

A Study on the Leadership of Kindergarten Principals: Based on Hefei City, China

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Abstract: This study focuses on the current status of leadership among kindergarten principals in Hefei, China. It examines the overall situation of leadership among kindergarten principals in Hefei and explores whether there are differences in the leadership levels of principals under demographic factors, from four dimensions: educational leadership, values leadership, interpersonal leadership, and organizational leadership. The study surveyed kindergarten principals in Hefei, with a total of 190 questionnaires collected. After excluding 19 invalid questionnaires, 171 valid samples were obtained. Through discussion and analysis, it was found that the overall level of leadership among kindergarten principals in Hefei is relatively high. The leadership scores in the four dimensions are ranked in descending order as follows: educational leadership, organizational leadership, interpersonal leadership, and values leadership.

Keywords: leadership, kindergarten principals, leadership of kindergarten principals

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, there is a continuous rise in the demand for high-quality early childhood education. Standardized practices in preschool education are gradually becoming a development trend in the field of education and are widely attracting attention. To establish preschool education institutions recognized by society, it is necessary to create a modern management framework and philosophy that not only conforms to the national socialist characteristics of China but also can address the challenges posed by epidemics. In addition to the support and financial investment from the state in early childhood education, the role played by principals is extremely crucial as they are the key forces stabilizing the development of kindergartens. As early as 2001, the education authorities issued the “Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial)”, which emphasized principles such as optimizing daily management, reducing non-core management behaviors, and gradually guiding children towards self-management, with a particular emphasis on placing children at the center of management [1]. This guideline, as an important document guiding principals, together with the “Kindergarten Work Regulations” and the “Professional Standards for Kindergarten Principals,” has established detailed provisions for the daily operation of kindergartens, especially implementing

a principal leadership system where principals are fully responsible for all internal affairs of the kindergarten [2]. The authors of this study also agree that the role of principals is akin to being the leaders guiding the development of kindergartens. Their leadership directly impacts the educational quality of kindergartens and the possibility of sustained development. The personal qualities and abilities of principals play a decisively important role in whether kindergartens can thrive and grow.

1.1. Leadership

Overall, there is relatively little variation in the definitions of leadership among researchers in the field. Typically, most researchers define leadership as the ability of a leader to exert influence over subordinates and organizational members to ensure the smooth progress of leadership processes, motivating them to strive towards the common vision of the organization [3]. This study adopts the above definition in its conceptualization of leadership.

1.2. Leadership of Kindergarten Principals

Chinese scholars have engaged in numerous discussions on the concept of leadership among kindergarten principals. In the article “An Investigation and Analysis of the Current Situation of Kindergarten Principal Leadership” by Luo Li and Hong Xiumin, they argue that the leadership of a principal refers to the ability to inspire and guide teachers and children within the kindergarten to jointly formulate and achieve team goals. In 2007, Xiang Xiaoying, in her paper “Reflections and Reshaping of Leadership Abilities of Kindergarten Principals,” proposed that leadership originates from personal abilities and can influence others through exerting influence. Specifically at the level of principals, leadership involves the ability of principals to influence faculty members to produce desired responses through issuing instructions or providing advice and guidance. This study, based on the above concepts of leadership and kindergarten principals, considers the leadership of kindergarten principals as the ability of principals to utilize administrative authority to influence all members of the kindergarten and parents of children, motivating them to strive towards the common goals of the kindergarten in the execution of leadership and management responsibilities.

Additionally, this study, based on the “Professional Standards for Kindergarten Principals” and drawing on the theoretical views of Zheng Yanxiang and Thomas J. Sergiovanni regarding leadership competence, divides the leadership skills of kindergarten principals into four dimensions: values-oriented leadership, organizational management leadership, educational guidance leadership, and interpersonal relationship leadership.

