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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Negotiating Power and Teacher-leader Relationships: Evidence from Lower Secondary Schools in Central Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
In education systems shaped by hierarchical traditions and collectivist cultural values, school leadership is not only exercised through formal authority but also through the everyday negotiation of relationships, trust, and professional legitimacy. This study examines how power dynamics shape teacher-leader relationship building in Vietnamese lower secondary schools, with attention to how principals navigate authority within a hierarchical and collectivist cultural context. Drawing on a post-structuralist lens, the research employed a qualitative multiple-case study design. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 18 participants (principals, deputy principals, and teachers) across three public schools. The findings show that hierarchy remains a strong structuring force, but authority is continuously produced and legitimised through relational and moral work. Principals combined formal decision-making power with relational strategies - such as recognition, informal dialogue, and community-building - to foster trust and collaboration, while simultaneously shaping the terms under which teacher voice and dissent could be expressed. Cross-case comparison further indicates that leadership practices were contextually negotiated, resulting in different configurations of hierarchical, hybrid, and more participatory approaches. The study contributes to educational leadership scholarship by offering a culturally grounded account of how authority and relationality intersect in everyday leadership practice, with implications for leadership development and policy design in hierarchical and collectivist education systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

School culture is widely recognized as a key determinant of educational effectiveness, shaping teacher satisfaction, professional commitment, student learning, and organizational performance (MacNeil et al., 2009; Wang'ombe, 2023). Within this cultural ecology, leadership plays a central role not only in setting institutional directions but also in shaping the norms, expectations, and relational patterns through which school life is enacted. However, much of the dominant literature on school leadership and culture has been developed in Western contexts and tends to conceptualize leadership primarily in terms of individual behaviors, competencies, or formal roles (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2020). As a result, comparatively little is known about how leadership is enacted in non-Western, collectivist, and culturally hierarchical settings, where authority, legitimacy, and professional relationships are constituted through different cultural logics. In particular, existing research has paid limited attention to how power is exercised, negotiated, and normalized in the everyday relational practices of school leaders and

teachers. This constitutes an important theoretical and empirical gap, especially in contexts such as Vietnam, where leadership is embedded within dense networks of social obligation, moral expectation, and institutional hierarchy.

Vietnamese schools operate within a socio-cultural and institutional context that has been historically shaped by Confucian traditions, socialist bureaucratic governance, and more recent global education reforms. These influences have produced a complex normative environment characterized by hierarchical role expectations, respect for authority, relational obligations, and an emphasis on social harmony and collective responsibility (Hallinger & Truong, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2025; Hallinger & Truong, 2014). Importantly, these cultural norms do not function as static or uniform determinants of behavior. Rather, they operate as discursive and normative resources that are interpreted, enacted, and sometimes contested by school actors in their daily practices (Foucault, 1980; Ball, 2012a). School principals in Vietnam are thus positioned within a set of potentially contradictory expectations: they are expected to uphold hierarchical authority and administrative accountability while simultaneously promoting collaboration, trust, and teacher participation. This tension renders leadership not a stable role but an ongoing relational and moral accomplishment, continuously negotiated through interaction.

To examine these dynamics, this study adopts a post-structuralist theoretical lens that conceptualizes power not as a possession held by individuals or positions, but as a relational, productive, and discursively constituted force that circulates through social practices, language, and institutional routines (Brassett, 2023; Foucault, 1980). From this perspective, leadership is not simply exercised through formal authority or decision-making structures, but is continuously performed and legitimized through everyday interactions, communicative practices, and symbolic acts (Collinson, 2006; Niesche & Gowlett, 2019). This lens is particularly well suited to the Vietnamese context because it enables an analysis of how principals simultaneously reproduce and rework traditional hierarchies through subtle practices of persuasion, moral positioning, relational negotiation, and discursive framing. Rather than treating hierarchy and collaboration as opposing models of leadership, a post-structuralist approach allows us to examine how these logics coexist, intersect, and are mobilized strategically by school leaders and teachers in specific situations.

Guided by this perspective, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Vietnamese principals navigate and interpret culturally embedded norms in their efforts to build and sustain professional relationships with teachers?

2. How are leadership practices shaped by power dynamics in Vietnamese schools?

By addressing these questions, this study makes three main contributions. Theoretically, it extends post-structuralist and relational accounts of educational leadership into a Confucian-influenced, collectivist context, thereby challenging the universality of Western leadership models and moving beyond accounts that treat relational leadership as primarily positive or culturally harmonious. Empirically, it provides fine-grained insights into the micro-level practices through which Vietnamese principals and teachers construct authority, legitimacy, and professional relationships in everyday school life, showing how hierarchy and relationality are mutually constituted. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of a discursive-relational approach for analyzing leadership as an emergent and negotiated process rather than a set of predefined roles, competencies, or culturally fixed leadership styles. Beyond Vietnam, the findings offer a comparative perspective that can inform leadership research in other contexts characterized by strong cultural hierarchies and collectivist values, contributing to a more culturally grounded and theoretically plural understanding of educational leadership.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Power and leadership: from possession to practice

Early studies of educational leadership conceptualised power primarily as a resource attached to formal positions and individual attributes. Classical typologies such as French and Raven's (1959) bases of power - legitimate, expert, reward, coercive, and referent - framed leadership as the exercise of authority by those occupying designated roles. While such models offer useful descriptive categories, they tend to reify power as something that leaders *have*, rather than as something that is *produced* through social relations (Hosking, 2011; English, 2007). This approach obscures the micro-level processes through which authority is enacted, contested, and legitimised in everyday organisational life.

