

# Challenges of Teacher Involvement in School Management in China

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**Abstract:** *The philosophy of “participatory management” has garnered attention in a wide range of sectors. In China, research on teacher involvement in school management began in the late 20th century. The purpose of this article is to discuss the significance of teacher involvement in school management and summarize its challenges and causes in China on the basis of the existing literature, with the view to providing valuable insights for the advancement of school governance and the improvement of the quality of education in this country.*

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## **Introduction**

**S**INCE the 1960s, the theory of “participatory management” has become increasingly popular in various sectors. It is characterized by information sharing within the organization and the encouragement of employee participation in decision-making and the operation of the organization (Chen, 2009). The theory also provides justifications for maximizing teachers’ involvement in school management. Teacher involvement in school management refers to the process in which teachers actively participate in school decision-making and devote time and energy to the management of school affairs on the precondition that they have a comprehensive understanding of the school circumstances and sufficient communication with the school leadership (Liu, 2002). In China, the democratic management of schools is an important component of the construction of democracy at the grassroots level. With the continuous enhancement of their democratic awareness, Chinese teachers have become more active in speaking out on issues concerning their interests and demands, as well as participating in the decision-making and management of school affairs. This tendency is beneficial for safeguarding the democratic rights and legitimate interests of the teacher while also contributing to the establishment of a scientific and democratic decision-making mechanism in the school.

In recent years, Chinese educational authorities have made multiple legislative efforts to clearly define the rights of the teacher in the democratic management of the school and the responsibilities and duties of teacher representatives and have formulated a series of regulations and supervision measures to ensure that the legitimate rights of the teacher to participate in school management are fully guaranteed. In response to the governmental moves, the schools have also carried out profound reforms in their management systems, experimenting with decentralized leadership and the “bottom-up” management strategy. Despite the many institutional supports, the actual level of teacher involvement in school management is still lower than expected (Chu, 2009). Based on the relevant literature, this article focuses on discussing the significance of teacher involvement in school management and summarizing its challenges in the Chinese education world with the intent to contribute to the construction of modern school governance systems in China.

## **The Significance of Teacher Involvement in School Management**

The right of the teacher to participate in education management is an educational application of the democratic rights granted to the citizen by the Constitution. Teacher involvement in school management is also provided in the Teacher Law of China, with Article 7 of its Chapter 2 explicitly stipulating that the teacher is entitled to airing their opinions and suggestions on the school's education, teaching, and management work and the work of education administrative departments, as well as participating in school management through the faculty congress and other means (Wang et al., 2009). Teacher involvement in school management can benefit both the school and the teacher in multiple facets.

### ***Meeting the School's Needs for Democratic Management and Scientific Development***

A democratic management climate is the primary feature of the modern, human-centric machinery of school governance (Chen, 2009). The school's development is contingent on the efforts of all faculty and staff. The relationship between the school leader and the teacher is not simply one between the employer and employee. School leaders' thorough understanding of the nature of the teaching profession and the teacher's needs, as well as their capacity to build a highly collaborative team, is crucial for developing a democratic management mechanism in the school.

Specifically, teacher involvement in school management is conducive to the improvement of the school's management efficiency. By listening to the feedback from the teachers, the school leadership can have a clear understanding of the implementation status of their decisions. Accordingly, they can issue targeted instructions and deploy pertinent tasks to circumvent blindness and prejudice in their decision-making and improve their management efficiency (Liu, 1998). Also, involving teachers in the management and decision-making process by modifying the management hierarchy helps reduce the intermediary links and enables the teacher's opinions and suggestions to directly influence the decision-making of the school (Yu, 1995). In addition, fully utilizing the professional knowledge and experience of frontline teachers can make school management better suit the actual teaching needs and reduce the chance of disconnecting it from the actual circumstances of the school as the result of excessive bureaucracy (Wu, 2008).

### ***Heightening Teachers' Dedication to the Teaching Profession***

Teachers' involvement in school management can significantly enhance their dedication to their careers. First, involving teachers in setting the goals and plans for the school help boost their sense of responsibility. As a result, the increased ownership of these goals and plans can motivate teachers to devote more time to their implementation (Liu, 1998). Second, the policy of involving teachers in school management substantially increases their job satisfaction (Hu, 2014). When the teacher is involved in formulating schemes for performance evaluation and incentivization, they realize that decision-making processes like these are directly coupled with their own interests, which enables them to perceive the value of democratic participation, thereby improving their job satisfaction (Zhang, 2010). Third, the democratic style of school management can optimize the utilization of teaching resources, ensuring that each individual teacher has the opportunity to showcase their strengths, expertise, and competences and thus become more interested in their professional development. In this context, the teacher will identify more with their profession and be more ready to invest time and energy in their professional growth (Zhang, 2017).

## **Issues with Teacher Involvement in School Management in China**

### ***Teachers' Reluctance to Be Involved in School Management***

Among the majority of Chinese teachers, pervasive is the mentality that a teacher should concentrate on their instructional work, while non-instructional work is irrelevant to their responsibilities, and that they cannot spare any time and energy for school management given their heavy instructional workloads (Yao, 2016). Hou et al. (2019) argued that the reasons for this mentality are twofold: the teacher's lack of recognition of their agency in school management and their loss of interest in it due to their unsuccessful experiences in this regard. According to Mei's (2010) survey in primary schools, most teachers polled focused their attention on teaching work and matters related to their personal interests, rarely paying regard to other school affairs; they limited their professional development to the teaching level without developing adequate awareness of participating in school management. As a result, as school members, they made no contributions to the construction of a democratic management climate in the school.

