

Career Advancement of Female Principals in Public Schools in China

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Abstract	Article Info
<i>This article reports on the factors that promote and support the career advancement of six female principals in public schools in a city on the southeastern coast of China. A qualitative research approach, through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, was adopted to explore those factors and obtain comprehensive and in-depth information. Data was coded and analyzed thematically through content analysis. Social identity theory and self-categorization theory provide the theoretical framework for this study, guiding data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The findings suggest five major factors: government policies, progressive outlook in the region, relationship building, support from mentors and family, and strong human capital. These five considerations build towards two overarching themes: deconstructed gender power relations and identity depersonalization. This study concludes with theoretical and practical implications, and future research recommendations for gender and educational leadership and management.</i>	Article History: <i>Received:</i> January 23, 2025 <i>Accepted:</i> July 3, 2025 Keywords: <i>Female principals, career advancement, public schools, China.</i>

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Introduction

Research on gender and educational leadership is dominated by Anglo-American societies (Wilkinson et al., 2021) and lacks consideration of developing countries (Fuller et al., 2021). The need to provide diversity of the global knowledge base on gender and educational leadership calls for more research from Asia.

In Chinese school settings, international understanding of female leadership is scarce. In a review of English language-based empirical research on female school leadership from 1990 to 2024 (the year 1990 was chosen because this was the decade in which the first empirical study on the Chinese school context appeared), only six sources were located. Those studies focus on three research strands: reasons for gender inequality in management (Coleman et al., 1998), leadership preparation (Qin et al., 2019), and leadership practice (Law, 2013; Li, 2014; Pisapia & Lin, 2011; Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). There appears to be no research that specifically examines factors that facilitate women's career advancement. That is, research on factors that facilitate female principals' principalship in Chinese school settings shows a theoretical, contextual, and literature gap. The study reported in this paper sets out to explore the factors that promote and support the career advancement of female principals. Specifically, what factors reflected the deconstruction of gender power relations, and what qualities developed by women support them to become school principals?

Literature Review

International literature on gender and educational leadership (e.g., Coleman 2001; Fuller, 2009; Chan et al., 2016) identified a number of factors that promote and support the career advancement of women as school principals. Those identified factors provide a frame of reference to understand and explain women's career advancement in principalship. As leadership is context-sensitive, this study attempts to find out whether those factors remain drivers for women in the Chinese context in view of different social, contextual, and political environments. The selective presentation of those identified factors is bounded by the research objective and theoretical framework.

This section reviews the literature on factors that reflect the deconstructed gender power relations and identity depersonalization. The themes guiding the presentation are derived from the literature. All examples of empirical studies are drawn from school settings.

Government policies

Although government policies are criticized as limited in promoting gender equality (Coleman and Fitzgerald, 2008), they have still released some positive signs in helping women achieve leadership positions. Government policies enable women who may face issues of discrimination to have more equal opportunities in assuming leadership positions. Coleman (2007) positively comments on the UK government's efforts, based on a report provided by Flexibility Limited (2006), suggesting that the equal opportunities legislation and 'family-friendly' policies played a positive part in increasing the number of women in educational leadership positions. In Uganda, government regulations requiring every coeducational school to have one female head teacher or female deputy head teacher, to provide a

safer and more conducive study environment for adolescent girls, benefited women's advancement into leadership positions (Sperandio, 2010). However, there is currently no empirical research on the role of government policies in promoting women as school leaders in international and Chinese school settings.

Geographic advantage

Regional variation in women's representation in headship positions suggests geographical advantages for women becoming school leaders (Coleman, 2001, 2007; Fuller, 2009). Empirical evidence shows that areas with good economic development are more conducive for women to become school leaders. Consciousness-raising on gender equality issues at the local level provides women with greater opportunities to attain leadership positions.

Coleman's survey in England suggested the "London effect" (Coleman, 2007, p. 386), meaning that "London and the metropolitan areas are statistically favourable" for women to become educational leaders (Coleman, 2002, p. 48). The reason for this difference was speculated to be the legacy of equal opportunity policies committed and invested by the former Inner London Education Authority (IELA), which contributed to people's psychological acceptance of women as leaders (Edwards & Lyons, 1994). In addition, there exists an urban/rural split for women's representation in leadership positions. In New Zealand, benefitting from education reform in 1989, there was an increase in participation of minority groups (including women, Māori, and Pasifika) in school leadership, particularly in urban schools where students were predominantly people of colour (Fitzgerald, 2003). In Chinese school settings, Coleman et al. (1998)'s study in Shaanxi province showed that there were relatively more female primary principals in urban schools than in rural schools, although no

female secondary principals were found in the research area. The reasons for the differences were not provided. Therefore, the extent to which geography influences the career advancement of Chinese female school leaders warrants further investigation.

