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Reconciling top-down policy intent with internal accountability: the role of Chinese school principals

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to explore the role school principals play in managing the intersection of external and internal accountability systems within Chinese schools. Specifically, the paper seeks to understand principals' perception of top-down accountability demands and the strategies they adopt to build and strengthen internal accountability while responding to external demands. The data was drawn from in-depth interviews with primary school principals across six regions. The study suggests that a complex mix of leadership practices defines school principalship in China. On the one hand, their work environment seems to be highly political and they must be conscious of their role as state employees. On the other hand, there is a strong professional expectation of school principals and they must gain legitimacy by demonstrating expert knowledge in curricula and instruction and by approaching teachers in a way that combines sincerity and benevolence. This emphasis on relationship building may help to advance theoretical understandings of leadership in the face of accountability demands.

Keywords School principalship · Accountability · China · Instructional leadership

1 Introduction

In the course of their work, school leaders face political, bureaucratic, market-driven, and professional expectations from multiple directions including, for example, teachers, students, parents, superintendents, politicians, and the media (Leo 2013). Each of these groups holds principals accountable for meeting their expectations, whether they be

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stated in formal documents or held informally across local communities. Regardless of the form or directional flow of such accountabilities, when they hit the principal's office they can either align or conflict with each other and impact how principals themselves interpret and so implement them (Knapp and Feldman 2012; Walker and Qian 2012). In other words, central policy activity may reduce or enhance school leaders' ability to influence instructional decisions in their schools. As important connection points with the larger educational system, school principals are positioned to "notice, experience, and respond to the dynamics between external and internal accountability systems" (Knapp and Feldman 2012, p. 670). A key challenge faced by many such leaders is how to negotiate expectations written into top-down policies, with local requirements to improve learning and teaching in their schools. Questions thus arise about the extent to which principals perceive external policy direction as constraining or supporting their ability to influence school level instructional decisions, and the strategies they adopt to reconcile external and internal accountabilities.

The major purpose of the paper is to investigate the role of school principals in managing the intersection of external and internal accountability systems within Chinese schools. It has three inter-related sub-purposes. The first sub-purpose is to understand how school principals perceive the top-down accountability demands. A salient cultural and historical characteristic of China is its top-down and centralized government administration (Bush and Qiang 2002; Chen and Lee 2008). Earlier studies indicate an enduring acceptance of upward accountability among school principals (Qian and Walker 2011; 2015). This research elicits principals' perceptions about either the support or constraints accompanying the external accountability system. The second sub-purpose is to seek empirical understandings of how principals in China reconcile top-down policy direction with internal demands to maintain or improve instructional practices in their schools. The World Bank report indicates there is relatively a high degree of coherence between policy and implementation reported at least in some of Chinese cities such as Shanghai (Liang et al. 2016). A possible reason can be the high levels of professional accountability among teachers, principals, and administrators within the education system (Jensen et al. 2016; Tan 2013). However, little empirical research has explored the ways in which Chinese principals locate their leadership practices in response to the accountability demands.

A third sub-purpose is to seek to advance theoretical understandings of leadership in the face of multiple accountabilities. The existing theoretical models of accountability challenges for leadership are mainly derived from the Western societies (e.g., Grinshtain and Gibton 2018; Knapp and Feldman 2012). Few studies explore school-level responses to accountability challenges in a non-Western context. This paper will inform scholarship on leadership and accountability from an international perspective. The paper draws data from a large-scale qualitative study involving 101 primary school principals selected from six locations in China: Shanghai, Beijing, Hubei, Liaoning, Guizhou, and Guangdong. As such this paper helps to paint a somewhat more holistic landscape of how Chinese school principals, from both economically developed and under-developed areas, interpret and respond to the accountability pressures.

The paper has five sections. Following the introduction, the second section reviews literature on accountability and leadership both internationally and in China. The third section introduces the methodology employed, and the fourth section presents findings

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about how Chinese principals respond to top-down policy direction and how they strengthen and sustain internal accountability. The final section synthesizes the form and configuration of accountability as experienced by Chinese principals, explores the underlying reasons why they interpret the accountability challenges in the way they do, and discusses the implications for understanding successful instructional leadership in the era of accountability.

2 Accountability and leadership

This section first reviews international perspectives on accountability and leadership and then focuses on the Chinese context that shapes accountability demands on school principals.

2.1 International perspective

There is no single, agreed-upon definition of accountability. Different systems or approaches to accountability are simultaneously at play within public school systems (Pollock and Winton 2016). A synthesis of the literature (e.g., Darling-Hammond 1989; Firestone and Shipps 2007; Møller 2004, 2009; Pollock and Winton 2016; Stone et al. 1988) suggests that some of the major sources of accountability impacting schools include the following:

- *Bureaucratic (administrative, managerial) accountability* can be understood as top-down accountability enforced through formal organizational structures that schools must live up to.
- *Market-oriented accountability* asks schools to deliver the products/services that consumers expect on the basis of standardized declarations.
- *Political accountability* is concerned with those individuals or constituents that are elected by the public. In other words, the local community assesses if the school performs according to political/public promises.
- *Professional accountability* refers to meeting the professional standards as defined by the teaching profession and upholding professional standards of practice in work.
- *Moral accountability* involves the correctness or morality of individuals' or organizations' actions.

Most types of accountability are represented simultaneously in educational systems, but the balance between them is different and changes over time (Moos 2005). Over the past two decades, a key challenge facing school leaders is to strike a balance between the external bureaucratic/managerial accountability and internal professional accountability. The challenge is mainly posed by decentralization reforms which have spanned across the global since the 1990s (Leithwood and Menzies 1998).

