

# Sharing Leadership in Chinese Primary Schools: Teachers' Participation, Feedback Mechanisms, and Strategic Silence

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## Abstract

Sharing Leadership is widely promoted as a key approach to enhancing teacher participation in school governance. However, evidence from Chinese primary schools suggests that the practical enactment of Sharing Leadership remains limited. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis conducted in three public primary schools in China, this study examines the challenges teachers encounter when engaging in leadership-related participation. The findings reveal three interrelated challenges. First, teacher participation is often constrained by limited access to substantive decision-making opportunities, resulting in formalistic involvement rather than shared governance. Second, weak feedback adoption mechanisms reduce the perceived effectiveness of teacher expression, undermining teachers' sense of influence and willingness to participate. Third, a culture of silence has gradually emerged, in which teachers strategically withdraw from expression due to perceived risks associated with speaking up in hierarchical and stability-oriented organizational contexts. The study argues that these challenges are not primarily rooted in teachers' professional capacity, but are shaped by organizational structures, institutional arrangements, and cultural expectations within primary schools. By highlighting how participation mechanisms, feedback processes, and expressive norms interact to constrain Sharing Leadership, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of teacher leadership practices in centralized education systems. The findings suggest that improving teacher leadership requires not only expanding participation opportunities, but also strengthening organizational responsiveness and creating conditions that support meaningful engagement.

**Keywords:** Teacher Leadership, Sharing Leadership, Participation, Silence, Chinese Primary Schools

## Introduction

Despite the growing prominence of Sharing Leadership in educational leadership research and policy discourse, its practice in everyday school governance remains uneven. Although Sharing Leadership emphasizes collaboration, teacher participation, and collective decision-making, evidence shows that the presence of participatory structures does not

necessarily lead to shared influence in practice. In many schools, teachers are invited to take part in meetings, consultations, and feedback processes, yet their involvement remains largely procedural and has limited impact on key decisions. This gap between the formal promotion of Sharing Leadership and teachers' actual participation experiences represents an important but understudied issue in school leadership research.

Existing studies indicate that leadership participation is often limited by hierarchical decision-making, accountability demands, and efficiency-focused organizational practices, particularly in centralized education systems. However, much of the literature has focused on whether participatory mechanisms are in place, rather than on how these mechanisms operate in practice or how teachers experience their effects. As a result, Sharing Leadership is frequently discussed as a policy ideal or structural arrangement, while the everyday processes through which participation becomes procedural, feedback loses impact, and expression is constrained receive less attention. This limits understanding of how teachers interpret participation opportunities and adjust their leadership involvement in daily school routines.

One clear expression of this problem is the gap between teacher voice and organizational response. In many schools, teachers are encouraged to share their views through meetings or feedback channels. When such expression is not followed by clear acknowledgment, explanation, or action, participation can become one-way and symbolic. Over time, repeated experiences of non-response may lead teachers to question the value of speaking up and to participate selectively or remain silent. Such silence reflects not a lack of professional commitment, but an adaptive response to organizational conditions in which expression offers uncertain benefits but predictable risks.

These challenges are especially evident in Chinese primary schools, where leadership practices operate within a highly centralized governance system that emphasizes administrative accountability, organizational stability, and policy compliance. Although national policies promote democratic management and teacher participation, decision-making authority remains largely concentrated at the school leadership level. At the same time, primary schools rely heavily on teachers' coordination, collaboration, and informal leadership work, while teachers face strong performance expectations, close supervision, and limited decision-making power. This context makes Chinese primary schools a revealing setting for examining how Sharing Leadership is enacted and constrained in practice.

Against this backdrop, the central problem addressed in this study is not whether teachers are willing or capable of assuming leadership roles, but how organizational arrangements shape the meaning and consequences of participation. When participation occurs after key decisions have been made, when feedback lacks transparency and follow-up, and when expression is perceived as risky, Sharing Leadership is reduced to formal inclusion without genuine influence. Accordingly, this study investigates the challenges teachers encounter in practicing Sharing Leadership in Chinese primary schools, with particular attention to participation structures, feedback processes, and expressive norms.

In recent decades, sharing leadership has emerged as an influential concept in educational leadership research. Sharing leadership emphasizes collaboration, participation,

and distributed decision-making. It challenges traditional hierarchical models by recognizing teachers as active contributors to school development. Within this framework, teachers are expected to participate in decision-making processes, assume leadership responsibilities beyond classrooms, and contribute to school-wide improvement initiatives (Angelle, 2017). International research suggests that sharing leadership can enhance teacher professionalism, strengthen collective responsibility, and improve organizational learning in schools. When teachers are meaningfully involved in leadership processes, schools are more likely to benefit from diverse professional knowledge and sustained improvement efforts (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). As a result, sharing leadership has been widely promoted in policy discourse and leadership frameworks, particularly in contexts advocating decentralization and school-based management.