1.3. Studies on the Constituents of Leadership

American management expert Sergiovanni has delved deeply into the issue of leadership in the education industry, systematically outlining the construction of leadership elements in education, involving technical skills, human resources, educational leadership, symbolic leadership, and cultural leadership [4]. On the other hand, Hong Kong scholar Zheng Yanxiang, in 2005, synthesized the theories of scholars Bolman, Deal, and Sergiovanni regarding leadership abilities, forming a set of leadership concepts that Chinese principals should possess, dividing the elements of leadership into five categories: structural, humanistic, political, cultural, and educational [5]. Furthermore, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, in its research on the relevance of leadership and leadership, points out that leadership can essentially be viewed as a process that, in a certain environment, can inspire and motivate subordinates or groups with common interests to strive together to achieve the same ideals and visions[6].

Ma Jianxin, in a study in 2007, stated that leadership can be distinguished between power-based influence and non-power-based influence, representing the effects of leaders’ influence on

subordinates through their own power and non-power resources [7]. Lan Xumin believes that leadership includes “three major forces,” namely communication, motivation, and guidance, referring to the ability of organizational leaders to infect and guide subordinates in the process of assuming organizational leadership responsibilities[8].

1.4. Studies on the Essence of Leadership

Researchers such as Ren Zhen in 2006 proposed at the Pudong Cadre College in China that leadership is defined as a special ability that can motivate other members to actively participate, forming and achieving common team goals [9]. By 2008, Dr. Paul Hershey further elaborated on the essence of leadership, stating that leadership fundamentally reflects an influence inherent in interpersonal interactions or its manifestation across multiple levels of corporate culture. He emphasized that “leadership” is essentially the core of the implementation process. American researcher John C. Maxwell in his doctrine delineates the nature of leadership as not being related to rewards, delegation, commands, or awards from others, but rather from influence [10]. In the book “Leadership,” author James discusses the issue of how leadership is defined, stating that leadership is a kind of power, referring to the ability of leaders to effectively encourage each team member to actively dedicate themselves to outstanding performance in pursuit of organizational common goals [11].

1.5. Studies on the Constituent Factors of Principal Leadership

In her article “Reflection and Construction of Principal Leadership,” Xiao Li believes that leadership is an influence that can awaken or guide team members to strive for established goals. She believes that when shaping leadership, various factors such as theoretical framework, traditional cultural influence, operational characteristics of early childhood education institutions, and the personal qualities of principals should be comprehensively considered [12].

1.6. Current Research

In summary, the study of the concept of “leadership” has existed since ancient times and has a long history. Various ancient Chinese texts also record or reflect various leadership ideologies. As time has evolved to the present day, educational leadership, as a branch of theoretical research, has not only drawn on concepts from the field of corporate management but also has its own unique characteristics in certain aspects. Since the 1990s, discussions on the educational leadership level have become more frequent, highlighting the importance of educational attributes. Researchers, when preparing relevant manuscripts, have extensively collected literature and found that, at the present stage, there is relatively more discussion on the leadership abilities of principals, while research on the leadership of kindergarten principals is relatively scarce.

This study selects Hefei City as the research area. Building on the achievements of previous scholars and drawing on the current post-epidemic period, theoretical and practical methods are applied to closely observe the leadership capabilities of kindergarten principals in Hefei City, analyze the influencing factors, and focus on the issues that principals face in the leadership process and targeted coping strategies, aiming to enhance the practical application value of the research.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Questionnaire Survey Method

This research adopts the “Professional Standards for Kindergarten Principals” as the basis and refers to the questionnaire content contained in the Master’s thesis “Investigation and Research on the Leadership of Kindergarten Principals in Nanning City” by Zhao Xiqing from Guangxi University

for Nationalities. Based on this, combined with the specific situation in Hefei, the original questionnaire was modified and optimized to facilitate local principals' comprehension and application of the relevant content.

