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Contextualizing System Leadership in China: Evidence From Inter-School Collaboration in the Greater Bay Area

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Abstract

As inter-school collaboration becomes a key strategy for educational improvement, the role of system leaders in sustaining such efforts has drawn increasing attention. Yet empirical research in the Chinese context remains limited. This study examines how system leaders facilitate sustainable inter-school collaboration in China's Greater Bay Area, focusing on a successful long-term school partnership established under the government-supported Sister School Scheme. Using a qualitative case study, we analyzed interview data from five principals—each holding multiple roles—as our primary data source. Documentary materials (e.g., policy texts and school reports) were used to triangulate and contextualize the interview findings. Thematic coding analysis shows that these leaders enacted system leadership by shifting among four interrelated roles—thought advocate, practice pioneer, boundary spanner, and resource mobilizer, each linked to specific leadership practices. The study advances international understanding of system leadership by showing how principals lead across school and system boundaries in China's policy-driven, cross-border context. It also offers practical insights for sustaining inter-school collaboration.

Keywords

Greater Bay Area; inter-school collaboration; Sister School Scheme; system leadership

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, inter-school collaboration has attracted growing global interest as education systems move beyond traditional top-down reforms (Muijs, 2015). The increasing permeability of school

boundaries has underscored the strategic value of cross-school partnerships in fostering innovation and driving school improvement (Chapman & Muijs, 2014; Cheah, 2023; Hargreaves, 2011). Specifically, inter-school collaboration facilitates resource sharing (e.g., teachers, facilities), builds mutual support for school improvement (Chapman & Muijs, 2014; Lieberman, 2000; Muijs et al., 2010), and promotes knowledge integration and innovation, as well as the diffusion of effective practices (Atkinson et al., 2007; Katz & Earl, 2010). As such, building school networks has also become popular in discourses on school change and improvement (Díaz-Gibson et al., 2017).

Against this context, there has been growing scholarly interest in system leaders—educational leaders who demonstrate systems thinking and exert system leadership across multiple levels (Fullan, 2004). As inter-school collaboration does not inherently yield positive outcomes, its effectiveness depends on supportive conditions, particularly the presence of system leaders who act as boundary spanning agents extending stakeholder influence across organizations (Senge et al., 2015). In the educational context, system leaders drive systemic transformation and ensure lasting impact within, between, and beyond schools (Chapman & Muijs, 2014; Hopkins & Higham, 2007). As for system leadership, scholars (e.g., Beehner, 2019; Boylan, 2016; Greany, 2022; Harris, 2010) have proposed varied definitions, yet a common theme emphasizes its role in overcoming systemic inertia by linking localized efforts to broader systems and fostering collaboration (Fullan, 2004). Originating in Scotland, the concept has attracted attention from the OECD and countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States (Dimmock, 2016; Pont et al., 2008). It is increasingly viewed as a strategic approach to advancing equity and quality across school systems, grounded in moral purpose (Dimmock, 2016; Pont & Hopkins, 2012; Spillane et al., 2023). Although system leaders may hold different hierarchical roles, they share the goal of achieving system-wide improvement through collaboration and evidence-informed practices (Hopkins et al., 2014).

System leadership is increasingly recognized for its role in promoting effective school collaboration and educational reform, has attracted global attention (Dimmock, 2016). However, empirical research in the Chinese context remains limited, despite its distinct institutional and cultural conditions. The knowledge base on inter-school collaboration/partnership is also dominated by Western perspectives, with limited exploration in East Asia. In particular, how system leaders support and sustain such collaborations within East Asia cultural settings remains under-explored. Moreover, not all school partnerships are effective; understanding the effective leadership practices that enable sustainable school collaboration is essential. The Sister School Scheme (hereafter, the Scheme) between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland has been implemented for more than two decades, yet it has attracted limited scholarly attention. Nevertheless, it constitutes a valuable case for investigating how system leadership can support and sustain inter-school collaboration.

This study thus examines how system leaders (mainly principals, often holding multiple roles) facilitate sustainable and effective inter-school collaborations within the Scheme, using a qualitative case study to explore their leadership beyond individual schools and across system levels.

2. System Leadership

To explore how system leaders enact leadership practices, including their roles and behaviors, it is essential to first develop a clear understanding of system leaders and system leadership. This section outlines the evolution

and conceptualization of system leadership, examines the roles and practices of system leaders, and presents the theoretical foundation of the study.

