

Localization of Global Education and Its Leadership Practices: A Case of China

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Abstract

Shadow education has become a popular educational service, and it has been booming in many regions of China, attracting a large population of school-age students. This study illustrates the current K-12 public and international school system in China and its association with shadow education. A report demonstrates two teachers' and the Principal's practices to deliver global education. The case study data reveal the localization process (i.e., how the teaching and management of a Western curriculum operates). It points out that shadow education often demands the integration of business models. The findings suggest that teachers and principals who work in shadow education require professional training in both pedagogy and business. In this line of work, teachers and principals must amend educational practices and solve commercial issues. While educators must become familiar with the local social and cultural context and local students' characteristics, they also need to master business skills, such as communication and marketing, to effectively connect with the local community. This study addresses leadership challenges and offers practical advice for improving shadow education in China.

Introduction

The mission of global education is to shape students as global citizens rather than merely deliver subject knowledge (Yang, 2010). The trend of global education in China has been developing since the 1980s, following the country's economic growth, which is a result of the "going global" strategy in the new millennium (Feng, 2021; Yang, 2010). Global education is increasingly implemented, both in and outside public schools, in private educational institutions, known as shadow education. Studying to learn more about the localization process of global education has drawn many scholars' attention in recent years.

Previous research on shadow education focuses primarily on the evolution of its practices, mainly on how shadow education mimics public school subject teaching (Feng, 2021). Few studies have focused on the practice of shadow education of localizing global education, especially from a leadership perspective. Our research used a local shadow education case to examine the localization process. In particular, this study addresses leadership practices in localizing a western K-12 curriculum in China.

We first discuss the case context and the study's aim, followed by a description of the Chinese public schools' teaching practices, the Chinese international-oriented school's characteristics, and the role of shadow education in Chinese K-12 education.

Furthermore, we chose to present the path-goal theory as its theoretical pinning to understand leadership practices.

The Case Context and Purpose of the Study

This case study took place in Suzhou, China, which has a population of about 7.4 million ("Suzhou Population," n.d.). Schooling is compulsory from Grade 1 at approximately age 6 to 9, till about age 15. Currently, 432 K-12 public schools serve the public's educational needs for Chinese children ("Statistics about Suzhou 2020 Primary Education," n.d.). In addition to public schools, there is an increasing demand for international-oriented schools (see *the International-Oriented Schools and Its Characteristics* section for definition) in urban areas. In Suzhou, the number of international-oriented schools has been increasing. According to the Suzhou International Schools' website, there are 53 international-oriented schools ("Guojixuexiao.org," n.d.). Although efforts to cultivate a global mindset and competency through the learning of English has been incorporated as a part of curriculum instruction in some public schools, the local Chinese learners' English proficiency typically cannot meet the demand of effectively learning foreign textbooks. Consequently, parents in many public schools send their children to take extra tutoring, known as shadow education services, to improve their children's English proficiency and strengthen their global outlook.

Literature Review

Chinese Public Schools and Their Teaching

The typical pedagogical approach in Chinese public schools concerns content knowledge delivery and rote memorization. Teachers often assess students' learning outcomes by asking students to complete standardized tests. Part of the reason for that is the large classroom population. It is common for public schools to hold between 50 and 60 students in a classroom. As a consequence, teachers find it difficult to perform student-centered learning. Teachers also lack the professional development to introduce more innovative teaching techniques. Therefore, most teachers use the cramming method (Zhang, 2014).

International-Oriented Schools and Their Characteristics

In Suzhou, the term "international school" typically represents two types of non-public schools. One type of international school is designed only for foreign citizens who hold non-Chinese passports; the other type is bilingual schools that enroll local Chinese students who would benefit from a higher social and economic status. The bilingual schools combine domestic and western curricula and employ both domestic and foreign teachers to deliver courses. Students who attend this type of school usually pursue colleges overseas. Driven by this end goal, the concept of global education has been gradually recognized by more and more Chinese parents who send their children to bilingual schools. Both types of international schools require higher tuition fees than the average family in China can afford. Such a reality leaves the majority of parent population and their children who go to public schools knowing little about global education, or having a global mindset.