The research questionnaire is divided into two main sections. The first part focuses on collecting basic information about the person in charge of the kindergarten and the kindergarten itself, covering nine questions. The second part of the questionnaire adopts the Likert five-point scoring method, mainly covering four dimensions of principal leadership, eight sub-dimensions, and specific leadership measures represented by each dimension, totaling 54 items. After the reliability and validity analysis using SPSS, the reliability of each dimension of the questionnaire was found to be greater than 0.89, the KMO coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.913, and the significance of Bartlett's spherical test was less than 0.05, indicating high reliability and validity of the questionnaire.

2.2. Participants

This study focuses on Hefei City, Anhui Province, with the main attention on kindergarten principals. The evaluation objects include kindergarten principals, vice principals, and full-time principals in Hefei City. The research scope is broad, covering the eight main districts of Hefei City and their subordinate counties. The participating kindergartens include both regular and demonstration types, covering early childhood education institutions operated by both government and private entities. Out of 190 questionnaires distributed, 19 improperly filled questionnaires were excluded, leaving 171 valid questionnaires for subsequent data analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Basic Information of Kindergarten Principals Participating in the Questionnaire Survey

Research analysis shows that in the surveyed kindergartens in Hefei, the majority of principals are female. Out of the 171 qualified questionnaires collected, only 9 were from male principals. In terms of age, the highest number of principals falls within the age range of 30 to 39, followed by those aged 40 to 49, and those aged 50 and above are fewer in number, while principals under 29 years old are the least common. Most principals had over 3 years of teaching experience before taking on their current positions. Regarding education level, the majority of principals hold a university degree, with 74.27% having at least an associate degree or higher. In terms of professional background, 85.96% of principals have a professional background related to preschool education, while the remaining 14.04% come from other fields.

3.2. Analysis of the Current Situation of Kindergarten Principal Leadership in Hefei

Through detailed analysis of the questionnaire data, the study particularly focused on comparative research of demographic attributes. We focused on four key aspects of leadership: values, education, interpersonal, and organizational. We compared eight demographic variables: gender, age, years of teaching experience, education level, professional field, geographical location of the kindergarten, nature, and grade. The aim was to identify and explore which demographic factors have a deeper influence on each leadership dimension, forming a series of discussions.

The questionnaire data collected in this study showed that out of the participating principals, there were only 9 males and 162 females, resulting in a significant difference in quantity between the two genders, making gender comparison statistically insignificant, and therefore not discussed further. Additionally, among the demonstration kindergartens, there were only 5 samples at the provincial and municipal levels. Due to the low quantity, they were merged with district-level demonstration kindergartens, categorizing kindergartens into only two types: demonstration and non-demonstration.

Regarding the analysis of factors influencing principals' values-based leadership, there were no significant score differences observed in demographic variables. However, significant differences were observed in age, education level, kindergarten type, and geographical location, indicating that these variables show significant differences when compared to other variables. This suggests that principals' values-based leadership is greatly influenced by education level, age, kindergarten type, and geographical location factors. See Table 1 for detailed analysis.

Table 1: Analysis of the Differences in Kindergarten Principals' Values-Based Leadership Based on Demographic Characteristics.

Option	Variable	Number (N)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	F Value
Gender	Male	9	4.6419	0.65781	0.129
	Female	162	3.9480	0.56551	
Age	≤29 years old	28	4.8492	0.57387	11.696
	30-39 years old	61	4.6393	0.56833	
	40-49 years old	40	4.4416	0.56550	
	≥50 years old	42	4.8968	0.57061	
	≤2 years	20	4.1888	0.57186	
Tenure	3-5 years	38	4.2251	0.57244	1.155
	6-10 years	40	4.2027	0.57655	
	11-15 years	35	4.0952	0.57537	
	≥16 years	38	4.1228	0.57417	
	Secondary School/High School	3	4.2222	0.58728	
Education	College Diploma	41	4.2520	0.55714	2.191
	Bachelor's Degree	125	4.4404	0.57179	
	Master's Degree	2	4.7444	0.35083	
	and Above				
Major	Non-Early Childhood Education	24	4.1851	0.57537	0.079
	Early Childhood Education	147	4.1632	0.57179	
Location	County	98	4.2891	0.57061	29.968
	Urban Area	73	4.0015	0.55733	
Nature	Private	85	4.3098	0.55393	53.296
	Public	86	4.0245	0.57244	

Table 1: (continued).