2.1. Development of System Leadership

System leadership, rooted in systems theory, emerged in the early 21st century as an approach emphasizing the interactions among system components rather than the isolated actions of individual parts. In the field of education, system leadership builds on earlier theories, particularly effective school leadership, instructional leadership, and distributed leadership (Lyle et al., 2024; Mowat, 2019). One of the reasons system leadership gained prominence is the policy trend in school reform. Before the 1980s, school reforms in Western countries were largely top-down and government-led, but were often unsuccessful because the policy context became more complex (Sarason, 2002). In response, societal expectations for schools increased, and the 1990s and early 2000s saw a shift toward bottom-up approaches such as school-based management, school autonomy, and school partnerships (Dimmock, 2016). Since the early 21st century, system leadership has gained global attention from organizations like the OECD and from countries such as Scotland, the United Kingdom, the United States, Singapore, and Australia. It is increasingly recognized as a key tool for school improvement, emphasizing horizontal collaboration among professionals rather than vertical reforms (Dimmock, 2016).

To achieve effective school reform and systemic change, Fullan (2004) emphasizes the importance of systems thinkers and systems thinking. These systems thinkers are "leaders who work intensely in their own schools, or national agencies, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture" (Fullan, 2004, p. 8). Scholars have proposed varied definitions of system leadership (Beehner, 2019; Boylan, 2016; Bush, 2023; Greany, 2022; Harris, 2010), yet a common theme emphasizes its role in overcoming systemic inertia by linking localized efforts to broader systems and fostering collaboration (Fullan, 2004).

2.2. Practices of System Leaders

Scholars have proposed various frameworks to conceptualize system leadership practices, all converging on the notion that moral purpose—a commitment to equity and to supporting schools in challenging contexts—lies at its core (Mowat, 2019). Building on this foundation, Hopkins (2009) identifies five key domains of system leadership: improving student learning, fostering professional learning communities, developing collaborative networks, promoting equity and inclusion, and recognizing the interdependence between school and system levels. In line with this, Mowat (2019) emphasizes that system leaders serve as change agents by building partnerships and driving curricular and pedagogical innovations. Dreier et al. (2019) further advance the CLEAR framework, which outlines five interrelated phases of system change: convene and commit, look and learn, engage and energize, act with accountability, and review and revise.

System leadership has also been explored at multiple levels. Harris et al. (2021) synthesize the literature that distinguishes between the macro and micro levels: the former focuses on systems thinking and policy-level reforms (e.g., Fullan, 2004), while the latter highlights individual traits and functions such as collaboration, vision-setting, and leadership capacity (e.g., Boylan, 2016; Dimmock, 2016). Cheah (2023) adds that effective system leaders must operate across individual, organizational, and community levels, continually learning and adapting to lead sustainable change. Finally, system leaders often work across three nested levels—school,

local network, and national system—offering support, sharing expertise, and aligning practice with broader reforms (Fullan, 2004; Hopkins, 2009; Spillane et al., 2023).

2.3. Theoretical Foundation of This Study

Although scholars have proposed various theoretical frameworks for system leadership, their descriptions of leadership practices differ in emphasis. Drawing on frameworks developed by Hopkins and Higham (2007), and by Hopkins (2009), together with insights from system thinking and system leadership literature, this study develops an analytical framework for understanding how system leaders facilitate inter-school collaboration in China's Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA). The framework of system leadership practices outlines four dimensions:

1) Setting Direction with Moral Purpose: System leaders focus on improving student learning while promoting equity and inclusion, aiming to raise academic standards and close achievement gaps (e.g., Cheah, 2023; Dimmock, 2016; Hopkins, 2009; Mowat, 2019).
2) Managing Teaching and Learning: They drive continuous improvement in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to strengthen instructional quality across schools (e.g., Beehner, 2019; Hill, 2011; Hopkins & Higham, 2007; Mowat, 2019).
3) Developing the Organization: They optimize structures, mobilize resources, and cultivate professional learning communities, fostering a supportive culture and enabling sustained improvement and innovation (e.g., Boylan, 2016; Cheah, 2023; Harris, 2010; Mowat, 2019).
4) Understanding the Interdependence of School and System Levels: They recognize that meaningful change requires engagement at multiple levels—from classrooms to schools to the broader system—and work to ensure that change meets diverse educational needs (e.g., Beehner, 2019; Chapman & Muijs, 2014; Harris et al., 2021; Spillane et al., 2023).

The synthesis of system leadership practices outlined above serves as the theoretical foundation for the data analysis in this study. Although the analysis primarily employed data-driven coding, the later stages incorporated the existing framework to facilitate deeper reflection, examining how system leadership practices manifest within the Chinese context in relation to the Western-derived framework.

3. Methods

This study explores two main issues: (a) the roles of system leaders in facilitating inter-school collaboration in China, and (b) the leadership behaviors enacted by these system leaders. To address these questions, a qualitative case study approach was adopted. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of The Education University of Hong Kong, and informed consent was secured from all participants. This section covers the study context (the Scheme in the GBA, China), participant selection, data collection, and analysis.

3.1. Context of This Study

The Scheme is a key form of inter-school collaboration in the GBA, comparable to the San Francisco and New York Bay Areas in the United States and the Tokyo Bay Area in Japan. As part of a national strategy

to deepen regional integration and educational cooperation, the Scheme serves as a platform for fostering connectivity and shared development across the region.

