling this gap in theory

and practice, this study hopes to provide educational administrators with a set of leadership practice frameworks adapted to the local context, which will help optimize the school management model and sustainably improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Transformational leadership theory was first introduced by Burns (1978) and emphasizes that leaders motivate their subordinates to work together to achieve organizational goals by motivating them to go beyond their personal interests. Bass (1985) built on this foundation by proposing key dimensions of transformational leadership, including individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and charisma-inspiration, which emphasize the need for leaders to serve as role models and inspire their subordinates to reach for higher goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 3). (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, Yang (2013) noted that situational variables may enhance or diminish the effectiveness of transformational leadership, and Bass did not describe its application in educational contexts in detail. Therefore, it is important to explore the practice of transformational leadership in the context of Chinese K12 private schools.

The importance of transformational leadership in the field of education has been increasing with the deepening of education reforms around the world. Leithwood introduced transformational leadership into the field of education, and his research suggested that transformational leadership can significantly enhance the innovative and adaptive capacity of schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Leithwood and Sun's (2012) study suggests that transformational leadership can significantly impact school development by setting direction, developing people, redesigning organizations, and improving

instructional programs and related practices. However, the ways and effects of these practices may vary across countries and cultures (Li & Shi, 2005). For example, in regions that emphasize a culture of collectivism and authority, transformational leaders need to focus on communicating and collaborating with faculty and staff to ensure the effectiveness of change programs (Litz & Blaik-Hourani, 2020). Therefore, examining the practice patterns of transformational leadership in Chinese K12 private schools can help deepen the understanding of its application in specific educational settings.
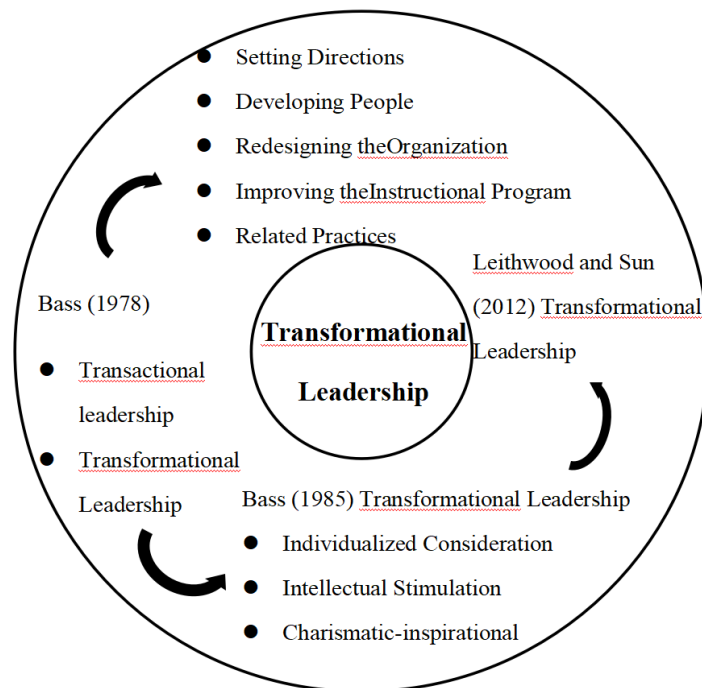

Figure 1. *The Development of Transformational Leadership Theory*
(Bass,1978; Bass,1985; Leithwood & Sun, 2012)

In many countries, private schools have become synonymous with high-quality education and are favored by elite and affluent families (Cheng, 2020). Overwhelmingly, governments believe that it plays a key role in developing the habits and interests of students once they enter university (Coughlin & Castilla, 2014). The number of students choosing private K12 schools continues to grow not only in the United States but globally (Binelli & Rubio-Codina, 2013). For example, the private K12 education market in Malaysia is dominated by pre-primary and secondary schools which account for nearly 75% of the market, reflecting the importance of private education at different stages (Gurugram, 2022). In developed countries, private schools are more "branded", with high acceptance rates at prestigious universities, good student quality, and a focus on quality education (Li, Lu & Qian, 2020). The elite education of private K12 schools in the UK has attracted a large number of international students, and between 2007 and 2020, an increasing number of international students will flock to all types of private schools in the UK (Sohu News, 2020).

In China, the international schools are similar to private schools in terms of the nature of their management; they are non-public organizations founded by social forces, charge higher tuition fees, focus on specialized education, and offer different curricula to public schools, e.g., private schools may offer international classes, while international schools usually adopt international curricula (Yuan, 2017). Most international schools in China are private but follow international accreditations (e.g., IBO, CIS) and China's policies, differing significantly from public schools in target audience, curriculum, and regulations.