In contrast, post-structuralist and critical perspectives reconceptualise power as relational, dynamic, and productive rather than static or merely repressive (Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1982; Brassett, 2023). From this

perspective, power does not reside in individuals or structures alone, but circulates through discourses, routines, and interactions that define what is seen as normal, legitimate, or possible within organisations (Ball, 2012a; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Watts et al., 2019). Leadership, accordingly, is not a fixed role but a performative practice enacted through language, symbols, and relational positioning (Collinson, 2006; Niesche & Gowlett, 2019; Hosking, 2011).

Despite the growing influence of such perspectives, much leadership research continues to rely on managerial or behavioural frameworks that prioritise effectiveness, outcomes, or competencies while leaving the operation of power largely implicit (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Fullan, 2020). This creates a theoretical gap: while leadership is widely acknowledged to be power-laden, the specific mechanisms through which power is produced and normalised in everyday school practices remain under-examined (Blase, 1991).

This gap is particularly salient in non-Western and culturally hierarchical contexts, where authority is not only organisational but also moral, relational, and culturally embedded (Hallinger & Chen, 2015). In Vietnam, leadership authority is shaped by Confucian traditions emphasising hierarchy, role order, and respect for seniority (Hallinger & Truong, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2025; Truong & Hallinger, 2017). However, there is little empirical research in Vietnam that explicitly adopts a post-structuralist lens to examine how power is enacted and legitimised through everyday interactions in schools. As a result, the micro-level processes through which leadership authority is constructed and sustained remain under-explored.

2.2. Relationship-building as leadership practice and as power

Relational approaches to leadership have gained prominence as a response to the limitations of transactional and bureaucratic models. Scholars argue that trust, collaboration, emotional connection, and shared meaning are central to effective leadership, particularly in complex and changing educational environments (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Gregory, 2017; Webb, 2021). Relational leadership frameworks emphasise leadership as a social process co-constructed through interaction rather than imposed from above (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Raelin, 2016).

However, relationality is often treated normatively - as inherently positive, empowering, and desirable - without sufficient critical attention to its power effects (Fletcher, 2004; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). From a post-structuralist perspective, relational practices are not neutral; they are sites where power is exercised subtly through inclusion, recognition, moral framing, and expectations of reciprocity (Foucault, 1982; Ball, 2012a; Bourdieu, 1991). Practices such as trust-building, recognition, and participation can foster engagement, but they can also function as techniques of governance that encourage conformity, self-regulation, and alignment with organisational norms (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Shore & Wright, 2015).

This dual nature of relational leadership is particularly significant in collectivist cultures, where harmony, face-saving, and relational obligations play a central role in social life (Hofstede, 2011; Lau et al., 2023). In such contexts, relational practices are deeply intertwined with moral expectations and social hierarchies, making them powerful mechanisms through which authority is legitimised and resistance is managed (O'Donoghue, 2013; Selvarajah et al., 2013). Yet few studies examine relational leadership through a critical lens that interrogates both its enabling and disciplinary dimensions.

In Vietnam, relationship-building is culturally expected and morally valued, but it also operates within hierarchical structures that limit open dissent and redistribute agency unevenly (Truong et al., 2017; Hallinger & Truong, 2016). Existing studies tend to celebrate relational leadership as a means of mitigating hierarchy, but they rarely explore how relational practices themselves reproduce hierarchical norms by defining appropriate ways of speaking, disagreeing, or participating. This constitutes an important empirical and theoretical gap.

2.3. Culture as discourse rather than background

Much research on educational leadership in Asia treats culture as a stable set of values shaping leadership styles - for example, Confucian respect for authority, collectivism, and moral leadership (Cheng & Wong, 1996; Law, 2012; Shengnan & Hallinger, 2021). While such work has illuminated important cultural influences, it often risks cultural essentialism by portraying culture as homogeneous, coherent, and deterministic (Belsey, 2022).

Post-structuralist perspectives offer an alternative view by conceptualising culture as a discursive field - a set of meanings, norms, and expectations that are produced, contested, and transformed through social practice (Foucault, 1980; Ball, 2012a). From this standpoint, cultural norms do not simply shape leadership; they are enacted, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in everyday interactions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Bourdieu, 1991).