Launched in 2004 through a tripartite agreement among the Education Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the Education and Youth Development Bureau of the Macao Special Administrative Region, and the Department of Education of Guangdong Province, the Scheme aims to strengthen mutual understanding, enrich educational experiences, and align educational practices across Hong Kong, Macao, and mainland China. Its goals include enhancing mutual knowledge, promoting international as well as cultural exchange, fostering national identity and belonging, expanding inter-school networks, and broadening the perspectives of school leaders, teachers, students, and parents.

Since its inception, the Scheme has connected schools in Hong Kong and Macao with counterparts across mainland China—including those located in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Sichuan, Zhejiang, and Fujian—as well as with overseas institutions such as schools in Singapore. To sustain and enhance these collaborations, education authorities in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao have provided ongoing financial and professional support. Since the 2018/2019 academic year, the Education Bureau of Hong Kong (2025) has institutionalized the Scheme by issuing guidelines and offering annual grants. Until May 2025, eligible publicly funded and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools (excluding special schools) have received HKD 165,000 annually to support collaboration, and 1,546 sister school pairs have been established between Guangdong and Hong Kong/Macao, representing over half of all such partnerships in mainland China, largely due to the close geographic proximity between Guangdong and Hong Kong.

Today, the Scheme is the largest and most influential inter-school collaboration initiative in basic education within the GBA. Its success relies not only on sustained government support but also on the active engagement of system leaders, who play a pivotal role in fostering mutual understanding, building strong partnerships, and coordinating collaborative initiatives at both the school and regional levels.

3.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was adopted as the primary strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Based on the list of model sister schools recognized by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong over the past decade, more than 10 school pairs were initially identified. Among them, School A of Hong Kong and School B of Guangdong Province were selected for their long-standing partnership since 2006. School A is an aided secondary school in Hong Kong with a strong patriotic ethos, while School B is a public junior secondary school located in urban Shenzhen, Guangdong Province. Despite leadership transitions in both schools, the collaboration has remained steady and ongoing since 2006. The two schools have carried out 39 exchange activities involving nearly 2,000 teachers and students. The depth and continuity of this collaboration made them a suitable case for exploring the conditions that sustain school partnerships.

Furthermore, five system leaders who played key roles in this collaboration—each holding multiple titles and exerting influence across different levels—were selected as research participants (see Table 1). These five system leaders served as important connectors, linking various departments and stakeholders to collectively facilitate the sister school collaboration within the GBA. While some have retired, others remain active in leadership roles.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

Code	Gender	Years of Experience	Current Position	Key Past Roles
P1-GD	F	35–40	Retired principal	Subject-matter expert; Vice principal; Principal; Department head of local education bureau
P2-GD	M	20–25	Principal	Subject-matter expert; School middle leader; Principal
P3-HK	M	30–35	President of a professional organization in Hong Kong	Principal; Delegate to the National People's Congress
P4-HK	F	15–20	Principal	Assistant principal; Head of the Chinese department; Vice principal; Principal
P5-HK	F	25–30	Principal	Student affairs officer; Vice principal; Principal

3.3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the sister school partnership and the role of system leadership in this context. Interviews in Mandarin and Cantonese were conducted with five current or former principals who played key roles in initiating and sustaining the collaboration. Each session lasted one to two hours, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Guided by an interview protocol, the interviews explored three key areas: (a) background information on the schools and leaders, (b) the development and practices of inter-school collaboration, and (c) the leaders' perspectives on their contributions. These interviews provided rich, first-hand insights into the processes, challenges, and leadership strategies underpinning long-term collaboration in the GBA.

Documentary evidence was also collected to contextualize how these system leaders exercised their leadership. Sources included: (a) national and local policy documents on the Scheme; (b) records of collaborative activities such as partnership agreements, event proposals, reports, and newsletters, including a book published by the Guangdong school titled *Promoting Exchanges Between Schools in Guangdong and Hong Kong and Enhancing Patriotic Education*; and (c) media reports highlighting the leaders' involvement in Scheme-related initiatives. These materials offered a comprehensive view of their system-level roles and leadership practices.

3.4. Data Analysis

To theorize how system leaders exercise leadership across multiple levels of the education system, we employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following an analytic sequence of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis proceeded in three stages.

In the first stage, we conducted within-case coding of interview transcripts from five current and former principals using both concept-driven and data-driven approaches (Babbie, 2014). Open coding identified leadership actions, collaboration strategies, and institutional contexts, followed by axial coding that organized categories around (a) leader and school background, (b) partnership development and practices,

and (c) perceived leadership contributions. In parallel, policy texts, partnership records, and media reports were analyzed to triangulate and enrich the interview data.

In the second stage, a cross-case analysis identified common patterns and meaningful variations in how leaders mobilized resources, bridged institutional boundaries, and influenced cross-border collaboration. Analytical rigor was strengthened through member checking and iterative inter-coder discussions to ensure reliability.