In May 2021, China introduced new regulations to strengthen the regulation of compulsory education and training institutions,

prohibiting profit-making at the compulsory education level, aiming to reduce the burden on students and parents, and encouraging the development of vocational education. This policy poses new challenges for private K12 schools will increase the difficulty for schools to access capital and operate, which will weaken the willingness of private schools to invest in compulsory education and lead to slower revenue growth (Fitch Ratings, 2021).

After decades of research, transformational leadership has been shown to play a positive role in school transformation and development, and is particularly effective in enhancing teachers' organizational commitment, innovative behaviors, job satisfaction, and performance (Jiao & Liu, 2017; Liu, 2022). Liu (2022) found that visionary incentives and intellectual incentives, in the context of China's traditional collectivist culture, made a significant contribution to teachers' organizational commitment, while idealized influence and personalized care were relatively weak. This suggests that Chinese culture tends to favor group-oriented leadership behaviors but may ignore the variability of individual needs, which poses a challenge for teachers' personalized development (Li, 2019; Liu, 2022).

In addition, Liu and Kong (2020) noted that transformational leadership creates an atmosphere of innovation and stimulates teacher creativity in K12 practices by encouraging innovation and exploration of new approaches. However, whether such innovation incentives are sustainable in resource-constrained school environments requires further research. Zhao and Xi (2018)'s study shows that although transformational leadership is more effective than transactional leadership in enhancing teacher satisfaction, the role of transactional leadership in basic management cannot be ignored, especially as the

balance between satisfying teachers' material needs and promoting values transformation remains unresolved.

Sunwu (2016) and Sun & Henderson (2017) emphasized that the moral modeling and leadership charisma dimensions of transformational leadership are critical to the improvement of teacher performance. Principals earn teachers' trust and inspire their active participation in school management through high moral and charisma. However, these studies have mainly focused on teacher performance and the indirect effects on student learning outcomes have lacked in-depth exploration. Lee's (2022) literature review further criticized that most of the current studies are predominantly quantitative in nature, ignoring the complexity of transformational leadership in different cultural and resource environments, and called for the introduction of more qualitative and mixed-methods studies in the future for a more comprehensive understanding of its practical applications and limitations.

Most studies show that transformational leadership plays a positive role in four aspects: teachers' organizational commitment, teachers' innovative behavior, teachers and students' satisfaction and performance. However, researcher find that among this research in China, there are less relevant researches only focus on private K12 schools in China this filed and the research angle is relatively scattered. However, this study adopted qualitative research for analysis, so as to have a deeper understanding and discover the problem and obtain more abundant data to answer the question. The researcher also found that the study should bring a multi-angle analysis of all dimensions to explore how transformational leadership is practiced in different dimensions. This also shows that this research has very important practical value.

These are some of the typical literature summaries on practices of transformational leadership that researcher mentioned above (Table 1).

Table 1.

Typical Literature Summary on Practices of Transformational Leadership

Research &Authors	The findings	Comments
Liu (2022)	1. Vision motivation and intellectual stimulation have a greater contribution to organizational commitment. 2. Idealization influence and individualized care have relatively small contribution organizational commitment. 3. Transformational leadership behavior significantly affects school organizational innovation climate.	This study has a detailed analysis of the effects of various dimensions of transformational leadership on teachers' organizational commitment. But the research direction is too single. Besides, the idealization related to personal performance and the contribution rate of individualized care to teachers' organizational commitment is not large. The explanation for why this is happening is not so clear.
Sunwu (2016)	1.Transformational leadership has a positive impact on the performance of primary and secondary school teachers. 2.The two dimensions of the moral model and leadership charm have a greater impact on the work performance of primary and secondary school teachers.	School principals influence their teachers through their own noble morality and unique charm, so that teachers have trust in principals and are willing to follow them, so that teachers can devote more enthusiasm to their work and produce better performance. This study provides valuable suggestions for the understanding and practice of some dimensions of transformational leadership.
Li (2022)	This study shows that transformational leadership has a significant effect on improving teachers' work enthusiasm and overall school effectiveness, especially on teachers' professional growth. However, in terms of improving student learning outcomes, the impact is relatively small and may	Researcher Li (2022) suggests that more qualitative and mixed-methods research is needed in the future to more fully understand the role of transformational leadership across cultures and educational settings.

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Method

This qualitative study conducted a case study of K12 private schools in China's Sichuan-Chongqing region, chosen for its economic and educational significance. The Sichuan-Chongqing region (Sichuan Province and Chongqing Municipality) has similar cultural and social characteristics, and both are China's new first-tier cities, which makes them highly valuable for research (CNR News, 2020). In addition, even though Sichuan and Chongqing are among the top regions in terms of GDP and population, there has been little research on transformational leadership in private K12 schools in the region, and there is an urgent need to fill this research gap (Wang, Meng & Feng, 2022).

