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Source: *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2012, Vol. 87, No. 2, School Leadership and Change in East Asia (2012), pp. 253-266

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41725336>

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# The Paradox of Power in Leadership in Early Childhood Education

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Western frameworks for school improvement, including the stakeholder model and the model of decentralized leadership, have recently been promoted as solutions for school improvement. Using early childhood education in Hong Kong as an illustrative case, this article focuses on the power and authority of leadership in school decision making. The interview data collected from the two case study schools reveal a paradox of power in leadership that is characterized by tensions between centralization and decentralization in the change process, where decentralization is advocated by policymakers but traditional hierarchical cultures remain. The relationship between the leaders and school stakeholders incorporates a concept of harmony that functions to defuse the potential power struggle embedded in decision making.

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership and power are inextricably intertwined. The distribution of power has always been central to understanding the phenomenon of leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2003; Spillane, 2006). Recently, many developed Western countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have decentralized education with the aim of creating more stakeholder influence on schools. The stakeholder model has been put forth as an appropriate framework for redistributing influence and power among schools. The basis of this model is the assumption that sharing of power among stakeholders can encourage active participation in decision making and increase student achievement.

In a global context, research on leadership in the West often forms our perception of power and its use. Governments of East Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and China, including Hong Kong, have initiated reforms to improve their educational system (Mok, 2006). Looking abroad for promising solutions to domestic problems is an approach commonly used by these same Asian societies (Hallinger, Walker, & Bajunid, 2005). As educational models are culture bound, Western reform movements must be critically reviewed to generate locality-specific knowledge and practice for a particular sociocultural context (Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Tikly, Crossley, Dachi, Lowe, & Mukabaranga, 2003). In this article, I attempt to use Hong Kong early childhood education as an illustrative case to reveal the paradox of power in Chinese preschool settings. Focusing specifically on those schools where local policymakers have pushed for the

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Western stakeholder model as a solution for school improvement, I analyze whether Western ideas about decentralized leadership have a place in the early childhood education in Hong Kong.

To provide a context for this discussion, I briefly review the literature on stakeholderism and power. Second, I situate the study within the educational reform effort to improve the quality of early childhood education in Hong Kong. Next, I describe the research problems, research site, and the methods I used. Finally, I present the research findings to support my discussion. In conclusion, I argue that a paradox of power in leadership exists in the Chinese early childhood education context. I state that the Chinese relationship between leaders and school stakeholders focuses on a concept of harmony that serves to diffuse the potential power struggle embedded in the centralization and decentralization dichotomy.

### Stakeholderism and Power

Key aspects of school stakeholderism and power are identified in the recent literature within this article. Each of these key aspects is discussed with a focus on its implications for the research problems, which are given in the section that follows.

The term *stakeholder* first appeared in an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute in 1963. According to this definition, stakeholders are “those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist” (as cited in Kujala, 2004, p. 561). Stakeholder is juxtaposed with the dominant idea of shareholder in a market economy, where the goal of the firm is to maximize shareowner wealth (Heller, 1997). Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm’s objectives” (p. 25). The notion of stakeholderism was further elaborated by Ackoff in 1994, who imported a social system perspective into the business field. He argued that enterprises can be regarded as social systems, which are wholes “that cannot be divided into independent parts” (Ackoff, 1994, p. 21). Acting as essential parts to give synergy to the whole system, stakeholders are encouraged to participate actively in decision making.

The stakeholder model gained much of its popularity as a result of a speech given by the former British prime minister Tony Blair, who called for a stakeholder economy in *The Guardian* in 1996. Continental Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries have now employed the concept in the field of public management. The Netherlands, Finland, and England are useful examples of systems that have adopted a stakeholder model in their educational system. The governments of those countries have changed the patterns of governance of schools to include a wide range of school stakeholders and their interests (Sliwka & Istance, 2006).

Nowadays, the need for stakeholder involvement in educational reform has become a more pressing objective for policymakers around the globe. This effort to reform educational governance can be understood as an external force imposed from the outside on managerial leadership, creating new forms of governance. In a traditional model of leadership, the leader is at the centre of power. In contrast, the stakeholder model relies on horizontal, not vertical, relationships. It invokes a persuasive ideological change in the distribution of power from vertical to horizontal, capturing the spirit of democratic participation rather than central control.