In the final stage, the analysis focused on identifying the four principal roles of system leaders, which are discussed in the findings section. The discussion section then offers a comparative analysis that draws on existing theoretical foundations to explore how system leadership practices in the Chinese context align with, diverge from, or expand upon predominantly Western-derived models.

4. Findings

The findings indicate that the five system leaders demonstrate exceptional leadership capacities. Across different stages and contexts, they assume multiple roles, including those of middle-level school leaders, (vice) principals, expert teachers, education bureau officials, and presidents of professional associations. Drawing upon their professional credibility and social capital, they build an extensive network that connects various educational sectors and stakeholder groups. Through this network, they exert considerable influence on systemic educational development. The analysis further shows that the leadership practices of principals as system leaders both align with and diverge from existing research, showing consistencies such as setting direction and building networks while also presenting notable differences. These practices are further conceptualized in four roles—thought advocate, practice pioneer, boundary spanner, and resource mobilizer—each associated with specific leadership behaviours. Within these roles, principals enact differentiated behaviours as system leaders.

4.1. Thought Advocate

As thought advocates, system leaders (five principals in this study) were responsible for setting organizational direction around a moral purpose and building a shared vision for collective progress across schools. In this study, principals were regarded as a group of insightful actors who proposed forward-looking ideas in response to evolving educational contexts, set strategic directions, and mobilized diverse stakeholders through vision-driven appeals. In this study, prior to the official launch of the Scheme, collaboration between Hong Kong and mainland schools remained limited due to various factors, including visa application difficulties between Hong Kong and Guangdong as well as differences in their educational systems. However, P3-HK, P1-GD, and P4-HK had already recognized the complementary needs of schools in both regions and identified opportunities for cooperation, making sustained efforts to overcome challenges and advance collaboration, even when it required personal investment of time and resources. As P3-HK noted, "Hong Kong's strengths lie beyond the classroom, while the Chinese mainland's strengths lie within." He believed the two regions could learn from one another. P3-HK explained:

> In Guangdong—and more broadly in the Chinese mainland—teachers engage in collaborative lesson planning, which is rare in Hong Kong. Teachers in Hong Kong prefer working independently and tend

to resist external input. Learning from the mainland's practices has improved classroom teaching in Hong Kong. Conversely, Hong Kong's international exposure offers valuable insights for the mainland.

System leaders also actively communicate their visions to others, fostering shared understanding and engagement in reform. For example, P3-HK regularly met with principals and middle leaders from both sides to highlight the benefits of cooperation. He stated, "To strengthen cross-border ties and mutual understanding of each other's economic and cultural development, and to enhance students' sense of national identity, we must promote direct student interaction." His advocacy influenced many people, including P4-HK, then an assistant principal, who remarked: "Through student exchanges, teachers and students gain firsthand understanding of the mainland's development. This enriches teaching, broadens student horizons, and facilitates mutual learning."

To operationalize partnerships, system leaders support the development of shared visions and mutually beneficial plans. As P4-HK emphasized, "The starting point must be student benefit. We must identify available resources and ensure that students truly gain from our programs." P2-GD proposed organizing student site visits to broaden perspectives; P5-HK recommended STEAM-based collaborative projects (i.e., joint initiatives integrating science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) to cultivate interdisciplinary and innovative skills; P4-HK further suggested joint teacher professional learning, including collaborative research and lesson study. These leaders continue to guide the future direction of the Scheme. As P1-GD stated, "It's not just about increasing the number of sister schools—but improving the quality of exchanges." Such thought leadership continues to shape cross-border school collaboration in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao context.

4.2. Practice Pioneer

After generating enthusiasm among various stakeholders, many were still uncertain about how to translate this enthusiasm for collaboration into concrete action. At this point, system leaders took on the role of practice pioneers by initiating pilot efforts to explore viable pathways for inter-school collaboration—"turning the impossible into the possible" (P3-HK). As scholars have noted, system leaders need to be both thought leaders and practical leaders (Harris et al., 2021). As one leader recalled, "Before the Scheme was officially promoted, we had already launched a pilot and had begun forming sister school partnerships with different schools" (P5-HK). P5-HK and colleagues experimented with diverse forms of collaboration by "planning and designing routinized activities." Some activities were later endorsed by authorities and developed into flagship programs. Beyond these established practices, the pair of sister schools selected in this study—School A in Hong Kong and School B in Guangdong Province—continued to explore new possibilities—"start early" and "pilot new forms of collaboration" (P5-HK)—demonstrating a commitment to ongoing innovation. As pioneers, selected principals in this study (e.g., P1-GD, P2-GD, and P5-HK) developed context-responsive practices tailored to the needs of different stakeholder groups, implemented across three levels: school leaders (principals and middle leaders), teachers, and students.