Shadow Education and Its Role in K-12 Education

Shadow education, i.e., private tutoring after school, is bolstered by the advent of economic development and social trends (e.g., Aslam & Atherton, 2014; Buchmann, Condrón, & Rescigno, 2010; Chapman, 2001; Rushforth, 2011; Stevenson & Baker, 1992). Shadow education is a form of supplementary tutoring in China, in which educational services are offered beyond regular school hours, usually in the evenings or on weekends (Buchmann et al., 2010; Chapman, 2001; Rushforth, 2011; Stevenson & Baker, 1992). There are two popular forms of shadow education: one targeting children's extra-curriculum interests and talents beyond the school subjects, and one enhancing students' learning of school subjects to improve their exam performance in science, math, and language (Feng, 2021). The former includes learning subject matter from the Western curriculum (Zhang & Bray, 2015). The aim is to increase students' proficiency in English and develop global competences. This concerns especially students attending public schools.

Previous research indicates that shadow education in private tutoring is significant in mainland China (Zhang, 2014). Chinese families are willing to spend money in exchange for such educational services (Wang, 2013). Statistics show that 73.8% of primary school children, 65.6% of lower secondary school children, and 53.5% of upper secondary school children receive shadow education services (Bray, 2013). On the one hand, shadow education serves as a robust supplement to the education market, meeting the needs of Chinese learners, while on the other hand, critics argue that most of such tutoring provides “more of the same” to Chinese students. For the most part, shadow education is a way to reinforce material already learned in public schools. One study suggests that the accessibility of shadow education can satisfy the increasing learning demand and ensure quality learning standards (Valerio, 2013).

Regardless of the content of learning, one advantage of shadow education is that it can be flexible, providing remedial work that helps students keep up or targets high achievers who want to pursue beyond that which has been learned in school (Bray, 2013). Shadow education services mainly depend on customer demand. As a result, operations share the characteristics of business operations. Shadow education institutions often position themselves as service companies and demonstrate commercial-like practices. For example, they treat parents and students as customers: they invest heavily in marketing and promotion and they are more willing to adapt to customers' needs, such as transferring teaching to an online platform or making the same service options available across multiple locations in a city or country (Bray, 2013).

The Chinese parents' and students' demand for shadow education to reflect its sociocultural emphasis on learners' individual effort. Parents perceive that studying outside of school (i.e., extra effort) would improve their academic performance. Such generally-accepted social assumptions allow Chinese parents to trust the effectiveness of shadow education in boosting higher competencies. Their method of measuring results often refers to better examination scores or certificates of tangible, skill-driven

performances (e.g., dancing, playing piano, winning a math competition) (Chapman, 2001; Kim & Lee, 2010; Tansel & Bircan, 2006).

Research Questions:

Our research questions were as follows:

1. What challenges do teachers face with respect to shadow education while localizing the Western curriculum in Suzhou, China?
2. What leadership challenges and practices can be identified in the Principal's management of shadow education institutions?

Methodology

Data Source

We conducted a qualitative case study at a local shadow education institute in Suzhou, China (Center). The Center provides holistic education using an American curriculum for students aged 3 to 12 years. The service is provided outside of the compulsory school time. The Center is part of an educational corporation with 11 branches in Suzhou and serves approximately 7,800 students collectively. The school promotes student-centered education by setting up smaller classrooms of 12-16 students each. It offers three subjects: English language, art, math, and science; all instruction is in English. Teachers and students are required to speak English when they are at the Center. With this content-based approach, the school aims to cultivate future talents with self-motivated learning ability, leadership, and global vision ("RISE Subject English, Philosophy," n.d.).