Furthermore, the teacher's intention of management involvement is related to their attitudes towards the changes in the field of education. In the context of intensified educational reforms, Chinese teachers are developing a

fresh understanding of their roles as educators and nurturing more diverse needs, such as senses of belonging, professional security, and self-actualization. Nevertheless, a portion of teachers who are insensitive or resistant to the ongoing transformations in the education world may still stick to the traditional notion of school management and exclude themselves from the efforts of school governance (Wang, 2023). Kong argued that there were two main reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly, the longstanding authoritarian culture in school management has led the teachers to believe that they do not have the discourse power in school governance. Secondly, the traditional hierarchical management pattern is deeply rooted in the teachers' impression of school management that the responsibility of decision-making resides with school leaders rather than ordinary teachers (Kong, 2013).

At the same time, certain researchers discovered that the teacher's unwillingness to become involved in school management is also due to a lack of legitimate incentive mechanisms. Song's research findings show that the majority of teachers did not receive any incentivization from the school or explicit invitations from the school leaders that encouraged their involvement in school management (Song, 2013). According to Liu's and Wu's study, school leaders tend to prioritize the evaluation of teachers' instructional work but neglect their basic rights as school members, which largely obliterates teachers' intention of participating in school management (Liu & Wu, 2014).

### ***Personal Factors Influencing the Teacher's Involvement in School Management***

Gender, service durations, and concurrent administrative positions, among others, are the factors affecting the teacher's participation in school management (Wang, 2023). There are significant gender differences in teachers' involvement in school decision-making. According to Lin's study of management involvement of Chinese primary and secondary teachers, the causes of these gender differences include that (i) the traditional prejudice of the woman taking a back seat is still pervasive and negatively influences female teachers' position in school management; (ii) the stereotype of the married woman being the primary care provider in the family hinders female teachers from devoting time to the school's management affairs; and (iii) the "assertive" presentation of male teachers in contrast to the more "gentle" attitudes of female teachers in the decision-making process makes the former's opinions more likely to be accepted by the school leaders (Lin, 2008).

Moreover, senior teachers are more active in participating in school management than their junior counterparts (Wang et al., 2009). Lin's

research found that teacher groups with prior service durations of 11–20 years and 6–10 years both had higher levels of management involvement than the group with less than five years of service. Often, older teachers' opinions have more weight in school decision-making than their younger peers; the overrepresentation of senior teachers in the faculty congresses of primary and secondary schools well mirrors the issue. Also, senior teachers with richer instructional experience are more likely to concomitantly act as team leaders, grade leaders, or administrators, thus being at an advantage in contributing to school decision-making (Lin, 2008).

Lin's study also suggests that teachers holding concurrent administrative positions have more discourse power than ordinary ones. The majority of Chinese schools adopt the pyramid-style management structure, which gives priority to management efficiency but at the expense of depriving ordinary teachers of the right to speak, resulting in the concentration of decision-making power in a handful of "high-ranking" school members. Ordinary teachers may have difficulty expressing their opinions through easily accessible channels to effectively influence the decisions of school leaders (Lin, 2008).

### ***A Lack of Organizational Arrangements for Involving Teachers in School Management***

Popular among Chinese schools is the principal responsibility system, which is basically a hierarchical management model where the decision-making power primarily resides with the principal-centered school leadership. With this system, there are few avenues for ordinary teachers to take on the management work, let alone be involved in the decision-making process (Hou et al., 2019). Some principals and their leadership teams still adhere to the outdated notion that teacher involvement in school decision-making undermines the efficiency and quality of this process in fear of the difficulty of reaching agreement when all staff has the right to speak (Wang, 2013). Yet, the teachers' right to speak is crucial for promoting peer communication among them and developing their sense of belonging to the school. Also, it ensures that they have the opportunity to exercise their power to oversee the school's operations (Zhang, 2020). However, in a school with an authoritarian climate, where the principal is the "boss" who orders the teacher what to do, there is no need for the latter to be shared with the decision-making power (Zhao et al., 2012).

At the same time, in some of the schools that declared the implementation of democratic management, the deployment of democratic procedures is often superficial, only serving as a response to the requirements from the higher-level educational authorities (Hou et al., 2019). While the teachers are seemingly involved in school management, they are

only going through the motions in form. Over time, they develop the perception that their management involvement is ineffective and become indifferent to school affairs (Jin, 2019). In a survey on the role of secondary teachers in school management, nearly 60% of teachers polled contended that organizational arrangements in this regard are far from sufficient (Chen, 2012). In addition, the faculty congress is not functioning as it should in the majority of schools, where ordinary teachers have no chance to express their real opinions (Hu, 2014). A survey of the faculty congress of the school found that 74% of respondents chose to “agree” or “fairly agree” with the statement that this organization is mere a formality with little substantive meaning (Yao, 2016).

## Conclusion

In the context of educational reform and advancement, the teacher needs to take on more roles other than just being “Mr. Teaching.” Only when teachers truly participate in school management can school leaders, society, and the government understand the real circumstances of the school, the authentic needs of teachers, and most importantly, the needs of students as the future pillars of the country. To this end, it is imperative to institutionalize teacher involvement in school management by specifying the rights and responsibilities of the teacher in this area as well as the concrete enactment procedures to provide an institutional framework for ensuring their participation in school governance. Also, the school needs to strengthen teacher training on education management knowledge and competences to enhance teachers’ capacity for decision-making and management involvement. Equally important are consideration of the individual differences among teachers and the provision of personalized opportunities for management involvement to ensure each of them realizes their full potential in the most suitable management area.

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