In the Vietnamese context, Confucian ideals of hierarchy, harmony, and moral authority coexist with socialist bureaucratic governance and contemporary reform discourses promoting collaboration, autonomy, and innovation (Ho & Dimmock, 2023; London, 2023). These overlapping discourses create tensions and contradictions that leaders must navigate. Yet most empirical studies do not examine how these discourses are mobilised in practice to justify decisions, manage relationships, or define legitimate leadership (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017).

Understanding culture as discursive rather than static allows for a more nuanced analysis of leadership as a situated and negotiated process. It shifts the analytical focus from how culture shapes leadership to how leaders use cultural meanings to exercise power, build legitimacy, and manage relationships.

Taken together, the literature points to important limitations in current understandings of leadership, power, and culture, particularly in non-Western and culturally hierarchical contexts. While leadership is widely acknowledged to be power-laden and relational, we still lack detailed accounts of how power and relationships are enacted and negotiated in everyday school practices, and how cultural norms are mobilised in these processes.

Specifically, this study addresses how principals navigate culturally embedded norms to build professional relationships with teachers (RQ1), and how leadership practices are shaped by power dynamics in Vietnamese schools (RQ2).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore how power dynamics shape leadership practices and relationship-building in Vietnamese schools in Central Vietnam. A case study approach was appropriate because the study seeks to investigate a complex, context-dependent social phenomenon in depth and in its natural setting (Yin, 2018; Tisdell et al., 2025). Each school constituted a bounded case, defined by a specific organisational setting, leadership structure, and relational culture. The three cases were selected to allow for analytic comparison across contexts, enabling both within-case and cross-case analysis of leadership practices and power relations.

The schools were purposefully selected to represent variation in leadership styles, school culture, and organisational climate, rather than to achieve statistical representativeness (Patton, 2014). All three were public lower secondary schools operating under the same national policy framework but differing in size and location. This variation enabled the study to examine how similar policy and cultural conditions were enacted differently across institutional contexts.

3.2. Theoretical framework

The study is informed by a post-structuralist theoretical perspective, drawing primarily on Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of power as relational, productive, and embedded within discourse and social practice (Foucault, 1980, 1982, 2020). From this perspective, power is not understood as a possession held by individuals or formal positions, but as something that circulates through interactions, norms, language, and institutional routines. Leadership is therefore conceptualised not as a fixed role or set of competencies, but as a performative and relational practice enacted through everyday interactions and discursive positioning (Collinson, 2006; Niesche & Gowlett, 2015).

This theoretical lens is particularly appropriate for examining leadership in Vietnamese schools, where hierarchical authority, moral legitimacy, relational obligation, and reform discourses coexist and interact. Rather than treating culture as a static background variable, the study conceptualises culture as a discursive field composed of competing and overlapping meanings that shape what is considered legitimate, appropriate, and possible in leadership practice (Ball, 2012b). These discourses include, for example, norms of hierarchy and respect, expectations of harmony and face-saving, and contemporary reform narratives emphasising collaboration, innovation, and participation.

3.3. Methods of data collection

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives in detail, while also providing flexibility for follow-up questions to explore emerging themes (Patton, 2014). A total of 18 participants were interviewed across the three schools. Each school case included six participants: one principal, one deputy principal, and four teachers. Overall, the sample comprised three principals, three deputy principals, and twelve teachers. Principals were included because of their formal leadership responsibilities and central role in shaping school relationships. Deputy principals provided additional

perspectives on leadership practice, decision-making, and internal power dynamics, while teachers offered accounts of how leadership was experienced in everyday professional interactions. The sample size was guided by the concept of information power rather than saturation, on the assumption that a smaller, information-rich sample is sufficient when the study aim is narrow, the sample is specific, and the analytical framework is theory-driven (Malterud et al., 2016). Table 1 provides a summary of participants' demographics:

Table 1. Professional demographics of the participants

Schools	n	Gender		Age			Principal's years at current school
		Female	Male	30-39	40-49	>50	
A	6	4	2	1	4	1	5
B	6	5	1	2	2	2	3.5
C	6	4	2	0	4	2	5

Participants were purposefully selected following specific criteria: They needed to be in a leadership or teaching role within the school, have a minimum of three years of experience in their current position. Diversity was a key consideration, therefore, participants represented varying years of experience, and included both male and female teachers to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives. All interviews were conducted in person at the respective schools, each lasting between 50 and 60 minutes. The sessions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview questions were developed based on a comprehensive review of the literature on educational leadership and aligned with the study's research objectives. The questions were designed to explore key areas of interest, such as:

1. How principals perceive and enact power in their leadership roles.
2. The strategies principals use to build and maintain relationships with staff.
3. Teachers' and deputy principals' experiences of leadership.

Ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to throughout the data collection process. Participants provided informed consent before their interviews and were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. All data were securely stored, with access limited to the research team.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis informed by a post-structuralist orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). This approach was appropriate because the study sought not only to describe leadership practices, but also to examine how authority, legitimacy, teacher voice, and professional relationships were constructed and negotiated in everyday school interactions.