In the early 1990s, neither the top-down, first-wave reform nor the bottom-up, second wave reform produced significant improvement in student achievement (Cheng 2003; Fuhrman 1993). Policy-makers reconceptualized reform in systemic terms and initiated a third wave of school improvement that emphasized accountability for results (Fuhrman 1993). Under the prevalent systemic reform approach, states are

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accountable for results, specifically, strong student performance on standards-based assessments. However, states leave the route to achieve these results to local actors who are adjudged closest to learning and teaching. A major decentralization reform policy—school-based management (SBM)—has been adopted that gives principals, assisted by their school councils, authority over budget, personnel, and curriculum (Grinshtain and Gibton 2018; Nir 2009). In other words, central and district governments provide incentives, ideas, and assistance to build capacity, but ultimately, the local school leaders, the administration, and professional staff must respond by accomplishing the work of learning and teaching. Under SBM, the complexity and demands required of principals have sharply increased (Caldwell 2008). Principals should "implement government reforms while being accountable for the effectiveness of these in terms of school improvement and student achievement" (Anderson and Turnbull 2016, p. 691).

Under SBM reform policy, the term "accountability" can be divided into two main components—authority and responsibility (Grinshtain and Gibton 2018). Authority refers to the "competence and mandate given to the principal in order to exercise the powers delegated by certain regulations, or administrative orders issued by the Education Department in the case of government institutions, and by management" (Khan and Iqbal 2013; cited in Grinshtain and Gibton 2018, p.4). However, principals' "perceived" autonomy may not equal the "defined" degree of autonomy which is prescribed by educational law and driven by the precepts of new public management (Brauckmann and Schwarz 2014; Grinshtain and Gibton 2018). Responsibility refers to being responsible and providing explanations to a specific authority around specific activities (Julnes 2006; Grinshtain and Gibton 2018; Mulgan 2000). There is usually a clear emphasis on recognizing and taking responsibility, but the boundaries of the spheres of authorities often remain ambiguous (Grinshtain and Gibton 2018).

Consequently, principals may adopt different strategies to balance competing accountabilities and reduce the role ambiguity. The strategies can be personal, internal, or extra-organizational (Addi-Raccah 2015; Grinshtain and Gibton 2018; Ng and Ho 2012):

- Personal strategy taps the principal's qualities or behavior patterns;
- Internal organizational strategy builds rapport with school leadership teams and individual teachers, which helps to deepen the school's values and moral outlook. These may also include strategies such as setting priorities for time invested in different activities and empowering some teachers to handle the implementation;
- Extra-organizational strategies mainly consist of establishing or using key relations with the superiors or local authorities.

Some empirical studies illustrate how principals in different parts of the world reconcile and respond to the different accountability demands. For example, Moos' (2005) study showed that Danish school leaders did not feel pressured by external control. Principals were able to translate and transform external accountability demands into internal educational tools. They did not seem to be loyal to the authorities for the sake of loyalty, but because they were convinced of the educational and leadership values of the educational system that made the demands. Oplatka's (2017) study in Israel reported that many principals felt frustrated about not having time for "pure"

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educational tasks. When the tasks, meetings, and activities were perceived by principals to be unrelated to education and externally imposed on the school, principals associated them with workload, or even overload. When faced with overload, principals tended to delegate authority and set priorities, including waiving seemingly unimportant tasks.

Many accountability studies have been conducted in the USA. For example, Elmore's (2006) seminal work found that "teachers and principals viewed external accountability systems like the weather… not something they could or should do much about" (p. 196). Teachers and principals often dealt with the demands of formal external accountability structures "either by incorporating them in superficial way… or by rejecting them as unrealistic for the type of students they served" (p. 196). However, Knapp and Feldman's (2012) multi-case study of learning focused leadership in 15 schools in the USA paints a different picture. They found principals adopted remarkably similar ways of crafting tools and creating occasions from the array of external accountability demands and resources to serve internal accountability purposes. The principals tended to internalize external expectations and develop accountable practice within the school.

It seems that the way principals perceive and respond to the competing accountabilities is context-dependent. There is thus a need for this study to understand the context of dominant educational accountabilities in China.

2.2 The Chinese context

Following the 1985 "Decision on the Structural Reform of China's Education System", education in China has become decentralized with the central government no longer the main financier or administrator of compulsory education (Dello-Iacovo 2009). As a result, local governments need to bear the main cost of financing compulsory education and the full cost of senior secondary education (Lin and Zhang 2006, p.256). The 1985 policy also signaled the formal adoption of the Principal Responsibility System (*xiaozhang fuzezhi*) in China. It formally recognized the principal as the person-in-charge of school affairs and a separation of party functionaries from the day-to-day operation of school (Qian and Walker 2011). The 1993 policy "Outline for China's Education Reform and Development" further reaffirmed that all schools should adopt "Principal Responsibility System", while the same policy emphasized that the state remained the arbiter of rules and regulations (Walker and Qian 2018).

