

## Critically examine effective leadership in Early Childhood Education

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### ABSTRACT

This essay critically examines effective leadership in early childhood education (ECE) within China's unique socio-cultural context. It focuses on two prominent leadership models: distributed leadership, which emphasizes shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making, and pedagogical leadership, which prioritizes instructional quality and direct support for teaching practices. The analysis reveals that while China's traditional, authority-oriented and collectivist culture presents challenges to implementing these models, both possess significant potential when contextually adapted. Distributed leadership can enhance teacher engagement and professional development, whereas pedagogical leadership ensures alignment with educational goals and policies. The study concludes that an integrated approach, combining the collaborative strengths of distributed leadership with the instructional focus of pedagogical leadership, may be most effective. Such a hybrid model can navigate the complexities of the Chinese ECE setting, fostering both teacher growth and the achievement of high-quality educational outcomes.

### KEYWORDS

Early childhood education leadership; Distributed leadership; Pedagogical leadership

## 1 Introduction

The critical analysis and exploration of leadership in early childhood education is a significant subject that is well worth investigating. Leadership is a dynamic and multifaceted concept that can manifest itself in a variety of forms<sup>[1]</sup>. Leadership in early education involves the specific application of leadership principles to the context of educating young children. Such leadership requires a deep understanding of child development, educational practices, and the unique challenges and opportunities that exist in early childhood environments. Thus, effective leadership in early education is crucial. In early childhood education, leaders play the role of setting and communicating vision and direction<sup>[2]</sup>. Leaders are crucial in education and teaching, as well as with regard to parents, teachers, and young children. Research has proved that effective leadership not only enhances the quality of education and achieves better educational outcomes<sup>[3]</sup>, but also, according to Siraj and Manni's research, effective leadership provides teachers with opportunities for professional advancement, and has some positive impacts on teacher career development<sup>[4]</sup>.

In the international context, the importance of effective leadership in early childhood education is reflected in many countries, both in terms of policy and action. Australia has developed the National Quality Standard to provide quality assessment standards for early education and care services, as well as Scandinavia's Finland, which provides a legal framework for the quality of leadership and education for children<sup>[5]</sup>, reflecting a focus on the quality of teacher development and leadership in early childhood education. Leadership has an impact on early childhood education and is an essential element of early childhood education. Therefore, there is a need to explore and scrutinise the concept of effective leadership in early childhood education in greater depth and detail, as well as the importance of embodying effective leadership in teacher development and achieving educational goals. In China, with the rapid socio-economic development and the continuous updating of educational concepts, the significance of early childhood education has gradually been widely recognised, and a series of policies have been introduced at the national level to improve the quality of education and the professional competence of teachers. The Working Regulations for Kindergartens<sup>[6]</sup> first put forward systematic requirements for early childhood education and defined the management and educational tasks of kindergartens. Since then, with socio-cultural changes, families' increasing demand for top-notch early childhood education has promoted the rising importance of educational leadership in the subject of early childhood education. This essay is grounded in the socio-cultural context of China, where traditional educational philosophy emphasises respect for teachers and their centrality in the educational process, a cultural context that necessitates both prestige and managerial competence on the part of the leader to ensure the achievement of educational goals. This leadership style fits with the collectivist culture of China<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, the efficiency of leadership in early childhood education in China not only depends on the competence of individual leaders, but is also profoundly influenced by socio-cultural and collective values. At the same time, this essay also takes into account the educational context of China, where the Chinese government has introduced a series of policies in recent years that set higher requirements for educational leadership. For example, the Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers (Trial)<sup>[8]</sup> emphasises teachers professional development and ethics, which requires kindergarten leaders not only to have a guiding influence on the process of education and instruction, but also to provide support and resources in teachers' professional growth. This essay aims to critically

analyse the manifestation of efficient leadership in practice and to investigate efficient forms of leadership in early childhood education. Therefore, this essay critically analyses effective leadership in Chinese ECE, focusing on distributed and pedagogical leadership models. It explores how these models manifest within China's socio-cultural context, their potential to support teacher development and educational goals, and the challenges they face. Recognizing that no single leadership paradigm fits all contexts, this essay discusses how both models can be adapted effectively within Chinese ECE.