We collected data through semi-structured interviews with the Center's Principal and two experienced teachers. We also reviewed relevant information on the Center's official website to learn general information about its curriculum offer, vision, and mission. We analyzed school documents, such as the Center's teaching plan, with its intended learning outcomes. By gathering data from the three sources, we satisfied the triangulation requirement for qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Interviewees

We wanted to identify people who had reasonable experience in working in the shadow education field and knew the local culture well. Hence, we deployed the technique of purposeful sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018) with the following criteria: interviewees should hold more than five years of teaching experience and more than three years of work experience at the Center. The three selected interviewees satisfied this expectation before the interviews were conducted. All the interviewees were female and in their thirties. They had been working in schools for more than four years. The Center's Principal (fictitious name: Jennifer) acquired her higher education degree in the United States. After working at the Center for two years, she was promoted to Principal. She had been working in the shadow education field for about five years. Her background and first-hand experience in shadow education enabled her to directly understand global education and the localization of global education as a teacher and leader. She obtained rich leadership experience in different situations while facing

multiple rounds of local policy changes. She is experienced in handling communication with parents, particularly in helping parents adapt to the global mindset. She is familiar with the teacher population growing up in the 80s and 90s, and their associated social-cultural values. Kelly (fictitious name) teaches grades one to five. She is the leader of an elementary teacher team. Laura (a fictitious name) is a teacher leader of the K1-3 team, which mainly covers kindergarten children. They both have rich experience (more than five years) in teaching students and communicating with junior teachers and parents.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were designed and conducted separately for each interviewee. We interviewed the Principal face-to-face twice. The interviews with each teacher were conducted online. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The Principal's interview was conducted in English, and the interviews with the teachers were conducted in Chinese. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The two teachers' interview questions encouraged them to discuss their challenges when localizing the American curriculum within their teaching practices and communication with their parents. Follow-up questions were asked to the teachers to learn about their problem-solving techniques. The interview questions for the Principal focused on challenges and problem-solving, regarding both teaching and management.

The data files were analyzed independently by two authors of this paper, using an inductive approach. Interview transcriptions served as the data source for the qualitative analysis. Data collected from the three interviews were coded thematically. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within the data. Thematic analysis requires a researcher to produce a generalized understanding of coded data with the repetition of codes. The codes may be more precisely defined as themes when they frequently appear in the dataset. In particular, the two authors performed the following steps to analyze the data. First, each author searched for repeated words, phrases, and relevant expressions to form a list of themes that illustrated the localization challenges and leadership practices. During this process, the two authors frequently revised the coding used to develop themes in the data. Such a practice ensures that the authors obtain the subjective consistency of inductive coding categories, which improves the reliability of the research findings. Next, the authors used the themes that emerged to compare the relevant situations in the data. Finally, the two authors cross-checked the identified themes.

Key Findings

Teachers' Challenges:

Based on the data analysis, the study found that teachers faced critical challenges with regards to pedagogy, marketing, and communication of the global mindset to parents.

1. Pedagogical Challenge: Teachers struggle between the English language and content teaching because more emphasis on either may lead to unsatisfactory student learning experiences and outcomes.

Since the training school provides lessons for students in English, the students need to learn both the subject content and the English language simultaneously. However, the problem is that most students' English proficiency is insufficient to support their learning of content in a satisfactory manner, especially in science and math subjects. For instance, since the students had already learned most of math concepts, theories, and question-solving techniques in their public schools in Chinese, they felt that learning the same again in English would be redundant. The students were only interested in learning mathematical terms and expressions in English. Although the teachers tried to expand the students' competencies (e.g., teamwork or public speaking in English) by introducing more methods to learn math, some students felt that these efforts were pointless. Students faced even more significant challenges when taking science lessons because learning science demands a tremendous amount of English vocabulary, most of which is distant from students' everyday lives. Hence, most students found it difficult to relate to science content and could not comprehend science knowledge. Moreover, the teachers at the Center are required to follow American curriculum requirements and teaching plans. This means that they are not allowed to alter teaching content. When the content is misaligned with the chosen medium of instruction, it is no wonder that students' academic performance is stagnant. When parents saw no improvement in their children's public school examination results, they began to doubt the value of following the Western curriculum. Consequently, some students dropped out.