Since the 1990s, China has initiated massive reforms to improve learning and teaching under the banner of *suzhi jiaoyu* (Walker and Qian 2012). This imprecise term, which is frequently translated as "quality education," encompasses a range of educational ideals, but generally refers to a more holistic style of education which centers on the whole person (Dello-Iacovo 2009). In the Chinese discourse, *suzhi jiaoyu* is usually discussed as the antidote to the excesses of *yingshi jiaoyu* (examination-oriented education) (Dello-Iacovo 2009; Sargent et al. 2011). Towards the end of promoting *suzhi jiaoyu*, a series of policy initiatives have been released since the turn of the new century. One of the most high-profile of these was the New Curriculum Reform which was launched in 2001 (Zhong 2006). The New Curriculum aimed squarely at changing beliefs about, and approaches to, teaching and learning. It focused on the cultivation of students' moral development, innovative spirit, critical thinking, and practical abilities. The reform also established a system whereby the

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curriculum is managed simultaneously at the central, local, and school levels. As a form of decentralization, this calls on schools, cities, districts, and provinces to design school-based curricula that account for local needs (Wilson et al. 2016). In effect, and driven by financial considerations, the decentralization reforms in China have granted more autonomy to the school level, through the local government (Walker and Qian 2018). The autonomy to school principals has more in the form of operational rather than policy-making power in order to allow principals to strategically implement central policies (You and Morris 2016).

The general trends emerging from reform documents include diminishing Party influence, reduced participation by the state, and the devolution of authority to the local level and to school principals. The central Chinese government has consciously retreated from being the sole provider of social services, with some of the rights held by the state in previous decades now delegated to local governments and principals. Principals are increasingly expected to lead changes at the school level and to cater to the central government's demands for performance and accountability (Walker and Qian 2011; Walker et al. 2012). The system promises principals greater autonomy in terms of school-based curricula, teacher development, recruitment, and promotion (Qian and Walker 2013; Yin et al. 2014). For example, the State Council enacted *The Guidance of Implementing Teacher Performance Pay in K-9 Schools* in 2008 and launched a new merit pay system for teachers in effect since 2009 (Liu et al. 2017). Under this new system, it is school leaders' responsibility to create school-based appraisal criteria to assess teachers' performance, which will determine teachers' incentive salary. However, an integral aspect of decentralization has increased public accountability for academic performance and resource utilization. Various performance indicators have been adopted to review the performance of schools, principals and teachers (Walker and Qian 2018). Principals also need to demonstrate that their school produces satisfactory academic results and is adhering to the requirements of curriculum reform (Wilson et al. 2016).

The majority schools in China are public schools. Local governments are the schools' major, if not the sole, source of income. School principals are usually appointed by the government, and their career progression depends on the government (Qian and Walker 2015; Walker and Qian 2018). On the other hand, the market does not have a well-developed role in the school sector in China. This is partly due to the existence of a hierarchy of schools in term of status; schools do not compete with one another on a level playing field. Thus, for most schools, a loss of market attraction is not an existential threat (Qian and Walker 2015; Yin et al. 2014). Some empirical studies (e.g., Qian and Walker 2015; Sargent et al. 2011) found that principals acknowledged the considerable pressure to ensure that their students performed well in exams. However, their major concern was not that poor exam results might worsen their market status, but rather that their superiors would place sanctions on the school if their performance was not up to scratch. The situation facing Chinese principals is a strong presence of the governments and relatively muted role of the market.

Some studies focusing on the role of school principals in China pointed to the competing expectations and the consequent role ambiguity experienced by principals (e.g., Li 2012; Zhu and Ruan 2008; Yang and Brayman 2010). In China, a teacher ranking system and teachers with better teaching performance would be granted high ranks such as senior teachers or special-class teachers (Walker and Qian 2018). Many principals were promoted from these higher ranks of outstanding teachers (Cheng 2010).

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They tended to emphasize teachers' professional knowledge and capacity and prioritize instructional improvement and teacher development (Li 2012). Upward accountability was also emphasized (Walker and Qian 2018). Yang and Brayman's (2010) study of 81 Chinese principals found these principals perceived themselves more as government officers accountable mainly to higher-level officials in local and central governments. In Zhu and Ruan's (2008) study, principals complained about becoming the microphone of the authorities instead of the decision-maker for their schools' future. A more recent study conducted by Wilson and his colleagues (Wilson et al. 2016) explored the work-lives of three Chinese principals and depicted a different picture. While these principals were mindful of the need to satisfy performance targets, they nevertheless protected their staff and their wellbeing in ways that made teachers feel valued (Wilson et al. 2016).

Thus, as in other Asian societies, the primary role of principals in China has been managerial and political in nature and the principal is formally situated in the school as an "officer" of the government (Hallinger 2004; Pan and Chen 2011; Walker et al. 2012; Walker and Hallinger 2015). However, this strong managerial cum political focus in the principalship may not be sufficient for fostering productive innovation and change in teaching and learning (Hallinger and Ko 2015). The current reform efforts in China also attempt to push a transformation of the primary role of the school principal from organizational manager into leaders of learning (Hallinger 2011; Walker and Hallinger 2015). As long as principals are primarily held accountable for meeting external demands, it remains a question as to how principals translate this responsibility into expectations for themselves and for their own staff and how they reconcile external expectations with internal school priorities. This study attempts to answer these questions: How do school principals in China understand the top-down accountability demands? What strategies do they adopt to reconcile external demands with internal accountability?

3 The data

The data was drawn from a large-scale qualitative study that focuses on principal instructional leadership in China. This macro-study attempts to understand how primary school principals in China make sense of and enact instructional leadership under the current reform context. The study involved interviews with primary school principals in selected regions in China, including Shanghai, Beijing, Guangdong (Southeast China), Hubei (middle China), Liaoning (Northeast China), and Guizhou (Southwest China). All the interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2017. We adopted maximum variation criteria to select principals from different types of primary schools. In our sample, there were elite and non-elite public schools, urban, suburban and rural schools, and a small number of *minban* (people-run, private) schools. The total number of participants of the macro-study is 101.