The analysis involved several iterative stages. First, all interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data and to identify preliminary analytic ideas related to hierarchy, authority, trust, teacher voice, recognition, and dissent. Initial notes were written to capture recurring issues, such as teachers' hesitation to express disagreement, principals' references to responsibility and care, informal interactions between leaders and teachers, and differences across school cases.

Second, the transcripts were coded with the assistance of NVivo 14. Coding combined semantic and interpretive codes. Semantic codes captured explicit meanings in participants' accounts, such as "principal makes final decision", "teacher hesitation", "informal meetings", "public recognition", and "consultation before decision-making". Interpretive codes captured more conceptual meanings linked to the post-structuralist lens, such as "moralising authority", "softening hierarchy", "bounded teacher voice", "relational legitimisation", and "self-regulation through respect". Thus, while the analysis was grounded in participants' accounts, it was also theoretically sensitised by concepts of power as relational, productive, and embedded in discourse and practice.

Third, codes were compared within each school case and across the three cases. Within-case analysis examined how authority and relationships were constructed in each school, while cross-case analysis identified similarities and differences in leadership configurations across School A, School B, and School C. Related codes were then grouped

into candidate themes and reviewed against the data to ensure that they were coherent, empirically grounded, and analytically distinct. This process led to the development of themes concerning hierarchy as a structuring force, relationship-building as leadership practice, variations in leadership practices across schools, and the tension between authority and collaboration.

Finally, the themes were interpreted through the post-structuralist framework, with attention to how power operated through formal authority, language, moral framing, recognition, relational expectations, and culturally appropriate forms of participation. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process through analytic memo-writing and repeated checking of interpretations against participants' accounts (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). This helped reduce the risk of over-theorising the data and ensured that the final themes were both theoretically informed and empirically grounded.

To illustrate how the coding process moved from participants' accounts to interpretive codes and final themes, Table 2 provides examples of coding and theme development.

Table 2. Example of coding and theme development

Data extract	Initial code	Interpretive code	Candidate theme	Final theme
"The principal's decisions are final. It's expected, given their role as the head of the school."	Principal as final decision-maker	Formal authority normalised through role expectation	Hierarchy and authority	Hierarchy as a structuring force in leadership and participation
"Sometimes I want to share my opinions, but I hesitate because I'm afraid it might be seen as disrespectful to my superiors."	Teacher hesitation to speak	Bounded voice; self-regulation through respect	Limits of participation	Hierarchy as a structuring force in leadership and participation
Our principal always encourages us to share our opinions. He often says, 'If no one dares to speak up, we can't improve.'	Encouraging teacher voice	Invitation to participate within hierarchy	Relational participation	Navigating tensions between authority and collaboration
"I am strict with my staff when it comes to work, but I'm very approachable in everyday life."	Strict at work; approachable outside work	Softening hierarchy through relational accessibility	Relationship-building strategies	Strategies for relationship-building in leadership practice

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Results

This study investigates the dynamics of power and relationship-building in Vietnamese schools, focusing on the experiences of principals, deputy principals, and teachers. The findings highlight three interrelated themes: (1) The influence of hierarchical relationships on power dynamics; (2) Strategies for relationship-building in leadership practice; (3) Variations in leadership practices across schools. These themes provide insights into the complex interplay between leadership, cultural norms, and institutional expectations.

4.1.1. Hierarchy as a structuring force in leadership and participation

The hierarchical structure of Vietnamese schools, deeply rooted in Confucian traditions, significantly shapes how power is perceived and exercised. Principals are positioned as central figures of authority, embodying both responsibility and respect. Participants in this study consistently emphasized the role of principals as ultimate decision-makers, reflecting the embedded cultural norms of hierarchical governance. For instance, teachers in School A and B described:

"*The principal's decisions are final. It's expected, given their role as the head of the school*" (Teacher A2).

"*We always respect the principal's decisions. Once a decision is made, we know we need to follow it, even if there are differing opinions*" (Teacher B3).

Such statements highlight the centralized decision-making typical of Vietnamese schools, ensuring clarity and order in administrative processes. However, this centralized approach can limit the agency of staff. As participants remarked:

"*There are times when we cannot question decisions, even if we think improvements could be made. It's just the way things are structured*" (Deputy Principal B2).

"*Sometimes I want to share my opinions, but I hesitate because I'm afraid it might be seen as disrespectful to my superiors. Here, silence is often regarded as a form of respect.*" (Teacher A4)

"*In our culture, respecting superiors is essential. But when we want to introduce new ideas, we sometimes have to find a way to persuade the principal without disrupting that balance*." (Deputy Principal A)

These insights reveal the potential constraints of hierarchical systems, where respect for authority often overrides opportunities for dialogue and critique. Despite these limitations, all principal participants were recognized for their efforts to balance their authoritative roles with relational practices that promote collaboration and trust. For example, the principals of School B and C were commended for fostering a more inclusive environment. The teacher participants noted:

"*He regularly holds informal meetings to hear our concerns and ideas. It feels like we have a voice, even though we know he makes the final decisions*" (Teacher C4).