Networking

Networking refers to individuals' active action and behaviour to build and maintain relationships with others who demonstrate the potential to help them achieve career promotion and improve work performance (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Literature informs that networking impacts women's career advancement through mentoring, access to promotion opportunities, and skills building. By using mixed methods, Karamanidou's (2017) study on women principals in Cyprus primary schools suggested that networking was a platform for them to interact with other female principals and that the insights gained informed their management of work-life balance. In China, especially in Chinese government organizations, good relationships with superiors and colleagues have become one of the promotion criteria, helping people to achieve "what otherwise may be difficult to secure" (Cooke, 2005, p. 158). However, there is a paucity of studies investigating the impact of networking on female school leaders. Given that education in China is a sub-branch of, and supervised by, the government (OECD, 2016), how networking impacts the career advancement of female school leaders requires further investigation.

Family support

Empirical evidence shows that family support varies in forms and plays an important role in enabling women to reduce work-family conflict, manage career advancement demands, and maintain career continuity.

Sharing childcare responsibility is regarded as significant by respondents to Coleman's (2001) survey of women secondary headteachers in England and Wales. Her findings suggested that husbands/partners' support was important for them to achieve headship, especially with those who were married with children. Family support can also be reflected in emotional, spiritual, and material aspects. Female principals of post-primary educational sectors in the Republic of Ireland revealed that material and emotional support from their family members (including husbands, partners, and parents) increased their career opportunities (Cunneen & Harford, 2015). A similar finding was found in Chan et al.'s (2016) study of eight female principals in Hong Kong, suggesting that their husbands played important roles by persuading or nudging them to apply for promotion and principal positions. However, no studies have been found to investigate the impact of family support on female school leaders in mainland China.

Mentor support

A mentor is usually an influential, experienced senior member who is willing to share knowledge and experience with new and young members of the organization (Mathews, 2003). The positive role of mentors for mentees is widely recognised as helpful for career and psychosocial development (Kram, 1983), which eventually helps identity construction of leaders (Moorosi, 2014). Mentoring women who have been undervalued helps them reduce the skill gap and enhance promotion opportunities, as supported by empirical studies in global and Asian school contexts.

Coleman's (2001) survey of female secondary headteachers in England and Wales showed the significant role of former headteachers, senior managers, and even colleagues in encouraging them to pursue career

promotion. These survey findings are supported by a qualitative study conducted by Chan et al (2016) in Hong Kong. By using the life history method, eight female principals indicated that their career advancement was facilitated by mentoring and encouragement from their former heads, who recognized their diligence and dedication, identified their potential, and nurtured their skills. However, in mainland China, there is a paucity of studies on how mentoring influences the career development of female school leaders.

Role models

Role models are those individuals whose lives, actions, and activities influence others in certain aspects (Quimby and DeSantis, 2006). Several scholars (e.g., Coleman, 2002; Shakeshaft et al., 2007) claim the encouraging role that role models play in helping women obtain senior leadership positions. Role models demonstrate viable pathways to career success and provide practical strategies and stronger motivation for women to overcome challenges. This is supported by a study conducted by Sperandio and Polinchock (2015) on female elementary school principals aspiring to the school district superintendency in the USA. By utilizing mixed methods, their findings suggested that having role models to emulate (e.g., supervisors, colleagues, family members) fostered their aspirations for advancement and helped them to attain leadership positions (Sperandio & Polinchock, 2015). However, in mainland China, there is a paucity of studies to reveal the impact of role models on female school leaders.

Personal agency

Agency is the ability to manage and control one or more aspects of one's own life (Smith, 2011). Being conscious of the need for control

and personal development leads women to cultivate the qualities, skills, and qualifications needed for promotion.

Being active in career planning, in terms of enhancing education and attending training, was found important to the career advancement of eight women primary school principals in Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2016). The useful and transformative knowledge and skill from education or training transcended their humble background and entitled them to further promotion (Chan et al., 2016). Ambitions, together with self-confidence and self-motivation, were reported by Smith's (2011) qualitative research on 40 female secondary school teachers in England. These qualities formed strategic approaches, which allowed women teachers to take their initial steps and exert their agency to seek career goals (Smith, 2011). Diligence in helping women's career success has empirically yielded mixed results. Several studies have shown diligence's positive effect on female principals' careers by taking on extra duties (Chan et al., 2016) and working long hours (Chan et al., 2016; Coleman, 2000). However, Fuller's (2009) study challenged this by suggesting that fewer women secondary headteachers attributed their career success to diligence. In mainland China, few studies report the influence of agency on female school leaders.

Political orientation

China is run by a single party, the Communist Party of China (CPC). This political environment demonstrates the dominant power of the government in managing education, including school principals. It is therefore important for aspiring school leaders to demonstrate correct political orientation.

There is growing recognition of the impact of party membership on one's career advancement. Wang and Shirmohammadi's (2016) view that pursuing political education is a means of career advancement in state-owned organizations has been recognized by aspiring employees. Xue and Bush's (2024) research on one training program for new and aspiring high school principals in a Southwest province of China showed that the participating male and female high school principals and vice principals were all party members. This finding suggests that whether female school principals consider pursuing political education and party membership as a means of advancing their careers requires further investigation.

