

A CHAT lens on schools' leadership and intercultural collaboration in a Chinese International school

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dual leadership framework of Chinese international schools through the lens of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). It analyses the interactions between local and expatriate leaders and the impact of these interactions on intercultural relationships and how they affect overall school performance. The CHAT model reveals that systemic contradictions, such as differing leadership norms and communication styles, can act as catalysts for expansive learning and cultural development when approached with diagnostic and practical strategies. Employing a qualitative case study methodology, the research incorporates document analysis and structured observations of leadership activities, classroom dynamics, and school life within an international school in China, where leadership roles are collaboratively shared between a foreign principal and coordinators alongside their Chinese counterparts. Key findings indicate that this dual leadership structure fosters improved collaborative relationships, trust, and intercultural understanding, driven by inclusive communication and cooperation.

1. Introduction

International schools, especially those in countries with culturally diverse and fast-paced growing environment, such as China, offer unique organizational challenges. Educational philosophy, cultural mirroring, and administrative structure are some of the factors which frequently collide in these settings. These challenges require creative approaches to leadership. This paper is a narration of how a twin leadership system of a Chinese international school can help to generate cultural relationships which improve general organization and educational performance. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provides a powerful theory and methodology for understanding and scrutinizing the dialectical relationship among human cognition and activity in relation to such a complicated sociocultural setting. CHAT, pioneered by L. S. Vygotsky and elaborated on by Aleksei N. Leont'ev and Yrjö Engeström, offers a multi-level as well as systemic framework to grasp professional-practice activities. It focuses on human activity as collective (Vygotsky, 1978), learning as doing (Wenger, 1998), and communication as bound up with activity, by mediating tools and signs, where community is seminal in the construction of meaning.

By examining the school as an evolving activity system, this paper aims to enhance the understanding of how the co-leadership governance model within the educational framework, influenced by various mediating factors, impacts the

development of intercultural relationships among participants. Furthermore, it explores how these dynamics contribute to achieving desired performance outcomes. In this context, the following three research questions are pertinent:

- i. How does the dual leadership model of Chinese international schools, analyzed through the perspective of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), influence the intercultural relationships among teachers?
- ii. What systemic contradictions exist within Chinese international schools that adopt dual leadership and management strategies, and how can these be interpreted through CHAT?
- iii. How does CHAT provide insight into the interplay of leadership and culture in the context of Chinese international schools, and what effects does this have on performance practices?

2. Analytical Lens: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provides an effective approach to study the human activity in cultural and historical form. It has its roots in the work of early 20th century Russian psychologists L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leont'ev, and A.R. Luria (Engeström 1987, 1999), and has developed across three generations. Each layer adds to another layer of complexity on the study of human activity.

The initial CHAT by Vygotsky in the 1920s/30s took mediation as a core idea. Vygotsky argued that human cognition and behavior are not a direct response to the environment: rather, the continuous process is mediated by cultural tools such as physical tools (e.g. computers) and symbolic tools (i.e., language, signs) (Cole & Hatano 2007). This methodology is founded on the belief that people must be understood in the context of their culture, and that culture must be understood relative to what people produce and use. The focus during this first phase is primarily on the individual and his/her culturally-embedded activities. The strength of CHAT is that it provides an analytical framework for understanding process through which learning and development occur in specific cultural contexts. The first generation CHAT is illustrated in **Figure 1** below.

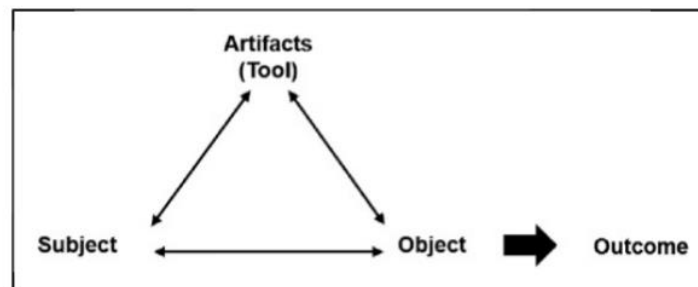


Figure 1. Representation of the first generation of CHAT, based on the Vygotskian theory of cultural mediation. The arrows represent the interaction between the subject, artifacts and object of the activity.