"*Our principal always encourages us to share our opinions. He often says, 'If no one dares to speak up, we can't improve.' This makes us feel respected*." (Teacher B1)

These practices demonstrate an effort to navigate the cultural expectations of hierarchy while fostering relational trust. By encouraging feedback and maintaining open communication, principals can bridge hierarchical divides and cultivate a collaborative school culture.

Moreover, the findings underscore how principals' leadership styles can influence school dynamics differently. While some rely heavily on formal authority, others strategically use relational approaches to build a sense of community. Participants observed:

"*Our principal makes us feel like a team. She often says, 'Together, we can solve this.' It makes us more engaged, even if we don't agree with every decision.*" (Teacher B2)

"*I feel that people are willing to speak up and share their opinions during monthly Professional Council Meetings. It's different from the atmosphere in meetings at my old school, where people rarely expressed their views. I think the way the principal and other school leaders manage the meetings makes everyone more open to sharing their ideas—they feel safe and heard*." (Teacher C3)

These examples illustrate the dual nature of power in Vietnamese schools: it is both a structural force dictated by hierarchical norms and a relational tool shaped through everyday interactions. This dynamic aligns with Foucault's (2020) notion of power as relational and embedded in social practices, offering insights into the interplay between cultural traditions and leadership strategies in educational settings.

4.1.2. Strategies for relationship-building in leadership practices

Building and maintaining strong relationships emerged as a critical strategy for effective leadership in Vietnamese schools. The principals employed various methods to foster trust and collaboration among their staff, navigating the unique challenges of hierarchical and collectivist cultural norms.

Creating a sense of community: Principals in all three schools emphasized the importance of creating a collegial and supportive environment. Social activities, such as team-building exercises, celebratory gatherings, and informal lunches, were regularly organized to strengthen interpersonal bonds. These activities were particularly vital in reducing barriers between leadership and staff in the context of hierarchical relationships. Some teachers shared:

"*Our principal makes us feel like a family. These activities help us trust each other more and work better as a team*" (Teacher C1).

"*We teachers can feel that our principal is a decisive person at work. However, that doesn't mean he ignores others' feelings. He remains enthusiastic and sociable during group activities, such as sports and cultural events on*

occasions like Vietnamese Teachers' Day (November 20) and Vietnamese Women's Day (October 20)" (Teacher A2).

Or a principal revealed:

"*I always distinguish between work and other activities. I am strict with my staff when it comes to work, but I'm very approachable in everyday life. I think my staff recognize this. Some of them even joke about how I can be so strict at times and so easygoing at others. My principle is to be strict in work but open and sociable with everyone in daily life*." (Principal B)

By fostering a sense of belonging and community, the principals were able to cultivate a collaborative culture where staff felt valued and motivated to contribute more actively to school initiatives.

Acknowledging individual contributions: Recognizing and celebrating the achievements of staff members was another prominent strategy used by principals to build relationships and enhance morale. In School C, for instance, the principal implemented a practice of publicly acknowledging teachers' efforts during staff meetings. As he expressed:

"*Teachers and staff need timely and appropriate encouragement to stay motivated. Since I was appointed as principal, I've changed the way we recognize achievements. When a teacher completes a professional development course or is appointed to a leadership position—like becoming a subject group leader—we present them with a bouquet of flowers and a small gift in front of the entire teaching staff. This public recognition motivates everyone to strive harder*." *(Principal C)*

This simple yet effective approach reinforced a culture of appreciation and encouraged a sense of pride and dedication among the staff. As one teacher remarked:

"*Being recognized for our hard work gives us more confidence and encourages us to keep improving*" (Teacher B2).

These practices also served to bridge the hierarchical divide by creating opportunities for open recognition and fostering mutual respect between principals and staff.

Cultural adaptation: The principals demonstrated cultural sensitivity by adapting their leadership styles to align with local norms while incorporating modern approaches to leadership. This ability to navigate traditional expectations and introduce innovative practices was particularly evident in School C, where the principal balanced respecting traditions with making progressive changes. A deputy principal in School C explained:

"*Our principal understands the community well. He knows when to uphold tradition and when to make changes that benefit everyone*" (Deputy Principal C).

This balancing act required a nuanced understanding of the cultural and institutional context, allowing principals to lead effectively without alienating staff or the broader school community.

4.1.3. Variations in leadership practices across schools

Although all three schools operated under the same national educational policies, their leadership practices varied significantly, reflecting the principal's personal style and the unique context of each school. From a post-structuralist perspective, these variations highlight how leadership is discursively constructed within the broader power relations and historical legacies of Vietnamese education.