In summary, a variety of factors are identified as important to the career progression of female school leaders, globally and in the few Chinese studies. However, those factors seem to be fragmented and lack a framework to integrate them. Coleman (2011) integrated facilitating factors of women's career success into three categories: social capital (e.g., through networking), human capital (e.g., through agency), and organizational support (e.g., through policy). However, her integration is not based solely on female school leaders.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) to construct a theoretical framework. SIT proposes that a low-status group member can cross the group boundary to become a higher-status group member. This perspective helps to analyse the experience of female principals crossing the gender boundary from teaching positions to typically male-dominated principal positions.

SIT is proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), while SCT is developed by Turner and his colleagues (Turner et al., 1987). SCT has been seen

as a significant complementary concept of extended social identity theory (Hogg & Terry, 2000). By extracting and synthesizing the relevant assumptions and propositions, intergroup relations and self-identity are thematized to form the theoretical framework to guide the data collection, data presentation, and discussion.

Intergroup relations

Intergroup relation is the core feature of SIT (Hogg, 2016). SIT proposes that society is comprised of different social groups with hierarchical power and status relations (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Hornsey, 2008). Gender is an important factor in constructing power relations (Watkins, 1989). As argued by Eagly and Karau (2002) that men and women are respectively located in the high and low power hierarchy in society because of traditional role definition, with men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Such gender power relations constitute a society in which women are responsible for the majority of family responsibilities (Coleman, 2001; Lumby, 2015) and women are naturally and psychologically categorized as outsiders of male-dominated leadership groups (Schmuck, 1996). Therefore, society, workplaces, and home may be observed as places filled with gender power relations. As women have successfully reached principal positions, such gender power relations are likely to be deconstructed in various dimensional contexts, hence they can cross the gender boundaries to become principals. This perspective is used by this study to identify factors that reflect deconstructed gender power relations experienced by female principals in their career advancement.

Self-identity

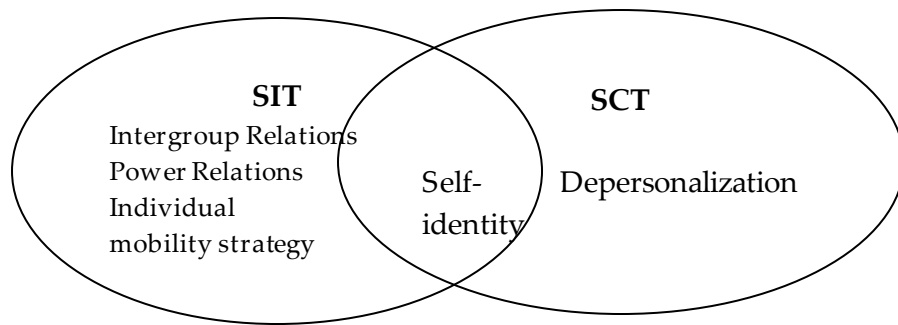
SIT proposes that individuals' intrinsic motivation to pursue positive distinctiveness can enable them to take individualistic mobility strategies to gain access to other higher status social groups, conditional on the perceived permeability of group boundaries (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This helps aspiring female leaders to depersonalize identity from teacher to principal.

Identity depersonalization occurs when the process of self-categorization takes place, as proposed by SCT. Enabling the self to cognitively assimilate context-dependent in-group prototypes, which are fuzzy sets of interrelated attributes (e.g., beliefs, values, behaviors) that capture similarities within groups and differences between groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000), self-categorization leads to a "cognitive redefinition of self"-depersonalization (McGarty, 1999; Turner, 1984, p. 528). Such prototype-based depersonalization is dynamic and orients individuals towards social identity instead of personal identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). That is, when an aspiring female leader's salient self-category is to become a member of a particular principal group, she tends to assimilate with members of that leadership group (Haslam et al., 2011). Given that men dominate leadership positions, women may consciously or unconsciously build and display male leadership qualities to increase their suitability for principal roles. This perspective is used by this study to identify the male leader qualities developed by female principals in their career advancement.

