

Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of Headmasters' Transformational Leadership in Guangdong Province

Xiao Xiaolin, * Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bity Salwana Binti Alias

National University of Malaysia (UKM), Faculty of Education, Lingkungan Ilmu, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: P144336@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Corresponding Author Email: bity@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

Transformational leadership is widely regarded as crucial for sustaining teacher motivation and school improvement, yet descriptive evidence from China's reform-intensive regions remains limited. This study investigates how primary school teachers in Guangdong Province perceive their headmasters' level of transformational leadership, addressing the lack of dimension-specific evidence in this context. Using localized Transformational Leadership Questionnaire, data were collected from 384 full-time primary school teachers through convenience sampling and analysed using descriptive statistics. The results show that teachers, overall, perceived their headmasters' transformational leadership as high. Among the four dimensions, Moral Modeling received the highest mean score, followed by Visionary Inspiration and Charismatic Leadership, indicating that headmasters are generally viewed as ethical leaders who provide clear direction and professional confidence. Individualized Consideration, however, recorded the lowest mean score and the greatest variability, suggesting uneven experiences of personalised support and relational engagement. These findings reveal a leadership profile characterised by strong moral and vision-oriented behaviours but relatively weaker relational practices under heavy reform-driven workloads. The study offers context-specific evidence from Guangdong's primary schools and provides practical implications for strengthening headmasters' training, refining leadership evaluation, and aligning policy efforts with the goal of more teacher-centred, supportive school leadership.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Primary School Teachers, Teacher Perceptions, School Leadership, Guangdong Province

Introduction

Across global education systems, teachers today face increasingly complex professional challenges stemming from rising workloads, emotional strain, and heightened performance expectations. International evidence indicates that teaching has become a high-pressure profession, with many teachers reporting significant work-related stress and burnout that

hinder their instructional effectiveness (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021; Roesminingsih & Windasari, 2025). These conditions highlight the growing importance of supportive and responsive school leadership in sustaining teacher motivation, professional engagement, and instructional quality. Within this context, transformational leadership has gained prominence as a leadership approach that strengthens teachers' sense of purpose, fosters innovation, promotes collaboration, and enhances overall work performance (Sliwka et al., 2024).

Similar challenges are evident in China, where rapid and continuous educational reforms have intensified expectations placed on schools and teachers. Primary school teachers frequently experience heavy administrative workloads, heightened emotional demands, and limited opportunities for professional development, all of which shape how they interpret and respond to their working environment (Wu Xiaoping, 2020; Xu & Pang, 2024). Research consistently shows that teachers' perceptions of support from school leadership play a critical role in influencing their morale, engagement, and attitudes toward their work (Liu & Kong, 2020; Zhang & Mao, 2023). In response to these concerns, the Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Teacher Workforce in the New Era (MOE, 2018) emphasise the cultivation of ethical, competent, and people-centred school leaders. However, despite these policy intentions, national reform goals have not been fully realised at the school level, and many teachers continue to experience inconsistent leadership support, rapid reform cycles, and substantial administrative demands (Gao, 2020; He, 2023).

Transformational leadership has been widely recognised as a leadership style capable of inspiring and empowering teachers in such demanding contexts. Rooted in Burns' (1978) notion of moral influence and Bass's (1985) behavioural framework, transformational leadership in schools involves articulating a compelling vision, modelling ethical behaviour, motivating teachers, and providing individualized support (Leithwood, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). To better reflect the Chinese cultural and organisational context, Li and Shi (2005) localised this framework by identifying four core dimensions—moral modelling, visionary inspiration, charismatic leadership, and individualized consideration—which align closely with Confucian expectations that school leaders demonstrate moral authority, collective responsibility, and relational sensitivity.

Guangdong Province represents a particularly meaningful context in which to examine teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership. As one of China's most reform-intensive and economically dynamic regions, Guangdong has implemented extensive curriculum, assessment, and teacher-management reforms. These reforms have expanded headmasters' managerial responsibilities while simultaneously heightening expectations for supportive and people-centred leadership practices. Empirical studies suggest that although many headmasters in Guangdong demonstrate strong moral values and policy awareness, they often face difficulties in providing consistent individualized support due to heavy administrative workloads and reform pressures, resulting in mixed teacher perceptions of leadership effectiveness (Zheng Liangyu, 2019; Shen & Wu, 2022). Teachers in this region have also reported feelings of insufficient support, professional disconnection, and undervaluation, indicating a potential gap between policy expectations and everyday leadership practices in schools (Zhu, Cheng, & Dong, 2023; Zhang & Mao, 2023).