School A exemplified a more traditional hierarchical leadership style, characterized by top-down decision-making, strict rule adherence, and a strong emphasis on discipline. This model ensured consistency and organizational clarity; however, it restricted teachers' sense of agency and innovation. The teachers described the environment as predictable yet rigid, with limited opportunities to contribute to decision-making or experiment with new ideas. As participants noted:

"*We know what to expect, but there's not much room for creativity or new ideas*" *(*Teacher A3).

"*My principal is from an older generation, so his management style is quite traditional. He is meticulous in his work and expects the same from everyone else. Once a decision is made, we usually just follow it without much further discussion. This can be good for creating consistency in our actions, but it sometimes makes staff feel reluctant to share their thoughts about work*." (Deputy Principal A)

This approach, while efficient in maintaining order, constrained professional growth and stifled creative teaching practices.

In contrast to the more hierarchical pattern observed in School A, both School B and School C exhibited a hybrid leadership model that combined formal authority with relational and participatory practices. In these schools, principals retained clear decision-making power while simultaneously cultivating open communication, consultation, and interpersonal trust.

In School C, the principal actively sought teachers' input on pedagogical and organizational matters, fostering a sense of respect and shared ownership over school initiatives. Teachers described this as a relational style layered onto a formally hierarchical structure:

"*Our principal always listens to us before making decisions. Even when the final decision is not exactly what we suggested, we still feel that our voices matter*." (Teacher C2)

Another teacher noted that this consultative approach strengthened both motivation and collective responsibility:

"*Because we are involved in discussions, we feel more responsible for making things work. It's not just the principal's plan - it becomes our plan*." (Teacher C4)

This participatory environment contributed to higher levels of job satisfaction, interpersonal trust, and a stronger sense of collegiality. At the same time, the principal did not relinquish authority entirely. As one teacher remarked:

"*In the end, the principal still decides. But the way decisions are made feels fair and transparent.*" (Teacher C1)

This illustrates how relational practices operated *within* rather than *instead of* hierarchical structures.

Similarly, School B demonstrated a hybrid model, though with a slightly stronger emphasis on formal authority. The principal maintained a clear chain of command and was perceived as highly decisive, particularly in situations requiring quick action. However, this was balanced by informal interactions and openness to feedback. As one teacher explained:

"*The principal knows when to be strict and when to be approachable. It's a good mix.*" (Teacher B3)

A deputy principal described this balance explicitly in terms of authority and relational responsiveness:

"*I feel that my principal is a decisive person at work, sometimes even authoritarian when quick decisions are urgently needed. However, everyone still recognizes that the principal is someone who listens to others' feedback.*" (Deputy Principal B)

Another teacher emphasized how this combination created both clarity and psychological safety:

"*We know clearly who is responsible for what, but we are not afraid to speak up. That makes the school feel both organized and humane.*" (Teacher B5)

These accounts suggest that the hybrid model in School B and C functioned not as a compromise between two opposing styles, but as a dynamic integration of structural stability and relational trust.

Overall, the comparison across the three schools highlights the influence of leadership configurations on school culture and teacher engagement. The predominantly hierarchical approach in School A provided clarity and efficiency but tended to constrain teacher initiative and innovation. The more collaborative orientation in School C empowered teachers and fostered creativity, while the hybrid approaches in School B and C achieved a balance that promoted both consistency and participation. These findings suggest that leadership practices are most effective when they are contextually adaptive - maintaining clear organizational structures while simultaneously enabling teacher voice, relational trust, and shared responsibility through participatory decision-making.

4.1.4. Navigating tensions between authority and collaboration

Across the three schools, participants consistently described leadership as involving an ongoing tension between maintaining hierarchical authority and fostering collaborative relationships. Rather than eliminating this tension, principals appeared to work within it, using a combination of discursive framing, relational practices, and emotional sensitivity to manage how authority and participation were experienced by teachers.

One strategy involved how the principals talked about and justified their decision-making role. They frequently framed their authority in terms of responsibility and care for the school rather than as formal power. For example, one principal explained:

"*Even though I have the final say, I want them to know their input matters.*" (Principal C)

This framing positioned authority as a burden of responsibility rather than a privilege, which appeared to make hierarchical decision-making more acceptable to teachers.

Teachers, in turn, often evaluated leadership not only by who made decisions, but by how those decisions were communicated and whether they felt respected in the process. As one teacher noted:

"*Even when the final decision is not exactly what we suggested, we still feel that our voices matter.*" (Teacher C2).

Another explained:

"*We know clearly who is responsible for what, but we are not afraid to speak up. That makes the school feel both organized and humane.*" (Teacher B5).

These accounts suggest that teachers distinguished between having influence over outcomes and having recognition in the process.

The principals also actively created spaces for interaction that softened the experience of hierarchy. Regular feedback sessions, informal meetings, and open discussions were described as important opportunities for teachers to express views without directly challenging authority. A teacher in School B remarked:

"*The principal is firm when it comes to important decisions, but they're also approachable. It makes us feel more comfortable sharing our thoughts.*" (Teacher B4).