Initial screening of schools was conducted at the beginning of the study through the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1992) to ensure that participating schools possessed the important attributes of transformational leadership. Screening criteria included leadership scores and the length of time the school had been in operation (over five years). Schools with at least five years of operation were selected for the following reasons: According to Organizational Life Cycle Theory, a five-year history of operation indicates that a school has entered a stable stage of development, and its leadership practices are more representative (Greiner, 1998). The effects of transformational leadership need to be observed over time, and five years is an important point in time to demonstrate the long-term impact of leadership (Rost, 1993). At the same time, psychology's 10,000-hour theory suggests that this length of time is enough practical experience to reflect the maturity of the leader (Ericsson et al., 1993). The researcher chose case studies, so a large sample was not applicable to this study, and the role of the MLQ was limited to screening the

study participants and was not used for hypothesis testing, so the study remained qualitative.

In terms of data collection, the study used three methods: semi-structured interviews, observation and document analysis to ensure the comprehensiveness and depth of the study. Interviews were conducted with principals, senior teachers and general teachers, where senior teachers and general teachers were recommended by the principals through the snowball sampling based on the criteria of having more than five years of experience, excellent performance and active participation in school affairs to ensure that the interviewees were able to provide information that was closely related to the topic of the study (Lokot, 2020). Observation was recorded on a location basis to verify the consistency and authenticity of the interview data, while document analysis included materials such as school policy documents, reports and press releases to provide objective contextual support for the study. The study was cross validated across different data sources through the principle of triangulation (Heale & Forbes, 2013), thus enhancing the credibility and reliability of the study.

For data analysis, this study used thematic analysis to identify key themes and impacts of transformational leadership. The interview guide, based on Leithwood and Sun's (2012) leadership model, focused on five core dimensions and was validated by experts to ensure in-depth exploration of leadership practices. Through initial coding, themes were extracted from interview data and observation notes, followed by cross-case comparison and triangulation with literature. Based on data saturation theory, three schools in the Sichuan-Chongqing region were selected as study sites. The final themes highlight the practice of transformational leadership in private K12 schools in this region.
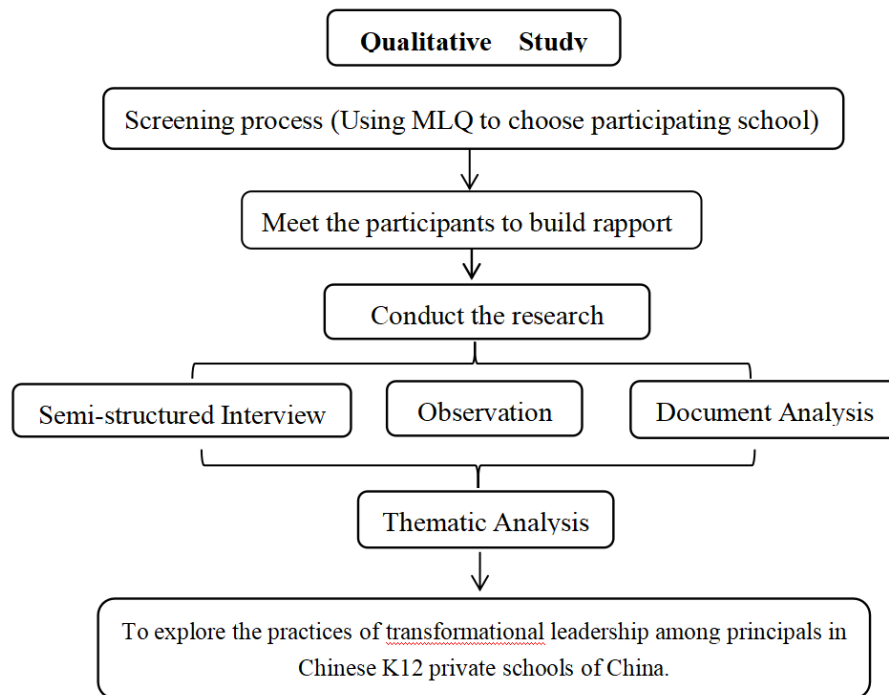
Figure 2. *The Research Process in This Study*

Results

Setting Directions

Develop a Shared Vision and Building Goal Consensus. In Chinese K12 private schools, the construction of shared values is one of the key practices for principals to implement transformational leadership. This study found that by fostering a shared vision, principals not only enhanced the cohesiveness of the school community, but also improved teacher and student engagement and the collaborative climate of the school organization. This is consistent with studies by Wang and Gao (2016) and Leithwood & Jantzi (2000), indicating the

important role of shared values in shaping school culture and enhancing organizational transparency. However, the existing literature focuses more on macro-level cultural influences and lacks exploration of specific ways of practicing them, especially in the unique context of Chinese K12 private schools.