Although transformational leadership has been widely studied in China, existing research has predominantly focused on its outcomes—such as teachers’ job satisfaction, organisational commitment, or innovative behaviour—rather than on teachers’ direct perceptions of leadership behaviours themselves (Li, Wang, & Li, 2018; Liu & Kong, 2020; Ramadhini, 2024). Moreover, relatively few studies provide detailed, descriptive evidence on how primary school teachers in Guangdong perceive headmasters’ transformational leadership within a reform-driven educational environment. In particular, limited attention has been paid to identifying which specific dimensions of transformational leadership are perceived as strengths and which may require further development from the teachers’ perspective.

Taken together, despite strong policy advocacy for ethical and teacher-centred leadership, there remains insufficient empirical evidence that clearly documents how primary school teachers in reform-intensive regions such as Guangdong actually perceive headmasters’ transformational leadership behaviours. Addressing this gap is essential, as teachers’ perceptions form the foundation through which leadership practices are experienced, interpreted, and enacted in daily school life. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining primary school teachers’ perceptions of headmasters’ transformational leadership in Guangdong Province. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Determine the overall level of headmasters’ transformational leadership as perceived by primary school teachers in Guangdong.
2. Examine teachers’ perceptions of the four dimensions of transformational leadership—moral modeling, visionary inspiration, charismatic leadership, and individualized consideration—to identify their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Literature Review

Teachers’ Perceptions of Transformational Leadership in Education

Transformational leadership has long been recognised as a leadership approach that enhances teacher motivation, strengthens school culture, and supports sustained school development. Burns (1978) conceptualised it as a moral process of mutual elevation between leaders and followers, while Bass (1985) elaborated it into four behavioural dimensions that inspire and support followers. In school contexts, transformational leadership is associated with articulating shared goals, promoting teacher growth, and creating conditions that support innovation (Leithwood, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

In China, leadership is enacted and interpreted through daily interpersonal interactions. Teachers’ perceptions of leadership behaviours therefore play a decisive role in shaping how leadership is experienced in schools. Research consistently shows that teachers’ attitudes, emotions, and professional engagement depend not on leaders’ stated intentions, but on how teachers interpret leaders’ behaviours and communication patterns (Zheng, 2019; Han, 2020).

Understanding transformational leadership from teachers’ perceptual standpoint thus provides an essential foundation for investigating how primary school teachers in Guangdong experience headmasters’ leadership practices within a reform-intensive educational environment.

Policy and Context in China and Guangdong

China has placed strong emphasis on strengthening the teaching workforce through the *Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Teacher Team in the New Era* (MOE, 2018). The policy stresses moral cultivation, professional growth, and the development of a stable and high-quality teacher team. Although the national framework provides broad guidance, implementation differs across regions, and schools continue to face substantial pressures associated with educational reform.

Guangdong Province represents a particularly meaningful context for examining headmasters' leadership. As one of China's most reform-active and economically dynamic regions, Guangdong has undertaken extensive curriculum and assessment reforms, which have increased demands on both teachers and school leaders. Primary school teachers frequently report heavy workloads, emotional strain, and pressures associated with intensified teaching responsibilities. Teachers experience medium to high levels of work stress, often linked to heavy workloads, complex teaching tasks, and interpersonal demands (Chen, 2017). These stressors contribute to reduced professional well-being and shape teachers' perceptions of leadership support. Several studies have documented moderate levels of professional identity and notable emotional strain among teachers, reflecting the impact of intensified responsibilities and tight performance expectations (Zhang & Mao, 2023; Zhang et al., 2017).

These challenges also influence how leadership is enacted in schools. Research conducted in western Guangdong indicates that although many headmasters display strong moral values and policy awareness, their ability to provide individualized guidance and supportive leadership is often restricted by administrative obligations and reform pressures (Shen & Wu, 2022). Teachers may therefore encounter leadership that is more task-oriented than people-centred, which can shape how they interpret and evaluate their headmasters' transformational leadership behaviours. National studies similarly report that leaders who demonstrate ethical modelling, vision, and interpersonal support are generally perceived more favourably by teachers (Bao, 2023).