## 2 Definition of Leadership

Leadership is broadly defined as a process of influence to achieve organizational goals. Northouse<sup>[1]</sup> describes it as the ability of an individual or group to influence others towards specific goals. Transformational leadership theory<sup>[9]</sup> extends this, viewing leadership as a process that motivates and elevates followers, shaping organizational culture and values<sup>[10]</sup>. Alternatively, leadership can be seen as a quality demonstrated by all acting as "change agents"<sup>[11]</sup>. In ECE, leadership combines management and ethical guidance. Hall<sup>[12]</sup> argued that "Management without leadership is unethical, and leadership without management is irresponsible," highlighting the dual role of ECE leaders. ECE leadership can be defined as a collaborative process where leaders foster child development and teacher growth by setting goals and providing support<sup>[13]</sup>. It involves building supportive environments, encouraging reflection, and promoting community collaboration<sup>[14]</sup>. Gronn<sup>[15]</sup> emphasizes distributed leadership, viewing it as a collective practice where all participants influence education.

In China, traditional respect for teachers coexists with a perception of ECE teachers as mere "babysitters"<sup>[16]</sup>. Hierarchical leadership models prevail, but critiques note their potential to stifle teacher initiative<sup>[17-18]</sup>. This necessitates exploring alternative models like distributed and pedagogical leadership. Distributed leadership stresses collective collaboration and shared responsibility, with leadership dispersed among organizational members<sup>[19]</sup>. In ECE, it involves teachers and staff in decision-making, leveraging diverse expertise<sup>[20]</sup>. It requires leaders to communicate effectively, trust followers' judgement, and empower them<sup>[21]</sup>. Pedagogical leadership focuses on the leader's direct role in teaching quality and outcomes, prioritizing educational knowledge over mere management<sup>[22]</sup>. It involves setting clear goals, monitoring teaching, providing feedback, and fostering a positive learning environment<sup>[23]</sup>. In ECE, it requires deep understanding of child development to guide and support teachers<sup>[24]</sup>. Leaders act as both administrators and active participants in educational practice<sup>[13]</sup>. The application of these models varies by context. The next section examines their manifestation in Chinese ECE.

## 3 The Contextual Setting of ECE Leadership in China

In the context of China early childhood education, leadership behaviours are influenced by socio-cultural traditions and political systems, where leaders tend to have a high level of authority<sup>[25]</sup>, and teachers and other practitioners operate under this authority structure. In traditional Chinese educational philosophy, the Confucian concept of the 'monarch-chancellor relationship' is seen as a typical model of relationship between leaders and followers, which emphasises the authority of the leader and the loyalty and obedience of the followers<sup>[26]</sup>. In the Chinese early childhood education setting, this traditional leadership model would demonstrate that kindergarten principals are given great authority and responsibility for supervising and guiding teachers' teaching and learning. At the same time, this model of leadership perpetuates the influence of a collectivist culture that emphasises the overall good of the team over individual autonomy<sup>[27]</sup>. In addition, collectivist theory has a significant impact on early educational leadership development in China. The Chinese collectivist culture further reinforces the vertical leadership model in early childhood education. Collectivism, as defined by Hofstede<sup>[28]</sup>, is a social framework in which individuals expect to be cared for in a social group and provide loyalty to that end<sup>[28]</sup>. This cultural context makes it important for leaders in early childhood education not only to ensure that educational goals are met, but also to strike a balance between collective interests and individual needs<sup>[29]</sup>. From this point of view, the social context of early childhood education in China contrasts markedly with the individualistic culture of the West. In addition, there are consequences for early childhood education in China when pursuing a balance between the collective and the individual in a collectivist vertical leadership model, where the views of teachers of greater status are easily approved, while those of teachers of lower status have fewer opportunities to express their thoughts in the group<sup>[26]</sup>. Some of the implications of this for early childhood leadership practice are worth considering. Next, as China's modern political system has evolved and changed, social ideology has also had a profound impact on ECE leadership in China. Therefore, to explore the effectiveness of leadership in early childhood education in China in a particular context needs to take into account the influence of the three factors of socio-cultural context mentioned above.