There are implications for the sharing of organizational power that may have a profound effect on the relationship between leaders and stakeholders (Heller, 1997). Indeed, interstakeholder relationships exist that can and do “affect the real and perceived authority of individual stakeholder

groups” (Cohen-Vogel, 2003, p. 8). Theoretically, the notion of stakeholderism embraces open and horizontal relationships based on equitably distributed power, but in practice the interplay of multiple stakeholders makes decision-making situations more complicated (Brazier & Keller, 2006). Therefore, balancing the competing values and interests of various stakeholders is a challenge for today’s leaders (Shariff, 2006).

Power is the ability to influence others toward the outcomes one wants. In an organizational context, it refers to the ability to influence people to accomplish the mission of an institution. Power can be supported by hierarchical structures or conferred on followers. The exercise of power can be understood as an interactive process wherein behaviour is situationally adaptive between leaders and followers (Busher, 2006). When examining the nature of power, the concept of authority must also be considered. Authority is often used synonymously with the term *power*, but they have different meanings to some extent. Power refers to the individual’s capacity to influence and motivate others toward a goal, whereas authority refers to the legitimate right which an organization or group confers on an individual to enable that person to carry out his or her responsibilities (Munduate & Gravenhorst, 2003). In the dimension of legitimate authority, the leader is a person who has power “over” followers. Power, however, can be regarded as a form of exchange between leader and followers, each receiving something from the relationship and each giving. This was described as “power with” by Coates (1997, p. 13). In these circumstances, followers can participate in some of this power, making this a means of resolving the potential conflicts in power relations.

In discussing the bases of power, Barbalet (1985) argued that

Power relations imply acceptance on the part of those subject to them. They also imply resistance. This has been regarded as paradoxical, if not contradictory. . . . Resistance can take different forms, but none are necessarily associated with conflict. What they have in common, rather, is the fact that resistance imposes limits on power. Indeed, it is through its limitation on power that resistance contributes to the outcome of power relations. (p. 531)

His arguments provide insights into the phenomenon of power dynamics.

In recent years, the model of decentralized leadership has increasingly been the object of study in the context of school improvement in Asian countries (Cheng & Tam, 2007; Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger, 1998). The dimension of power and authority is important in understanding this form of leadership. Much of the Western literature on school improvement has shown that decentralized leadership presupposes a power base that is diffuse and authority that is dispersed within a nonhierarchical collaborative network separate from managerial control (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). However, Karlsen (2000) stressed the tension between centralization and decentralization in the process of distributing power and authority. He used the term “decentralized centralism” to describe systems where “decentralization movements from the centre to periphery and centralization movements in the opposite direction will normally lead to tension” (p. 526). His work has shown the complexity of power flow in educational governance.

Moreover, research on school leadership in Asian countries has identified high power distance and collectivism as cultural forces influencing the development of school leadership (Hallinger et al., 2005). This raises questions about stakeholderism’s role as a form of democratic participation in school governance in Asian-Pacific countries, which are often predominated by the ideologies of collectivism and high power distance culture. To summarise, this review of the

literature presents a picture of the complex, dynamic, paradoxical nature of power relations in the discourse of stakeholdership and decentralized leadership.

### Hong Kong Early Childhood Education

Over the last decade, the Hong Kong government has moved from a passive to a proactive role in formulating policies for local early childhood education. In the past, the government provided preschools with only minimal support in the form of legislation, finance, inspections, teacher training, and curriculum (Oppen, 1992). The preschool sector has thus been running under conditions resembling the free market. Since the transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China in 1997, the government has taken a more active role in improving the quality of early childhood education through a number of reform policies, including teacher qualifications, curriculum development, quality assurance, and education vouchers. The central focus of these measures is to raise standards and increase accountability.