Teacher Kelly commented on that in the following way:

“When I teach them Math in English, they know how to solve the problems and answer correctly. However, they cannot express their ideas in English. So, I have to let them remember English words and phrases first. For example, they know $1+1=2$, but they do not know how to express it. Sometimes, students feel bored about this type of learning and say, 'I have learned this!'”

“In my S1 class, most of the students are in Grade 3 in public schools, which means they should be capable of learning the S3 content in our system curriculum. But their English is too poor to support their content learning, especially the science class with too many unknown words.”

“I think it is a challenge for us. We have to use many teaching activities to make the class interesting and provide a platform to speak English. Even so, some parents would not buy it (i.e., the teaching of American curriculum and philosophy).”

2. Marketing Obstacles: Teachers feel stressed to push parents for service renewal (marketing) when communicating with them about the pedagogy, curriculum (academic) and children's performance improvement.

Teachers at the Center need to communicate with students' parents for dual purposes. On the one hand, teachers are asked to explain what they have done to help their children develop as a whole person. Here, the purpose of communication is to inform parents of their children's learning. On the other hand, the Center hopes that teachers can convince parents to pay an additional fee for extended services during this line of communication. Thus, teachers feel that there is a lot of extra communication to carry out. For the most part, teachers are passionate about teaching and not as much interested in generating revenue for the Center.

For example, teacher Laura stated:

“Although I know our Center needs to make money, I still think the teacher's responsibility is teaching, not pushing parents to pay. It makes me feel that it is not professional for a teacher to talk about money.”

3. The Challenge of Cultivating Chinese Parents' Global Mindset: The traditional exam-oriented mindset still plays a dominant role in parents' educational choices for their children. Hence, they tend to select shadow education services that aim to improve children's exam performance and develop their personal competencies on a more holistic level.

The Center utilizes the student-centered teaching methods and follows Bloom's taxonomy when designing teaching activities. The teaching goal is to cultivate future leadership, covering content knowledge and abilities such as critical thinking, teamwork, and public speaking (Rise, 2021).

However, teacher Laura mentioned:

“Some parents feel that their children have not improved in English learning. Because we follow our curriculum instead of the public school's requirements concerning students' learning, they tend to choose the exam-oriented training schools after grade two, when the school examination result becomes increasingly important for them.”

4. Professional Development to Support Teachers: The school tries to establish a professional team by training teachers in global pedagogy and management of parent-teacher relations through effective communication.

Training schools have programs for teachers of every grade, who can learn new teaching methods annually, each lasting about two weeks. They must attend the training program and pass the exam successfully to obtain a certificate to teach. As teacher Laura mentioned, “Teachers can always learn new teaching methods and ideas when they attend the training. They can meet teachers from different branches and learn from them. Such an organizational initiative is a training requirement as well as a teacher selection method.” The training aims to improve teachers' teaching and consulting abilities in global education, enhancing their professional competencies. The hope is that teachers can communicate more effectively and professionally with parents. The school promotes a cooperative learning structure and utilizes Bloom's taxonomy to design teaching goals. Such an approach enables teachers to conduct

personalized education with different students. The school provides authorized teaching materials to support teachers' teaching activities accordingly.

Leadership Challenges

In addition to the challenges faced by teachers, the study explored the challenges faced by the Center's leader. More importantly, the study aimed to determine how the leader handled challenges in her leadership practice.

1. Leadership Challenge and Practice: The Generation Gap: Some teachers are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the Center's current leadership styles, as most of the population changed between the 80s to the 90s.