Existing empirical studies have documented that, despite its strong theoretical appeal, sharing leadership is not consistently enacted across different educational systems. Prior research has repeatedly noted a gap between the formal promotion of participation and teachers' actual influence on school governance. In many contexts, leadership participation is institutionalized in form but remains constrained in practice. Teachers may be invited to attend meetings, offer suggestions, or engage in consultation processes, yet their contributions rarely shape core decisions. Research suggests that the challenges of sharing leadership are particularly pronounced in centralized education systems, where formal participation mechanisms coexist with strong administrative control and accountability pressures. Although participation is frequently emphasized at the policy level, organizational routines and cultural expectations may restrict opportunities for meaningful deliberation. As a result, sharing leadership has often been observed to operate as procedural inclusion rather than substantive collaboration.

China provides a compelling context for examining this tension. Primary schools in China operate within a highly centralized governance structure characterized by strong policy regulation, performance-oriented evaluation systems, and an emphasis on organizational stability. National policies frequently advocate democratic participation, teacher involvement, and shared governance. At the same time, school management practices remain largely top-down, with principals bearing primary responsibility for decision-making and being ultimately responsible for school operations. Existing research on teacher leadership in China has documented various structural constraints, including limited professional autonomy, heavy workloads, and role ambiguity (Zhao et al., 2025). Studies have also noted the influence of cultural norms emphasizing hierarchy, harmony, and compliance. However, relatively few empirical studies have examined how sharing leadership is experienced by teachers in their daily interactions with institutional arrangements and organizational culture, particularly at the primary school level. Moreover, much of the existing literature focuses on the presence or absence of participation mechanisms, rather than on how these mechanisms operate in practice. Less attention has been paid to teachers' perceptions of participation effectiveness, feedback processes, and expressive risk. As a result, the micro-level dynamics through which participation becomes formalized, feedback becomes weakened, and expression gradually gives way to silence have received limited attention.

Primary schools represent a particularly important yet understudied setting for investigating these issues. As the foundational stage of compulsory education, primary schools play a critical role in shaping students' learning experiences. Teachers at this level often engage in extensive coordination, collaboration, and informal leadership work. At the same time, they operate under strong administrative supervision and policy expectations, making the practice of sharing leadership both significant and challenging. Against this backdrop, this study examines the challenges of sharing leadership as experienced by teachers in Chinese primary schools. Rather than treating sharing leadership as a normative ideal or individual competency, the study approaches it as an organizational practice shaped by institutional arrangements, administrative routines, and cultural expectations. By focusing on teachers' practices, the study seeks to illuminate how participation is structured, how feedback is processed, and how expression is negotiated in everyday school governance. In response to the organizational and experiential problems outlined above, this study addresses the following research question: What challenges do teachers encounter in practicing sharing leadership in Chinese primary schools, and how are these challenges shaped by institutional arrangements and organizational culture?

Using qualitative data from interviews, observations, and document analysis, the study provides an in-depth examination of participation practices in three primary schools. The findings reveal that sharing leadership is constrained by limited access to decision-making, weak feedback adoption mechanisms, and a culture of silence that discourages expressive engagement. These challenges collectively shape teachers' leadership participation and contribute to the persistence of a gap between participatory ideals and organizational realities. By offering a contextualized analysis of sharing leadership in Chinese primary schools, this study contributes to the broader literature on teacher leadership and school governance. It advances understanding of how leadership participation is shaped by organizational environments and highlights the importance of examining not only formal structures but also the cultural and institutional dynamics that shape everyday practice.

### **Literature Review**

Shared leadership has become a widely discussed concept in teacher leadership research. In empirical studies, it is often examined through the process of sharing leadership in everyday school practices, and is closely related to distributed leadership (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Despite differences in emphasis across these approaches, prior studies converge on several core assumptions regarding what sharing leadership entails in school contexts. In school contexts, sharing leadership refers to a collective form of influence in which leadership is not confined to formal administrators but enacted through the participation of multiple organizational members, particularly teachers (Liu et al., 2023; Mifsud, 2024).

A central feature of sharing leadership is collective participation in school affairs (Spillane et al., 2001). Rather than positioning teachers as passive implementers of externally defined decisions, sharing leadership emphasizes teachers' involvement in shaping instructional practices, organizational processes, and school improvement (Spillane, 2005). This participation is not limited to formal meetings or designated roles, but is embedded in everyday interactions, professional dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving. As Harris (2008) argues, leadership in such contexts is exercised through relationships and practices

rather than through positional authority alone. Influence beyond formal roles is closely related to collective participation. Sharing leadership challenges traditional hierarchical assumptions by recognizing that leadership influence may emerge from expertise, professional credibility, and situational engagement, regardless of whether individuals hold official titles (Yang & Chang, 2024). Spillane (2005) describes leadership as a distributed practice distributed across people and situations, highlighting how leadership functions are enacted through interactions rather than assigned positions. From this perspective, teacher leadership is not determined by formal roles but rather by teachers' capacity to shape others' thinking, actions, and organizational direction (Ghamrawi et al., 2024).