The introduction of *Performance Indicators* by the Education Bureau, a local authority, in 2000, is a cornerstone of this quality assurance policy. All preschools are required to make their quality inspection reports accessible to the public. Parents use these reports as a basis for choosing schools for their children. The introduction of reports relating to school performance can be seen as an attempt by the government to exercise indirect control over school quality through parental choice (Ho, 2007a). Thus, the document *Performance Indicators* promotes an ideology of stakeholdership and decentralized leadership, and states that “[school management] works closely with its major stakeholders in formulating policies and developing a proper administration system to enhance effectiveness in management” (Education Bureau, 2002, p. 5). It explicitly recognizes that the involvement of various school stakeholders in the process of planning and implementation of school policies will facilitate the management process. Schools are encouraged to make efforts to promote stakeholder involvement to achieve better student outcomes. Parents and teachers are now regarded as key stakeholders in the local context of early childhood education.

There are two implications for school leadership. First, as mentioned earlier, the provision of preschooling has long been influenced by parental preferences through market choice. With a clear agenda for the involvement of school stakeholders in the decision-making process, reformers now recognize the consumer power of parents. That deepens the impact of market forces on shaping the provision of preschool service (Ho, 2008). More important, the Performance Indicators provide an official channel for parents to extend their power over school policy and operation. Second, a noteworthy feature of Hong Kong early childhood education is a centralized form of leadership. What is being advocated in the stakeholder model set out by the *Performance Indicators* is the creation of a new form of governance at the school level. School leaders are strongly encouraged to involve teachers in decision making, thereby restructuring professional relationships. This could potentially lead to a fundamental change in the distribution of power between school management and teachers.

### Research Problems

The research reported in this article is part of a study that seeks to understand the effective leadership practices of various school stakeholders in Hong Kong preschool settings. In the

following, I examine the specific power relationships between the leaders and school stakeholders taking part in the decision-making process of two preschools. I also examine the extent to which a model of stakeholder power pulled from the Western literature is relevant to early childhood education in Hong Kong. Accordingly, I posed two main research questions: How do school principals and different stakeholders perceive the role of power and authority in their school decision-making relationships? What are the conditions that influence the power distribution in such processes?

## METHOD

### Case Selection

The research objectives stated earlier require a methodology that will generate in-depth data that recognize the role of power and authority in school decision making. As Stake (1995) stated, a case study is “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). A qualitative case study methodology was thus used in this study. The main reason for this choice was that the organizational context is important for understanding the complexity of multiple perspectives among various school stakeholders. As the overall purpose of the larger study was to investigate effective leadership’s impact on quality early childhood programmes, I deliberately selected schools from those that the Education Bureau evaluated as excellent. The Education Bureau’s quality assurance inspection covers four domains: management and organization, learning and teaching, support for children and school ethos, and child development. The overall performance of a school is graded at four levels: unsatisfactory, acceptable, good, and excellent. Each year, the Education Bureau evaluates only a small number of preschools as excellent in the inspections. With the assistance of Education Bureau, I was able to identify two preschools that received grades of excellent and were willing to participate in the study.

### Description of Case and Context

School A is a nonprofit kindergarten operated by a social voluntary organization. The school was established in the mid-1980s and, along with a number of sibling schools, has been operated and overseen by an experienced coordinator who also serves as school governor. The school is located in a social community building, which was built for educational and social services. At the time of study, the number of students enrolled was 100. School A had nine teachers and four support staff. Among these teachers, four obtained their professional training at the 2-year higher diploma level and five obtained the 1-year certificate. The team of teaching staff was stable. The only example of turnover was one teacher who was internally transferred to a sibling school, requiring the recruitment of a new teacher as a replacement. Eight parents participated in the focus group interviews. Only one of the parents had tertiary education. The remaining seven parents had attained only secondary education. The occupations of the parents were closely linked to their levels of educational attainment. For those who were working, all of them were nonprofessionals. Their occupations included office staff, accounting clerk, and secretary.

School B is a nonprofit kindergarten operated by a religious organization. In operation 30 years, the school is overseen by an experienced coordinator who also serves as school governor. It is located in a private housing estate. At the time of the study, the number of students enrolled was 250. The school principal had more than 10 years of teaching experience and more than 5 years of leadership experience. At the time of the study, she was studying for her master's degree. The school features a team of 15 teachers and three support staff members, each of whom had been serving for at least 3 years. Among these teachers, two had obtained their professional training at the 2-year higher diploma level and 13 had obtained their 1-year certificate. The turnover rate at School B was also very low, as only one teacher was recruited for the new school term. Nine parents participated in the focus group interviews. Two of the parents had tertiary education. The remaining seven parents attained only secondary education. For those who were working, all were nonprofessionals.