Collaboration among school leaders has focused on experience sharing between principals from the pair of sister schools selected in this study. Noting differences in leadership styles and school cultures between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, both sides engaged in reflective dialogues. P2-GD pointed out that "the schedule of Hong Kong schools is meticulous and systematic, a feature often lacking on the Chinese mainland."

P1-GD also stated that although the two contexts differ, "we still need to learn from Hong Kong principals" to improve goal-setting and planning for teachers. She believed that school leaders should avoid excessive administrative intervention and short-notice assignments so that "each teacher knows what to do at specific times" (P1-GD). In her view, this "meticulous and systematic school management model" (P1-GD) is worth learning from and could enhance school management on the Chinese mainland. Through such exchanges, principals gained practical insights into improving their own leadership practices.

Teacher-level collaboration aimed to improve instructional quality by introducing the Chinese mainland's school-based teaching-research system (*jiaoyan zhidu*, 教研制度) to Hong Kong schools. This included lesson co-design (*tongti yijiao*, 同题异教), peer and expert observation (*guanke*, 观课), and structured feedback (*pingke*, 评课). Although these practices are common in the Chinese mainland, they are rarely implemented in Hong Kong. To bridge the gap, the sister schools developed a joint lesson study project using a shared text, *Memory of Father's Back*, through which teachers designed parallel lessons and received feedback from expert observers. P1-GD commented, "The atmosphere and approaches of teaching-research in the Chinese mainland are very worthwhile for Hong Kong teachers to adopt." P5-HK echoed this view:

> The teaching-research system…helps teachers notice the strengths of others, reflect on their shortcomings, and refine their lessons….Although some well-prepared lessons were just "for show." I still think Hong Kong teachers can learn a lot….That's why I insist on co-organizing teaching-research activities with my partner school….We have benefited greatly.

Student-level collaboration was mainly implemented through biannual study tours aimed at broadening students' horizons and developing shared values. Activities included mutual school visits, community service, home-stays, and theme-based experiential learning. As P1-GD explained, "Hong Kong sent students to Shenzhen [a city in Guangdong], and we organized off-site activities together, such as visiting the elderly in Lianhua North Village." The most representative initiative was the home-stay exchange program, launched in 2010. In the first round, 20 Hong Kong students participated, and over 80 mainland families volunteered to host. P2-GD recalled:

> The most interesting thing was that Hong Kong students came to Shenzhen and lived with mainland students for several days….Each one had a local partner who took care of them….One of my students said she had brought her Hong Kong buddy to a three-hour extracurricular class….Some parents even took them to places like Happy Coast and museums. I think these were excellent experiences.

P5-HK also mentioned that during the three-day and two-night study tour, Hong Kong students were taken to attend various activities—"volunteering and serving in elderly homes," for example. After that, P5-HK took the opportunity to ask students to "compare issues related to the elderly in Hong Kong and Guangdong, analyze the differences between the two places, and then propose some constructive suggestions for the government." The sister schools also took students to visit urban construction projects in Shenzhen, high-tech enterprises (e.g., BYD Company in Chaozhou), natural landscapes in the GBA (e.g., Danxia Mountain in Shaoguan), and cultural heritage sites (e.g., the ancient city in Chaozhou). After each study tour, the school organized students into teams to share what they had seen and learned. P5-HK told us, "After each study tour, most of my students came back with great enthusiasm. They enjoyed the exchange activities."

4.3. Boundary Spanner

In the long-term collaboration between sister schools in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, system leaders serve as boundary spanners. Similar terms, such as "broker," have appeared in existing research (Hopkins & Higham, 2007). These leaders navigate through institutions, cultures, and networks, playing a pivotal role in expanding the scope and strengthening the resilience of cross-border educational partnerships. Their leadership as boundary spanners can be observed in three interrelated practices: nurturing relational networks, facilitating institutional understanding across systems, and supporting the continuity of collaboration over time.

System leaders proactively nurture multi-level relational networks that span individuals, organizations, and administrative boundaries. These relationships are grounded in interpersonal trust and sustained through long-term engagement. During the Covid-19 pandemic, they demonstrated resilience by overcoming travel restrictions and logistical barriers, leveraging digital platforms to organize online exchange activities and maintain meaningful collaboration despite unprecedented disruptions. As P2-GD explained, many school partnerships are built through "friends" and "good relationships." P4-HK similarly noted, "I try to attend their events whenever possible…these important connections take time to build."

The five participants in this study were closely connected with key organizations, including the Education Bureau of Hong Kong, the Federation of Education Workers of Hong Kong, and various Hong Kong principals' associations, as well as the International Exchange Office of the Shenzhen Education Bureau. Through these ties, they facilitated more than a dozen school partnerships across regions, including Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Chongqing. As P1-GD shared, "Each year, we independently establish around six new partnerships, and we never stopped doing so even during the three years of the Covid-19 pandemic." She added, "The federation understands both the schools' situations and the principals' intentions…when the match is right, collaboration becomes possible."