This study further found that the combination of short-term goals and long-term vision is key in principals' transformational leadership practices. Clear short-term goals provide immediate results through measurable outcomes, while the long-term vision provides a stable direction. This practice not only increased school management efficiency, but also balanced short-term needs with long-term development planning in the face of resource constraints and policy pressures (Song, 2024). Existing research has paid less attention to the specific role of integrating short-term and long-term goals, and this study fills this gap by providing a practical reference for principals to implement transformational leadership in complex educational environments.

Hold High Performance Expectations. Setting high performance expectations was found to be an important component of transformational leadership practices in private K12 schools in Sichuan and Chongqing, China, and was found to be effective in improving the quality of education and fostering the overall development of students. This study found that by setting rigorous performance standards, principals motivated teachers and students to strive for excellence and drove overall school performance. This is consistent with Schleicher's (2020) study, which suggests that high standards not only inspire potential, but also promote academic achievement and the overall development of students' social, emotional, and civic awareness. However, the existing literature focuses more on the positive effects of

high performance expectations on educational outcomes and less on the specific ways in which they can be practiced in specific cultural contexts and resource-constrained situations (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Zhang, 2023).

This study further found that by implementing high performance expectations in private K12 schools in Sichuan and Chongqing, principals were able to effectively balance the challenges of policy constraints and uneven resource allocation, and that these schools used rigorous standards and selection procedures that not only enhanced teachers' teaching and research, but also attracted and retained excellent educators (Yang & Chen, 2024). This practice not only enhances the quality of education, but also meets parents' and students' expectations for quality education and enhances the competitiveness and reputation of the school (Cai & Xie, 2021).

This study fills the gap in the existing literature by emphasizing the characteristics of the practice of high performance expectations in private K12 schools in Sichuan and Chongqing, and reveals how rigorous goal setting and effective incentives can drive school development under transformational leadership. This not only provides a deep understanding of transformational leadership practices in the Chinese educational context, but also offers a clear path for principals to implement high performance expectations in complex educational contexts.

Focus on Comprehensive Student Development. The study found that principals not only focus on the overall development of the school, but also promote the balanced development of students in the areas of ethics, intellect, physique, aesthetics, and labor by introducing the concept of holistic education. This is consistent with Wang's (2007) proposal of a "comprehensive goal planning system" that provides

clear benchmarks for student growth through clear vision and goal setting (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). This study further found that principals incorporate the shift from traditional test-based education to quality education into their leadership practices in promoting a well-rounded education that centers on fostering critical thinking and creativity in students (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008).

Unlike the existing literature, this study reveals how transformational leadership in the context of Chinese K12 private schools can address practical issues such as unequal resource allocation and conflicting needs of parents and teachers through flexible incentives and cultural reshaping (Zhang, 2021). By integrating holistic development goals with school culture, principals not only enhance the relevance of their leadership behaviors, but also effectively address the limitations of the traditional test-oriented approach. In addition, this leadership practice provides a clear direction setting for student development through clear direction setting, thus remedying the problem of the inadequacy of current theoretical frameworks in practical application (Jiao & Liu, 2017).

This finding combines transformational leadership with the transformation of quality education policy for the first time in a Chinese K12 private school context, demonstrating how principals can reshape their school development goals through a holistic approach to education under policy constraints and resource pressures, and providing a new perspective for principals to optimize their school management and improve education quality.

Developing People

Provide Individualized Support. Individualized support is a crucial practice in school transformational leadership. Principals must

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prioritize each student's unique needs to drive transformation in school systems and culture, emphasizing individual development. The finding of this study is relevant to the study conducted by Liu and Kong (2020). The study suggests that personalized care is particularly important for transformational principals. Offering personalized support, rather than the standardized education of the industrial age, involves designing and implementing educational strategies tailored to students' distinct needs, interests, and learning styles. Data collection, analyses, and artificial intelligence technologies facilitate individualized support, ensuring all students access suitable educational resources for their development. Individualized support is integral to school transformational leadership, demanding a focus on individual student needs to improve school systems and culture effectively. Besides student-centered support, personalized support for teachers is equally vital. Principals also provide teachers with professional development opportunities and resources to foster innovation in teaching and learning. A supportive work environment that accommodates teachers' professional needs and interests enhances their job satisfaction and promotes their professional growth, ultimately benefiting students.

Provide Intellectual Stimulation. Principals demonstrate openness by providing opportunities for collaborative thinking among employees. Intellectual stimulation involves enhancing cognitive abilities and creativity through various methods and strategies (Wodehouse, 2022). In educational settings, this entails challenging teachers and students to think innovatively and explore new teaching and learning approaches. Chinese schools have always attached great importance to teachers' career planning and development. When Xin and Sun (2024) talk about how schools can promote their own development through

planning, he suggests that the three dimensions of "school organizational planning and development", "principal career planning and development", and "teacher career planning and development" should be emphasized. To foster teaching quality and professional competence, principals establish professional development programs, organize training workshops, support innovative projects, and offer continuous feedback and support to help teachers reflect on and enhance their teaching practices. These efforts promote both individual and team development, ultimately contributing to overall educational excellence.