Preschools in Hong Kong are heterogeneous in terms of background, educational ideology, operation, size, staffing, staff qualifications, and the needs of their clientele. They have a variety of sponsors including religious organizations, voluntary agencies, and profit-making organizations. The two schools in this study have several common characteristics. Both of them were run by nonprofit organizations. They were operated together with a number of sibling schools by their own parent organization and were overseen by an experienced coordinator who also served as school governor. Both the school principals had received training at degree level or higher and had more than 5 years of experience. Meanwhile, most teachers had obtained only their professional qualification of 1-year basic certificate, though some had a higher diploma. The school principals had relatively higher qualifications than their teaching staff. Comparatively, the gap in professional qualifications of staff at School B was bigger than at School A. Both schools had a stable team of teachers who had been serving for at least 3 years. Seventeen parents were interviewed in this study, 14 of whom had received secondary education. The educational attainment of the other three was at the tertiary level. None of the parents were professionals.

## Participants

The stakeholders in this study were defined as those individuals with a vested interest in their preschool's programme quality. In each case study school, I interviewed the coordinator (i.e., school governor appointed by the parent body), principal, one senior teacher (if any), one class teacher of each cohort, one subject or special education teacher (if any), and half of the support staff. Two parent groups were also selected for interview. Parents of students 5 to 6 years old and those of graduates (6- to 7-year-olds) were selected for interview. The children of these parents had been or were going through the whole schooling process. It can be anticipated that these parents had a good understanding of the operation of the school and its recent changes. The composition of participants is listed in the table in the appendix.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Interviewing was the major method of data collection for this study. Interviews can be divided into three categories: structured interview, semistructured interview, and unstructured interview

(Fontana & Frey, 2005). Each category varies in format and structure of questioning. Semistructured interviews lie in between structured and unstructured interviews in terms of the flexibility of the interview process. For semistructured interviews, the interviewer prepares a list of open-ended questions, from which the interviewer has some space to adjust based on the flow and context of the conversations. This study featured semistructured interviews as a data collection method because this type of interview is more systematic than the conversational interview and less restrictive than the standardized open-ended one (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). It allows the interviewees to express their opinions and describe their experiences in a more relaxed and spontaneous way. It can therefore generate a depth of understanding that is appropriate for the objectives of this study. That is to investigate the multiple perspectives on power and authority in decision making held by various school stakeholder groups and the interactions between school leadership, in-school processes, and school context. Interviews of the school governors, school principals, teachers, and support staff were conducted on an individual basis to allow each participant the opportunity to express their views openly and confidentially. The parent interviews were conducted among focus groups of three to five people. All interviews were conducted by the researcher. All participants were interviewed for one session, and each interview ranged from 60 to 90 min. The interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed. The study used Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic model to conduct the data analysis. NVivo, computer software for qualitative analysis aided the data coding. Codes were applied to the text to dissect it into segments. After completing this process, all interview transcripts were reread for a second time to ensure consistency of categorization across transcripts. Categories and themes subsequently emerged from the interview transcripts.

## FINDINGS

In this section, I discuss the views of various school stakeholders concerning the power relations inherent to leadership roles and how those same stakeholders perceived the role of power and authority in the process of decision making. I also discuss the conditions that influence power distribution in such processes. Based on these findings, the next section addresses the issues of power and leadership.

### Participation in Decision Making and Degree of Power Control in Delegation

I used two interconnected dimensions, namely, boundaries of participation in decision making and degree of power control in delegation, to discuss the power relations between the leaders and school stakeholders in the process of school change. In this regard, two definitions support my analysis. Duke, Showers, and Imber (1980) stated that "school decisions are greater than a particular classroom, but not greater than a school including nine areas: instructional co-ordination, curriculum development, staff development, evaluation, general school improvement, personnel, rules and discipline, general administration, and policymaking" (p. 26). McKenna (1998) defined delegation as the act to "designate decision-making authority and task responsibilities to appropriate staff; effectively use their times, skills, and abilities and potentials" (p. 108). I used these two definitions as the theoretical framework for the following discussion. In this study, both school principals limited their staff's participation in decision-making processes to the areas of

curriculum and pedagogy. The principals also made some degree of power control by delegating to their teachers. However, the delegation itself was different in nature between the two case study schools. With reference to McKenna's definition, Principal A designated task responsibilities and some decision-making power to her staff, whereas Principal B mainly focused on delegating task responsibilities. Thus, Principal A exhibited less power control than Principal B.