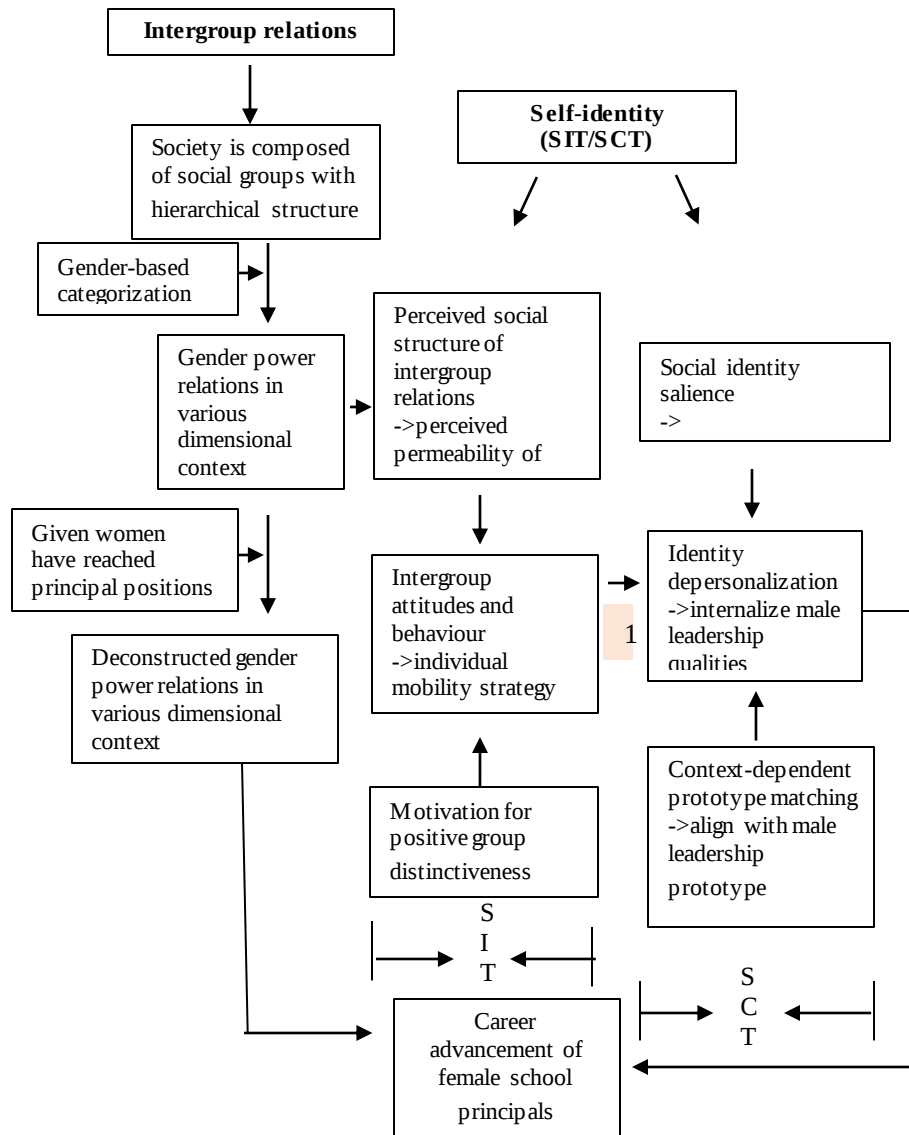
According to the assumption proposed by SIT or SCT, a model was developed to demonstrate the relationship between theories, theoretical concepts, and factors related to women's career advancement, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

A theoretical model to investigate the career advancement of female school principals



Continued in the next page



Note on 1. Self-identity derives from both SIT and SCT.

In SIT, individual mobility strategy shifts one's behaviour from acting "as an individual in terms of interpersonal relationships" to acting "as a group member in terms of intergroup relationships" (Turner and

Reynolds, 2001, p. 135). Such a behaviour shift, as extended by SCT, can be explained by the distinction between personal identity and social identity (Turner and Reynolds, 2001). The basic idea is that “self-perception or self-conception varies between personal and social identity and that as one moves from defining self as a person to defining self in terms of a social identity, group behavior becomes possible and emerges” (Turner and Reynolds, 2001, p. 135).

Methodology

A qualitative approach is adopted to explore the factors that promote and support the career advancement of six female principals in six public schools in a city on the southeastern coast of China. The exploratory nature of this study requires in-depth data collection, so qualitative research is preferred (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Sampling

Six female leaders were purposively selected to participate in this study: three female principals and three female vice principals. They worked in six different public schools: three primary, one combined (primary school and junior secondary school), one junior secondary, and one vocational. The background of participants is shown in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of participants (Cohen et al., 2017). VP6 has experience as a vice-principal in two schools.

Table 1
Backgrounds of the interviewed participants

Interviewed participants	Years as teachers and middle leaders	Years as vice principal	Years/months as principal
P1	17	10	5 months
P2	18	10	2 years and 5 months
P3	13	10	8 months
VP4	16	10	
VP5	16	12	
VP6	8	6 (1 st experience)	
	6	8 (2 nd experience)	

Positionality and reflexivity

The researcher's positionality (e.g., gender, education, experience) may introduce biases to research (Berger, 2015). To help minimize the influence of positionality, the researcher took reflexivity through constant evaluation and self-reflection throughout the research process (Berger, 2015; McGhee et al., 2007). A hybrid position (McGhee et al., 2007) was embraced in this study. On one hand, the researcher was familiar with the research areas and embraced the role because of some understanding of the topic under study through reading and lived experience (McGhee et al., 2007). On the other hand, the researcher was not familiar with the female leaders and their schools (McGhee et al., 2007). This helped the researcher to build a rapport with participants to obtain more information, and meanwhile present their perspectives rigorously (Berger, 2015).

Data collection

Before data collection, ethical approval was sought and received from the University Ethics Board in December 2020. All principals provided written informed consent before participating in this study.

Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were chosen as the research methods. Semi-structured interviews were used as a major research instrument because of the exploratory nature of this study. Semi-structured interviews often consist of several key questions, with a few sub-questions and possible probing questions (Coleman, 2012). Such a structure is flexible, enabling the researcher to ask probing questions for a particular response, aiming to seek more comprehensive and in-depth information (Coleman, 2012). All interviews were carried out on a one-by-one basis and lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. The main interview question was determined by the aim of this study, and the two sub-questions were generated based on the theoretical framework and literature review:

What are the factors that facilitate and promote female leaders as school principals in Chinese public schools?