Furthermore, such a view emphasizes the dynamic co-constitution of agency and structure, and in turn how cultural tools shape cognitive and social processes. This first phase served as the foundation for future developments of CHAT that expanded upon the importance of community and cultural activity in the formation of cognition.

The second-generation CHAT, in large part formulated by Leont'ev, extended CHAT by moving the focus of analysis from individual action towards collective activity. Leont'ev's conception of activity considers it a mode of acting on an object where the object and the motives are shaping the activity. This generation espoused and introduced the social dimensions practice – notably the fact that the relationship between an individual and the environment is not simply governed by signals and tools, but also by social relations, rules, as well as the division of labour within the community. This broadening opened up a fuller appreciation of the role of cultural tools in social processes to break beyond the somewhat person-centered monopoly of first-generation studies. **Figure 2** below depicts the second-generation CHAT:

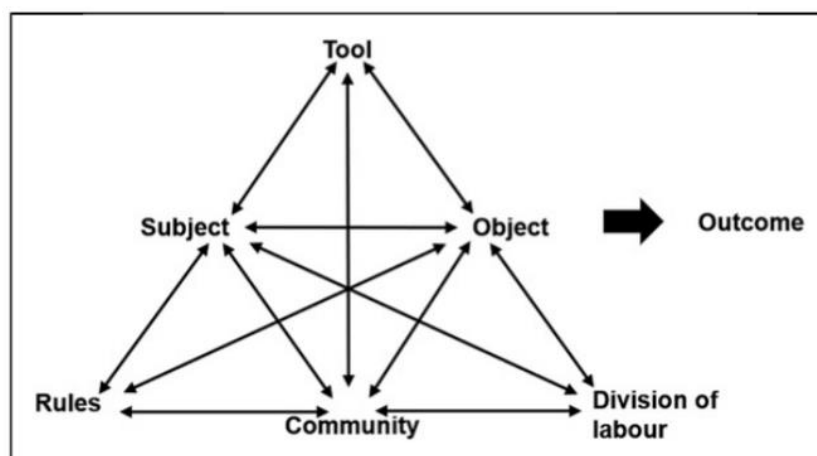


Figure 2. Representation of the second generation of CHAT, based on the work of Leont'ev and elaborated by Engeström (1987).

The approach annotated above, ensures that goals are aligned and efforts are coordinated, ultimately contributing to enhanced educational results.

The third generation of CHAT, shown below, and drawing is a subsequent work by Cole and Engeström, (2007) that extends the first and second generations. See **figure 3** above.

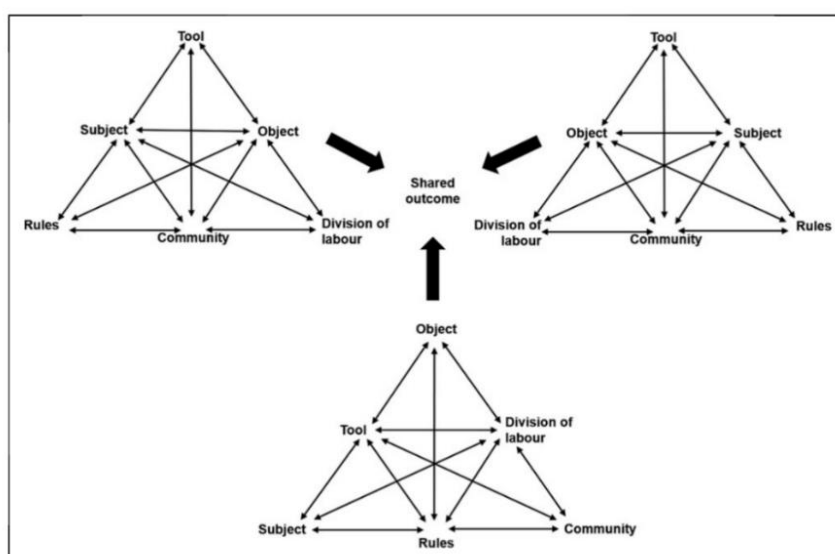


Figure 3. Representation of the third generation of CHAT, based on the work of Cole, Engeström and others, where different activity systems with a shared outcome can interact with each other, as published in Engeström (2001).