Another defining dimension of sharing leadership is involvement in decision-making (Harris et al., 2022). Existing literature consistently associates shared or distributed leadership with teachers' participation in deliberative processes related to curriculum, assessment, professional development, and school governance (Mifsud, 2024; Galdames-Calderón, 2023). Importantly, such involvement implies more than consultation or information sharing. It assumes that teachers' contributions have the potential to inform, shape, or influence decisions (Harris & Jones, 2019). Angelle (2017) emphasizes that teacher leadership becomes meaningful when teachers are able to exercise judgment and agency within organizational decision-making structures, rather than merely implementing predefined tasks. Within this framework, it is crucial to distinguish sharing leadership from simple task assignment (Harris et al., 2022). Assigning additional responsibilities to teachers, such as coordinating activities or managing projects, does not in itself constitute sharing leadership if decision-making authority and influence remain centralized (Hickey et al., 2022). In this sense, leadership does not simply mean workload expansion. Instead, sharing leadership is best understood as an organizational practice, shaped by structures, norms, and interactional patterns that enable or constrain teachers' participation and influence (Nadeem, 2024). It reflects how leadership is enacted within the organization, rather than a set of individual characteristics or skills held by particular teachers.

This conceptual clarification provides an important analytical baseline for examining how sharing leadership operates in practice. When leadership is reduced to task execution without meaningful influence, the core principles of collective participation and shared decision-making are undermined (O'Shea, 2021). Establishing this distinction is essential for interpreting empirical findings related to teachers' constrained participation and the procedural nature of leadership practices observed in school settings.

Teacher participation has long been regarded as a central component of democratic school governance and shared leadership (Mifsud & Wilkins, 2025). In both teacher leadership and organizational studies, participation is commonly associated with enhanced commitment, professional agency, and collective responsibility (Shal et al., 2024). However, existing research suggests that participation in form does not always translate into influence in practice, particularly when decision-making authority and power relations remain unchanged (Lim et al., 2025). The distinction between teacher participation and teacher influence therefore provides a critical analytical framework for understanding the limitations of shared leadership in organizational settings. A key issue identified in the literature is the gap between formal participation and substantive participation (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024). Formal participation refers to institutionalized opportunities for involvement, such as

attendance at meetings, consultation procedures, or representation on committees. Substantive participation, by contrast, involves meaningful engagement in decision-making processes, where participants' views can shape outcomes (Abonyi, 2024). As several scholars have noted, the presence of formal participation structures alone does not guarantee that participants exercise real influence over decisions (Hickey et al., 2022). In educational settings, teachers may be invited to participate, yet remain outside the core of governance processes.

This gap has been described through concepts such as procedural democracy and symbolic participation. Procedural democracy emphasizes adherence to formal rules and processes of consultation, often to demonstrate openness and fairness (Sousa et al., 2023). However, when procedures are separated from decision authority, participation may function primarily as a symbolic exercise rather than a mechanism for collective deliberation. In this sense, symbolic participation refers to practices that signal inclusion without altering power. Prior studies suggest that such arrangements may fulfill organizational or policy expectations for participation while preserving centralized control over key decisions (Delgado-Baena & Sianes, 2024; Or & Berkovich, 2023). As a result, participation within school organizations can operate as a legitimacy mechanism. By involving teachers in meetings or consultative settings, school leaders may strengthen the appearance of democratic governance and shared leadership. This symbolic inclusion can increase organizational acceptance within and beyond the school by demonstrating compliance with participatory norms (Galanti, 2023). However, such forms of participation often emphasize agreement display and procedural completion over genuine debate. As a result, teachers' contributions may be acknowledged but not incorporated into final decisions (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024).

Another common theme in the literature is consultation without decision power. Teachers may be asked to express opinions, provide feedback, or respond to proposals that have already been largely determined. In such cases, consultation occurs after critical decisions have been made, positioning teachers as respondents rather than co-constructors (Mohammad Nezhad & Stolz, 2024). This arrangement effectively limits the scope of participation, turning it into a late-stage activity. Research on organizational participation highlights that when influence is restricted to implementation stages, participants are unlikely to perceive their involvement as meaningful (Or & Berkovich, 2023). Governance structures that simulate inclusion further complicate shared leadership in practice. Committees, representative bodies, or staff meetings may exist as formal channels of participation, yet their discussion topics, time allocation, and decision boundaries are often tightly controlled (Hickey et al., 2022). Control over discussion topics plays a crucial role in shaping participation outcomes. When teachers have limited influence over what issues are discussed, their capacity to shape organizational priorities remains constrained, regardless of how frequently they are invited to speak (Stosich, 2023).

Importantly, prior studies suggest that such participation arrangements are not necessarily the result of deliberate exclusion. Rather, they are often embedded in organizational logics that prioritize efficiency, coordination, and risk management (Barker Scott & Manning, 2024). In complex organizations, leaders may perceive broad-based participation as time-consuming or potentially disruptive, especially when decisions involve high stakes or accountability pressures. As a result, participation is selectively structured to

balance inclusiveness with control. This tension between participation and efficiency has been widely documented in both public administration and teacher leadership research (Galdames-Calderón, 2023). Formalistic participation affects more than immediate decisions. When teachers repeatedly experience participation without influence, their expectations regarding leadership involvement gradually adjust (Zeng et al., 2025). Participation becomes understood as a requirement rather than an opportunity for agency. Over time, this dynamic can erode teachers' willingness to reduce actively in governance processes, contributing to disengagement or strategic withdrawal. Research on organizational behavior indicates that a lack of perceived influence within participatory structures can be more discouraging than non-participation, as it fosters a sense that engagement has little effect (Musengamana et al., 2024).