The interviews were conducted by regional research coordinators selected from each site; that is, researchers working in local educational institutions who were trained for the purpose of this study. Our local research coordinators could utilize their personal networks to get access to schools; they mainly adopted purposive and snowball sampling procedures to select the principals. The interviews were usually conducted in the participants' schools; each interview lasted between 1 and 2 h. Our interview questions focused on their personal backgrounds, the history of the school, their

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instructional improvement strategies, and the major difficulties encountered in their current schools.

All the transcribed data was then analyzed by a research team comprising the authors and three Chinese research assistants, with the support of NVivo software. For the purpose of this paper, all interview transcripts were analyzed both inductively and deductively. We began the process more inductively in search of patterns and themes (Miles and Huberman 1994). A set of initial categories were produced that included, for example, local governments' expectations; school teachers' expectations; principals' self-expectations; motivation strategies; and relationship building strategies. The data was further regrouped into two major themes: (a) principals' perception of expectations and (b) principals' strategies to strengthen internal accountability. All the relevant data about principals' perceptions and reconciling strategies around external and internal accountability was retrieved.

Based on an extensive review of leadership and accountability literature and mainly drawing on Grinshtain and Gibton's (2018) framework, we reviewed the transcripts from a more deductive perspective. We recategorized data about principals' perception of expectations into two sub-categories—perceived authority and responsibility. Data about how principals reconciled external with internal accountability were clustered under these three sub-categories—personal, organizational, and extra-organizational level strategies.

Both convergent and divergent patterns could be delineated when comparing these categories and sub-categories across participants. Although the common nature of external pressures facilitated similarities in the leadership responses, there were still differences in leadership strategies, which were mainly influenced by principals' work experiences and location of the schools (Wilson et al. 2016). For example, almost all the principals mentioned the importance of maintaining good relationship with the local governments and they saw the good relationship could sometimes bring schools extra resources. However, those who successfully attracted extra resources tended to be more senior principals with closer relationships with local governments. Due to the constraint of the scope, this paper mainly focuses on the convergent patterns of the leadership practices and the similar strategies adopted by principals to strengthen and sustain their school's internal accountability systems in pursuit of school-defined learning improvement agenda.

4 Findings

In this section, principals' perceptions of responsibility and authority are reported, followed by the strategies which principals used to reconcile the external expectations with internal accountability.

4.1 Perceived authority and responsibility

4.1.1 Authority

Principals felt they had expanding autonomy to make school plans, design school curriculum, and develop teachers. At the same time, they shared a strong awareness of the limitations and constraints of their authority.

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One form of constraint flowed from long-standing national policies which did not cater to the changing needs of individual schools. For example, many principals complained that although they were promised autonomy to recruit teachers, their actual ability to do so was circumscribed by the national policy of "*bianzhi*" (teacher's posts), that is, a cap on the number of teaching posts assigned to each school by the government. One Guangdong principal complained that his school was assigned 27 *bianzhi* quotas. However, the number was calculated and assigned in 2012 and had not been updated since. While his school badly needed to expand the pool of teachers given substantial growth of student number over the years, he had no authority to do so because he could not get any more *bianzhi* (GZ_09). This seemed to be an issue encountered by many principals. A Shanghai principal commented that "the assigned number of *bianzhi* cannot keep pace with the current school development" and that this often resulted in "increasing teacher workload" (SH_01).

Principals also complained about the limitations around managing school curriculum. In the current curriculum structure, principals had autonomy to design school-based curriculum, but this only accounted for a small portion of the whole curriculum. The large portion of school curriculum is nationally circumscribed and principals were not supposed to make any change. A Liaoning principal questioned the curriculum guidelines to which he needed to adhere:

> According to the provincial curriculum guidelines, first-grade students needed to have three "Moral Education" lessons each week… I think one or two lessons are enough… It is a waste of time. Teachers do not know what to teach and students do not know what they have learnt (SY_14).

Another constraint was that principals could not refuse top-down demands which arrived regularly on their desks even if they disagreed with them. For example, the government expected schools to embrace and implement nationally or provincially promoted new education concepts or innovative approaches; consequently schools had to cope with these tides of education concepts. A Hubei principal's remarks are typical:

> Our local governments have promoted a lot of new education concepts. … They urged us to construct "intelligent classrooms" (*zhihui ketang*). However, before we figured out what an "intelligent classroom" was they started to promote "green classrooms" (*lvse ketang*). And this was soon replaced by another new concept of "ecological classroom" (*shengtai ketang*).

Principals believed these initiatives did not really improve schools, but that they were not in a position to control their flow into their schools. As a Shanghai principal commented, "although schools seemed to be promised options, actually they lacked the autonomy to opt out the top-down directives and advocacies associated with the new education ethos" (SH_19). Schools were thus tired of coping with these new ideas.

A third form of constraint was the interference of local governments in school affairs, which often resulted in additional work for principals. As a Guizhou principal described:

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> This morning our education bureau suddenly “borrowed” one of our PE teachers to attend one of their competitions. Our school has only two PE teachers and this teacher will not be back until the 9th (of the month). He has 19 PE lessons in his timetable, so I have to persuade the other teacher to take up some of his workload. I understand that this teacher will be unhappy [about taking up this extra workload]. As I am the subordinate of the education bureau, I have to obey them when they give us this task. I have to spend time talking to the teacher to try to get him to also understand [our difficulty] (GZ_04).