- What factors reflected the deconstruction of gender power relations in various dimensional contexts (e.g., society, organizations, family) that support you to become a school principal?
- What qualities have you developed and displayed that enable you to become a school principal generally dominated by men?

Document analysis of the 'Provisional measures for the management of primary and secondary school leaders' (MOE, 2017) was also carried out. Interpreting and analysing this document were intended to understand the criteria and procedures set by the government for

selecting school leaders, enabling triangulation and corroboration of information obtained from semi-structured interviews (Fitzgerald, 2012).

Data analysis

Data analysis contains two approaches, namely, deductive analysis and inductive analysis. Deductive analysis was guided by the theoretical framework and used to set the boundaries for data analysis and frame the findings of this study. Inductive analysis relied on the data of interviews and documents framed by interview questions and a theoretical framework. The specific procedure is explained below.

Data collected from interviews and documents were thematically analyzed through content analysis. Content analysis was used to examine patterns by categorizing texts from interviews and documents systematically (Cohen et al., 2017). The basic principles of analysis adopted the data analysis spiral presented by Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 186). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and organized into 6 Word files, and then analyzed simultaneously with documents. Scanning the text from these two data sources was first conducted to gain a general sense of data, and meanwhile, ideas and concepts that came to mind were recorded. This is followed by coding, a process of 'winnowing' the data, selecting relevant and discarding irrelevant text information based on the aim of this study. Coding aggregated transcribed interviews and documents into small categories, and then into broad units of information to form fewer themes and subthemes. Those codes, sub-themes, and themes were identified deductively, based on predetermined concepts guided by a theoretical framework and literature review, and inductively, emergent from research data related to the topic of this study. They were improvisational and open to revision and were structured

logically, coherently, and hierarchically by using constant comparative methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). At this stage, cross-analysis was carried out to cluster themes and sub-themes into similarity, to build links and patterns, and to distinguish differences, with the aim of making comparisons. Throughout the entire analysis, interpretation ran through the process of generating codes and themes, abstracting and making sense of data, by linking to personal experience and perspectives, and insights and concepts from literature developed by others (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

Female principals' career progression follows a step-by-step ascent, from teachers, middle leaders, vice principals, and finally to principals. Factors that promote and support them to reach principalship are categorized into five major themes: government policies, progressive outlook in the region, relationship building, support from mentors and family, and strong human capital. They are shown in the following sub-themes.

Government policies

Government policies tend to promote an equal playing field for men and women to enter and advance into leadership positions. However, on the impact of government policies on their career development, female principals demonstrate mixed perspectives, either positively or negatively.

Positively, the reserve cadre examination (open to middle-level school leaders, regardless of gender, aiming at selecting reserve talents for future principals), initiated and organized by the government, provided female principals with an equal opportunity to excel as their male counterparts, laying the foundation for their further

advancement in leadership positions. Based on the recommendations from their respective schools, three female leaders (P1, P3, VP6) took and passed the exam. Following a series of evaluations and assessments, they were then identified and selected into the principal reserve talent pool. As recalled by P3, 'I submitted my resume, honours and achievements gained, followed by the exam, and then an interview'. This style of selecting principal candidates, as they believed, was vital for their progression to current leadership positions. VP6, for example, who has two experiences as a vice principal and has taken the examination twice in both her previous school and school 6, made it clear that:

The promotion system was open and fair to men and women. This exam made me stand out . . . I was promoted to the vice principal position for a few years. I did not feel that being a woman gender was a barrier to my promotion to school leader. (VP6).

In 2017, MOE issued an official document, namely, 'Provisional measures for the management of primary and secondary school leaders' (MOE, 2017), to clarify selection criteria and procedures for promoting school leaders (including middle leaders, vice principals, and principals), without any indication of gender preference for any leadership position. This downplayed the apparent impact of gender on women and benefited two principals (P1, P3) in their promotion to principal positions. For example, P3 articulated that:

Our education system in the local district gave women an equal chance as men. It didn't mention that I cannot do certain things because I am a woman. The social environment like this was very helpful. (P3).

Negative perspective came from female principals P2, VP4, and VP5. Their initial promotion path was not through the reserve cadre

examination. The lack of uniform standards for their promotion to the positions of middle leaders and vice principals indicated the lag in promotion policies. This, therefore, prevented them from seeing any benefit of government policies on their career advancement.

Progressive outlook in the region

All six female leaders mentioned the importance of the region in which they worked in helping them achieve their current leadership positions. The region is located in an important port city on the southeastern coast of China, with good economic development.

The rapid economic development bred and cultivated the open-mindedness among residents who valued girls' education and were willing to send their daughters to receive an education. Such broad-mindedness created opportunities for females to obtain better education, as addressed by P2 and VP4. Meanwhile, the accumulated and continued broad-mindedness also created opportunities for females to be tolerated and accepted by men as leaders. This enabled six female principals to advance to their current leadership positions. Regarding the above two points, VP4 mentioned in her own words below:

Through education, women become better and better. So, they can be assigned a challenging job, like me. (VP4).