I do not participate in the staff meetings. I think the teachers can express their opinions more freely [if I am not there]. Except for matters of emergency, I won't give them an agenda and guidelines. This is to give them a free hand to work things out. (Principal A)

The description provided by Principal A was consistent with what her staff told me. Teacher B said that Principal A chaired the meetings at the initial stage of the change. She gradually withdrew in the later stages, pushing the teachers to take turns to holding the meetings and leading the discussions.

Because Principal A intended to delegate some authority and give autonomy to her staff in the leadership process, her subordinates reciprocally found themselves with more power to take up the lead role in implementing the curriculum change. Teacher C cited the coordination of the science curriculum:

The outside experts visited our school to teach us the subject knowledge and teaching skills in conducting science experiments with the children. . . . Afterward, I had to compile the information and share it with other teachers. I taught them how to conduct science experiments. I found myself acting like a leader in the process. (Teacher C)

In contrast to the situation at School A, Principal B delegated only the task responsibilities to her staff, not the embedded power and authority. In return, the staff of School B tended to conform to the authority of the school management. Two teachers described the process of decision making in the following terms:

When Principal B has a new idea, she will not order us to follow her direction immediately. She usually tells us to make a trial. After she has observed the process for a period of time, she discusses with us. Whether our suggestions are accepted or not all depends on her final decision. (Teacher J)

Effective communication between a principal and the teachers is very important. Every week, we have the staff meeting with Principal B to facilitate the communication between us. It is difficult to work things out if we don't understand the thinking of Principal B. (Teacher G)

Market theory assumes that the two schools in this study actively involved their parents in decision-making processes. The reason for this is that "output closely links to service demand and quality is defined by the consumers in a private market" (Shaw, 2000, p. 57). This assumption implies that the power and influence of consumers significantly determines the running of an organization responsive to the market. In line with this assumption, the interview data suggested that both principals made considerable efforts to collect parents' opinions on the orientation of the curriculum and pedagogy, the effectiveness of teaching and learning, and school activities. They also provided parent education through various channels, such as parents' meetings, daily conversations, telephone calls, newsletters, and opinion surveys.

Basically, I conduct opinion surveys for each school activity. Some are closed questions and some are open. The survey is to provide an opportunity for parents to express their views. (Principal B)

The schools took actions to follow up on parents' opinions thoroughly. Parents consistently echoed this fact. Parent D told me that she gave suggestions on the choice of curriculum content to the school. After consideration, School B accepted her opinion.

Many investigators have concluded that encouraging participation in decision making can increase the probability of change in organizations. However, some argue that no control in participatory decision making may be just as damaging as no participation at all (Lammers, 1967, p. 213). The aforementioned examples indicate that parents participated actively in the process of decision making and the schools valued such participation as an input for planning their educational service. But still, the boundary of participation was limited to school activities and the area of curriculum and pedagogy. For example, Principal A said the school management did not have any plans to involve parents in decision making at school policy level. This indicated that the boundary for parents' participation in decision making was well defined by the school management.

### Relationships in Harmony

These findings on participation levels in decision making and the delegation of power prompt me to raise another important question: How does management lead the staff in ways that enabled them to become, as I term it, "restricted autonomous followers" without leading to a power struggle between the leader and school stakeholders within the school context? Data from this study suggest that a harmonious relationship is the answer. Similar to the organizational paradox phenomenon described by Moos (2003), the relationship among all school stakeholders was twofold. One was social and the other was a working relationship. Each of these is explained in turn next.