The Principal of the Center mentioned that the headquarters sent monthly revenue goals to each center. The Principal then passes down the requirements to the teachers, stating: "How well we can achieve the goal will affect our income." Thus, the Principal puts pressure on teachers to push them for better performance and better results in asking parents to renew services. She believes that leaders should have higher expectations of teachers, "Because sometimes, when you reach the goal, you get rewarded. Then, you will know that everything you put in is worth it." Her statement suggests that she believes that if teachers want to pursue more money and a better reputation, they have to comply with the company's requirements. Nevertheless, the Principal revealed her powerlessness in this respect when discussing the differences between the 80s and 90s' generation of teachers.

The Principal stated:

"In the 80s, the parents were hardworking because they were not as rich or wealthy. Or, they felt like you should be working hard to obtain the result. In the 90s, their parents were already richer; they did whatever they liked to do. The environment changed. Society changed. Therefore, the individuals from the 90s were harder to motivate because there were not many things you could motivate them with. They did not lack money. They had houses. They did not care about other fancy stuff, they cared about themselves."

Therefore, the leader needs to apply different leadership practices for teachers from the 90s' generation. The Principal needs to respect this group of teachers' ideas and values, or they will not believe in the Principal's opinions or commands. Moreover, even when the leader tries to communicate with this group in different styles, it might not work as expected. Since the teacher generation and its culture in the organization are changing, the leader needs to consider generational differences and try to manage conflicts caused by dissimilar interpretations of teachers' roles and responsibilities.

Discussion and Implications

Teachers' Dual-Role in Localizing an American Curriculum

The findings suggest that, in contrast to traditional teachers in public schools, teachers working in shadow education have to play dual roles in their jobs: an academician and a salesperson. This unique characteristic is due to the local people's sociocultural preference toward exam-oriented education rather than the Western teaching

approach. Not many parents and students have embraced the concept of holistic development. With the demand for economic survival, the Center expects teachers to promote a global education mindset and explicitly communicate its advantages to parents in the hope of convincing them to pay for more services. Thus, shadow education teachers need to develop better communication skills as well as teaching abilities. Teaching alone will not help in promoting a global education mindset to students and parents; explicit and frequent promotions and explanations are required.

Dual-Value Contradiction

As the Principal mentioned, each center receives a sales target (i.e., renewing students' quota), which determines the Center's monthly rewards and punishment, and her routine work requires her to provide each teacher with their targets. In addition to mentioning sales goals, she needs to make specific plans to support teachers so that they are likely to achieve the given targets. This leadership practice represents some elements of the path-goal theory in leadership.

Path-goal leadership theory, built on expectancy theory, claims that leader behavior affects followers' outcomes and motivations (House, 1996). The theory argues that the essential role of leaders is to ensure that subordinates see the connections between outcome and action in the hope of effectively triggering subordinates' motivation. According to House (1971), path-goal theory focuses on making a connection between two dimensions. The first dimension is between work effort and work goal achievement. Regarding leadership practices in this dimension, leaders are first required to explain clearly to subordinates what their responsibilities are. Second, leaders need to support subordinates to improve their ability to complete tasks. When followers face challenges during the process, leaders should offer support in helping clear obstacles. The second dimension is between work goal achievement and rewards valued by followers. This suggests that leaders need to address the following two aspects in their practices: (1) communicate with followers clearly about the possible rewards related to their work achievements and (2) be willing to adjust those rewards in a consistent manner according to the follower group's performance. Furthermore, the valued rewards can be in multiple forms, such as rewards that target enhancing followers' extrinsic motivation (e.g., cash bonus or promotion) or targets triggering followers' intrinsic motivation (e.g., an appraisal for individual growth).

However, the findings suggest that some key elements are missing at the Center according to the path-goal theory approach. First, the Center's goals are not made collectively with teachers; instead, they are directly announced to teachers by the leader without their input. During the Principal's discussions with teachers, the conversation is usually about achieving the goal, not whether the teachers accept the already made-decisions. The participatory leadership approach suggests that teachers combine their expertise and creativity to develop shared plans, design methods collectively, and solve problems. In the Center's case, all instructions and supportive behaviors are achievement-driven. The Principal assumes that her practices will be helpful in motivating and supporting subordinates to achieve set goals. This approach is a pattern seen at all levels of the Center's operation, including the teaching process, quality assurance, teachers' training, and promotion of sales.