The first generation, inspired by Vygotsky (1978), concentrated on the mediated relationship between the subject and the object through the medium (sign) and the second expanded the model through the introduction of a more sophisticated triangular model (Engeström, 1987) that comprises a concept of rules, community and division of labour. The third generation continues in this vein by showing how several interacting activity systems with its

subjects, tools/artefacts, rules, communities and divisions of labour are working together towards an object and ultimately an outcome in common.

The third model is especially relevant for examining the dynamics of dual leadership and management roles in schools, where opposing constituencies or systems of leadership cross paths and are required to co-ordinate their intentions and practices in order to share education objectives or whole system change. Here, it is noted that this model understands activity systems as undergoing constant evolution in response to systemic contradictions. Contradictions are not only logical contradictions, but the basic ruptures inside or between parts of the system that impact change and development. Identifying and addressing these contradictions are at the heart of CHAT, giving rise to expansive learning, involving translation of abstract concepts to activities and practice and evolution of new and more efficient activity systems. This organizer provides the means to reflect multiple aspects of complex professions, making it possible for researchers to get a grip on systemic wholes, instead of merely on a few parts and to investigate how interactions are influenced by, for instance, cultural, historical, political and economic aspects.

3. Developing relationships across cultures and improving performance

In a contemporary world of global connections, intercultural competence is a critical skill that supports respectful and effective interactions in a variety of population groups (Deardorff, 2006). International schools, by definition, serve as environments for the growth of such relationships among students, teachers, and staff of diverse cultures (Bennett, 1998). Intercultural competences include being aware and understanding cultural commonalities and differences, as well as the ability for critical culture self-reflection in comparison to others (Deardorff, 2006). This encompasses competencies similar to those of intercultural competence, communication, and dialogue and draws on the dynamism of cultural identities and power relations (Fantini, 2009).

Building strong intercultural relationships within an educational environment is indeed a profit, contributing to performance in various ways. Firstly, it fosters students' social and emotional growth to ready them for a competitive world (Zhou & Lee, 2015). Students who learn and work with people from differing backgrounds in a diverse working environment have a broader and stronger understanding of content, and the recruit has learned to maximize his or her unique strengths and perspective in a diverse working environment (Gordon, 2008). This exposure engenders open-mindedness, which enables students to see the world from another person's shoes and have a better understanding of a subject by looking at it from different points of view (Bennett, 1998).

Besides social emotional development, intercultural learning also strongly influences cognitive development and employability. Supporting academic evidence indicates that cultural interaction can enhance students' cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, team working for decision making (Shives, Payne, Parieli, 2002). It's good for creative thinking, complexity management, and agility—what the military calls operating “at the speed of war” (Leung et al., 2014). The advantages of offering such a structure to students are in the full immersion into a variety of different perspectives, which expand their cognitive capacity and equip them for the complexities of an increasingly diverse global workforce (Zhou and Lee 2015).

For the organization such as the school, supporting intercultural bonds contribute to a caring community in which all of its constituencies namely; students, faculty, staff and parents feel closely connected to the school in a significant and meaningful way (Katz, 2008). This positive and reinforcing climate of interaction between various constituencies is created through the reinforcement of value and mutual support (Gordon, 2008). This includes dealing with challenges associated with intercultural communication of varying approaches to direct versus indirect communication, nonverbal communication, and perceptions of leadership (Hofstede, 2001). Techniques such as open communication, inviting questions, active listening, and recognition of difference are essential components for breaking down culture barriers and heading off misunderstanding (Bennett, 1998).

In summary, the development of intercultural bonds in a community is a sign that can be measured with different instruments, and the dimensions of the social competences such as sensitivity, communication effectiveness, commitment to diversity networks and use of diversity as a source of learning an innovation can be considered (Deardorff, 2006). The progression of these skills is a lifelong process and the development that are expected to contribute to improved individual and collective performance in the school setting (Fantini, 2009).