System leaders also facilitate institutional understanding across systems by mediating between different policy environments, organizational logics, and governance cultures. They often initiate partnerships through informal channels and later formalize them—adopting a flexible, adaptive approach. As P1-GD described, "I just ask them to add each other on WeChat…if they feel it works, they can coordinate directly online…they even established partnerships before the official signing ceremony with the Education Bureau." These leaders are also attuned to local policy nuances and capable of proposing context-responsive solutions. For instance, in response to the relatively relaxed textbook regulations in Hong Kong and the concurrent need to strengthen Mandarin instruction, P1-GD suggested: "[The Education Bureau of Hong Kong] doesn't regulate it like the Chinese mainland….You can write your own." With her support, the Hong Kong secondary school, in collaboration with its sister school, developed its own Chinese teaching materials for grades 7 through 11. Many system leaders possess multilingual skills and cross-cultural experiences. P3-HK, for example, studied in Hong Kong but said, "I really love Chinese mainland culture….I genuinely want to contribute to the country." This positioning enables them to balance political sensitivity with professional collaboration.

Finally, system leaders support the continuity of collaboration by managing leadership transitions and cultivating long-term commitments. When school leaders rotate or retire, they intentionally arrange handovers to ensure that institutional memory and collaborative momentum are maintained. As P2-GD

recalled: "Principal P4-HK recently came together with a new male principal before her retirement to discuss the exchange plans for the upcoming year." He added: "When people change, the relationship stays, and cooperation continues." Long-term collaboration is further reinforced by shared values and interpersonal trust. As P2-GD noted, "I trust Principal P5-HK because she was introduced by Principal P1-GD, whom I already trusted." P4-HK also reflected that her school's partnership with School B began in 2014: "At that time, it was Principal P1-GD who facilitated it." As P2-GD summarized: "The reason we've been able to sustain this partnership for 17 years is due to the strong personal bonds between principals…of course, shared values and a common vision for collaboration also matter."

4.4. Resource Mobilizer

System leaders serve as key enablers in sustaining cross-border partnerships by proactively constructing institutional conditions rather than merely responding to top-down mandates or resource requests. To advance school collaboration and system change, they must overcome multiple constraints while building broad support and securing resources. In this study, the obstacles to effective school collaboration included historical legacies of colonialism that fostered biases against the Chinese mainland among Hong Kong educators, resulting in limited contact and interaction; institutional constraints that differ significantly across the two regions, posing practical challenges to collaboration (e.g., restrictions on cross-border mobility); and psychological barriers such as the conservative mindset of some Hong Kong teachers, which limited their willingness to step outside their comfort zones. Addressing these challenges was essential for strengthening exchange and collaboration among schools in the GBA. In this study, system leaders adopted a range of measures aimed at overcoming these obstacles and mobilizing resources, with their practices manifested in four interrelated domains: institutional embedding, financial support, structural coordination, and pathway innovation. Together, these practices reflect a strategic transition from fragmented efforts to a coherent and sustainable ecosystem of collaboration.

First, system leaders help transform informal school-level initiatives into officially recognized and institutionally supported collaborations. As P3-HK recalled: "The Scheme started as an informal relationship, but over time, the Education Bureau recognized its value and began to promote it… Once you took the lead, it gained an official nature." This institutional embedding demonstrates how grassroots experiences can inform policy, leading to the formal launch of the Scheme in 2004 with accompanying regulatory frameworks.

Another key aspect of resource mobilization is addressing financial constraints. System leaders have actively negotiated financial resources to ease the cost burden of cross-border collaboration. As P4-HK explained:

> The Education Bureau created designated funding for us, so when we travel to the Chinese mainland, we can use that money instead of asking the host school to cover our expenses. I think that's very considerate. What used to be a difficulty has been gradually addressed by the Bureau.…For example, if we need to organize a seminar, we can approach the Federation of Education Workers, and they'll provide support. Each school has a liaison…one of our teachers serves in this role and maintains regular contact. They really support us, even participating in some on-site activities as invited guests or experts.

System leaders also design flexible and adaptive pathways to initiate and expand collaborations. P1-GD described how informal connections between schools—such as principals encouraging teachers to connect via WeChat—can later be formalized through annual partnership ceremonies. "Once they feel ready, they report to the Education Bureau for official recognition," she noted. P3-HK further emphasized that partnerships are not limited to official matchmaking but can be brokered by professional associations or personal networks and later submitted to the government for support. These practices reflect system leaders' ability to navigate both within and beyond institutional boundaries, creating space for innovation and responsiveness.

Moreover, once basic mechanisms are in place, system leaders continue to expand the collaboration's reach. P4-HK observed that new policy requirements—such as the mandate for all secondary students to participate in at least one outbound learning experience—have effectively turned sister school exchanges from optional activities into institutional expectations. P2-GD highlighted how the network grew organically:

> It started with our partnership with a secondary school, but when their administrators moved to new schools, those schools also partnered with us….The network kept expanding—even schools from Singapore visited us.