In conclusion, existing literature highlights that teacher participation must be examined not only in terms of access, but also in terms of decision authority, influence pathways, and organizational meaning. Participation that remains procedural and symbolic may exist alongside shared leadership discourse, yet fail to support shared leadership in practice. This distinction provides a critical theoretical basis for interpreting empirical findings on limited access and formalistic participation, and sets the stage for examining how such participation arrangements shape teachers' leadership experiences in practice.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the organizational and experiential challenges of Sharing Leadership as experienced by teachers in Chinese primary schools. Given the study's focus on teachers' experiences, organizational practices, and contextual constraints, a qualitative approach was appropriate for examining leadership participation beyond formal policy discourse. The research was guided by an interpretive perspective, aiming to understand how teachers and principals make sense of participation, decision-making, and expression within their daily organizational environments. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study aimed to develop a detailed understanding of how Sharing Leadership is practiced, constrained, and discussed in everyday school contexts. Multiple qualitative methods were employed, including semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. This methodological triangulation strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings by enabling comparison across data from multiple sources and perspectives.

The study was conducted in three public primary schools located in Shandong Province, China. Shandong was selected due to its representative position within China's compulsory education system, combining relatively advanced educational development with strong administrative governance. As one of China's major provinces in terms of population and educational scale, Shandong provides a typical context for examining teacher leadership under centralized policy conditions. The three schools differed in size, location, and administrative characteristics, including one key school, one regular school, and one reform pilot school. This variation allowed the study to capture diverse organizational settings while maintaining comparability in governance structure and policy environment. All three schools operated under the same national curriculum standards and administrative regulations, ensuring consistency in institutional context. At the same time, differences in school culture

and management practices provided rich comparative data for understanding how Sharing Leadership is shaped at the school level.

Participants included both teachers and principals from the three sample schools. In total, 12 participants were interviewed, comprising classroom teachers, grade-level or subject leaders, and school principals. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience with leadership-related practices, such as participation in meetings, curriculum coordination, or school projects. Teachers with varying levels of experience, professional roles, and organizational visibility were included to ensure diverse perspectives. To enhance the depth of data, theoretical considerations guided ongoing sampling during the research process. As data analysis progressed, additional participants were selected to clarify emerging patterns related to participation, feedback, and expression. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, with no substantially new themes emerging from subsequent interviews. All participants were informed of the research purpose and procedures, and numerical codes were used to protect their confidentiality.

Data were collected from three public primary schools in Shandong Province between May and August 2025. The selection of schools followed purposeful sampling principles, with consideration given to school type, organizational structure, and policy implementation context.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary data source. Interviews were conducted between May and August 2025 and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Separate interview protocols were developed for teachers and principals, focusing on experiences of participation, decision-making processes, feedback mechanisms, and organizational culture. To protect participants' anonymity, all interviewees were assigned numerical codes. Principals were identified using the letter "P" followed by a capital letter indicating the school (e.g., PA, PB), while teachers were identified using the letter "T" followed by a numerical identifier (e.g., TA1, TB2). These codes are used consistently throughout the findings to indicate participants' roles and school contexts without revealing personal identities. This coding system allows for analytic comparison across roles and schools while ensuring confidentiality. Interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants to expand on their experiences and perceptions. Follow-up questions were used to examine specific practices, clarify meanings, and address inconsistencies. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis.

Non-participant observations were conducted to examine how participation and expression occurred in everyday organizational settings. Observations included staff meetings, grade-level meetings, and routine administrative activities. Observation notes focused on interaction patterns, opportunities to speak, control over discussion topics, and participants' responses to discussion questions. Observational data provided contextual evidence that complemented interview accounts and helped identify discrepancies between formal participation arrangements and actual practices.

Relevant school documents were collected and analyzed, including work plans, meeting records, feedback forms, internal notices, and publicly available school communications released by the schools. Document analysis focused on how participation, consultation, and

leadership were represented at the textual level. Documents were examined for consistency between stated intentions and operational mechanisms, as well as for implicit signals regarding authority, hierarchy, and acceptable forms of expression.

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive process. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were imported into NVivo 15 for systematic coding and organization. Initial open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units related to participation, decision-making, feedback, and expression. These codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, focusing on relationships among institutional arrangements, organizational practices, and teachers' responses. Through selective coding, key themes were refined and integrated to form an integrated analytical framework addressing the challenges of Sharing Leadership. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison was employed across data sources and participant groups to ensure analytical consistency. Analytical memos were written regularly to document emerging interpretations and support reflexivity.

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents strengthened credibility. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation.

## Findings

Findings indicate that although teacher participation is widely institutionalized in primary school governance, actual access to decision-making remains highly constrained. Across the three schools, participation mechanisms such as all-teachers' meetings, grade-level meetings, and consultation sessions were formally established and regularly convened. However, these arrangements rarely enabled teachers to exert substantive influence over school governance. Teachers were frequently involved in secondary or low-stakes matters, while decisions concerning core issues—such as school governance structures, assessment standards, resource allocation, and instructional systems—were largely determined in advance by a small leadership group.