While principals had a focused and narrow view of authority, they believed they shouldered a wide range of responsibilities.

4.1.2 Responsibility

The overarching sense of responsibility was expressed mainly in the many obligations that principals had to accept—these appeared to them as almost unlimited. The general feeling was that they had to “be responsible for everything” and they needed to “be a perfect human being who is capable of everything” (HB_03).

> I have a wide range of responsibilities. I have to take responsibility for all-round management of the whole school. This includes school instruction, security, teachers, students and school facilities… [People from outside] will come to me if anything negative happens to our schools, including for school staff and students. We have to be fully responsible for everything. (HB_09)

A major concern held by principals was the inconsistent and sometimes competing responsibility expectations coming from local governments. Specifically, the curriculum reform demanded a fundamental shift to more student-based learning and whole person development. Schools were expected to demonstrate the change in their curriculum and instruction. However, when it came to evaluating schools, the major and the most important criterion remained student test scores. A Hubei principal talked about his efforts of implementing curriculum reform in this way:

> In our region the new textbooks were formally adopted in 2002. The new curriculum reform definitely has an impact on schools, but may not have delivered the intent of the policy… Our local education bureau promoted a lot of new programs. For example, they have promoted different schooling models including Yangsi High School, Dulangkou School and Hengshui High School. They have also advocated inquiry learning and group collaboration… Whatever they advocate, we are expected to follow and implement. After they issue a policy directive, there is sometimes insufficient follow-up support.

Thus, schools were pressured to demonstrate how they had implemented the mandated educational policies, such as inquiry learning and group discussion, across their school. On the other hand, they faced simultaneously pressure to produce high student exam

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results because the real, if not claimed, evaluation criterion remained unchanged. Principals across different regions in China shared some similar concerns about the pressure brought by exams.

> While we have been advocating *suzhi jiaoyu* (Quality Education) for many years, there may not be fundamental change if the current college entrance examination (*Gaokao*) and senior school entrance examination (*Zhongkao*) are not reformed… Now there is more emphasis on monitoring the quality of primary schools. In Hubei, [our local governments] still rank us after exams. The governments are actually stressing the importance of tests scores. (HB_03)

Principals understood that as long as there was no major change to the High Exam system, curriculum reform was a largely a matter of "old wine in new bottle" (GZ_12). Despite this reality, they were still responsible for curriculum reform as well as producing high student exam results. Thus, principals had expanding but constrained authority while also facing high-level but often inconsistent responsibilities. The national reforms created pressures for school principals and prompted a leadership response that prioritized teaching quality improvement and curricular and pedagogical change. The next section reports the strategies principals adopted to reconcile external demands with internal accountability.

4.2 Strategies to reconcile external demands with internal accountability

This section reports how principals strengthened and sustained the school's internal accountability system in order to pursue a school-defined learning improvement agenda while, at the same time, responded productively to external accountability demands. Internal accountability has three tiers, these include "the individual's sense of responsibility; parents', teachers', administrators', and students' collective expectations; and the organizational rules, incentives, and implementation mechanisms that constitute the formal accountability system in schools" (Carnoy et al. 2003, p. 4). It is mainly up to the principal to ensure that these multiple expectations are coherent, shared, and acted upon (Knapp and Feldman 2012).

Chinese principals shared a common belief that they must hold themselves accountable for the state of student learning across the school. This belief helped them to internalize many external expectations for performance—the school must produce the results that are expected of them by their environment. If effect, their first inclination was to "own" the expectations, and then used various means to make the expectations shared and internalized by all school staff. Various strategies were identified; these were classified as the principals' personal-, organizational, and extra-organizational level strategies.

4.2.1 Personal strategies: be visible and be a buffer (a safety net)

As stated earlier, principals were responsible to meet both the requirements of the new curriculum and produce high student test results. Within schools, many principals tried to accommodate such expectations by explicitly applying concepts such as "student

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learning," "student growth," "sense of happiness." Principals felt the need to use such concepts to make sense of the conflicting expectations both for themselves and for teachers. As some principals explained:

> We expect our teachers to respect each child's personality. They can not only focus on scores, but also the learning process and student capacity. … If a teacher does not have a sense of happiness, how can they cultivate children who feel happy? Thus we promote "Happy Education"… We hope our children feel learning is happy. (GD_19)

> Primary school is the foundational stage for children. We have to construct a solid foundation for kids, not only in terms of knowledge base, but also their behaviours and morality. (SY_01)

Thus, improving students' learning and development was principals' ultimate goal and facilitating and supporting teachers' classroom teaching was key to this. Towards this end, many principals mentioned that they intentionally made themselves visible around the school and in classrooms. As one Liaoning principal said, "in addition to attending meetings held outside the school, I spend all the rest time within the school…. Teachers can see me all the time. I spend 95% of my working time at the school."

