



Qualitative Analysis of the Construction of the Leadership Model of Principals in Small-Scale Rural Schools in China-Exploration Based on Grounded Theory

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Received 29/08/2023

Revised 01/09/2023

Accepted 13/09/2023

Abstract

Background and Aims: There are a huge number of rural small-scale schools in China, and they have “normally existed”. After entering the new era, its core value positioning is to meet the high-quality education needs of the people who want to go to a good school nearby. This study aims to understand the leadership improvement mechanism of small-scale rural school principals in China

Materials and methods: This study interviewed 12 small-scale rural school principals in G City, J Province, China, and coded the collected original data with the grounded theory.

Results: The results show that the influencing factors of the leadership of small-scale rural school principals in China: are personal level, school level, family level, and social level.

Conclusions: This study constructed the leadership improvement mechanism of small-scale rural school principals in China.

Keywords: Grounded Theory; Small-scale Rural Schools in China; Principal Leadership; Qualitative Analysis

Introduction

"The prosperity of the countryside leads to the prosperity of the country, and the decline of the countryside leads to the decline of the country." Helping rural revitalization not only focuses on promoting the social and economic development of the countryside but also promoting the modern transformation of rural schools and promoting the balanced development of urban and rural education, so that the sense of gain and happiness of the rural population will be enriched and guaranteed. In this context, the modern transformation of small-scale rural schools is the basic guarantee for the high-quality development of rural education. According to statistics, in 2017, there were about 270,000 primary schools (including teaching sites) at the compulsory education stage in China, and there were about 107,000 small rural schools with less than 100 students, accounting for 39.6% of the total number of primary schools (including teaching sites) in China. The number of small-scale rural schools is not only staggering, but also has been "normally existing", and its core value is also changing with the development of the times: in the past, it was based on the value positioning of "keeping the basics" and "covering the bottom line" to satisfy the basic educational rights of the people to "go to the nearest school" according to the law, but now it puts forward the high-quality education appeal of "going to the nearest school".

"Professional Standards for Principals of Compulsory Education Schools", which has far-reaching significance for promoting the professional development of principals of compulsory education schools and building a team of high-quality principals of compulsory education schools. However, in educational practice, the professional standards for evaluating principals of rural small-scale schools are often “referenced” to the requirements of the “Principals of Compulsory Education Schools”, without fully taking into account the particularities of rural small-scale schools such as their small size, remote location, and management system. It is difficult for principals of rural small-scale schools to meet the requirements of the "Professional Standards for Principals of Compulsory Education Schools" and become qualified principals of compulsory education schools when working in school-running conditions where various resources are extremely scarce.

Objectives

This study aims to understand the leadership improvement mechanism of small-scale rural school



principals in China. This study interviewed 12 small-scale rural school principals in G City, J Province, China, and coded the collected original data with the grounded theory. The results show that the influencing factors of the leadership of small-scale rural school principals in China: are personal level, school level, family level, and social level. This study constructed the leadership improvement mechanism of small-scale rural school principals in China.

Literature review

The principal is the leader of the school, and his level of leadership directly determines the effect of school transformation (Ding Xiaolei, 2019), and the principal of rural schools is considered to be a key link in the process of revitalizing rural education (Wang Xin, 2019). Therefore, as the main body of rural schools, the leadership of small-scale rural school principals is a topic worthy of research. There are three main aspects of research on the leadership of small-scale rural school principals: First, given the particularity of the leadership of small-scale rural principals, Teng Yun (2010), Xu Di (2018), Ding Xiaolei (2019) & Yu Hui (2020) adopt case study methods. Second, along the lines of research on principal leadership, some scholars also focus on a specific field of principal leadership in rural small-scale schools. For example, Ma Jing (2019) & Zhang Xiaoqiang (2021) focused on the teaching leadership of principals in rural small-scale schools. The third is that although Kong Li (2016) and Geng Lei (2018) macroscopically outline the basic situation of the leadership of rural primary school principals, such as gender, education, and tenure, Kong Li's research scope is broader than Geng Lei's.