Teachers described their participation as formal rather than substantive. Attendance at meetings was typically required, yet opportunities for meaningful deliberation were limited. As one teacher noted, meetings often functioned as channels for notification rather than negotiation: "*Sometimes they ask for opinions, but in fact, it is more about informing rather than negotiating*" (TA2, 13/08/2025). Another teacher similarly described the procedural nature of participation, explaining that voting processes required by policy were often symbolic: "*The voting at the meeting is merely a formality*" (TB3, 08/08/2025). These accounts suggest that teachers were aware of the distinction between formal inclusion and actual influence, and experienced participation as a late-stage process occurring after key decisions had already been made. Principals' perspectives further illuminate how limited influence becomes normalized within organizational practice. Several principals openly acknowledged that collective meetings were not intended as spaces for decision-making. One principal explained that decision-making followed an unwritten convention: "*Generally speaking, small matters are decided in larger meetings, while major issues are handled in smaller ones. In fact, major decisions are often already discussed within the leadership team.*"

(PA, 11/08/2025). Another principal emphasized efficiency as a primary consideration, noting that broad participation was perceived as impractical: "*It's not realistic for everyone to make decisions together. We usually first invite a few core group leaders to discuss and set the general direction*" (PB, 23/08/2025). These statements suggest that limited access is not accidental, but reflects an organizational logic prioritizing efficiency and control over collective deliberation.

The performative nature of participation was particularly evident in the repeated use of organizational discourse encouraging "open expression." Both teachers and principals recognized such language as symbolic rather than substantive. While leaders frequently used phrases such as "*feel free to speak*" to convey openness, they at the same time held low expectations for critical views in public settings. One principal openly acknowledged this tension, stating that large-group discussions were unlikely to produce effective decisions due to conflicting positions (PA, 11/08/2025). Teachers understood these messages as largely symbolic rather than inviting genuine expression. One teacher noted that calls for open expression were "not real" and that leaders were uncomfortable with being openly challenged (TA3, 23/08/2025). Another teacher similarly felt that the organizational atmosphere favored compliance over authentic expression (TB2, 06/08/2025). This unspoken understanding between leaders and teachers further reinforced the formalistic character of participation.

Observational data corroborate these interview findings. During an observed meeting at School A, the meeting topics had been fully set in advance by the administrative department, and teachers' speaking opportunities were placed at the end of the meeting with very little time provided (15/05/2025; School A; Meeting Room). Most teachers responded briefly with statements such as "no objection," and no substantive discussion occurred. Similar patterns were observed in grade-level meetings at Schools B and C, where meetings primarily served to pass on instructions and assign tasks rather than invite opinions. Across these settings, participation was present in form but limited in substance, with teachers positioned as recipients rather than co-constructors of decisions.

Document analysis further reveals the formalization of participation without corresponding implementation mechanisms. While school documents frequently emphasized "teacher participation" and "democratic consultation," they rarely specified how teachers' input would be incorporated into decision-making. For example, School A's Teaching and Research Work Plan highlighted the goal of enhancing participation but provided no operational guidelines. Similarly, although Schools B and C promoted "Teacher Representative Symposia" through official channels, published materials focused exclusively on principals' summaries, with no record of teachers' contributions. These patterns indicate that participation is emphasized in organizational talk but weakly supported by procedural arrangements.

Taken together, these findings suggest that teachers' limited role in decision-making reflects a structural arrangement rather than isolated administrative practices. Although teachers are formally recognized as "participants," their involvement is largely limited and symbolic. Over time, repeated experiences of ineffective participation contribute to a gradual decline in teachers' sense of responsibility and willingness to engage in governance. As

participation becomes associated with formality rather than influence, Sharing Leadership is gradually reshaped into task coordination rather than collective decision-making. This pattern highlights a fundamental challenge in embedding Sharing Leadership within existing organizational arrangements, where institutional design and managerial priorities constrain the scope of teacher participation from the start.

Findings further indicate that even when teachers are provided with opportunities to express opinions, the absence of effective feedback adoption mechanisms significantly constrains the implementation of Sharing Leadership. Across the three schools, channels for teacher feedback formally existed, including meeting discussions, suggestion forms, anonymous mailboxes, and online feedback platforms. However, these mechanisms were largely characterized by weak responsiveness, unclear processing procedures, and a lack of visible outcomes, resulting in teachers' expression being perceived as a one-way process without practical impact.

Teachers consistently described a gap between expression and organizational response. Although they were invited to provide suggestions, they rarely received information regarding how their input was evaluated, whether it was adopted, or why it was rejected. This lack of process clarity gradually transformed participation into a procedural act rather than a meaningful exchange. One teacher recalled participating in a school-organized meeting aimed at improving teaching practices: "*We put forward many suggestions about teaching pace and evaluation pressure. But later, neither any changes were seen, nor did anyone tell us whether these suggestions were adopted*" (TA2, 13/08/2025). Over time, repeated experiences of non-response led teachers to re-evaluate the value of expression, resulting in strategic withdrawal rather than overt resistance. Another teacher similarly described on the symbolic nature of feedback mechanisms, noting that anonymous suggestion forms existed but rarely led to observable change: "*Gradually, teachers become less motivated to participate, as the process feels more like procedural compliance*" (TC1, 12/08/2025). These interviews suggest that the problem lies not in the absence of feedback channels, but in the lack of institutionalized procedures for responding to and implementing teachers' expressed views. Without feedback mechanisms, expression loses its function as a mechanism for shared understanding and collective problem-solving.