4. Dual leadership and management structures in Chinese International Schools

International schools function as a distinctive and changing field of educational practice marked by complicated tensions and ambiguities (Bunnell, 2016). In China the leadership picture for these schools is particularly unique, with a much more common form of dual management and leadership in many schools. This is frequently a system where power is divided in decision-making between a school principal (who handles administrative work) with a School Management Team (SMT) and a school board school. (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012). This pattern reflects a general feature of Chinese institutions for which the dual-line system has long been adopted since the year 1949 (Li & Zhang, 2010). Chinese international schools typically adopt a hybrid approach to governance, integrating Confucian principles with Western educational and administrative frameworks (Hayden & Thompson, 2013; Walker & Dimmock, 2000). These schools hope to take Chinese and western educational models and combine the best of the two in order that students can develop as citizens of the world who can think bilingually in Chinese (Mandarin) and who are aware of the two cultures (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). This bi-cultural background is not only theoretical, but entrenched in the life of the school-community, caring and well-being, and respect for both traditional and innovative practices (MacDonald, 2006).

The Chinese education model is Confucian-oriented and attaches importance to education; as a result, it stresses endeavour, reflection, and moral obligation to pursue education which is tended to be realised as self-actualization and profound understanding (Li, 2002). China is often associated with rote memorization and an authoritarian educational system. Nevertheless, in the 21st century, this perspective has evolved, integrating student-centered methodologies, prominently exemplified by such educational systems such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum.

In this context, the dual leadership model in Chinese schools can take multiple forms. Whereas the so-called “island status” of international schools, characterized by their relative independence from host-country domestic regulation, might be a feature of (older) international schools, Chinese international schools tend to be part of highly-centralized systems with control being held by the Ministry of Education (Zhou & Bray, 2007). Yet, recent educational changes have also advanced the idea of distributed leadership, in which principals share power with teachers in order to encourage a broad participation in school-wide decision-making and work (Harris, 2008). Such distributed leadership is often formalized in teaching-research groups and/or mentorship systems, which are consistent with the collectivity (i.e., social orientation toward communal learning) promoted by Confucian cultural values (Walker & Qian, 2015). One key feature in Chinese internationalizing schools is that management is local, profit driven and takes form in the stamp of Chinese work culture, with expatriate managers filling middle level positions (Bunnell, 2019). This can lead to a situation in which expatriate teachers do not feel valued, which can cause the problems of job dissatisfaction and high rates of turnover when the situation is not managed well (Poore, 2005). Thus, the success of dual leadership depends largely on the capacity of the leaders to negotiate these cultural differences in an effort to reconcile policy imposition with bottom-up flexibility (Hallinger & Lu, 2013).

5. Using CHAT: Exploring the Interconnections between Dual Management, Cultural Interactions, and Performance

To comprehend how dual management and leadership function within a Chinese international school that promotes intercultural relationships impacting performance, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) serves as an effective analytical lens. The school can be viewed as a complex, dynamic activity system where various elements interact to achieve defined objectives.

Defining the Activity System:

Subject: This refers to the collective of individuals working towards a shared goal. Within this context, it includes the dual leadership (local and expatriate leaders, the principal, as well as teachers, staff, students, and parents (Engeström, 1987).

Object: This denotes the material or challenge that the activity aims to address. In the case of the school involved in this study, the objective is aligned to its mission statement which states that the school intends to provide the comprehensive education and training of world-class standards to students, who excel not only intellectually but also in their physical health, mental well-being, and intercultural understanding (Vygotsky, 1978).

End Result: This represents the anticipated outcome of the system's efforts. The expected results include enhanced student performance (academic success, analytical thinking, and problem-solving abilities), improved intercultural competence among all community members, and a thriving, inclusive school environment (Hofstede, 2001).

5.1 The Benefits of Dual Leadership

Mediating Tools and Rules: Within the CHAT framework, the two management structures act as mediating artifacts (or tools) and guiding principles that shape the activity system. The Principal, School Management Team (SMT), community leaders, local and foreign leaders serve as interconnected governance mechanisms. The formal and informal norms and guidelines regarding their roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes (e.g., centralized governance, decentralized leadership elements, Confucian values) significantly influence the modes of action (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

This system inherently mediates relationships. The presence of local and expatriate staff, potentially from diverse cultural backgrounds and holding different leadership and management perspectives, introduces cross-cultural dynamics in communication and decision-making. The ability of dual leadership to navigate and integrate effectively across two or more cultural contexts (bicultural leadership) becomes a vital mediating skill in this activity system. Leaders who possess cultural awareness, empathy, and adaptability can bridge cultural divides, facilitate collaboration to address cultural differences and ultimately drive positive intercultural outcomes (Bird & Osland, 2004).