Regarding the specific groups that accepted and tolerated them as leaders, female principals mentioned two general types, namely, local community and school leaders.

Relationship building

Networking was in an open state. Female principals did not encounter any joining restrictions and can freely choose whether to participate or

not. As directly mentioned by P2, “it is not a problem anymore”. However, their perception of the relationship between networking and their career progression presented mixed information. Several female principals (P1, P2, P3, VP5, VP6) who saw its convenience actively developed and expanded their relationships within and outside of schools. They employed two main approaches to build and expand their networking: work-related aspects and personal-related aspects. Work-related aspects included task-based problem-solving (P2) and frequent work contacts (VP6), while personal-related aspects included women’s own charisma (P1), femininity (P3), and personality (VP5). The people whom those female principals targeted and chose to establish relationships with were the leaders of their respective schools and the superiors of the educational bureau. Those established relationships helped them obtain and secure visibility and favorability during their promotion to their current leadership positions. VP6, for example, her perception of the difficulty of getting further advancement into a principal position confirmed the importance of networking for women’s career success: “If someone had helped me, I would have become the principal long ago”.

Compared to networking, VP4 had a different view and claimed that her career promotion depended on herself, not others. As she informed, it was her capability and diligence demonstrated in her work that earned her the appreciation of one former female principal, who recognized her potential and promoted her to the current position of vice principal. Regarding this point, VP4 made a clear explanation:

I had no social circle. I felt that I had risen to where I am because I was willing to endure hardship and invest time and energy in my work. (VP4).



Support

Support includes mentor support and family support, which are reported separately.

Mentor support

All female principals agreed on the importance of former principals to their career advancement. They were given opportunities to develop and advance their career. They were mentored by their former male and/or female principals in terms of nurture and recognition (Kram, 1983). Nurture was reflected in the development of management knowledge and skills, for instance, problem-solving skills, teacher management, instructional management, organizing activities, and delegating tasks; and in building them, the values and norms for leadership roles, for example, school running philosophy.

Recognizing their leadership potential took the form of recognizing their abilities, promoting them to middle leadership, and recommending them to be vice principal and/or principals. The benefit of mentors in both nurture and recognition was mentioned by P2, who was mentored by two former principals:

They were all well-known principals and had their own management style. The first one was really respected, nurtured, and cultivated me, and led by example . . . The second one was the principal in the xx school and was very avant-garde in terms of ideological and educational philosophy, and in line with international standards. They promoted me to a management position and also influenced my way of leading the school. (P2).

Family support

All female principals showed strong agreement on the impact of family support on their careers. By family, they included their own parents, husbands, and/or in-laws. The role of female principals in the family has been redefined, and they have been allowed to enter the public sphere. Whether as students or married women, they received support from their family members. When they were students, their parents invested in their education, which prepared them with the initial academic qualification for further learning and future career development. When they got married, sharing childcare responsibility with in-laws (VP4, VP5, VP6) or husbands (P1, P2, P3) provided them with the space and time needed for promotion, in terms of work focus and work overtime. As confessed by VP4, without the help of in-laws to take care of her child, she would not be able to do anything. Meanwhile, female principals also expressed gratitude for the emotional and spiritual support provided by their respective husbands. Encouragement and freedom given to them in seeking career development released them from the feeling of guilt of not spending time with their families. Regarding this, P1 deeply remembered what her husband said to her, "It's fine if you get the position. Don't worry if you can't get it".

Strong human capital

Human capital is broadly "defined as the stock of knowledge, skills, and other personal characteristics embodied in people that help them to be more productive" (OECD, 2022, p. 6). Strong human capital found from the findings of this study suggests that female principals are active in building, negotiating, and shaping themselves to possess the qualities expected of school leadership roles, a necessary and

significant process in depersonalizing their identity from teacher to principal. This is shown in the following sub-themes.

Expertise in teaching

In school, preference for men as leaders was still pervasive, and this put women at a disadvantage in advancing into leadership positions. As mentioned by female principals that although women had gained increasing recognition, the rarity of men in the field of education gave men an advantage over women in advancing to principal positions. For example, P3, taking a middle leader man who held the director of general affairs as an example, elaborated how the Education Bureau might 'bend' the rule to promote men:

Even if the male teacher was not as good as the female teacher in terms of teaching, if this position indeed needed him, and if he did a good job, he was likely to become the next principal. Many male teachers in schools around us grew up in this position. (P3).

Awareness of perpetuated leadership stereotypes made female principals realize that they had to show a certain level of superiority over men to be seen and valued. Being strong instructional leaders was unanimously recognized as a useful avenue for them to shine. Their expression covered two levels of effort they put into improving their teaching expertise. First, from the level of personal achievement, they won awards through active participation in various teaching competitions. Second, from the level of classroom teaching, they improved students' academic performance and made good and effective management of administrative affairs (e.g., managing the "most chaotic" class and organizing teaching activities). They also showed strong commitment and dedication to classroom teaching (e.g., good working attitude, strong sense of responsibility, and selfless

work). Their expertise in teaching had earned them recognition from their principals in schools and superiors in the Educational Bureau. P1, for example, had a deep understanding of her effort to become an English subject expert and how this helped her rise to the principal position:

Of all the career fields, teaching has the most serious PK . . . People who were able to come out should have exceptional excellence . . . Generally, those with excellent and exemplary teaching will be promoted to principals. (P1).