In this way, approachability did not replace authority, but reshaped how authority was experienced in everyday interactions.

At the same time, the participants noted that there were limits to how far collaboration could go. The teachers remained aware of hierarchical boundaries and often moderated their speech accordingly. As one teacher reflected:

"*Sometimes I want to share my opinions, but I hesitate because I'm afraid it might be seen as disrespectful.*" (Teacher A4).

A deputy principal similarly noted the need to express disagreement carefully:

"*When we want to introduce new ideas, we sometimes have to find a way to persuade the principal without disrupting that balance.*" (Deputy Principal A).

Together, these accounts indicate that collaboration in these schools was not a matter of shared control over decisions, but a relational process shaped by cultural expectations of respect, harmony, and role order. The principals managed this process by inviting participation, listening to feedback, and acknowledging teachers' contributions, while retaining final authority. The teachers, for their part, engaged in collaboration within culturally and institutionally defined limits. The tension between authority and collaboration thus remained present, but was continuously managed through everyday interactions, language, and relational practices.

4.2. Discussion

This study examines the interplay between power dynamics and relationship-building in Vietnamese schools, focusing on how principals enact leadership within a hierarchical and collectivist cultural context. Rather than treating hierarchy and collaboration as opposing leadership models, the findings suggest that leadership in these schools is constituted through the ongoing production, negotiation, and legitimation of both authority and relationality. Using a post-structuralist lens, the study shows that leadership in these schools is neither purely hierarchical nor purely relational; instead, authority and relationality are continuously produced, legitimised, and negotiated through everyday interactions.

4.2.1. Hierarchical authority as moral, cultural, and relational work

The findings confirm that hierarchical authority remains a central organising principle in Vietnamese schools, shaped by Confucian cultural traditions and reinforced by bureaucratic governance structures. Principals are widely recognised as the ultimate decision-makers and moral leaders of their schools, and teachers' deference to authority is not merely instrumental but culturally and morally embedded. This aligns with previous research that highlights the enduring influence of Confucian values of respect, hierarchy, and role order in East Asian educational leadership (Hallinger & Truong, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2025; Lau et al., 2023; Truong & Sanga, 2016).

However, this study extends existing accounts by showing that hierarchy is not simply imposed from above or passively accepted by teachers. Rather, it is actively legitimised through moral and relational work. Principals frame their authority in terms of responsibility, care, collective interest, and professional obligation, rather than as personal power or entitlement. This moral positioning made hierarchical decision-making more acceptable within the school community and helped reduce the possibility that authority would be experienced as coercive or authoritarian.

From a post-structuralist perspective, this process illustrates how power operates not only through formal structures but through discourse, affect, and relational positioning (Foucault, 1982; Ball, 2012a). Authority becomes legitimate when it is connected to culturally valued ideas of care, harmony, and collective responsibility. This finding nuances dominant portrayals of hierarchical leadership in Asian contexts as either oppressive or culturally harmonious. Instead, it reveals hierarchy as a relational accomplishment that must be continuously maintained through everyday leadership practice.

4.2.2. Relational practices as both enabling and governing

Relationship-building emerged as a central leadership practice across all three schools. The principals invested in trust, recognition, informal interaction, and a sense of community; and these practices were perceived by teachers as supportive and motivating. These findings resonate with relational leadership theories that emphasise leadership as a social process grounded in interaction, mutual recognition, and shared meaning (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Webb, 2021). They also align with empirical research demonstrating that trust and recognition are critical to teacher motivation and school improvement (Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Combs et al., 2018).

However, this study also highlights the ambivalent nature of relational practices. While they enabled participation and trust, they also shaped the terms on which participation could occur. Invitations to speak, recognition, and dialogue were embedded within hierarchical and cultural norms of respect, harmony, and face-saving, which constrained open disagreement and critical challenge. Teachers often moderated their speech, expressed dissent cautiously, or engaged in self-censorship to avoid being perceived as disrespectful.

This dual function of relational practices as both enabling and governing has been under-examined in the Vietnamese context. While relational leadership is often celebrated as inherently empowering, critical scholars have cautioned that relationality can function as a subtle mechanism of governance that encourages self-regulation, conformity, and alignment with organisational norms (Fletcher, 2004; Shore & Wright, 2015; Niesche & Gowlett, 2019). The findings of this study provide empirical support for this argument by showing how relational practices simultaneously foster trust and manage dissent.

This insight is particularly important in collectivist and face-oriented cultures, where disagreement may be interpreted not only as professional critique but also as a relational or moral disruption. Therefore, relational leadership in such contexts should not be understood only as empowerment. It is also a power-laden practice that shapes participation, self-regulation, and the limits of acceptable dissent.

4.2.3. Leadership as contextually produced and discursively negotiated

The variations observed across the three schools further underscore that leadership is not a universal model but a contextually produced and discursively negotiated practice. Despite operating under the same national policy framework, the schools exhibited distinct leadership configurations shaped by principals' personal histories, community expectations, institutional cultures, and local interpretations of reform discourses.