Characterised by caring and trustfulness, a strong social relationship was enjoyed by all stakeholders, thereby constituting a positive school culture and atmosphere. The school principals made considerable efforts to build up a network of good social relationships within their schools. Teacher E of School A mentioned that the school principal and teachers were open about their personal life, just as they would be with friends. This was echoed by a member of the school's support staff. She said that Principal A was very kind to each of them. The following excerpt given by a parent of School B highlighted the good relationship between Principal B and her staff:

Principal B knows that the teachers are very hardworking and responsible. They try their best to serve the children and their families. She can put herself into the shoes of teachers as she was a front-line teacher many years ago. Principal B often has a social gathering with her staff after school. It seems that they enjoy each other's company very much. (Parent C)

Another parent in the group interview also mentioned that Principal B valued the school's strong social relationships.

For example, Principal B invited the volunteer parents and all staff to the celebration party after the school graduation ceremony last year. She took the opportunity to thank each of us. We all enjoyed the party very much. Principal B stayed for the whole night. She would not just pay the money for the party and then leave us alone. (Parent C)

At the same time, the school principals and the stakeholders had a close working relationship. The principals were very willing to offer help to their staff whenever needed. Principal A said she would not mind working with her staff on trivial things. For example, she helped the staff wrap gifts for the school graduation ceremony. This helpfulness and supportiveness was consistently mentioned by teachers, support staff, and parents. Next is the experience of Teacher G in her own words.

I know Principal B is very busy with the school matters. No matter how busy she is, she always maintains close communication with me. For example, I have a few cases of children with learning difficulties. She always asks if she can offer me any help and support. (Teacher G)

I use the metaphor of “buffer” to describe this long-term harmonious relationship, as it functions to lessen the effect of the centralization and decentralization dichotomy. As Dimmock and Walker (2005) argued, leadership in East Asia is mediated by important cultural norms of high power distance, a collectivist orientation, and hierarchical compliance, where the cultures “continue to place a premium on collectivism and group harmony, it is more accepting of societal and organizational power inequities” (Dimmock & Walker, 2002, p. 78). Similarly, this study’s school stakeholders were quite satisfied with the present distribution of power. That is to say, the centralized power and authority held by a single head was uncritically accepted by the school stakeholders.

## SUMMARY

In general, the exercise of school leadership within the two case study schools was highly centralized. However, participation in decision making and the delegation of power operated differently to some extent. One principal extended less power control in delegation to her subordinates, whereas the other imposed more restrictions on the exercise of power and authority. On the whole, the two principals limited the delegation of power, whether it was power and authority or task responsibilities, to the scope of curriculum and pedagogy. For parents, the boundaries of participation in decision making were not as confined as those for the teachers, but they still did not extend to the school policy level. The role of school leadership was centralized on the principal herself. The school stakeholders in this study often used the terms *headship* and *leadership* as interchangeable concepts. And yet, the school stakeholders uncritically accepted the centralized power and authority exercised by the school management. Harmonious relationships established and maintained by the school principals functioned as a buffer to release the tensions and power conflicts embedded in the decision-making process.

## DISCUSSION

The introduction of *Performance Indicators* in 2000 imposed new demands for the involvement of various school stakeholders in the school decision-making process. The *Performance Indicators* also began a change toward decentralized leadership. This study examined the extent to which power sharing between the leaders and school stakeholders has produced a more equal relationship and reshaped preschool leadership. Though the results of this study cannot be generalized for the

whole picture of school governance and leadership phenomena in early childhood education in Hong Kong, it does shed some light on the latest developments.

I observed some differences where a centralized style of leadership dominated. The leading practice of one principal was centralized, with very limited scope for delegation and participation, whereas the second principal exhibited a higher degree of power sharing, which allowed for greater participation in school decision making among various stakeholders. Based on the limited evidence provided by these two case studies, I argue that the development of preschool leadership has just begun to shift toward decentralization. Some tensions may occur in this process of decentralizing leadership. In this section, I discuss the paradox of power in leadership in the local preschools by making reference to the work of Karlsen (2000) and also that of Hallinger et al. (2005) on power and leadership.

The mentality of school principals and teachers lays the foundation for later discussion. Through 1997, early childhood education was characterised by poor quality services with minimal professional training. Many perceived the field as custodial care or preparation for primary education (Oppen, 1992). Preschool teachers who had received no professional preparation were practicing in the schools until the implementation of a preservice training policy in 2003. Most of these teachers were originally “trained” in a modified form of apprenticeship. They tended to follow the practices of the experienced members of staff they worked alongside. They were expected to respect formal authority and not challenge the power held by those in senior positions. These experiences led them to be “professionally” socialized (Ho, 2006). School principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of power and authority mutually reinforced a patriarchal social structure. High power distance culture is thus deeply rooted in the profession.