Observational evidence reinforces this pattern of weak feedback adoption. During fieldwork conducted between May and June 2025, principal mailboxes were observed in all three schools. Although visibly positioned placed and labeled with welcoming messages, no traces of recent use or collection were found (Schools A, B, and C; On-campus Principal Mailboxes). Similarly, School B's internal online system included a column inviting teachers to submit teaching-related feedback. However, records showed no new submissions over the previous year, indicating that the platform had become functionally inactive. These observations suggest that the formal existence of feedback mechanisms does not guarantee their practical operation.

Document analysis further reveals a consistent gap between formal discourse and operational practice. In School B's Grade 3 office, a "Teaching Feedback and Suggestion Record Book" was designated for monthly use. While the cover explicitly instructed teachers to provide regular feedback, examination of the records revealed only two entries over a six-

month period, with no documentation of follow-up actions or responses. Similar patterns were identified in Schools A and C, where documents emphasized participation but lacked procedural clarity regarding feedback processing, responsibility allocation, or timelines for response. As a result, teachers were left without a clear understanding of how their contributions could influence organizational decisions.

The long-term effect of weak feedback adoption is a gradual decline in teachers' sense of agency and organizational belonging. When expression repeatedly fails to produce visible outcomes, teachers learn that participation carries limited instrumental value. Rather than interpreting this as a lack of professional recognition, teachers often come to accept it as an organizational reality that constrains sustained engagement. Over time, this experience reshapes teachers' participation strategies, shifting them toward selective expression or silence, particularly on issues perceived as sensitive or unlikely to result in change. Importantly, findings suggest that this pattern does not reflect teachers' indifference toward school development. By contrast, many teachers exhibited strong professional commitment and initial willingness to contribute ideas, particularly in relation to teaching quality and student development. However, the absence of effective response mechanisms undermined their motivation to continue expressing professional judgment. In this sense, weak feedback adoption functions as a structural constraint on Sharing Leadership, limiting teachers' opportunities to experience their expertise as influential within the organization.

Taken together, the findings indicate that feedback mechanisms in the sampled primary schools operate more as symbolic assurances of openness than as functional components of shared governance. While teachers are formally encouraged to express opinions, the lack of clear processing, response, and follow-up makes such expression largely ineffective. This disconnection between voice and impact plays a critical role in constraining the development of Sharing Leadership, as teachers are unable to translate participation into leadership practice within everyday school practices.

Beyond institutional arrangements and procedural mechanisms, the findings indicate that the practice of Sharing Leadership is deeply shaped by a pervasive culture of silence. Across interviews, observations, and document analysis, teachers consistently expressed the view that silence is safer than expression. This silence should not be understood as passivity or lack of professional commitment, but rather as a strategic response shaped by long-term institutional experience and organizational expectations.

Teachers frequently described expression as a behavior associated with potential risks. These risks were not limited to formal punishment, but more often involved informal consequences such as negative labeling, interpersonal tension, or being perceived as "troublesome" or "uncooperative." Within a highly collective organizational environment, maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict were widely regarded as professional virtues. As one teacher noted, *"I am rather cautious at meetings. I think the leaders hope that everyone—especially Party members—will speak with positive remarks"* (TB2, 06/08/2025). When feedback diverges from leaders' viewpoints or challenges existing arrangements, teachers perceived a high risk of creating awkward situations. Several interviews illustrate how compliance is implicitly rewarded over expression. One teacher recalled a apparently casual remark made by the principal after receiving an "Outstanding Teacher" award: *"The principal*

*half-jokingly said it was because I was obedient*" (TC2, 22/08/2025). Although framed humorously, this comment conveyed a clear organizational signal regarding valued behavior. Teachers interpreted such remarks as confirmation that alignment and compliance are safer strategies than critical engagement, particularly in public or formal settings.

Principals' own interviews further illuminate how a culture of silence is reinforced at the managerial level. Multiple principals emphasized the importance of stability as a core organizational priority. One principal described this logic clearly: "*Teaching is the ground, stability is the sky*" (PA, informal interview). This framing reflects a broader institutional orientation in which maintaining order, avoiding disruption, and minimizing risk are prioritized over deliberative participation. Under such conditions, open disagreement or critical questioning is implicitly framed as a threat to organizational stability rather than a contribution to collective improvement.