Level	Non-Demonstration Kindergarten	56	4.6408	0.57298	22.607
	Demonstration Kindergarten	115	4.6280	0.57417	

In terms of educational leadership among kindergarten principals, significant differences exist among the means of all demographic variables, indicating that all demographic variables in this study have a significant impact on educational leadership. This may be related to the wide range of aspects involved in kindergarten principals' educational leadership. Details are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis of Differences in Kindergarten Principals' Educational Leadership Based on Demographic Characteristics

Option	Variable	Number (N)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	F Value
Gender	Male	9	4.7189	0.57265	0.001
	Female	162	3.0123	0.55811	
Age	≤29 years old	28	4.8298	0.56165	8.492
	30-39 years old	61	4.6952	0.54455	
	40-49 years old	40	4.4985	0.52796	
	≥50 years old	42	4.9067	0.55934	
	≤2 years	20	4.8	0.53020	
Tenure	3-5 years	38	4.7708	0.55871	0.988
	6-10 years	40	4.6205	0.53234	
	11-15 years	35	4.3788	0.54643	
	≥16 years	38	4.3622	0.55900	
	Secondary School/High School	3	4.4744	0.55901	
Education	College Diploma	41	4.7647	0.52173	1.028
	Bachelor's Degree	125	4.8741	0.56085	
	Master's Degree and Above	2	5	0.28215	
	Non-Early Childhood Education	24	3.9852	0.54582	
Major	Early Childhood Education	147	4.3977	0.56085	1.159
Location	County	98	4.1590	0.55961	15.830
	Urban Area	73	4.5825	0.53076	

Table 2: (continued).

Nature	Private	85	4.9038	0.52570	39.411
	Public	86	4.5444	0.56025	
Level	Non-Demonstration Kindergarten	56	4.5546	0.56183	14.737
	Demonstration Kindergarten	115	4.8051	0.55883	

In terms of interpersonal leadership among kindergarten principals, there are significant differences in the mean values of cultural level, kindergarten nature, and level. This suggests that these three demographic variables have a significant impact on interpersonal leadership. There are no significant differences in the mean values of other demographic variables, indicating a lesser impact. Details are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Analysis of the Differences in Kindergarten Principal Interpersonal Leadership Based on Demographic Characteristics.

Option	Variable	Number (N)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	F Value
Gender	Male	9	4.6464	0.60809	0.182
	Female	162	4.7121	0.59713	
Age	≤29 years old	28	4.8019	0.60285	7.112
	30-39 years old	61	4.7049	0.58644	
	40-49 years old	40	4.4659	0.55541	
	≥50 years old	42	4.8831	0.59713	
	≤2 years	20	4.7909	0.55848	
Tenure	3-5 years	38	4.7392	0.59877	1.224
	6-10 years	40	4.7477	0.56130	
	11-15 years	35	4.5636	0.58492	
	≥16 years	38	4.7272	0.59892	
Education	Secondary School/High School	3	4.5841	0.59083	0.758
	College Diploma	41	4.7538	0.55315	
	Bachelor's Degree	125	4.7843	0.59846	
	Master's Degree				
	Master's Degree and Above	2	4.8636	0.31368	

Table 3: (continued).

Major	Non-Early Childhood Education	24	4.5719	0.58492	2.614
	Early Childhood Education	147	4.7309	0.59846	
Location	County	98	4.8116	0.59713	12.945
	Urban Area	73	4.5703	0.55819	
Nature	Private	85	4.9101	0.55263	42.347
	Public	86	4.5095	0.59877	
Level	Non-Demonstration Kindergarten	56	4.1213	0.59962	15.511
	Demonstration Kindergarten	115	4.7992	0.59680	

In terms of organizational leadership among kindergarten principals, there are significant differences in the mean values of age, educational level, kindergarten nature, and level. This indicates that these four demographic variables have a considerable influence on organizational leadership among principals. Details are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Analysis of the Differences in Kindergarten Principal Organizational Leadership Based on Demographic Characteristics.