Adherence to the CPC

All female principals understood the affiliation between education and politics, e.g., “the party manages and leads us, which means the party and administrative work are not two different things” (P2). The nature of education with a focus on serving politics determined the government’s dominant position in social values, which may be ‘imposed’ on schools to fulfil the intentions and values of the government (Bush, 2008, p. 277; Bush and Glover, 2014). Awareness of such a role of schools drove female principals to act and behave in accordance with government values, aiming to gain promotion opportunities. As informed by several female principals (P1, P2, P3, VP5), being a party member increased their chance of being promoted to current leadership positions. However, party membership was not a prerequisite for promotion to become school vice principals. VP4 and VP6 were not party members but were still given the opportunity to serve as vice principals. Meanwhile, to make their appointment effective, all female principals needed to accept the promotion recommendation arranged by the Education Bureau. The accepted arrangement included ‘reallocation’ (P1, P2, P3) and ‘internal promotion’ (VP4, VP5, VP6).

Masculinity

Coleman (2011) argues that gender stereotypes may lead to the assumption that successful women need to possess and demonstrate masculine qualities. Awareness of such assumptions influenced female principals in this study. Ambition and diligence were seen as the two main masculine features that they attempted to establish.

Ambition was significant and expressed by all six female principals. It allowed them to see the meaning of seeking principalship and played a role as a prerequisite and primary driving force for them to initiate and actively climb the career ladder. Female principals expressed ambition for positions of influence, which was reflected in school changes and personal desire. School changes manifested as a high level of ambition, specifically, realizing educational ideals (P1, P3), and contributing to education in terms of “leave something for the school” (P2) and “shoulder responsibility as an educator” (VP5). Personal desire was shown in autonomy in the position (P1), paving the way for her child (VP4), and pursuing freedom and achievement (VP6). Those ambitions fuelled female principals’ agency and framed other qualities, including determination, active career planning, motivation, and diligence, in their pursuit of principalships. The forms of diligence, they reported, were mainly reflected in working long hours, in terms of working overtime and sacrificing sleep, and being able to withstand pressure and heavy workloads, e.g., “if I did not do something well, I would not sleep and cannot sleep as well” (VP5). The diligence they put in was beneficial to their careers and rewarded them with high work performance and promotion opportunities.

Discussion

Five major factors emerge from the research as important to promote and support female principals' promotion to principalship. They are government policies, progressive outlook in the region, relationship building, support from mentors and family, and strong human capital. Linked to the theoretical framework, these five factors were discussed under the theme of deconstructed gender power relations and identity depersonalization.

Deconstructed gender power relations

Government practices may disturb the hierarchical gender order and create more equal gender power relations in the national context (Coleman, 2007). Government policies tend to mitigate overt discrimination against women and promote an equal playing field for women and men to compete for leadership positions. Reserve cadre examination, and the clarification of the selection criteria and procedures for school leaders, helped the studied female principals to advance into their current leadership positions. This finding on the active role of government policy in female principals' career advancement is consistent with several researchers' positive comments on the government's efforts in promoting gender equality in the UK (Coleman, 2007) and in Uganda (Sperandio, 2010). However, government policies also received negative reviews in the current research. The lag in policies and lack of uniform standards for promotion to middle leaders and vice principals precluded several leaders (P2, VP4, VP5) from seeing the benefits of government policies for their career progression. The mixed information found in this study regarding the impact of government policies on women's career advancement is new, and to what extent it can be replicated requires further investigation.

A progressive outlook may transform the perceptions of local people and challenge the traditional hierarchical gender power relations in regional contexts (Coleman, 2001, 2007; Fuller, 2009). The strong economic status in the studied region and a high education level among the residents have led to a shift towards more open and less discriminatory attitudes towards women. Growing tolerance and acceptance of women as leaders given by local community and school leaders enabled these female principals and vice principals to leverage favourable external and internal forces to move up their career ladder. This geographical advantage for women's career development, to some extent, may mirror the concept of 'London effect' (Coleman, 2007, p. 386) and urban/rural split (Coleman et al., 1998; Fitzgerald, 2003), suggesting that women are more likely to emerge as leaders in areas with good economic development.

Women's freedom of choice to build networking with superiors and school leaders may reflect deconstructed gender power relations in the context of the Education Bureau and schools. However, female principals' perceptions of the impact of networking on their career advancement are mixed. Those female principals who saw its benefits actively built and expanded their relationships within and outside schools. The relationships built with superiors of the Education Bureau or leaders in schools, through work-related or personal links, helped them to secure visibility and favorability. The importance of networking found in this study is consistent with Karamanidou's (2017) research, but there are differences in the persons to whom female principals develop relationships. Female principals of this study were targeted at individuals with higher power hierarchy (including superiors of the Education Bureau and school principals), rather than peers (other female principals) reported by Karamanidou

(2017). However, networking is not a 'panacea'. Aligning with the principal's preferences can create more influential effects than networking. Capability and diligence helped VP4 gain appreciation and support from her former female principal, who guided her and recommended her to the current vice principal position. The mixed message about the impact of networking on women's career advancement found in this study is new, and the extent to which it can be replicated needs further investigation.