However, the Center promotes the concept of student-centered and holistic education, which focuses more on the development process. According to Chipunza and Malo (2017), organizational culture and the quality of the organization's social climate determine the dominant positions of all workers. The school's achievement-oriented culture subtly sets the unspoken criteria for leaders and teachers. It exists as an implicit, powerful force that drives teachers' daily work practices. This force contradicts the publicly promoted student-centered value and becomes an invisible barrier in teachers' everyday work experience.

Generational Sub-Cultural Influence

According to the interviewees' descriptions, in the 80s generation, leadership practices, such as motivating teachers through self-development opportunities, generating inspiring personal passion for teaching, and giving a bonus, were very effective. Although teachers may complain about business-oriented work, such as pushing parents for renewing services, they would ultimately obey the Center's expectations, having considered tangible rewards. However, for the 90s' generation, the same leadership behaviors do not work. The Principal mentioned that "they [the 90s' generation] like big money and are more creative. They want the school to change to what they like." Hence, applying the same leadership practices does not lead to the same results. The post-90s' generation teachers form subcultures within the Center. Consequently, sub-cultural conflicts exist between the leader and the younger teachers when delineating roles and responsibilities. According to the role theory, the role of followers and the role of leaders affect one another's behavior during work (Chen et al., 2012). In view of this, the Principal has already begun to adjust leadership practices after witnessing an increase in the turnover rate.

Practical Implications and Suggestions

Offering global education at a local shadow education center is done by providing supplementary resources to public schools. Such a service can provide additional support for parents who want to ensure more educational opportunities for their children. Since shadow education operates differently than public school education, teachers in the shadow education center need training and motivation to foster academic teaching and business skills. In addition, leaders should enhance one-on-one mentoring between leaders and teachers to establish a shared mindset and culture. In turn, this practice can help teachers communicate and explain the global mindset approach more effectively to parents and students. Often, teacher recruits in the Center are preferred to be university students with English majors. Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that the recruitment pool could go beyond English or English-related majors. So long as applicants demonstrate the potential for demonstrating desired abilities, a person's mindset, attitudes, and professional skills are vital. For example, candidates with a business background and fluency in English should also be considered. Finally, training centers can strengthen communication with public schools. For example, they can introduce and promote personalized teaching and cooperative learning structures to local public school teachers to enhance their abilities and help local students embrace and experience educational approaches beyond examination-oriented education.

Limitation and Future Studies

As a case study on a shadow education center, this research aimed to gain insight into the localization process rather than produce generalizable conclusions on all shadow education practices. In addition, the study only interviewed three people at the Center, without covering all types of teachers. Therefore, the findings represent only a part of teachers' opinions on localizing global education. Moreover, this study mainly focused on the teachers' and leaders' methods to meet the challenges of promoting international education locally. More teachers and diverse dimensions warrant further research and exploration. For example, future research may consider the necessary adjustments in teaching methods when localizing the American curriculum in a foreign location.

Conclusion

Shadow education as supplementary education is not enough to overturn the profoundly rooted presence of examination-oriented education in China. Bringing the U.S. curriculum to China and teaching local students without sufficient sociocultural support leads to several operational barriers. Creating a suitable sociocultural context as part of the localization process is essential. When aiming to localize global education, shadow education practices need to address teachers' deficiencies in business skills. In addition to demonstrating ideas through their teaching, teachers and school leaders help local parents embrace the global mindset. For leaders of shadow education, assisting teachers with communication skills and business literacy will be the main direction to help them achieve their performance goals if those goals cannot be jointly developed with teachers. Shadow education could be more effective when positioned to complement public school offerings and can become a positive enhancement or an alternative for promoting positive change in Chinese education, i.e., making it more about holistic development rather than only about passing exams.

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