*Performance Indicators* advocate models of stakeholderism and decentralized leadership. Power sharing is a common characteristic of these models. Originally developed in continental Europe and Anglo-Saxon countries, these models would prove problematic if adopted in Chinese preschools without critical consideration of the differences in cultural context. Although the quality assurance policy encourages both greater participation by various stakeholders in school decision making and promotes decentralized forms of leadership as mentioned in the previous section, it also implies that harmonization plays an important role in the development of stakeholderism in school governance. The document states,

The management of the pre-primary institutions is visionary, capable and knowledgeable. They administer and develop the institution in an open and harmonious manner with great devotion. They have a good understanding of various changes and can lead the institution towards quality education through concerted efforts. (Education Bureau, 2002, p. 5)

The policy document itself is a useful example of a manifestation of the paradox of power in school governance. It implicitly recognizes the problematic nature of stakeholderism in local preschools. Influenced by the high power distance culture, school leaders utilize harmonization to reduce the tensions embedded in the dilemma presented by centralization and decentralization.

This study indicates how two school principals can use the establishment of stakeholder power relations to guide change on a daily basis. The study also suggests that leadership practices can be shaped by how the presence of harmonious relationships. I do not wish to argue that harmonization should not be used as a means to achieve stakeholder relations for positive school culture, but an important challenge remains for a modern preschool leader—how to go beyond harmonious relationships to develop a form of democratic participation in the decision-making

process. The purpose of such participation is to establish checks and balances on the absolute power and authority of school leaders. These checks and balances ensure that school policies are fair and can be applied equally to all members of a school. The concept of social equality is important to the ideology underlying the democratic movement towards stakeholder involvement. Social equality in schools is important if education is essentially a moral enterprise.

## CONCLUSION

The theoretical and conceptual contributions of this article fill an important gap in the power and leadership literature. By explaining the power relations and dynamics of multiple school stakeholders in a Chinese early childhood education context, this article asks questions about the distribution of in-school governance. This is a setting where decentralization is being discussed, but where traditional hierarchical structures remain. This article addresses the paradox of power in leadership, in the process pointing out the centralization and decentralization dilemma inherent to the process of school change. Empirical evidence from this study suggests that leaders in Chinese early childhood settings experience conflict over leadership roles, holding traditional views that a leader should take responsibility, at the same time as they are encouraged to move toward the development of decentralized leadership. The involvement of school stakeholders and decentralizing leadership practices will succeed in changing the top-down leadership values and behaviour if, and only if, leaders and school stakeholders can go beyond harmonious relationships and move toward democratic participation, thereby ensuring that all voices are heard in the formulation of school policy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The article arose from doctoral dissertation completed as part of the Doctor of Education programme at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, United Kingdom. I express my deepest gratitude to Professor Leon Tikly, who gave me enormous support and guidance throughout the entire journey of my studies and offered helpful comments on and encouragement to publish the doctoral research upon which this article is based.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1  
Composition of Participants

| Role of Participants                 | School A                      | School B            |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| School governor                      | 1 person                      | 1 person            |
| Principal                            | 1 person                      | 1 person            |
| Senior teacher                       | NA                            | 1 person            |
| Teachers                             |                               |                     |
| Class A (2–3-year-olds)              | 2 teachers                    | NA                  |
| Class B (3–4-year-olds)              | 2 teachers                    | 4 teachers          |
| Class C (4–5-year-olds)              | 2 teachers                    | 3 teachers          |
| Class D (5–6-year-olds)              | 2 teachers                    | 3 teachers          |
| Subject teacher                      | 1 teacher (Special education) | 1 teacher (English) |
| Support staff                        |                               |                     |
| Clerical staff/Housekeeper           | 4 workers                     | 3 workers           |
| Parents of students of Class D       | 5 parents                     | 4 parents           |
| Parents of graduates (6–7-year-olds) | 3 parents                     | 5 parents           |
| Total                                | 11 interviews                 | 11 interviews       |

*Note.* Source: Ho (2007b).