In private K12 schools, transformational principals enhance teacher effectiveness and professional growth through intellectual stimulation. The finding of this study is similar to the finding of a study conducted by leadership expert Michelle Ray (2020), the study emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for critical thinking and challenging entrenched ideas, enabling individuals to reach higher levels of potential and self-leadership (Ray, 2020). The principals of private K12 schools challenge assumptions, encourage innovation, and provide necessary resources for teachers to evaluate and improve their teaching practices through regular training, workshops, and teacher learning communities. Principals offer concrete feedback and support, motivating teachers to continually refine their teaching methods, leading to greater job satisfaction and professional competence, and contributing to overall school development.

Leader Sets an Exemplary Moral Standard. Transformational leadership has globally influenced the field of education by setting ethical standards. This leadership practice emphasizes that a principal's role is not only to guide and motivate the team, but crucially to establish benchmarks through their own ethical behavior. The finding of this

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study is similar to the finding of a study conducted by Tong (2012). The study argues that in the current society, traditional moral concepts are under attack and schools are facing such challenges. Therefore, the reconstruction and improvement of moral standards in school moral education is a top priority. This promotes a positive and just learning and working environment (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In education, ethical standards set by principals directly impact the professional conduct of teachers and the moral development of students.

This is especially significant for private K12 schools in China, where principals' ethical behavior shapes school culture and directly impacts the school's brand image and reputation in a competitive education market. Yang (2019) analyzes "authentic leadership", which advocates that principals use sincerity as a criterion to enhance self-awareness, demonstrate their inner moral concepts, balance their relationships with others, and present their true selves to others, with the aim of enhancing the trust between principals and followers, and enhancing the humanistic nature of ethical management. By practicing high ethical standards, educational principals inspire teachers to strive for professional excellence and cultivate responsibility, integrity, and innovation among students (Yuan, Li, Xu & Yang, 2024). Such an educational environment fosters students who are equipped to adapt to future societal challenges. However, ethical leadership is interpreted and understood differently across contexts. Previous research has identified a gap in understanding ethical leadership, with few studies exploring effective strategies for school principals to make better ethical decisions (Maxcy, 2002). This study addresses this gap, representing a breakthrough in this area of research.

Redesigning the Organization

Enhance school Culture and Humanistic Care. The goal of education is not only to impart knowledge and skills but also to cultivate lifelong learners who are innovative, critical thinkers, cooperative, ethically responsible, and globally minded. Achieving this goal hinges not only on the content and teaching methods but also on the school's culture and atmosphere. Private K12 schools, therefore, practice transformational leadership to strengthen school culture and promote humanistic care, adapting to societal changes and educational needs, thereby enhancing competitiveness and educational impact. Transformational leadership stimulates and fulfills the higher-level needs of followers, fostering personal and organizational transformation and development (Usman, 2020). Yang (2021) defines humanistic caring as a people-centered approach that values human nature, providing both spiritual and material support to ensure teachers' well-being and dedication to their work. Integrating humanistic care into school management fosters communication and mutual respect between teachers and students, contributing to the stability and growth of K12 schools (Yang, 2021). The school culture focuses on guidance, cohesion and motivation. Humanistic care places more emphasis on emotional support, mental health and personality development.

Moreover, school culture not only reflects human activities but also encompasses physical objects and the overall environment, which are equally important considerations. Lian (2013) highlighted in a case study the importance of modernizing school facilities with local elements and life aesthetics. This includes creating safe and open school environments, designing diverse and interactive learning spaces, and integrating natural elements into the school environment.

Such efforts optimize school spaces for educational activities that exemplify teaching through words, actions, and circumstances, thereby embedding humanistic care into school culture (Lian, 2013).

Building Structures to Enable Collaboration. Redesigning the Organization is more feasible for K12 private schools in China. This means they can make decisions and implement changes more quickly, without having to go through cumbersome administrative processes. The reconfiguration of the organizational and leadership structure of the school, the central work of the school to be able to better serve the training of students, and for the whole of school education to re-examine its internal and external relations is particularly important (Li, 2024). In addition, private schools are more likely to attract and retain innovative teachers and administrators, thus providing the talent to support organizational change. Harvard West Academy, it has successfully reorganized its school structure, optimized resource allocation and established more effective collaborative leadership through the implementation of transformational leadership. By encouraging teachers to participate in the decision-making process, school principals have improved teachers' job satisfaction and student achievement (Youthinks Academy, 2020).