Taken together, the policy emphasis on moral leadership, the reform-driven workload in Guangdong, and the documented variation in teachers' leadership experiences create a strong rationale for examining how primary school teachers perceive their headmasters' transformational leadership. Understanding these perceptions is essential for identifying leadership strengths and areas that require further development within Guangdong's evolving educational landscape.

Theoretical Frameworks

Transformational leadership provides the conceptual foundation for this study because it emphasises how leadership is interpreted and experienced by followers. Bass's (1985) theory positions transformational leadership as a set of behaviours that inspire, motivate, and support followers through ethical influence, clear vision, personal charisma, and individual attention. Crucially, these behaviours operate through followers' perceptions rather than leaders' intentions—making the theory inherently suitable for studies examining teachers' interpretations of headmasters' actions. In school settings, leadership influence is largely mediated by how teachers make sense of leaders' daily behaviours, communication patterns,

and interpersonal interactions. Thus, a perceptual approach aligns naturally with the core assumptions of transformational leadership theory.

While Bass's global framework offers a useful behavioural structure, Li and Shi (2005) adapted it to Chinese educational and organisational contexts by developing the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ). Their four dimensions—Moral Modeling, Visionary Inspiration, Charismatic Leadership, and Individualized Consideration—reflect cultural expectations that school leaders demonstrate ethical integrity, articulate collective direction, maintain professional authority, and attend to relational harmony. These culturally grounded dimensions resonate strongly with how Chinese teachers evaluate leadership behaviours in everyday school life, particularly in hierarchical systems where moral legitimacy and value alignment are integral to leadership effectiveness.

Adopting the TLQ as the theoretical framework therefore provides three advantages for the present study. First, it operationalises transformational leadership in a manner that directly captures teacher perceptions, allowing leadership to be understood as it is experienced by followers rather than as an abstract administrative role. Second, its emphasis on moral and relational dimensions aligns with the collectivist and value-oriented leadership culture in Guangdong primary schools. Third, the four TLQ dimensions map clearly onto the analytical structure of the study, guiding the interpretation of item-level responses and enabling systematic comparison across behavioural domains.

By grounding the study in Li and Shi's TLQ framework, the research is able to examine not only the overall level of perceived transformational leadership but also the salience and variability of specific leadership behaviours as interpreted by teachers. This theoretical alignment ensures conceptual consistency across the research questions, measurement tools, and subsequent analysis.

Empirical Findings on Teachers' Perceptions of Transformational Leadership

Empirical studies across China reveal consistent patterns in how teachers perceive the behavioural dimensions of transformational leadership. Teachers frequently rate moral modelling and visionary inspiration as the strongest aspects of school leadership. Zheng (2019) found that headmasters are commonly viewed as ethical role models who uphold collective interests, while Han (2020) reported that behaviours associated with articulating school goals and providing strategic direction are often positively evaluated by teachers.

In contrast, individualized consideration tends to receive lower ratings. Teachers frequently describe limited opportunities for personalised support or sustained interpersonal communication, a challenge attributed to principals' heavy administrative workloads and the wide scope of managerial responsibilities (Shen & Wu, 2022). Evidence from Guangdong further suggests that these constraints may intensify in rapidly reforming environments, where increased accountability and policy demands reduce principals' capacity for individualised engagement.

Recent studies have also highlighted discrepancies between principals' self-evaluations and teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership. For instance, Bao (2023) observed that teachers' ratings of principals' transformational leadership were generally moderate but

diverged from principals' own assessments, indicating that teachers may experience leadership behaviours differently from how principals intend them to be enacted. These perceptual gaps underscore the importance of relying on teacher-reported data when analysing leadership practices.

Overall, existing empirical evidence suggests that teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership vary across dimensions and are shaped by contextual factors such as administrative workload, school size, and reform intensity. These findings highlight the need to examine how primary school teachers in Guangdong—a province undergoing rapid educational transformation—perceive different components of transformational leadership and whether their perceptions align with national trends observed in other regions.