Option	Variable	Number (N)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	F Value
Gender	Male	9	4.7385	0.57429	0.014
	Female	162	4.7207	0.57491	
Age	≤29 years old	28	4.8025	0.57428	5.037
	30-39 years old	61	4.6933	0.55497	
	40-49 years old	40	4.5352	0.54298	
	≥50 years old	42	4.8865	0.56930	
Tenure	≤2 years	20	4.7823	0.54781	0.494
	3-5 years	38	4.7352	0.57180	
	6-10 years	40	4.7250	0.54655	
	11-15 years	35	4.6336	0.55260	
	≥16 years	38	4.7538	0.56935	

Table 4: (continued).

Education	Secondary School/High School	3	4.5833	0.57031	0.869
	College Diploma	41	4.7704	0.53654	
	Bachelor's Degree	125	4.8955	0.57057	
	Master's Degree and Above	2	4.9411	0.36757	
Major	Non-Early Childhood Education	24	4.6421	0.55260	0.901
	Early Childhood Education	147	4.7346	0.57057	
Location	County	98	4.8157	0.56930	10.967
	Urban Area	73	4.5954	0.54634	
Nature	Private	85	4.9017	0.54076	33.271
	Public	86	4.5437	0.57180	
Level	Non-Demonstration Kindergarten	56	4.5231	0.57172	18.492
	Demonstration Kindergarten	115	4.8184	0.56697	

4. Discussion

4.1. Differences Based on Overall Analysis

Kindergarten principals generally demonstrate outstanding leadership potential, with an average score of 4.3. This reflects that most principals hold a confident attitude towards their self-leadership abilities and rarely acknowledge deficiencies in their leadership talents. In various leadership categories, based on the order of scores, instructional leadership, team coordination, interpersonal skills, and values guidance are ranked accordingly. This indicates that they believe they handle aspects such as adhering to the combination of teaching and care and leading professional development of teachers relatively well, are competent in managing internal and external affairs of the kindergarten, and maintain relatively high confidence in team building and communication coordination. However, there is insufficient understanding of values leadership, indicating that they find it challenging to grasp professional knowledge related to industry development and cultural creation involving ideological and conceptual aspects.

4.2. Differences Based on Age

Kindergarten principals aged between 29 and 49 show a downward trend in leadership abilities in all aspects year by year. This may be because with deepening self-awareness and continuous enrichment of knowledge, they have a clearer understanding of the areas where they need improvement, thus

their scores in various aspects of leadership assessment tend to reflect their true level. Senior principals over the age of fifty reach their peak in leadership abilities, possibly due to their long tenure as kindergarten principals, accumulating a wealth of management experience. Sufficient time allows them to gradually overcome their deficiencies through practice. Principals under the age of 29 have higher leadership scores compared to those aged 30-39 and 40-49. They have not held the position of principal for long, lack rich management experience, and their self-awareness is not deep enough, leading to greater confidence in their own leadership abilities.

4.3. Differences Based on Teaching Experience

In terms of educational leadership, the longer the teaching experience, the lower the level of educational leadership. Principals with teaching experience of ≤ 2 years and 3-5 years have the highest overall leadership level, reaching its peak. This may be due to the continuous updating and development of early childhood education concepts as society progresses. Principals with shorter teaching experience who have just graduated from universities with a wealth of cutting-edge knowledge are more flexible in their thinking and more open to new things. They are more likely to innovate compared to principals with longer frontline teaching experience, resulting in more comprehensive educational leadership.