Transformational leadership enhances the quality of education by stimulating teacher creativity and initiative, and fostering collaboration among teachers. In K12 reforms in the Philippines, principals drive educational change by building structures to support the development of a more effective collaborative leadership. principals drive educational change by building structures to enable collaborative customized blended learning models and community practices (Oracion et al., 2020). The absence of a clear collaborative structure may lead to poor information transfer and unclear

responsibilities, which in turn affects the overall efficiency and management level of the school, and makes it difficult to form team cohesion and cooperative spirit, which is not conducive to the harmonious development of the school.

Engaging Parents and the Wider Community. In strengthening family education, transformational principals can create a more supportive and enriching learning environment for students by promoting home-school co-operation, which is crucial for students' holistic development. In addition, family education plays a pivotal role in the growth and lifelong development of adolescents, and the formation of synergy between family education and school education is crucial to improving the quality of school education (Zhao, 2023).

For example, Professor Qing Gu of the School of Education at University College London points out that successful schools do not just improve students' test scores, but also teach them positive values while nurturing their personal abilities (Hu, 2020). Through measures such as holding parent workshops and establishing home-school communication platforms, schools are able to attract and use family resources more effectively to support the improvement of teaching and learning programs. The Harvard Family Research Project (2016) is a well-known example, through research, resource sharing, and policy advocacy, the project emphasizes the important role of family engagement in enhancing students' academic achievement and social-emotional development, providing practical guidance and strategies for schools and families (Harvard Family Research Project, 2016).

Due to the special nature of school organizations, schools should become an important force in maintaining social harmony. This requires schools to effectively assume social responsibility and comprehensively understand the rich connotation of school social

responsibility. The practice of social responsibility refers to an individual's or organization's positive response and contribution to the problems and needs of the society through its own behavior and activities, and is an individual's or organization's moral and social behavior (Chen, 2013). For example, Phillips Academy in the United States, a private K12 school that aims to cultivate people with a sense of social responsibility and leadership, and the school fosters students' social responsibility and leadership in particular by providing a diverse, internationalized, and humane learning environment. He also strengthens students' ethical standards and morals by establishing a school culture that is centred on social responsibility that guides students' values and codes of conduct (Fierberg & Jackson, 2017). The school also enables students to pay attention to the problems and needs of the society and practice the concepts and actions of social responsibility by advocating and organizing students to participate in various community service projects, such as educational counselling, environmental protection, and charitable donations.

Many private K12 schools have implemented the "Home-School Co-Education" program to actively promote the improvement of family education. Schools organize regular parent meetings, lectures and workshops to enhance parental participation and support for students' learning and development. Strengthening family education is particularly urgent (Meng, 2018). Communication problems exist not only between principals and teachers, but also between schools and parents. Effective channels of communication between home and school and encouragement of parental participation in school activities promote equity and improve the quality of education.

Improving the Instructional Program

Good Quality and Effective Instructional Program. The traditional "Focus on instructional development" (Leithwood & Sun, 2012) focuses on a prescriptive and standardized approach to teaching and learning, which helps to ensure stability and consistency in teaching and learning. However, high-quality and effective instructional programs go a step further by emphasizing individualized and diverse teaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse students. Private K12 schools enable students to apply what they learn in real-world problem solving, fostering their critical thinking and creativity. This not only increases students' interest and motivation, but also significantly improves learning outcomes. A quality and effective teaching program refers to a series of teaching strategies and methods that are designed and implemented through careful design and implementation with the aim of maximizing student learning outcomes and teaching efficiency (Zhang, 2023). This type of teaching program focuses not only on the transfer of knowledge, but also on the development of students' understanding, application, analytical and creative skills. It includes clear learning objectives, differentiated instruction based on students' needs, the creation of a positive learning environment, comprehensive assessment of students' learning progress, and an emphasis on continuous professional development for teachers.

High-quality and effective instructional programs are designed to comprehensively support students' academic growth and holistic development. First and foremost, high-quality teaching and learning programs provide clarity of purpose and structure, enabling teachers to design course content and teaching activities in a more focused manner. This clarity reduces teachers' work stress and increases their self-confidence and sense of accomplishment. Research has shown that

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teachers are more likely to maintain high levels of professional engagement and enthusiasm when working within a clear instructional framework (Ekmekci & Serrano, 2022). The researcher's findings of good quality and effective instructional program, a practice that lacks relevant research in China, it is a gap, which is enriching for the practice of transformational leadership.