These variations cannot be reduced simply to leader personality or leadership effectiveness. Rather, they reflect different ways of negotiating the same structural, cultural, and policy conditions. From a post-structuralist perspective, this supports the view that leadership is not merely implemented but produced through practice (Ball, 2012b; Hosking, 2011; Karp, 2022). Leaders do not choose freely among styles; they navigate competing discourses of hierarchy, professionalism, reform, and relational obligation, selectively mobilising these resources to construct legitimacy and maintain organisational stability.

This finding has important implications for leadership development and policy. It challenges prescriptive, one-size-fits-all leadership frameworks and suggests that effective leadership in hierarchical and culturally complex contexts requires reflexivity, cultural sensitivity, and discursive awareness rather than the adoption of predefined models. Leaders must maintain organisational clarity while creating spaces for dialogue, trust, and teacher voice.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examines the interplay between power dynamics and relationship-building in Vietnamese schools, not as separate leadership styles or techniques, but as relational and discursive practices through which authority, legitimacy, and professional relations are continuously produced. By adopting a post-structuralist lens, the study moves beyond static or normative models of leadership and offers a more process-oriented understanding of how leadership is enacted in hierarchical and collectivist contexts.

The findings demonstrate that hierarchical norms remain a powerful structuring force in Vietnamese school leadership, shaping expectations of authority, responsibility, and role order. However, the study also shows that hierarchy is not simply imposed or passively accepted; it is actively moralised, relationally sustained, and discursively legitimised through everyday leadership practices. Principals frame authority as responsibility and care, while teachers evaluate leadership not only by outcomes but by recognition, respect, and relational treatment. This shifts our understanding of hierarchy from a fixed cultural given to an ongoing social accomplishment.

At the same time, relational practices emerged as central to leadership, but not in a purely emancipatory sense. While trust-building, recognition, and participation enabled collaboration and motivation, they also shaped the terms under which participation could occur, subtly governing voice, dissent, and professional conduct. This ambivalence complicates celebratory accounts of relational or distributed leadership and highlights the need for more critical and culturally sensitive interpretations of relational practices, particularly in hierarchical and face-oriented cultures.

The study further shows that leadership is not a transferable model but a contextually produced and discursively negotiated practice. Despite operating under the same policy framework, the schools enacted distinct leadership configurations shaped by local histories, institutional cultures, and personal trajectories of the principals. This finding challenges universalistic leadership frameworks and supports practice-based and post-structuralist accounts of leadership as emergent, situated, and contingent.

These findings carry important implications for leadership development and educational policy in Vietnam and similar contexts. First, leadership training should move beyond competence-based or trait-based models and include structured opportunities for principals to reflect on how power operates through everyday language, meeting routines, recognition practices, and informal interactions. Principals need support in recognising how their language, moral framing, and relational practices shape power relations and professional norms within schools.

Second, governance mechanisms at ward and provincial levels should support professional dialogue rather than rely mainly on compliance-oriented accountability. For example, school evaluation and leadership appraisal could include evidence of teacher participation in decision-making, the quality of internal consultation, and mechanisms for responding to teacher concerns. This would signal that constructive teacher voice is part of school improvement rather than a challenge to formal authority.

Third, at the school level, principals can institutionalise more concrete practices to strengthen dialogue and participation, such as structured professional council discussions, regular teacher feedback sessions, transparent follow-up on staff suggestions, and rotating facilitation in subject-group meetings. Such practices can make teacher participation less dependent on the personal style of individual principals and more embedded in school routines. Importantly, these practices do not require the removal of hierarchy, but its more careful relational and ethical negotiation.

This research makes several contributions to the literature on educational leadership. By applying post-structuralist theory, it provides a novel lens for understanding the relational and dynamic nature of power in hierarchical and collectivist settings. It also adds to the growing body of work on leadership in non-Western contexts, emphasizing the role of cultural norms in shaping leadership practices. The insights gained from this study have practical implications for leadership development programs, which should prioritize the cultivation of culturally responsive and adaptive leadership skills.

While the study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The research focused on three schools in a specific region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants may frame their responses to align with perceived expectations. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the scope to include a more diverse range of schools. Comparative studies across different cultural settings could also deepen our understanding of how leadership practices are influenced by local norms. Furthermore, comparative studies with other non-Western contexts (e.g., Biesta, 2015;

Moos, 2020; Normand, 2016) could deepen our understanding of how cultural factors shape leadership practices across different societies.

In conclusion, this study highlights that leadership in Vietnamese schools is neither purely hierarchical nor purely relational, but an ongoing negotiation between authority and collaboration shaped by cultural norms, institutional structures, and everyday practices. By foregrounding the relational and discursive dimensions of power, the study offers a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of school leadership that has relevance not only for Vietnam but for other educational systems characterised by strong hierarchies and collectivist values.

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