Research Gaps and Rationale

Although transformational leadership has been widely studied in China, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, most studies focus on its outcomes—such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, or teaching effectiveness—while comparatively fewer examine teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership as a construct in its own right. Understanding how teachers interpret leadership behaviours is essential, as their perceptions directly influence how leadership is enacted and experienced in schools.

Second, empirical evidence from Guangdong Province remains limited. As one of China's most reform-intensive regions, Guangdong presents unique organisational pressures and complex school environments that may shape teachers' views of leadership differently from other provinces. Yet few studies have examined how primary school teachers in this context perceive specific dimensions of transformational leadership.

Third, existing studies often rely on global scores of transformational leadership rather than analysing its individual dimensions. This restricts understanding of which leadership behaviours—such as moral modelling, visionary inspiration, charismatic influence, or individualized consideration—are more or less salient in teachers' daily experiences.

Fourth, methodological issues persist in the literature, including small sample sizes and inconsistent measurement tools. Many studies lack the use of validated, culturally appropriate instruments that capture transformational leadership within the Chinese educational context.

To address these gaps, the present study employs the localized Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (Li & Shi, 2005) and a large sample of primary school teachers in Guangdong to provide a dimension-specific analysis of how teachers perceive headmasters' transformational leadership. This approach enhances contextual relevance and contributes clearer empirical evidence to the field.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive survey design. A quantitative approach allows the use of standardized instruments to measure teachers' perceptions of headmasters' transformational leadership objectively and systematically (Creswell, 2014;

Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A descriptive design is appropriate for identifying the levels and patterns of transformational leadership as perceived by teachers without manipulating variables or testing causal relationships (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The cross-sectional nature of the study provides a timely “snapshot” of teachers’ perceptions within the ongoing educational reform context in Guangdong (Chua, 2020).

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and categorical interpretation levels, were employed to summarise teachers’ perceptions across the four dimensions of transformational leadership. All analyses were conducted using SPSS v26.0.

Participants and Sampling

Population and Inclusion Criteria

The target population consisted of full-time primary school teachers working in public and private schools across Guangdong Province. To ensure that participants were familiar with their headmasters’ leadership practices, inclusion criteria required that teachers (a) were currently employed in a Guangdong primary school, (b) held a valid teaching qualification, and (c) had served at least six months in their present school. Part-time teachers, substitute teachers, and staff whose roles were primarily administrative were excluded.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Given the geographical scale of Guangdong and practical access constraints, the study employed convenience sampling through school contacts and professional teacher networks. Convenience sampling is appropriate for descriptive survey research aimed at documenting perceptions within a large population (Chua, 2020). Guided by Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) sample size recommendations for large populations, a total of 384 teachers were recruited from both urban and rural districts (e.g., Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Foshan, Dongguan, Zhanjiang, Meizhou, Qingyuan, Zhaoqing) to reflect diverse school contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was entirely voluntary. An informed consent statement was included at the beginning of the questionnaire and explained the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Anonymity was ensured by avoiding the collection of personal identifiers, and all data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. Ethical approval from institutional authorities and permission from participating schools were obtained prior to data collection.

Research Instruments

Data were gathered via a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising demographics and two validated scales. Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ). Headmasters’ transformational leadership was measured using the TLQ developed by Li and Shi (2005), a culturally localized instrument grounded in Bass’s (1985) theory. The TLQ contains 26 items across four dimensions: Moral Modeling (MM), Visionary Inspiration (VI), Charismatic Leadership (LC), and Individualized Consideration (IC). The instrument used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). To ensure linguistic accuracy and cultural equivalence, the instrument underwent translation and back-translation procedures followed by expert review. Permission to use the TLQ was obtained from the original authors.

Validity, Reliability, and Pilot Testing

Content and face validity. An expert panel consisting of specialists in educational leadership, psychology, and measurement evaluated the relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness of the TLQ items for use in Chinese primary schools. Minor wording adjustments were made based on their feedback to enhance interpretability while preserving the conceptual integrity of each construct (Muijs, 2011; Chua, 2020).