Innovative Curriculum and Teaching Methods. The importance, necessity and feasibility of transformational leadership in implementing innovative teaching programs, curriculum and pedagogy in private K12 schools is evident. This type of leadership encourages school principals and teachers to adopt innovative ways of thinking in order to adapt to the ever-changing needs of education and improve student learning outcomes (Hu, 2020). Transformational leadership can drive innovation in schooling, including improvements in curriculum design, teaching methods and assessment strategies. This is essential for developing students' critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Private K12 schools in China have shown great dynamism in teaching program innovation and curriculum improvement. Yang and Xiao (2012) using the new curriculum standards pushes K12 English teachers to explore in new classroom teaching methods. These schools are using their flexibility to innovate educational content and methods, taking into account the specific needs of Chinese students and international educational standards. For example, some schools have introduced STEAM education programs aimed at fostering innovative thinking and practical skills among students. In addition, through collaboration with international schools and educational organizations, these schools provide students with opportunities for international exchange and learning, further expanding their horizons and experiences.

Expand Digital Education and Internationalization. Transformational leadership plays a key role in the implementation of improved teaching and learning programs, the expansion of digital education and the internationalization of education in private K12 schools. This type of leadership focuses on motivating and enhancing the motivation of staff and guiding them to work together to achieve the school's vision and goals (Zhou, Liu, Xie & Zhang, 2022). According to June 2013, the Ministry of Education emphasized in a meeting on education informational: "Take education digitization as a major strategic task at present, seize the opportunity, concentrate resources, go all out, speed up the promotion, keep making breakthroughs at stages, keep forming a series of highlights, and promote the digitization of China's education as a whole to approach the international advanced level, so as to make this work become the current most colorful educational work, become a glorious milestone in the history of the development of education" (Zhang, 2015). This can be seen that digitalize education and the internationalization of education are inseparable, and are the current mainstream and consensus in the domestic society and worldwide. The need for digital education lies in its ability to provide a more personalized and flexible approach to learning that meets the learning needs of diverse students (Shang & Li, 2023). Internationalized education, on the other hand, is about developing students' global perspectives and intercultural communication skills, which are essential for their success in a globalized world. Transformational leadership not only drives the implementation of these pedagogical reforms, but also creates an environment that supports innovation and inclusiveness in schools.

Internationally, Farleigh Primary School in the United Kingdom has enhanced the quality of teaching and learning through digitization by

providing students with free educational laptops, which provide new modes and content for classroom teaching and after-school extended learning with the help of educational applications and web-based databases. By introducing transformational leadership, a private school in Singapore has successfully integrated digital learning tools and an internationalized curriculum into its teaching program, significantly improving student learning outcomes and global competitiveness (Zhou, Liu, Xie & Zhang, 2022). In China, the K12 education system is undergoing rapid changes, especially in private schools. The spread of digital and international education is largely driven by transformational leadership. By implementing transformational leadership strategies, some leading private schools have introduced international curriculum and advanced IT resources, which not only improve the quality of teaching and learning, but also provide students with a broader global perspective.

Related Practices

Contingent Reward. Transformational leadership has emphasized the importance, necessity and feasibility of compensation and incentives in its practical application, especially in terms of strategic resources and performance innovation (Puni, Mohammed & Asamoah, 2018). The necessity and feasibility of compensation management in China's K12 education environment has also been widely discussed. For example, it has been argued that a sound compensation management system and a competitive compensation system should be established according to the internal and external characteristics of the enterprise, so that it can be gradually scientific, systematic and standardized, and can truly serve to mobilize the motivation and creativity of the enterprise's employees (HRD, 2023). In China, private K12 schools face particularly fierce competition for talent, and contingent reward is not

only an important means of attracting talented teachers, but also a key factor in inspiring long-term commitment and improving teaching quality. Therefore, establishing a fair and competitive compensation system is necessary to ensure the quality of education and promote long-term school development (Meng & Liu, 2019). In summary, transformational leadership is seen as an important strategic resource to enhance performance and innovation in both international and Chinese K12 private schools. By contingent reward, it can effectively stimulate the potential of employees and contribute to the overall development of the school. These perspectives and practices emphasize the central role of transformational leadership in educational innovation.

Management by Exception. The most important sign of positive expectation-managing leadership qualities is that the principal makes arrangements, knows when something is wrong, focuses on mistakes and deviations, pays close attention to rule violations, and instructs subordinates on how to make corrections (Antonakis et al., 2003). Some studies have found that managerial communication, learning opportunities, and work hour flexibility all positively affect commitment. Related research further suggests that management's perception of employee commitment affects their treatment of employees, which in turn affects commitment. Therefore, exception active management has a positive impact on employees' organizational commitment and it is vital that managers are actively involved in the growth and development of their employees. Exception passive management may have a negative impact on employees' organizational commitment, especially in terms of affective commitment (Abera & Marvadi, 2023). The researcher found out through a research survey. In China, private K12 schools usually

have more flexibility to implement such management strategies to meet individual student needs and to correct teacher misbehavior. But the researcher's findings of management by exception, a practice that lacks relevant research in China, is a gap, which is enriching for the practice of transformational leadership.