Observational data provide concrete evidence of how this culture operates in everyday interactions. During regular meetings across all three schools, teachers' participation was notably cautious. Even when principals verbally encouraged "open discussion," most teachers remained silent or offered brief, non-committal responses. When teachers did speak, their comments often repeated previously expressed viewpoints or relied on general affirmations such as "I think it's basically fine" or "I have no particular additions" (School B, 20/05/2025). Substantive alternative perspectives or critical reflections were rarely expressed in collective settings. This pattern of expressive withdrawal was particularly evident in large-group meetings, where visibility and perceived risk were highest. Teachers appeared to carefully assess not only what could be said, but also when, where, and to whom expression was appropriate. As a result, leadership participation was selectively redirected toward informal, private, or relational channels, such as one-on-one conversations, rather than open deliberation. While such strategies allowed teachers to manage interpersonal risk, they further limited the possibility of Sharing Leadership as a collective and transparent governance practice.

Document analysis reinforces these findings by revealing institutional language that indirectly constrains expression. Although school documents frequently emphasize values such as "democratic participation" and "open communication," they simultaneously stress organizational principles such as "unified deployment," "hierarchical compliance," and "consistency." These terms signal clear boundaries regarding acceptable behavior and implicitly discourage critical or non-aligned voices. Notably, none of the reviewed documents articulated protective mechanisms for teachers who express disagreement, nor did they specify procedures for handling contested opinions.

Teachers' limited willingness to use formal feedback channels further illustrates the depth of expressive insecurity. Although mechanisms such as anonymous suggestion forms or principal mailboxes were available, all interviewed teachers reported that they had never used them. Some attributed this to a lack of urgent issues, but more commonly mentioned concerns about anonymity and effectiveness. Teachers expressed doubts about whether anonymity could truly be guaranteed in an environment with extensive organizational monitoring and close interpersonal networks. Others questioned the value of written expression, believing that "*even if you write something, nothing will change.*"

Over time, these experiences contribute to the internalization of silence as a strategic and adaptive strategy. Teachers learn that expression carries uncertain benefits but predictable risks, while silence offers relative safety and stability. This learning process does not occur suddenly, but gradually accumulates through repeated interactions with institutional routines, managerial responses, and peer norms. As silence becomes normalized, teachers increasingly limit their leadership engagement to task fulfillment rather than collaborative governance. Importantly, the findings indicate that this culture of silence is not the result of individual disposition or lack of capability. Many teachers demonstrated strong professional expertise, commitment to instructional improvement, and initial willingness to contribute ideas. However, the organizational environment consistently communicated that leadership through expression was neither protected nor valued. As a result, teacher leadership potential was redirected away from collective decision-making and toward compliance-oriented collaboration.

In summary, the emergence of a silent culture represents a critical cultural constraint on Sharing Leadership. Expression is perceived as risky, compliance as safer, and silence as a pragmatic choice. This expressive withdrawal, shaped by institutional priorities and cultural expectations, significantly undermines the conditions necessary for sustained teacher participation in school governance. Together with limited access and weak feedback mechanisms, the culture of silence forms a central challenge in embedding Sharing Leadership within everyday organizational practice.

## Discussion

Revisiting the problem identified at the outset of this study, the findings demonstrate that the limitations of Sharing Leadership are rooted not in teachers' individual capacities, but in organizational design, feedback practices, and expressive norms. The findings indicate that Sharing Leadership in Chinese primary schools is primarily realized as procedural inclusion rather than substantive participation. Although teachers are formally incorporated into meetings at different organizational levels, their involvement rarely extends to meaningful influence over core decision-making. Thus, participation is experienced less as shared governance and more as an institutionalized formality (Ahtiainen & Heikonen, 2024). This pattern is consistent with existing research showing that participatory structures do not necessarily lead to distributed authority. In hierarchical organizational contexts, participation may function symbolically to signal organizational acceptance rather than to co-construct decisions. In the present study, teachers were frequently positioned as participants after key decisions had already been determined, emphasizing a sequence in which consultation follows determination. Such arrangements allow schools to demonstrate compliance with policy expectations regarding democratic management while maintaining centralized control over core decision-making (Stosich, 2023).

Participation within these arrangements is also differentiated. Teachers holding formal or semi-formal coordinating roles are more likely to be involved in early-stage discussions, whereas most teachers remain confined to approval or implementation roles. These differentiated patterns of participation create an internal hierarchy of influence that mirrors traditional administrative structures, even within formally participatory practices. As a result, leadership is shared selectively and concentrated among a limited group (Ahtiainen & Heikonen, 2024). Importantly, teachers demonstrated a clear awareness of the procedural

nature of participation. Instead of describing their experiences mainly as frustrating, many teachers understood participatory practices as largely symbolic and shaped by organizational routines (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis 2024). This awareness shapes teachers' expectations and engagement strategies. Over time, participation comes to be understood as acceptable but limited in consequence, reducing its perceived value within everyday school governance.

This perspective highlights that the constraints on Sharing Leadership are embedded in organizational design rather than in individual disposition. When participation is treated as a final step rather than a core part of decision-making, Sharing Leadership becomes a procedural exercise rather than a process of collective influence (Harris et al., 2022). This procedural framing does not merely limit teachers' formal influence; it also shapes how participation is interpreted and practiced. As teachers come to recognize participation as limited and largely performative, they adjust their expectations accordingly. Expression remains acceptable, but it is approached cautiously and selectively. Over time, restraint becomes a learned response rather than an individual tendency, reflecting teachers' practical adjustment to organizational routines.