Construct validity. Previous empirical studies have consistently confirmed the four-factor structure of the TLQ in Chinese educational settings (e.g., Han, 2020), supporting its suitability for measuring teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership. These findings provide a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for applying the instrument in the present study. Pilot study. A pilot test involving 41 primary school teachers in Guangdong was conducted to examine item clarity and internal consistency. After screening and minor refinement, Cronbach's alpha coefficients demonstrated satisfactory reliability across all TLQ dimensions: Moral Modeling (.833), Visionary Inspiration (.748), Individualized Consideration (.756), and Charismatic Leadership (.851). The pilot data were excluded from the main analysis to ensure the integrity of the final dataset (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection Procedures

Following institutional approval, school leaders were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study. The finalised online questionnaire (Wenjuanxing/Google Forms), which included an informed consent statement, was distributed through official school communication channels and professional teacher networks (e.g., WeChat, DingTalk).

The survey remained open for two weeks, during which a reminder message was sent midway to encourage participation. To ensure data quality, duplicate submissions were restricted, incomplete responses were removed, and reverse-coded items were properly recoded. For analysis, TLQ subscale scores (MM, VI, LC, IC) were computed as mean values for each dimension.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS v26.0. The analysis process began with initial data cleaning procedures, including checks for missing values, duplicate responses, and the accuracy of reverse-coded items. Following data screening, descriptive statistical techniques were applied to summarise teachers' perceptions of headmasters' transformational leadership across the four TLQ dimensions. Descriptive statistics—including means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores, frequencies, and percentages—were computed to provide a clear and comprehensive overview of teachers' responses. To facilitate meaningful interpretation of mean scores, the study adopted a five-point Likert scale classification commonly used in educational leadership research (Chua, 2020). These interpretation ranges allowed each leadership dimension to be categorised from "Very Low" to "Very High," thereby offering a systematic basis for evaluating the perceived level of transformational leadership.

Table 3.1

Interpretation of Mean Scores for the Five-Point Likert Scale

Mean Score Range	Level	Interpretation
1.00 – 1.80	Very Low	Almost never
1.81 – 2.60	Low	Rarely
2.61 – 3.40	Moderate	Sometimes
3.41 – 4.20	High	Often
4.21 – 5.00	Very High	Almost always

These categorical cut-offs enabled the study to determine the perceived level of each transformational leadership dimension, as well as the overall trend in teachers' evaluations. In addition to interpreting mean scores, the standard deviation was examined to assess variability in teacher responses. Lower variability indicated greater consistency in perceptions, whereas higher variability suggested more diverse experiences among teachers. Internal consistency reliability for all TLQ subscales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha based on the full sample to ensure the robustness of measurement. Subscale scores were then computed as mean values to summarise teachers' perceptions of each leadership dimension. Given that the purpose of this study was descriptive rather than inferential, no hypothesis testing or group comparison analyses were conducted.

Findings*Headmasters' Level of Transformational Leadership*

Table 4.1

Descriptive Statistics of Headmasters' transformational leadership

Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
Moral Modeling	3.676	0.984	High
Visionary Inspiration	3.620	1.126	High
Individualized Consideration	3.504	1.155	High
Charismatic Leadership	3.520	1.135	High
Overall	3.581	1.041	High

As shown in Table 4.1, the mean scores for the four dimensions of headmasters' transformational leadership ranged from 3.504 to 3.676. The highest mean score was recorded for Moral Modeling ($M = 3.676$, $SD = 0.984$), followed by Visionary Inspiration ($M = 3.620$, $SD = 1.126$), Charismatic Leadership ($M = 3.520$, $SD = 1.135$), and Individualized Consideration ($M = 3.504$, $SD = 1.155$). The overall mean score was 3.581 ($SD = 1.041$), which falls within the "High" interpretation range. These findings suggest that primary school teachers generally perceive their headmasters as demonstrating a high level of transformational leadership across all dimensions. It is noteworthy that perceptions were most consistent for Moral Modeling (lowest standard deviation), whereas Individualized Consideration showed the greatest variability among teacher responses (highest standard deviation).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how primary school teachers in Guangdong perceive their headmasters' transformational leadership across four dimensions: Moral Modeling, Visionary Inspiration, Charismatic Leadership, and Individualized Consideration. Overall, teachers reported generally positive perceptions, with particularly strong endorsement of moral and visionary leadership behaviours. These findings correspond to a

recurring pattern in the literature, where Chinese school leaders are commonly described as ethical figures who establish clear directions for school development (Zheng, 2019; Han, 2020). In Guangdong—a province undergoing rapid educational reforms—such vision-oriented leadership may be especially influential in helping teachers interpret policy shifts, align with school goals, and maintain professional coherence.