The above research results highlight the "rural" research of schools, examine the differences between urban schools and rural schools, emphasize the impact of the principal's gender, education, etc. on leadership, and study the differences between the elements that constitute principal leadership. However, these studies did not highlight the influence of the "rural remoteness" and "scale" of rural schools on the principal's leadership, and most of them used quantitative research methods.

Methodology

1. Research objects: The selection of samples will comprehensively consider the geographical coverage, the length of time the principal has been appointed, and school attributes such as school history and administrative attributes. Twelve samples were selected, including 11 principals of small-scale rural schools and 1 principal of a central primary school in a township.

2. Grounded Theory: As a bottom-up qualitative research method for theory building, grounded theory is based on the systematic collection of data, looking for core concepts that reflect social phenomena, and then forming a theory by establishing connections between these concepts (Chen Xiangming, 2000). This research is to go to the specific educational situation of G City, J Province, China, and build a theory that is more compatible with the local situation through the process of interaction with the principals, teachers, and their superior authorities of rural small-scale schools.

3. Data Collection: From October 2022 to June 2023, interviews will be conducted in small-scale rural schools to collect original data. The methods are individual interviews (semi-structured interviews) and group discussions. During the interview process, the researchers encouraged and guided the research subjects to describe the basic situation of the rural small-scale schools and their principals, talk about their understanding of "leading" the rural small-scale schools, as well as the achievements worth summarizing and the various difficulties and contradictions they encountered in the process. The general interview time ranges from 1-1.5 hours.

4. Research Implementation: To ensure the consistency of the data collection process and interpretation judgment, all the data were interviewed, recorded, transcribed, organized, and reviewed by the researcher himself. Through the three-level coding analysis of the transcribed audio text materials, the "other perspective" is used to revise the controversial category concept, to avoid the negative impact of the researcher's subjective intention on the coding effect, and to ensure the reliability and validity of the coding scheme.



Results

1. Open coding

This research examines and decomposes the sentences in the original data sentence by sentence, and "labels" the events or actions in the original data, as shown in Table 1 (excerpt), assigns these original data to concepts, and classifies them. Through the collation of the interview data of 11 principals, in the process of open coding, a total of 311 free nodes reflecting the "leadership of rural small-scale school principals" was established (coded in the form of "school name code + question code + paragraph code + serial number"), and forming 311 three-level categories. Subsequently, after further comparison, screening, and merging of similar initial concept codes, the original concepts with a repetition rate of 3 times or less were eliminated, and finally, 89 second-level category codes were abstracted, and these 89 tree nodes were reclassified to finally form 16 new tree nodes, namely first-level category codes. The original tree nodes became second-level tree nodes (see Table 2), as shown in Table 2 (excerpt).

Table 1 Examples of open-ended coding for principals' leadership in small rural schools (excerpt)

Source material	Labeled
AS Primary School was established in 1976, and the number of students reached more than 300 when it was large (AS-1-1-1). To fundamentally solve the school's backward teaching conditions and poor facilities, the district government launched a reconstruction and expansion project and built new teaching buildings, roof sports fields, canteens, badminton courts, basketball courts, toilets, teachers' turnover rooms, and other facilities and places, and successively invested 12.93 million yuan (AS-1-1-2). Currently, there are 12 teachers and 69 students in the school, distributed in grades 1-6. (AS-1-1-3)	Long time since the establishment of the school The appearance of the campus has been greatly improved Teachers and students
(Remarks: The information is reference, only for illustration)	(Total 311)

Source: Compiled from interviews

Table 2 Comparison and categorization of the open-ended coding of principal leadership in rural small-scale schools (excerpt)