Regardless of their location, all principals interviewed stressed the importance of observing teachers' teaching. In other words, they maintained a high level of visibility in classrooms. They believed this was not just to "collect the first-hand data [about school teaching and learning]" (GD_01), but also to model their role as a "learner." Under the pressure of curriculum reform, principals expected each teacher to keep learning. Teachers would not have the motivation if they could not see role models around them. As a Guizhou principal put it, "We need to be a leading learner. If you stop learning, teachers will not have the sense of crisis" (GZ_04). Principals also shared the belief that being hip-deep in classrooms was a way to maintain their professional identity:

> The first thing I did [after I came to the current school] was to go to classrooms to observe. You will not have the [professional] authority if you do not know what is going on in classrooms. (SH_03)

For principals, regularly observing classrooms and giving feedback to teachers was part of their daily routine (BJ_06). They understood this could be pressure for teachers, but they also believed that it was a sign of support that would benefit teachers and eventually students. As a Shanghai principal explained:

> I make sure I sit in each of the teachers' class. For those weaker classrooms, I will tell them what and how they need to improve. I visit their classrooms again in two weeks' time and then keep track and record of their classroom teaching. (SH_09)

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When important examination came, principals spent more time in classrooms to show their support for teachers.

> The grade-six students will have their school leaving examination soon. So I go to observe sixth-grade teaching every day. Teachers will also get the message that the principal places a high priority on this. They will then better prepare their lessons and students will also benefit [from their teaching]. (SY_24)

To relieve teachers' stress and show their support, principals believed it was important to act as a safety net and a cheer leader. The guiding belief was that teachers would then be happier and better able to manage the pressing accountability environment. A Shanghai principal explained her practice:

> Sometimes when we have teachers' meeting, I buy refreshment for them. Our teacher festival rewards are interesting too. We want teachers to feel a sense of belonging in this "big family". Even though they might be tired, we expect them to be happy. Therefore all rewards come with a letter, pretty sentimental. And in some letters I tell teachers that their award is they can choose any one day they prefer as the day off. In some letters I offer teachers to be their personal driver for one day. Haha… I have been doing this every year. I might drive the teacher home in one year, and the second year, I might substitute for him/her for a day's work... This is quite fun. (SH_16)

Similarly, a Guizhou principal shared what his presence meant for his teachers:

> When teachers need to go outside to attend teaching contests or other competition, I will always be with them. When they prepared for the competition at the school, I would be beside them, providing feedbacks. When they go out for the competition, they may have to be on their own so I will stay with them during the whole process. I will give them encouragement and warm regards whether they win an award or not. (GZ_02)

Thus, in the face of the external accountability, principals thought it important to buffer teachers and mid-level leaders from external pressure. They sometimes made personal promises not to impose any extra accountability-related burdens on the teachers. As the Liaoning principal said,

> I understand the accountability structure. I am accountable to the director of education bureau and my vice principals are accountable to me… Heads of different functionary offices are accountable to vice principals and teachers may be accountable to office heads… For my vice principals, I feel a need to ease their concern. I give them promises, [for the tasks I assign to them] that I will take full

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> responsibility if anything goes wrong. If it is successfully done, they take all the credit. Because of my promise, they dare to trial and innovate. (SY_04)

School principals believed they played the role of "a parent," because they had to "oversee everything." However, to be more accurate, they were "a parent who trusts and has a faith in [their school staff]" (GZ_02). Their visibility, emphasis on classroom teaching, and their supportive relationship with teachers had a positive effect of building and sustaining internal accountability. By assuming the role as a parent, principals suggested that the school was a home for all staff and their role was to provide a safety net to protect teachers.

4.2.2 Organizational strategy—building school infrastructure and culture

Most of the organizational-level strategies were related to understanding and developing teachers. Principals seemed to share a belief that the key to school success was "the growth of teachers" (SY_08). While they recognized they had limited autonomy in teacher recruitment and dismissal, they emphasized building the necessary school infrastructure and a positive school culture to enhance teacher capacity.

Principals believed school rules and structures were important. These rules could help track the performance of teachers and provide evidence-based evaluation tools. A Beijing principal talked about the importance of assigning each subject a quality gatekeeper:

> An important part of our internal leader responsibility system is to make sure there is a gatekeeper for each subject. We need to give teachers this message (that each subject counts and is taken care of)...We want every teacher to be serious about each single lesson. We need to let them know that they are supervised. (BJ_06)

A Shanghai principal mentioned similar practice in her school:

> Each member of our leadership team has a grade level and a subject to supervise. For example, I am responsible for the third grade and the Chinese subject… Another member can be responsible for visual arts or music. We have made the responsibilities very clear. (SH_10)

The rules and structure also extended to teacher evaluation policies. A clear trend was that principals tended to use material incentives to reward teachers who could produce high student results. However, under the "teacher performance pay" policy, principals could only maneuver teacher's incentive pay, which comprises a relatively small portion of teachers' overall salary package:

> Student exam results account for one part of the teacher appraisal criteria, but are not the only part. I compare the results of the teacher's class with the district

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> average. If your class is five scores lower than the average, I will see it as a teaching accident. It is acceptable if the difference is within 5 scores. If the score is above the district average, I will reward the teachers, and there is also monetary penalty for those who get more than 5 scores below the average. (SH_16)

Some schools recognized that using student exam results as criteria for individual teacher appraisal might influence teacher motivation. They introduced a group appraisal policy:

> In my second year at the school, I introduced a teaching research group (*jiaoyanzu*) appraisal policy. For example, if the exam result of your whole teaching research group is over the district average, each member of the group gets an award of 1000 yuan (about 180 USD). However, if only you as an individual teacher teach well and your class score is above district average, you will get a bonus of 200 yuan (about 30 USD). In this way, I send the message that sharing is important. You need to share with your team if you want to do well. (SH_07)

Principals, however, also acknowledged the limitations of the monetary incentives and talked about other motivational and reward mechanisms. One of these was to use non-monetary means, such as honorary titles to motivate and recognize teachers' performance. These honorary titles included the recognition as backbone (*gugan*) teachers, famous teachers (*mingshi*), and various teaching awards. A Shanghai school adopted such practices:

> We adopt multiple evaluation policies for teachers. In our school we set up a "*Junma* (Horse) Award". We recognize that there are different types of horses, so we use the image of horse to recognize the various talents and achievements of teachers. For example, we have a "Junma Award" for good teaching performance, for classroom management and for administrative service. Each year, we award ten staff on Teachers' Day. I will write and read the awarding words in a well-prepared award ceremony. (SH_18)

Another way to motivate teachers was to provide development opportunities. For better-resourced metropolitan schools, principals could even send teachers abroad, for further learning.