Beyond opportunities for participation, the findings indicate that feedback mechanisms play a decisive role in shaping teachers' experiences of Sharing Leadership. Even when opportunities for expression are formally provided, the absence of visible response or follow-up substantially weakens teachers' sense of influence. In this context, feedback functions less as a technical procedure and more as an organizational signal that communicates whether teachers' voices matter in practice (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024). Research on participation and feedback suggests that involvement becomes meaningful only when expression is accompanied by acknowledgment, explanation, or incorporation into decision-making. The present findings are consistent with this pattern. Teachers described feedback processes as unclear and inconsistent: although channels such as meetings and suggestion mechanisms existed, these rarely produced observable outcomes. Teachers were often uncertain whether their input had been considered, set aside, or rejected.

This lack of transparency turns participation into a one-directional act rather than an ongoing dialogue. As experiences of non-response accumulate, participation is increasingly perceived as acceptable but inconsequential, reducing its organizational significance within everyday school governance. From the organizational perspective, weak feedback adoption reinforces hierarchical authority structures. Decisions continue without explicit reference to teachers' input, allowing leadership to remain concentrated at the administrative level despite participatory discourse (Morrison, 2023). As a result, feedback mechanisms risk functioning symbolically, signaling openness while preserving control. Overall, the findings highlight feedback mechanisms as a central component of Sharing Leadership. Their effectiveness depends not on formal existence, but on consistent responsiveness and sustained communication. Without such feedback processes, participation loses its organizational significance, and Sharing Leadership is reduced to expression without influence.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that Sharing Leadership in Chinese primary schools can be understood as an organizationally conditioned practice rather than an individually enacted capacity. Teachers' participation, expression, and selective withdrawal are shaped

less by personal disposition or professional competence and more by institutional arrangements. These arrangements define how participation is structured, responded to, and valued. The analysis demonstrates that formal participatory mechanisms alone are insufficient to sustain meaningful leadership sharing. When participation is framed procedurally and positioned after key decisions have already been determined, teachers' involvement is experienced as limited and symbolic (Harris et al., 2022). Under these conditions, participation meets institutional expectations for inclusion, but decision authority remains largely centralized.

Feedback mechanisms further influence how participation is interpreted in practice. The absence of visible response, explanation, or follow-up weakens the perceived connection between expression and organizational action. This adaptive pattern reshapes how teachers participate in everyday school governance (Morrison, 2023). More importantly, these patterns should not be interpreted as resistance to leadership responsibilities or a lack of professional commitment. Many teachers remain highly engaged in instructional improvement and organizational tasks. What is constrained is participation in governance processes where influence is uncertain and the value of expression is unclear. As a result, leadership participation is redirected from co-construction toward implementation, reinforcing a separation between decision-making and enactment.

Understanding Sharing Leadership as an organizationally conditioned practice helps explain the persistent gap between policy discourse and school-level enactment (Spillane & Healey, 2010). While policies emphasize teacher empowerment and shared governance, these principles are difficult to realize without corresponding changes in organizational design and feedback processes. Participation becomes a formal requirement rather than a functional process, and leadership remains concentrated despite inclusive discourse. By shifting attention from individual willingness to organizational conditions, this study highlights the institutional responsibilities involved in the practice of Sharing Leadership. Meaningful participation depends not only on providing opportunities for expression, but also on ensuring reliable feedback, clear decision boundaries, and sustained communication. Without such conditions, Sharing Leadership is likely to remain an organizational ideal rather than an operational reality.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the challenges of Sharing Leadership in Chinese primary schools by focusing on teachers' everyday experiences of participation, expression, and organizational interaction. Drawing on interviews, observations, and document analysis, the findings reveal a persistent gap between the formal promotion of shared leadership and its substantive enactment in school governance. Rather than operating as a form of collective decision-making and shared influence, Sharing Leadership is frequently reduced to procedural participation, task coordination, and symbolic involvement. Although formal participatory mechanisms—such as meetings, consultation procedures, and feedback channels—are widely institutionalized, they rarely provide teachers with meaningful influence over core decisions. Participation is often positioned at a later stage, after key decisions have already been shaped within small leadership groups. As a result, teachers experience involvement as informational rather than deliberative, weakening the practical foundations of shared leadership as a governance practice.

Beyond opportunities for participation, the findings highlight the critical role of feedback mechanisms in supporting or weakening teacher involvement. When expression is not followed by transparent response, explanation, or visible adoption, participation loses its organizational significance. Over time, teachers adjust their engagement strategies, becoming more selective and cautious in expressing views, particularly on issues perceived as unlikely to generate response or change. This pattern reflects adaptive behavior shaped by organizational conditions, rather than a lack of professional commitment or leadership capacity. Overall, the study indicates that the challenges of Sharing Leadership stem less from individual teacher characteristics than from organizational design and cultural norms. Formal inclusion without substantive influence, expression without feedback, and participation without protection collectively constrain the enactment of shared leadership. While Sharing Leadership is widely promoted in policy discourse, its practical realization remains limited in the absence of supportive organizational conditions. Understanding these constraints is essential for advancing more grounded and context-sensitive approaches to teacher leadership development in primary education.

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