Source material	Labeled	Conceptualization	Categorization
AS Primary School was established in 1976, and the number of students reached more than 300 when it was large (AS-1-1-1). To fundamentally solve the school's backward teaching conditions and poor facilities, the district government launched a reconstruction and expansion project and built new teaching buildings, roof sports fields, canteens, badminton courts, basketball courts, toilets, teachers' turnover rooms, and other facilities and places, and successively invested 12.93 million yuan (AS-1-1-2). Currently, there are 12 teachers and 69 students in the school, distributed in grades 1-6.	Long time since the establishment of the school The appearance of the campus has been greatly improved Teachers and students (Total 311 Items)	Learn about the history of running a school Diagnostic school status Diagnostic school status (Total 89 Items)	Make a school plan (Total 16 Items)



(AS-1-1-3)

(Remarks: The information is
reference, only for illustration)

Source: Compiled from interviews

In the process of conceptualizing and categorizing the original data, the researchers mainly adopted the following three naming methods: one is to use the words of the parties concerned as much as possible in the labeling, such as "the school has been established for a long time", "I did not regard myself as the principal" and so on; the second is to use the concepts that already exist in the policy or literature and can summarize the content of the original data in the conceptualization and categorization, such as the concepts of "diagnosing the current situation of the school" and "persisting in teaching and educating people" in the "Professional Standards for Principals of Compulsory Education Schools"; Grasp self-created concepts such as overall ability", "executive ability", "coordination and communication", and "all-around leadership". These initial coding concepts are the product of a high-level generalization of the teachers' original interview sentences, which come from the original data and facilitate the understanding of the principal's real-life situation.

2. Axial coding

In this study, the second-level category codes and the first-level category codes were recombined, and the main results were as follows: firstly, 16 first-level category codes were formed, including leadership traits, leadership motivation, professional values, personal ability, personal experience, making school plans, creating an educational atmosphere, curriculum teaching guidance, leading teachers to grow, optimizing internal management, adjusting the external environment, family responsibilities, social culture, social relations, social changes, and social environment. The second is to form 5 first-level category codes and 29 second-level category codes under the "personal system"; the third is to form 6 first-level category codes and 50 second-level category codes under the "school system". Next is to form a first-level category code and a second-level category code under the "family system". Finally, 4 first-level category codes and 9 second-level category codes under the "social system" are formed. The corresponding relationship between the 4 main categories and the 16 first-level category codes and the connotation of the categories were defined and explained (see Table 3).

Table 3 Axial Coding of Leadership for Headmasters in Rural Small Schools

Main categories (4 Items)	Category (16 Items)	Original Concepts (89 Items)
Personal system	Leadership traits	Administrative leadership, lack of self-confidence, hard work, courage to take responsibility, honesty and dedication, and continuous improvement (6 Items)
	Leadership motivation	Influencing others, practicing management ideas, self-motivation, the pursuit of power, and active striving (5 Items)
	Professional values	Career choice, job burnout, job persistence, self-worth (4 Items)
	Individual ability	Capability to grasp the overall situation, executive ability, coordination and communication, all-round leadership, problem-solving ability, strategic thinking ability, and decision-making ability (7 Items)
	Personal experience	Education level, work experience, self-learning, consulting others, social experience, older age, principal training (7 Items)