Seek Policy Support. Policies can address the imbalance in educational resources, reduce the education gap between urban and rural areas and between different regions, and ensure that students have access to equitable educational opportunities, with the quality of online teaching in rural areas, particularly in less economically developed areas, being significantly lower than in urban areas (Zhang, Sheng & Song, 2018). This is the kind of problem that relies on policy to solve. Through the effective use of policy resources, schools are able to access the necessary funding, technology and expertise to support the implementation and development of educational programs. Such support not only helps to upgrade the school's hardware facilities, but also enhances teachers' professional development and students' learning experience (Wang, 2009).

Internationally, private schools in many countries have been successful in obtaining policy support through building a good relationship with the government, thereby facilitating school innovation and development. For example, the Finnish education system encourages schools to co-operate with the government in developing educational projects and innovative programs, a model that has proved to be very successful (Fen, 2021). The experience of Finnish schools suggests that through collaboration between transformational principals and policy makers, resources can be effectively integrated and utilized to support educational innovation. In the Chinese market, with the gradual liberalization and

internationalization of education policies, private K12 schools have more opportunities to introduce and practice transformational leadership for school innovation and development. To summarize, transformational leadership has shown its importance, necessity and feasibility in seeking policy support to advance strategic resource management and performance innovation in private K12 schools, both internationally and in China.

Summary of the results

This study centers on the transformational leadership practices of K12 private school principals in China, and explores the specific practices that these principals have adopted in promoting school development. The dimensions comprise five dimensions: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, improving the instructional program, and related practices. The dimensions comprise 15 practices.

Figure 3. *The Practices of Transformational Leadership of Chinese K12 Private Schools in China*

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This study to answer: How are the transformational leadership practices implemented by the principals of Chinese K12 private schools? This study focuses on the practice of transformational leadership in K12 private schools in China. It highlights the principal's setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, improving the instructional program and related practices. The specific and unique practice path in the five dimensions of practices fills the gap of existing Chinese literature in the field of private education.

In terms of setting directions, the principal emphasizes focusing on comprehensive student development, combining quality education with high performance goals, and integrating the concept of all-round development into the core strategy of the school, which has not been deeply explored in previous studies. Among developing people, the leader sets an exemplary moral standard to realize the organic integration of moral demonstration and personalized incentive, especially in the face of diverse teacher teams and resource differences, showing the unique advantages of private schools. In terms of redesigning the organization, the findings of the pain study highlight how enhancing school culture and humanistic care and engaging parents and the wider community, It is pointed out that the principal's dual practice in shaping the humanistic caring atmosphere and strengthening the home-school cooperation not only enhances the internal cohesion of the school, but also expands the external support network and promotes the home-school communication. In improving the instructional program, the principal promotes teaching innovation and the introduction of global curriculum by expanding digital education and internationalization. It reflects the flexibility of private

schools in curriculum design and the rapid response to education modernization. Different from the existing research, this study reveals how private schools, in the face of resource competition and international demand, provide diversified learning paths for students through concrete practice. In addition, in related practices, seek policy support reveals how principals ensure the sustainability of change through policy orientation in multiple contexts, which makes up for the limitations of existing research on the insufficient attention paid to the policy response mechanism of private schools.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores how principals in Chinese K12 private schools practice transformational leadership, focusing on five key dimensions and identifying twelve specific practices. Through a review of the literature, the researcher found that while transformational leadership theory has been widely validated in educational reforms globally, its application in Chinese K12 private schools lacks targeted practical guidance. By employing interviews, observations, and document analysis, this study reveals how K12 private school principals in China promote sustainable school development within a unique educational context.

The study identifies several practices specific to K12 private schools, contributing to areas of transformational leadership that have remained underexplored. The novelty of this research lies in its empirically grounded and context-specific foundational framework for transformational leadership in Chinese K12 private schools, addressing the current theoretical gap. These practices provide actionable strategies for principals and establish a foundation for

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future research into the challenges and strategies of transformational leadership in private K12 schools.

This study not only fills the research gap regarding leadership in Chinese K12 private schools but also highlights the practical pathways and effectiveness of transformational leadership in addressing complex challenges. This has significant implications for the future development of private education, particularly in the context of global educational reforms, by providing insights into how school governance and educational innovation can be simultaneously enhanced.

However, a limitation of this study is that the sample focuses on private K12 schools in specific regions of China, lacking broader comparative analysis. Future research could further explore leadership differences across various types of private schools. This study calls on future scholars to pay greater attention to leadership differences among private schools, particularly in resource- and policy-constrained environments, to explore sustainable leadership strategies and innovative practices. Nonetheless, this study not only addresses the leadership research gap in Chinese K12 private schools but also provides practical insights into the pathways and effectiveness of transformational leadership, offering important implications for enhancing school governance and educational innovation in the face of global educational reforms.

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