In recent years, China has experienced rapid socioeconomic and cultural development, and in this context thinking about alternative leadership models, pedagogical leadership and distributed leadership has possibilities in early childhood education in China<sup>[30-31]</sup>. Pedagogical leadership is particularly important in early childhood education because

this stage of education is directly related to children's holistic development and lifelong learning ability <sup>[14]</sup>. Regarding China's early childhood education system, teachers may not be able to gain enough autonomy to implement innovative teaching methods during the teaching process due to the authority structure in traditional culture <sup>[32]</sup>. The implementation of pedagogical leadership is challenging. However, Heikka and Waniganayake <sup>[13]</sup> point out that a key feature of pedagogical leadership is that leaders are not only managers but also participants and supporters of educational practices. In Chinese kindergarten educational practice, pedagogical leadership can help teachers to continuously improve the way they deliver instruction by providing them with ongoing professional development opportunities and support, thus improving the quality of education and children's development <sup>[31]</sup>. It is also worth exploring distributed leadership in early childhood education. This form of leadership manifests itself as teachers, administrators, and other support staff participating in the decision-making process and sharing responsibility for education. Although distributed leadership advocates the achievement of collective goals through collaboration, in China's collectivist culture and vertical leadership model, teachers often lack the opportunity to express their opinions independently, which limits the implementation of distributed leadership to some extent <sup>[26]</sup>. This shows that in China, the distributed leadership model is in conflict with the traditional vertical leadership model. However, some researchers have suggested the establishment of 'shared learning communities' through which collective leadership can be promoted in Chinese early childhood education settings <sup>[18]</sup>. Gao et al. emphasised that such communities not only enhance the collective identity of teachers, but also provide a platform for them to share experiences and knowledge and gradually introduce distributed leadership without undermining traditional cultural values. This 'shared learning community' is a model of collective action leadership, whereby through shared learning and practice, teachers are able to gradually develop their leadership skills without challenging authority. In summary, distributed leadership and pedagogical leadership, as two different leadership models, are still a topic worthy of in-depth discussion as to how their effectiveness can be realised in practice within the particular setting of Chinese early childhood education.

#### 4 Effectiveness in Leadership Practices

Leadership effectiveness in Chinese ECE is vital for educational quality, goal achievement, and teacher development <sup>[33]</sup>. Distributed and pedagogical leadership offer distinct advantages and face specific challenges. Distributed leadership can utilize organizational resources, boost teacher initiative, and improve educational quality <sup>[20]</sup>. However, China's traditional culture, emphasizing obedience, can hinder its implementation <sup>[26]</sup>. Teachers may be reluctant to participate in decision-making <sup>[34]</sup>. Yet, gradual introduction of collaborative concepts can shift cultural practices, enhancing teacher leadership and participation within traditional frameworks <sup>[18]</sup>. It fosters teacher engagement, responsibility, and professional growth through collaboration and knowledge sharing <sup>[35]</sup>, addressing limitations in teacher autonomy and development opportunities <sup>[36]</sup>. Pedagogical leadership directly enhances educational quality through clear guidance and support <sup>[23]</sup>. It aligns well with Chinese cultural respect for teachers, allowing leaders to model high standards and ethics <sup>[37]</sup>. It provides clear goals and instructional guidance without challenging authority, ensuring policy consistency and teaching effectiveness <sup>[38]</sup>. Challenges include teachers' potential lack of training for innovative methods <sup>[34]</sup>. Nonetheless, it supports teacher development through ongoing training and coaching, fostering reflective practice and improving educational quality <sup>[13-14,39]</sup>. The two models are not mutually exclusive <sup>[39]</sup>. An integrated approach can leverage the collaborative strengths of distributed leadership and the guiding focus of pedagogical leadership <sup>[20]</sup>. In achieving educational goals, collective involvement supports pedagogical guidance. For teacher development, distributed leadership encourages collaboration, while pedagogical leadership provides necessary supervision and professional development <sup>[14]</sup>. Effective integration requires careful consideration of China's complex socio-cultural and educational context.

#### 5 Conclusion

Discussions of leadership have important implications for early childhood education including the teachers, young children, parents and other practitioners involved <sup>[4]</sup>. This essay critically examines and analyses the effectiveness of distributed and pedagogical leadership in the context of early childhood education in China. Distributed leadership emphasises collaboration and shared responsibility and has the potential to fully engage teachers in the educational process. Pedagogical leadership emphasises clear guidance and support from leaders, which can enhance the quality of teaching and learning and ensure consistency with national education policy. Integrating distributed and pedagogical leadership models can mobilise teacher autonomy while emphasising leader direction and collective collaboration. Nevertheless, traditional culture has a significant impact on early childhood education in China, and it is important to be mindful of the specific context and environment while considering innovative leadership models <sup>[25]</sup>. From the above in this essay, it is clear that effective practice of any form of leadership cannot be fully adapted to each particular early childhood education setting.

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