Main categories (4 Items)	Category (16 Items)	Original Concepts (89 Items)
School system	Make a school plan	Understanding the history of running a school, diagnosing the current situation of a school, respecting reality, running a school philosophy, focusing on planning, school elements, school positioning, and local elements (8 Items)
	Create a nurturing atmosphere	Difficulty in carrying out activities, comprehensive development, flexible extracurricular activities, educating people with cultural cognition, lack of cultural heritage (5 items)
	Course Teaching Guidance	Strengthen teacher training, understand the method of class schedule preparation, pursue achievement, face all students, quality awareness, double-entry teaching, teaching reform, teaching design, curriculum reform, focus on curriculum resources, regional learning method (11 Items)
	Leading Teachers to Grow	Respect for teacher development, stimulating teacher development, improvement teaching, and research mechanisms, lack of incentive strategies, necessary off-campus teaching, and research, care for teachers, trust and appreciation teachers, excellent teaching and reward system, and grasping teacher quality (9 Items)
	Optimize internal management	Responsibility requirements, adherence to teaching and educating people, school system, collaborative culture, organizational structure, working environment, current situation of teachers, educational resources, network management (9 Items)
	Adjust to the external environment	Support from superiors, social support, conflict of demands, serving the society, government-led, villagers' trust, home-school cooperation, stakeholders (8 Items)
Family system	family responsibilities	Taking care of parents (1 Item)
Social system	social culture	Traditional cultural thoughts, and influence on the community (2 Items)
	social relationship	Value Conflict (1 Item)
	social change	Entering a New Era, Challenges and Opportunities, Rising Income, Policy Impact (4 Items)
	social environment	Convenient transportation, rural environment (2 Items)

Source: Organized from interview results

3. Selective coding

At this stage, this research mainly attempts to complete the following research work: first, combined with other secondary data, to clarify the “storyline” running through the interview data; second, to describe and interpret the connotation and relationship of the main category, the first-level category code, and the second-level category code; third, to test the established preliminary hypothesis, and to improve the concept category that needs to be supplemented or developed; fourth, to select the core concept category.

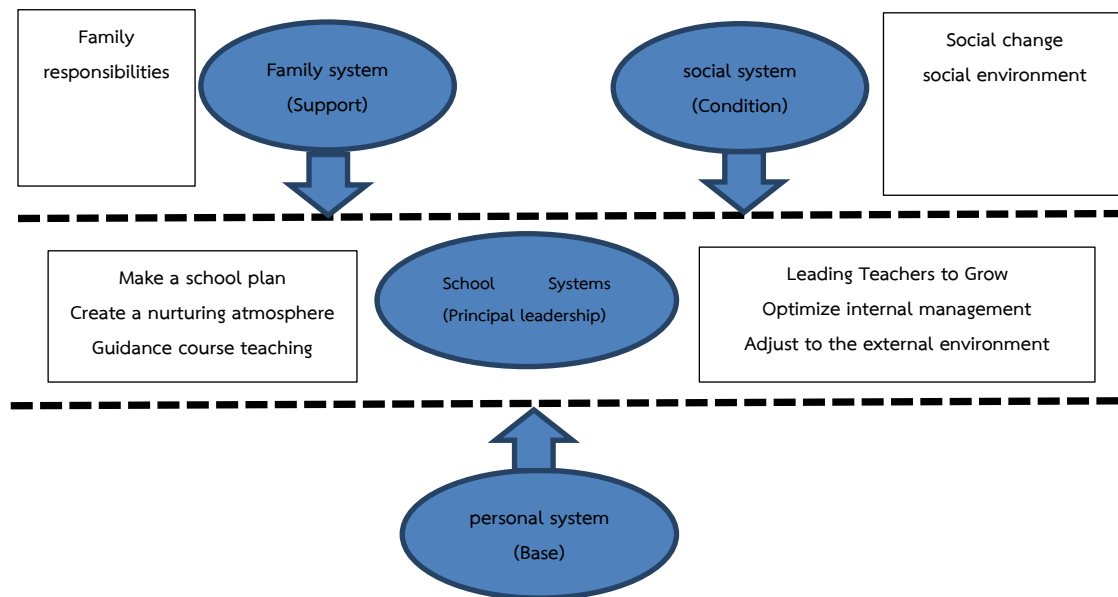


Figure 1 A framework diagram of factors affecting the leadership of small-scale rural schools in China in the new era

Source: Organized from interview results

Discussion

According to this model, a principal of a small rural school was interviewed again, and the interview data were compiled as coded text data for detailed coding analysis. Through the same process of data coding (i.e., open coding, axial coding, and selective coding), without adding original concepts, the model covers all generic concepts.