> We send our teachers to other provinces to visit famous schools and learn from famous teachers. We usually send them to Beijing and Shanghai. Each semester we send some teachers to these more developed regions. (SY_15)

> We send our teachers to the US and Canada. This year we have another teacher going to the US for half a year. What I need to do is to invest more money in teacher development and let more teachers benefit from the intercultural communication. (SH_14)

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4.2.3 Extra-organizational strategy—using connections to win resources for schools

An important feature of extra-organizational strategy adopted by principals was the use of personal connections and networks to win more resources for schools. Principals admitted that good relationships with local governments could be an important condition to get more resources more easily. One Liaoning principal was very proud of his personal connection with local government:

> I have always been well supported by our education bureau. You see, principals' personal connections can make a difference, even among principals. I have been working as the principal for more than 20 years. I know all the office leaders in our district education bureau. I have also built positive relations with our municipal education bureau and even our provincial education commission… When I was assigned to my current school, a director in our municipal education bureau promised to give the school additional 90 computers. (SY_13)

Principals mentioned that it was necessary to articulate their needs to the local education bureau. However, before articulating the needs, a principal needed to give the local bureau confidence that they were doing a good job.

> I have told our director of the education bureau that they did not need to worry about our school. I would be a gatekeeper of the school quality. If we had difficulties, we would try to solve them instead of seeking help from the bureau. I do not want to add extra burden for the bureau. Just think about it. There are altogether more than 40 schools in our district. How can they manage? So I would make sure my school is well managed and the director of the education bureau would be happy. … The other day when we met, the director asked me what our school needed. They would like to give us whatever we need. (SY_14)

A principal of migrant children's school in Shanghai commented that she had persuaded the government to invest seven million yuan (about 1.1 million USD) in campus renovation.

> After I came to the school, I have attracted resources to help renovate the campus each year. Now, our school has received seven million yuan in investment. As a principal, you need to go out to win the resources. If you do not ask, the government does not know you have the need. Now our campus looks better than some of the public schools. Those principals [of the public schools] make jokes that they want to swap their campus with ours. (SH_03)

The principal could do so partly because she worked as a principal in a public school for many years before moving to this migrant children's school and she had a good relationship with the local education bureau. It was also because she had turned the

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migrant school around and improved teaching and learning outcomes. Her performance proved that the school was worthy of the investment.

In addition to winning resources from the government, another approach to enhance teacher capacity and improve school curriculum was forming partnerships with peer schools. However, in China, much of the cross-school collaboration and partnership is initiated and coordinated by the local government.

For example, a principal of a migrant children's school talked about how they benefited from forming partnerships with high-quality schools.

> We have formed partnerships with high quality public schools. Over the past few years, we have sent 36 of our teachers to these schools… One teacher can stay in these schools and learn from the teachers there for one semester. (SH_03)

In Beijing, the local government arranged partnerships between rural and urban school so the two schools could share quality resources. One rural school principal discussed how her school has benefited from this partnership:

> Our school is a rural school. Confined by our geographic location, we did not have a lot of resources. Then our school was merged to be a branch school of X school (a famous urban public school). We share good teachers and other quality resources. We can learn and transplant their advanced ideas and experiences in our school. (BJ_01)

The practice of peer-school collaboration also seemed to be widely adopted in less developed western regions of China. A Guizhou principal talked about the practice of gathering several schools into an education group:

> Our school is in an education group. In Guiyang, it is now a common practice to gather several schools into a group. We will discuss and implement some education reforms together. If we have some difficulties, we can seek support from our peer schools in the group. We may also co-organize some student activities. Last year we had an art festival and a sport meet. All of the 13 schools in our group participated in these activities. (GZ_10)

5 Discussion

This study examined two main questions. The first question underlined principals' perceptions of top-down accountability demands, i.e., their understanding of the spheres of responsibility and authority in their work. Like their counterparts in other societies, Chinese principals tended to perceive responsibility as an intrinsic component of their work (Lauermann and Karabenick 2011), and as overwhelming because of the need to take charge of almost everything (Grinshtain and Gibton 2018). They saw their

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authority as more external and less amenable to professional autonomy, in other words they felt they faced many constraints.

Chan and Wang (2009) have adopted controlled decentralization to describe the process of educational decentralization and privatization in China. Local governments have been given greater power to establish and enforce regulations (Walker and Qian 2018). As the data showed, local governments' expectation of the school results and leadership performance tended to be varied and ambiguous. This was partly due to the disconnection between the demands of the curriculum reforms and the practical realities of teaching, learning, and leading in schools (Walker and Qian 2012). The challenge was to confront and address the disconnection. Principals alone could not address the disconnection, but our study showed that principals adopted various strategies to help the school community to internalize the expectations and to improve student learning as expected by top-down demands.