Gaining mentor support may indicate growing deconstructed power relations between leaders and employees, men and women in the schools (Coleman, 2004, 2007). Female principals in this study were mentored by male and/or female principals in nurturing for leadership positions and promotion, and in recognizing their leadership potential. This nurture and recognition helped female principals to internalize leadership identities and advance into principal positions. This finding echoes previous studies (Coleman, 2001; Chan et al., 2016), suggesting the role of the former principals in nurturing and recognizing aspiring female leaders.

Supportive family practices may suggest relatively equal gender power relations between men and women in the family (Coleman, 2001, 2002). Women's traditional family roles have been redefined, and female principals are supported in receiving education and seeking career advancement. Parents' financial support for education and families sharing childcare responsibility provided female principals with the initial academic qualifications and ensured the space and time required for promotion. Their respective husbands' emotional and spiritual support eased female principals' guilt for not spending time with their children while seeking career mobility. These results align with previous studies, showing the importance of families sharing

childcare responsibility (Coleman, 2001), emotional, spiritual, and material support (Chan et al., 2016; Cunneen and Harford, 2015) to female principals' career advancement.

Identity depersonalization

Female principals develop strong human capital by actively responding, negotiating, and shaping themselves in qualities expected of school leaders. Awareness of the perpetuated masculine leadership stereotypes and the role of schools in fulfilling government values leads female principals to build and internalize three qualities: teaching expertise, masculinity, and adherence to the CPC.

Developing expertise in teaching, from the level of personal achievement and classroom teaching, enabled female principals to gain recognition from their principals and superiors in the Education Bureau, and to stand out in school contexts that currently favour male leadership. Requiring female principals to demonstrate higher levels of competence than men, as found in this study, indicates double standards for competence, in that gender can be a basis for stricter and higher standards being applied to women (e.g., Foddy & Smithson, 1999; Foschi, 2000).

Masculinity, in terms of ambition and diligence, increases women's suitability for male-stereotypical leadership (Coleman, 2011). Aiming for positions of influence, through determination, active career planning, motivation, and diligence, underpins female principals' agency to seek career development. This finding is in line with a previous study (Smith, 2011), suggesting the role of ambitions in helping women acquire other qualities and increasing their agency to seek career advancement. In particular, diligence, including working long hours and being able to withstand pressure and heavy workloads,

allowed female principals in this study to gain high work performance and win promotion opportunities. This finding is consistent with previous studies, showing the importance of diligence in terms of taking extra duties (Chan et al., 2016) and working long hours (Chan et al., 2016; Coleman, 2000) for women to become principals, but contrary to Fuller's (2009) study, which suggested diligence's less effect on women's career success.

Adherence to the CPC, by pursuing and joining party membership, and accepting recommendations for promotion arranged by the Education Bureau, establishes their political identity and adjusts to the nature of education with a focus on serving politics. This finding is significant as there is a paucity of research linking gendered leadership and political affiliation. However, being a party member is not a must-have qualification to become school vice principals, as shown in the case of VP4 and VP6, who were promoted without party membership. This finding contradicts the research by Xue and Bush (2024) in the Southwest province of China, where male and female high school principals and vice principals were all party members. The difference may be due to the different research contexts. The extent to which these findings can be replicated requires further investigation in other parts of China.

Conclusion

This study explores the factors that promote and support the career advancement of six female principals in public schools in a port city on the southeastern coast of China. Deconstructed gender power relations and identity depersonalization are key to promoting and supporting female leaders as principals in public school settings.

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the research findings. However, given that it is the first English language-based study investigating factors that support female leaders as school principals in the Chinese school settings, this study enriches the global knowledge on female leadership and provides a reference framework to understand Chinese female school leaders. Therefore, it demonstrates significant theoretical and practical implications, and meanwhile allows us to propose recommendations for future studies.

From a theoretical perspective, this study uses an alternative theoretical framework, which can be seen as complementary to other theories used in gender studies, for example, intersectionality theory (e.g., Moorosi et al., 2018) and the management route model (e.g., Tangonyire et al., 2022). Given that this theoretical framework is introduced, the extent to which it can work in other contexts and whether it can generate similar findings requires further investigation. Meanwhile, this study emerges with some new understanding compared with existing literature and research. Mixed findings from networking and government policies, and new themes that have emerged (including teaching expertise, adherence to the CPC, and networking with individuals with higher power hierarchy), provide new insights into factors that promote women's career advancement. However, the extent to which these themes are replicable requires further research in other parts of China.

From a practical perspective, this study suggests that masculine leadership remains pervasive. Policy makers and practitioners (e.g., male principals in schools and superiors in the education bureau) can provide professional development training that directly focuses on men's and women's ways of leading and managing, and aims to

reduce prejudice about female leadership (Coleman and Fitzgerald, 2008). Aspiring female leaders themselves can also have a better understanding of their position, providing a direction for them to effectively plan their careers.

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