However, in this phase of the research, the primary objectives are to:

firstly, elucidate the overarching "storyline" embedded within the interview data by integrating it with other relevant secondary data;

Secondly, provides a comprehensive description and interpretation of the essence and interconnections among the main category, first-level category codes, and second-level category codes.

Thirdly, validate the initial hypotheses established, refining any concept categories requiring supplementation or development;

Fourthly, identify and prioritize the core concept category. This process involves a meticulous analysis, ensuring a thorough understanding of the data and contributing to the overall refinement and enrichment of the research findings.

Conclusion

Through the open coding, axial coding, and selective coding of the interview materials of 12 interviewed teachers, the leadership of rural small-scale school principals is closely related to the four aspects of the individual system, family system, social system, and school system. Based on this, an operating mechanism for improving the leadership of rural small-scale school principals is formed.

1. The individual system plays a fundamental role in improving the leadership of principals in rural small-scale schools.

During the coding process, the interviewed principals also mentioned age issues, social experience, etc. many times, and even used personal qualities such as hard work and concentration. After coding, the first-level category concepts in the individual system include leadership traits, leadership motivation, individual ability, professional values, personal experience, etc. These factors are in a basic



position among the factors affecting the leadership of principals in rural small-scale schools. From its point of view, as the main body of implementing leadership, the factors of the individual system affect the possibility of taking correct actions to achieve success.

2. The family system is the supporting position for improving the leadership of small-scale rural school principals.

Human energy is limited, and dealing with conflicts between work and family will affect the leadership of small-scale rural school principals, and family support has a positive impact on leadership. Parental education style, personality, financial support, etc. play a certain role in the process of leadership. For example, the supportive attitude of the spouse and family responsibilities such as caring for parents and educating children will subtly affect the principal.

3. The social system has a conditional role in improving the leadership of rural small-scale school principals.

Social factors are a "double-edged sword", with both advantages and disadvantages. It may be an opportunity or a challenge for the leadership of small-scale rural school principals. Generally speaking, rural small-scale schools are relatively remote and closed, and the communities where they are located are relatively stable and persistently influenced by traditional cultural ideas, such as the theory that reading is useless and the concept of family education. As the cultural front of rural schools, the culture of small-scale rural schools should not only be oriented to students, but also actively influence the villages and their villagers through different publicity channels as much as possible, change their understanding of education, and give full play to the leading role of principals.

4. The school system plays a central role in improving the leadership of small-scale rural school principals.

According to the requirements of the "Professional Standards for Principals of Compulsory Education Schools", the core of improving the leadership of principals in rural small-scale schools should eventually return to the school system. Through the interviews, it was found that classroom teaching, teacher growth, and the external environment were often talked about, and these three aspects were considered to be the "core" for improving the principal's leadership. For example, in terms of curriculum teaching, principals should play a leading role in compound teaching. In terms of teacher growth, given the current situation that teachers have heavy tasks, are tired of coping with teaching tasks and various inspections, and are slowly "acquired" and are not improving, principals should maintain an open professional vision, formulate standards that meet teachers' learning and development, and improve effective teaching support systems, and further lead teachers' professional development through measures such as expert guidance, teaching competitions, course evaluation, and support for project construction. In terms of the external environment, the principal regards win-win cooperation as the school's external relations criterion.

However, the principal's leadership of rural small-scale schools is unsatisfactory in three aspects: educating people and optimizing internal management. The reasons are: first, the essence of a school's existence is teaching quality; second, the main channel for schools to obtain resources is the village where they are located.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study did not use the method of comparative analysis. It compared the principal leadership of large and medium-sized schools with those of rural small-scale schools and excavated the value implication of principal leadership of rural small-scale schools. This will serve as a logical starting point for improving the path of principal leadership. These will be included in the follow-up research plan.



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