What principals did was to build and strengthen internal accountability while responding to external demands. This was the second question the study investigated. The study found that Chinese principals did not simply resort to positional authority to declare and reinforce the importance of meeting accountability targets. They also adopted strategies similar to those reported in the Western literature (e.g., Knapp and Feldman 2012; Knapp et al. 2013; Schechter and Qadach 2016). These included the following:

- Creating and making use of various incentive mechanisms for assuming and demonstrating desirable practice;
- Using professional development opportunities as a mechanism for internalizing expectations among teachers
- Communicating clear performance expectations through supervision and other one-on-one interactions with teaching staff.

In addition to these strategies, principals in China saw themselves as weavers of positive relationships within schools. Relationship building was widely used by Chinese principals to strengthen internal accountability:

- Fostering positive school relationships by balancing their role as a caring parent and the need for imposing performance requirements.

First, the school principals created monetary and non-monetary incentives for assuming and demonstrating desirable practice. School principals offered various resources to their staff as an enticement or reward for improving practice in ways that conformed to accountability expectations. Second, school principals used professional development as a mechanism for internalizing the idea of being accountable. Recognizing that being accountable for realizing the school's own learning improvement agenda generally meant finding better ways of teaching, principals tended to use different forms of school-based professional development as well as development programs organized by the local government to communicate the relevant reform messages. Third, school principals communicated clear performance expectations through supervision and their interactions with individual teachers. By doing so, they sent a clear message to all staff that accountability was a serious business and that the consequences were real. Fourth,

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principals provided guidance, protection, and care for teachers and they sought to build a trusting and harmonious relationship within schools despite the pressure of meeting performance requirements.

What makes the situation facing Chinese school principals different and what strategies seem to contribute to a higher level of coherence between policy and implementation? The study seemed to suggest some distinct accountability situations facing Chinese principals. The first distinction is the traditional strong presence of the state under which principal autonomy is circumscribed. To achieve "success" as a leader in the Chinese context requires first and foremost the recognition and favor of the system and political superiors (Walker et al. 2012). Successful principals are those who can adeptly manipulate their rich knowledge of relationship-maintenance and resource-attainment strategies (Walker et al. 2012; Walker and Qian 2018). The second distinction is a high level of professional accountability among principals and strong alignment between performance and incentives. Principals in China are usually promoted from the ranks of excellent teachers (Huang and Wiseman 2011), and this grants them an expert role when they discuss instructional matters with teachers. Principals are thus expected to devote a substantial amount of time to pedagogy, curricula, and student assessment. Their performance is often evaluated on the basis of both student academic results and the school's adherence to curriculum reform (Liu et al. 2017; Walker and Qian 2018). Principals producing better performance can be assigned to higher-status schools or rewarded with more prestigious titles.

In sum, a complex mix of leadership practices defines school principalship in China. On the one hand, their work environment seems to be highly political, and they must be conscious of their role as state employees and their accountability to and dependence on various government agencies. On the other hand, there is a strong professional expectation of school principals. Principals must gain legitimacy by demonstrating expert knowledge in curricula and instruction and by approaching teachers in a way that combines sincerity and benevolence.

The study also suggested that other factors contribute to the strong coherence between policy and implementation in Chinese schools. First, paternalistic leadership is a widely enacted style among Chinese school leaders. This leadership style is rooted in China's patriarchal tradition and bears some commonalities with socialist values (Farh and Cheng 2000). The leader's role is akin to that of the father in a Chinese family. Aligned with this traditional Confucian expectation, school leaders in China are expected to be role models in various ways. This was well illustrated in the study. Principals tended to see their role as parents, protectors, and "safety nets" for teachers.

Second, school leaders in China work in a very hierarchical system; thus, there is a general expectation that they will comply with established social norms. They are expected to adhere to the wishes of their superiors and to be accountable to a higher authority. The principals in the study regarded themselves as state employees who occupied the lower echelon of the government hierarchy. Thus, loyalty to their superiors appeared to have been taken for granted—they would not argue with the local governments about the implementation of top-down demands even if they personally disagreed with them. Third, a strong state is also a source of support for schools. Support comes primarily in the form of relatively stable government funding, and intellectual resources provided to schools. For example, without government support, it is difficult for the high needs or rural schools to develop partnerships with much better-

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resourced elite schools. Most teacher development resources, including sending teachers abroad, were also coordinated and sponsored by the different levels of government. The strong state provides top-down support as it imposes firm external control.

To sum, there is an "array of political, bureaucratic, and market-driven supports and constraints" that attempts to define "what educators in the school should be doing and producing" (Knapp and Feldman 2012, p. 2). How school principals negotiate, mediate, and contribute to these accountability mandates varies from context to context (Koyama 2014; Wilson et al. 2016). This study has investigated how Chinese school principals perceived the top-down accountability demands and how they used their way to strengthen internal accountability while responding to the external demands. The study has revealed that Chinese principals shared some common strategies with their Western counterparts. These included the adoption of incentive mechanisms; strategies to help teachers internalize expectations; and provision of development and supervision opportunities. Chinese principals also adopted some context-specific strategies. They placed a high priority on building mutually supportive and trusting relationships with teachers and invested time and emotional energy in supporting and motivating teachers. Their paternalistic leadership approach helped to strengthen the internal accountability in the face of external demands.

While we focus on the commonalities of principals' perception and strategies in this paper, there is a need to recognize that the level of government control and support varies from region to region. This may result in slightly different configurations of accountability pressures facing principals in different parts of China. We will report these differences in the future publications.

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