Among the dimensions, Moral Modeling received the highest teacher agreement. This indicates that teachers most strongly recognise headmasters' ethical conduct, integrity, and principled decision-making. Such emphasis on moral authority aligns with Confucian traditions that place high value on leaders' virtue and responsibility within Chinese organisational contexts. Teachers' positive evaluations of moral leadership may also reflect expectations that headmasters act in the collective interest and provide ethical stability amid reform-driven pressures.

Visionary Inspiration was also rated highly, suggesting that headmasters are perceived as effective in communicating developmental goals and articulating a shared sense of purpose. This reinforces previous research showing that the capacity to convey clear vision is a central expectation placed on school leaders in collectivist cultures, where unified direction and value alignment significantly influence teacher motivation and the broader organisational climate. Perceptions of Charismatic Leadership were moderately positive but less consistent. While many teachers acknowledged their headmasters' willingness to innovate or demonstrate professional confidence, others perceived such behaviours as uneven in practice. This aligns with Shen and Wu's (2022) findings that Asian school leaders often struggle to transform visionary intentions into consistent action due to administrative workload, accountability pressures, and risk-averse institutional norms. In Guangdong's rapidly evolving education system, headmasters may endorse reform rhetorically yet remain cautious in implementation to preserve school stability.

Individualized Consideration displayed the greatest variability across teachers. Some teachers perceived their headmasters as attentive and supportive, while others felt that personalised communication or emotional engagement was limited. Similar patterns have been reported in other Asian contexts such as Malaysia and Indonesia (Along & Mansor, 2023; Suryati et al., 2023), where school leaders often lack sufficient time or structural flexibility to engage deeply with individual teachers. In Guangdong, the substantial administrative burden associated with reform implementation may further restrict opportunities for relational leadership. This inconsistency highlights a persistent gap between policy expectations for teacher-centered leadership and the practical realities school leaders face.

Taken together, these findings illustrate a nuanced leadership profile within Chinese primary schools. While moral and visionary dimensions are consistently reported as strengths, the experience of relational leadership, particularly individualized consideration, is more varied and appears more vulnerable to contextual constraints. Cultural norms and institutional structures appear to reinforce value-driven, collective-oriented leadership while simultaneously limiting leaders' capacity to provide personalised support. Strengthening Individualized Consideration may therefore represent a strategic focus for leadership improvement in Guangdong primary schools.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study provides updated empirical support for Li and Shi's (2005) Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ), reaffirming its relevance within contemporary Chinese educational settings. The prominence of Moral Modeling and Visionary Inspiration underscores the enduring importance of ethical conduct and collective direction, while the variability observed in Individualized Consideration demonstrates the moderating role of contextual constraints. These findings contribute to cross-cultural leadership theory by showing how collectivist values and workload-related pressures shape the relative visibility of different transformational leadership behaviours.

Practically, the results underscore the need for headmasters to strengthen relational aspects of their leadership. While moral and visionary leadership are well recognised, teachers' more varied experiences with personalised support indicate room for improvement. Schools may benefit from implementing structured communication platforms, teacher voice channels, and professional dialogue mechanisms that facilitate more frequent and meaningful leader–teacher interaction. Enhancing headmasters' interpersonal communication skills, empathy, and emotional intelligence through targeted professional development may help balance administrative responsibilities with teacher-centered leadership practices.

The findings also have implications for leadership training. Training programs should incorporate modules on relational awareness, reflective practice, and emotional competence. Approaches such as case analysis, role-play, mentoring systems, and feedback-informed coaching can assist headmasters in translating leadership concepts into consistent daily behaviours. Professional learning communities involving both headmasters and teachers may further foster mutual trust, shared responsibility, and collaborative school improvement.

At the policy level, the study highlights a discrepancy between national reform expectations and school-level realities in Guangdong. Although the 2018 Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Teacher Team in the New Era emphasise teacher-centered and people-oriented leadership, administrative burdens and accountability demands are perceived by teachers as key factors limiting leaders' capacity for consistent individualized support. Policy adjustments that reduce administrative overload, incorporate relational leadership competencies into training and evaluation frameworks, and create institutional structures that facilitate meaningful leader–teacher interactions may help align leadership practice with reform goals.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was restricted to primary school teachers in Guangdong Province, which may limit the generalisability of findings to other regions or educational levels. Second, the cross-sectional design does not capture how leadership perceptions may evolve over time. Third, reliance on teacher self-reports may introduce perceptual bias and does not account for headmasters' perspectives or observed behaviours. Finally, the study did not examine potential mediating variables such as school climate, teacher well-being, or organisational culture.