4.4. Differences Based on Educational Background

In the demographic variable of educational level, there is a positive correlation between the educational background of principals and the development level of leadership in various dimensions. Combining the data analysis from Tables 1 to 4 above, among various dimensions, principals' educational background shows significant differences in mean values compared to other demographic variables, demonstrating the significant impact of educational background on their leadership level. The higher the education level, the higher the leadership level. This suggests a recommendation to all principals: to keep their leadership from falling behind, they can strive for higher education degrees.

4.5. Differences Based on Principal's Specialization

Beyond the dimension of values leadership, kindergarten principals specializing in early childhood education exhibit more outstanding leadership skills in all other dimensions. This phenomenon is sufficient to confirm that principals who have received specialized training in early childhood education possess remarkable leadership abilities. Especially in the aspect of educational leadership, the gap between early childhood education and other majors is very obvious. This indicates that principals who have received training in early childhood education are more accurate in grasping the trend of teacher development, emphasizing the combination of teaching research and care, guiding teachers' professional growth, and providing more professional insights into the research progress of early childhood education institutions. Compared to principals from non-early childhood education backgrounds, they are more adept in managing early childhood education.

4.6. Differences Based on Kindergarten Location

In terms of assessment scores, kindergarten principals in the city center perform better than county-level principals in the dimension of educational leadership. However, in several other aspects, the leadership abilities of county-level principals surpass those of city center principals. This indicates that kindergarten principals in the districts and counties under Hefei City are not inferior to those in the city center in terms of leadership. This phenomenon may be related to several factors: the highly developed transportation between Hefei City and its districts and counties, which facilitates

interaction and learning among principals; the local government adheres to the principle of balanced development, conducts reasonable allocation of educational resources, and maintains an equal attitude towards professional training and improvement of kindergarten principals.

4.7. Differences Based on Kindergarten Ownership

Principals of privately operated kindergartens usually excel in leadership compared to principals of government-operated kindergartens. This trend is closely related to the direct performance evaluation undertaken by principals of private kindergartens. The competitive market environment endows them with a higher level of results-oriented thinking. It is this business competition background that drives them to constantly explore their potential and stimulates greater enthusiasm for work. Therefore, these private kindergartens often outperform public kindergartens in execution efficiency and areas of innovation and improvement.

4.8. Differences Based on Kindergarten Level

The leadership abilities of principals serving in exemplary kindergartens generally surpass those of principals in non-exemplary kindergartens, thanks to the specific and detailed evaluation criteria set by exemplary kindergartens for principals in managing early childhood education institutions. In the process of kindergarten rating and review, the leadership skills of principals are essentially examined. Principals in exemplary kindergartens participating in the evaluation process generally exhibit higher comprehensive qualities in leadership than those in non-awarded kindergartens.

In terms of handling interpersonal relationships, compared to other leadership skills, the leadership abilities of principals in non-exemplary kindergartens are significantly inferior to those of principals in exemplary kindergartens. This indicates that the ability of principals to manage interpersonal relationships both inside and outside the kindergarten significantly influences the external evaluation of kindergartens. Kindergartens with good evaluations perform excellently in various competitions, which is reflected in the division of kindergarten levels.

In terms of values leadership, there is no significant difference in leadership abilities between principals of high and low-level kindergartens. This suggests that there is no significant impact or difference in how kindergartens of different levels approach industry development and cultural construction, which involve professional knowledge and conceptual cognition.

5. Conclusion

This study found that kindergarten principals in Hefei City demonstrate a generally high level of overall leadership and leadership in various dimensions, reflecting their ability to organize and coordinate various aspects and relationships within kindergartens, which aligns with modern management principles. From an overall perspective, principals are most confident in their educational and organizational leadership, followed by interpersonal leadership and values leadership. This indicates that they believe they are relatively competent in maintaining the integration of teaching and research with care, leading the professional development of teachers, and managing internal and external affairs of kindergartens. They also exhibit confidence in team building and communication coordination. However, their understanding of values leadership is not as profound, indicating a difficulty in grasping professional knowledge involving industry development and cultural cultivation, which are related to ideological and conceptual aspects.

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