In sum, system leaders act as resource mobilizers not only by securing external support but also by cultivating favorable institutional, financial, and structural conditions. Their efforts transform isolated projects into sustained initiatives, enabling cross-border partnerships to expand in scope, deepen in impact, and gain policy significance. Although the collaboration between School A and School B has become relatively mature and benefits from official support, it has nevertheless encountered challenges and still relies on the enduring commitment of successive principals.

5. Discussion

This qualitative case study explored how system leaders facilitate inter-school partnerships, offering nuanced, context-specific insights into the dynamics of system leadership in China. The findings shed light on strategies that drive effective collaboration, reveal how principals expand their leadership beyond individual schools, and highlight ways in which these practices enrich and extend system leadership theory within the Chinese context.

5.1. Insights Into Effective Inter-School Collaboration

First, while inter-school collaboration is increasingly promoted as an alternative to top-down government-led reforms (Cheah, 2023; Hargreaves, 2011), it does not automatically lead to meaningful change. Its success depends on specific conditions—among which, key individuals play a particularly crucial role. In the Chinese context, where interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*, 关系) and social networks are highly valued, the quality of interactions between key actors can significantly influence both the depth and continuity of school partnerships. Distinct from general social connections, *guanxi* denotes enduring, trust-based relationships characterized by mutual respect and reciprocal obligations. Functioning as a culturally embedded and informal mechanism, guanxi facilitates collaboration, resource exchange, and problem-solving within and across organizations, especially in contexts where formal structures are

insufficient. Accordingly, it has been widely recognized as an ethical and effective mode of organizational coordination (Chen & Tjosvold, 2007; Child, 1996; Hofstede, 2001; Su et al., 2003). In this study, the nearly two-decade collaboration between sister schools was consistently sustained by the close and harmonious relationships maintained by successive school leaders.

Second, this study supports international findings that place student development and teacher learning at the center of collaboration. However, it also points to additional factors that matter in the Chinese context—especially under the "one country, two systems" (*yiguo liangzhi*,一国两制) framework. Effective school partnerships in this context require alignment not only of educational goals but also of political values, institutional culture, and shared beliefs. In this case, both schools identified as patriotic and integrated values-oriented activities—framed as "values education" in Hong Kong—into their collaboration. Such emphasis reflects the central role of patriotic education on the Chinese mainland, particularly for secondary school students.

5.2. Expanding Understandings of Principals' System Leadership

Traditional research has primarily examined principals' roles within their own schools, often classifying leadership into types such as transformational (Leithwood et al., 2010), instructional (Hallinger et al., 2020), paternalistic (Farh et al., 2008), and distributed (Spillane, 2005). However, emerging studies suggest that principals can also lead beyond their own institutions, playing strategic roles in inter-school collaboration and broader system improvement (Dimmock, 2016; Hopkins et al., 2014; Lyle et al., 2024; Mowat, 2019; Senge et al., 2015). This study provides further empirical support for this view, situated within the unique sociocultural context of China.

The principals examined here exemplify a distinct leadership trajectory: In addition to their formal school leadership roles, they often serve as senior subject experts, lead professional networks, and hold positions in education-related associations. Their leadership is not conferred solely by their formal positions, but developed through long-term experience, accumulated recognition, and deep participation in professional communities. Many began their careers as teachers and gradually moved into administrative roles, gaining influence through a combination of expertise, titles, and institutional trust. Thus, principals can serve as system leaders beyond their own schools.

In the Chinese Confucian cultural context, professional authority is closely linked to seniority and moral credibility (*lunzi paibei*, 论资排辈). With time, these principals accumulate not only symbolic capital (e.g., honors, status), but also practical capital in the form of broad interpersonal networks and preferential access to policy platforms, expert groups, and collaborative opportunities. This combination allows them to exercise system leadership—mobilizing resources, building alliances, and shaping regional educational directions—often beyond their immediate school settings. This culturally embedded, experience-driven leadership trajectory offers a distinctly Chinese pathway to system leadership that has been largely underrepresented in international scholarship.

5.3. Enriching System Leadership Theory in the Chinese Context

As Leithwood et al. (2010) argue, while leadership practices may have broad applicability, their enactment is always shaped by specific cultural and institutional contexts. This study contributes to the ongoing theorization of system leadership by grounding it in the distinctive setting of the GBA, where political systems, school cultures, and policy frameworks vary significantly across cities.