Future research could broaden regional scope, employ longitudinal designs, or use mixed-methods approaches to provide deeper insights into leadership practice. Incorporating headmasters' self-evaluations or third-party observations would also enable triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of leadership behaviours. Examining mediating or

moderating factors—such as teacher self-efficacy, workplace climate, or emotional well-being—would further illuminate how transformational leadership functions within Chinese schools.

In summary, this study enhances understanding of how Guangdong primary school teachers perceive transformational leadership in their schools. While headmasters are widely recognised for their ethical and visionary behaviours, relational dimensions of leadership remain inconsistent and warrant further development. Strengthening Individualized Consideration may enhance teacher experience and support the broader goals of educational reform aimed at cultivating professional, motivated, and well-supported teaching communities.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how primary school teachers in Guangdong perceive their headmasters' transformational leadership, with specific attention to the four dimensions articulated in Li and Shi's localized Transformational Leadership Questionnaire. The research objectives were achieved through a descriptive survey design that captured teachers' lived experiences and interpretations of leadership behaviours within a context of rapid educational reform. By analysing teachers' perceptions of each leadership dimension, the study successfully identified overall patterns of leadership strengths as well as areas that may require further development.

The findings indicate that teachers generally hold positive perceptions of their headmasters' transformational leadership. Moral Modeling emerged as the most clearly recognised strength, suggesting that teachers experience their leaders as ethical, principled, and committed to acting in the collective interest. This aligns with long-standing cultural expectations that school leaders embody moral authority and set an example for the school community. Teachers also responded favourably to Visionary Inspiration, reflecting their appreciation for headmasters who communicate clear goals, offer direction, and provide a sense of purpose during periods of policy change. These findings reinforce existing literature emphasising the centrality of value-driven and vision-oriented leadership in Chinese educational contexts.

In contrast, teachers' experiences with more relational dimensions of leadership—particularly Individualized Consideration—were more mixed. While some teachers perceived strong interpersonal support, others reported limited opportunities for personal communication or tailored guidance. This inconsistency may reflect structural realities in Guangdong's schools, where heavy administrative workloads and reform pressures often limit leaders' capacity for sustained relational engagement. Charismatic Leadership was also perceived positively but with some variability, suggesting that while headmasters demonstrate confidence and initiative, such behaviours may not always be enacted consistently across school contexts.

The study contributes theoretically by reaffirming the relevance of Li and Shi's localized transformational leadership framework and by demonstrating how cultural values and contextual pressures shape the visibility of different leadership behaviours. It also highlights

the importance of examining leadership from teachers' perspectives, as these perceptions strongly influence how leadership is experienced and enacted in daily school life.

Practically, the findings point to several areas for improvement. While moral and visionary leadership are well established, there is a clear need to strengthen personalised support and relational engagement. Professional development programs for headmasters should incorporate training in communication skills, emotional intelligence, and teacher-centred leadership strategies. At the policy level, reducing administrative burdens and creating institutional mechanisms that support regular leader–teacher interaction may help align leadership practice with national goals for building a supportive and people-centred school environment.

This study is not without limitations. Its focus on a single province restricts broader generalisation, its cross-sectional design does not capture changes over time, and its reliance on teacher self-reports may introduce perceptual bias. Future research could be expanded across regions, adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches, and include multiple perspectives such as headmasters' self-assessments or observational data. Exploring mediating factors, such as school climate or teacher well-being, would also deepen understanding of how transformational leadership shapes teachers' experiences.

In summary, the study enhances understanding of how transformational leadership is perceived within Guangdong's primary schools. While headmasters are widely regarded as ethical and visionary leaders, relational aspects of their leadership remain uneven. Strengthening these dimensions will be essential for supporting teachers more effectively and for advancing the broader aims of educational reform toward cultivating a motivated, professional, and well-supported teaching workforce.

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