This study confirms several key insights from existing system leadership literature. First, consistent with international research, it supports the emphasis on setting direction with moral purpose—namely, promoting equity and improving student learning, particularly in less advantaged schools (Cheah, 2023; Dimmock, 2016; Pont & Hopkins, 2012; Spillane et al., 2023). In our case, system leaders worked to enhance the overall quality of education across partner schools. Second, echoing previous studies, these leaders demonstrated a range of behaviors, including setting direction, developing the organization, fostering partnerships, and managing resources (Hopkins & Higham, 2007; Mowat, 2019; Spillane et al., 2023). Third, the influence of system leadership operated across multiple levels—from within-school improvements to inter-school collaboration, and ultimately to impact at the regional level. In the case analyzed, what began as a partnership between two schools gradually evolved into a model of innovation that influenced government policies and was subsequently incorporated into broader educational reform initiatives.

However, one dimension of system leadership practice was not fully evident in this study: managing teaching and learning as curriculum or pedagogical experts (Mowat, 2019). In the GBA, system leaders involved in school collaboration rarely prioritized curriculum reform or school change as a core objective. Instead, they placed greater emphasis on the moral and ideological development of teachers and students, fostering cultural identity and promoting values and national identity. One explanation lies in the fragmented curricular systems across the GBA: Guangdong adheres to a national standardized curriculum, while Hong Kong and Macao retain high levels of curricular autonomy. Similarly, while system leadership is thought to play a role in advancing teacher professional development (Hopkins, 2009), such collaboration remains limited in the GBA, due to differing qualification standards and promotion pathways across regions. Moreover, under the framework of "one country, two systems," school collaboration in the GBA carries not only an educational mandate to improve quality but also a political function, a distinctive feature of the Chinese context. These findings suggest that system leaders must carefully navigate structural constraints and focus on identifying areas of shared interest when fostering cross-boundary cooperation, as this forms the foundation for establishing a shared vision.

This study provides context-specific contributions by identifying leadership behaviors rarely addressed in existing system leadership frameworks. While the four proposed roles broadly resonate with international literature, their enactment in China reveals distinctive features. As "thought advocates" and "practice pioneers," system leaders not only influence teachers and students but also shape government policy. They often initiate pilot programs ahead of official reforms and act as policy consultants through feedback to policymakers. Moreover, system leaders frequently hold multiple positions. Influenced by the Confucian ideal that those who excel in learning should serve in government (*xue er you ze shi*, 学而优则仕), educational experts leverage professional capital, social networks (*renmai*, 人脉), and seniority (*zili*, 资历) to gain informal authority (Zhang et al., 2025), which gradually translates into formal legitimacy through roles such as principal, education bureau leader, or chair of a professional association. Finally, unlike Western contexts

where system leadership is primarily framed as bottom-up, in China it emerges through the interplay of bottom-up initiatives and top-down directives. Government-led reforms provide additional resources and legitimacy, explaining why system leaders in this study actively sought official support when acting as resource mobilizers. Taken together, these findings expand the typology of system leadership and offer culturally situated insights that enrich a literature that remains dominated by Western perspectives.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative case study was conducted in the GBA, China. Based on coded interviews and documentary data collected from five system leaders, the study reveals how these leaders shift between interrelated roles to drive school collaboration and educational change, enacting varied leadership practices throughout the process. As thought advocates, they articulate forward-looking ideas and actively communicate their visions to stakeholders, fostering shared goals and mutually beneficial strategies. As practice pioneers, they initiate pilot programs to explore feasible pathways and demonstrate how seemingly impossible goals can be realized. As boundary spanners, they nurture relational networks, facilitate institutional understanding across systems, and support the continuity of collaboration over time. Finally, as resource mobilizers, they not only secure external support but also create enabling institutional, financial, and structural conditions to sustain educational development.

This study has some potential limitations. First, data were collected from five system leaders who were involved in a successful sister school partnership. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to all principals acting as system leaders across China. However, as a qualitative study, the primary aim is to explore the meaning and role of principals' system leadership in school collaboration, rather than to produce generalizable findings. Second, the current study focuses only on interactions within the GBA, and the findings cannot be generalized to all principals acting as system leaders across China or in other contexts. Future research could extend to other Bay Areas worldwide (e.g., San Francisco Bay Area, New York Bay Area, Tokyo Bay Area) and to cross-school collaborations in different countries, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, this study makes important contributions and offers implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends the Western concept of system leadership into the Chinese context, particularly in the domain of cross-border inter-school collaboration rather than within a single district or city. By using principals involved in a successful sister school partnership as a case study, the article enriches international understandings of how system leadership operates to facilitate school collaboration. It also expands the knowledge base related to inter-school partnerships and system leadership in the Chinese context.

Future research could explore differences in system leadership practices across various cultural and social contexts beyond China, employing quantitative or mixed-method approaches, as core leadership practices may differ internationally (Leithwood et al., 2010). In addition, subsequent studies could examine how teachers act as system leaders, building on this study by adopting a "leader-plus" perspective (Boylan, 2016).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

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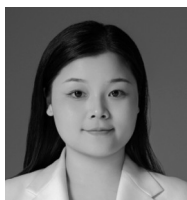
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