5.2 Intercultural Relationships as Object, Process, and Outcome

Intercultural relations are not merely incidental but are central to the activity system, fulfilling multiple roles. The school actively fosters these relationships through its “East Meets West” philosophy and commitment to interculturalism (Chen, 2005). Furthermore, transcultural relationships play a crucial role in achieving performance outcomes. Enhanced interaction allows for the integration of diverse knowledge bases and perspectives, serving as a catalyst for creative performance and problem-solving within multicultural teams.

Community: The Ningbo community within which a Chinese international school operates, is inherently diverse, encompassing individuals from various national, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. The dual leadership model influences the structure and dynamics of this community. For example, institutionalized teacher collaboration through teaching-research groups, along with the influence of collectivist Confucian values, affects interactions among community members and impacts learning outcomes (Baker, 2006).

The division of labour, which implies who performs what tasks toward the objective is also shaped by the dual leadership structure. For instance, how administrative and political responsibilities are allocated, along with the roles of local and expatriate staff, can either facilitate or hinder intercultural collaboration. When the division of labour fosters shared accountability and mutual respect among different work areas, it enhances the school's intercultural fabric and contributes to improved collective outcomes (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012).

5.3 Contradictions and Expansive Learning

A central aspect of CHAT is its focus on identifying inconsistencies or contradictions within an activity system (Engeström, 1987). In the context of this dual-administered international school, sources of contradiction may include:

- **Primary Contradictions (between elements):** These involve conflicts that may exist between elements such as software and implementation strategies, or formal rules versus informal decision-making. Individual leaders within the dual structure may experience inner conflicts regarding their bicultural identities or leadership roles.

- **Secondary Contradictions (between elements):** These arise particularly in situations involving dual subordination. Conflicts may occur between the *subject* (e.g., expatriate teachers feeling undervalued) and the rules (e.g., local management's profit-oriented concerns). Additionally, discrepancies between the *tools* (e.g., Western pedagogical methods) and the *community* expectations (i.e., traditional Chinese learning styles) frequently create communication and value conflicts.
- **Tertiary Contradictions (between systems and new models):** The introduction of new educational frameworks or the alignment of various curricula can lead to tensions.
- **Quaternary Contradictions (cross-activity-system):** The school's activity system may be at odds with other systems in the broader environment, such as local government agencies or accreditation bodies, particularly given the ambiguous nature of international schooling.

While these contrasting possibilities are inherent in dual leadership, CHAT posits that such contradictions are not merely hindrances but rather opportunities for expansive learning and transformation (Senge, 1990). When dual leadership acknowledges these tensions and actively seeks to engage with them such as being receptive to dialogue and adapting motivational strategies to cultural preferences, the activity system evolves. This allows for a reassessment of practices, analysis of situations, and the modelling, testing, and implementation of new approaches, which can then be evaluated and refined until effectively integrated into routine practice (Senge, 1990). Throughout this reflective process, dual management may transform potential conflicts into opportunities for innovation and improved cross-cultural relations, thereby enhancing school performance. The ability of dual leadership to cultivate a positive and supportive work environment is crucial for fostering change.

6. Methodological considerations for research

Exploring the intricate relationship between the two leadership managements roles, using CHAT as the theoretical framework requires a sound methodology. Because activity systems are both systemic and dynamic, qualitative tools are particularly useful for capturing the subtleties of learning and development in educational contexts. I utilized a case study design and collected data by means of different methods. In order to highlight the different components of the activity system and their interactions, the methods I employed included:

Observation: Both formal and informal observations of daily life in a school, management and leadership team meetings, classroom interactions how everyone interact to actualize the school's mission and vision. Those illustrated how *tools*, *rules*, and *division of labour* mediate action and relationships.

Document Analysis: Examining school policies, curriculum documents, communication plans, and results reports also offered a sense of formal rules and goals. The history of the school and structure itself, as well as its dual management system, was also taken into cognizance, as they are a central principle within CHAT to make sense of the historical build-up of contradictions and change. From an investigation of these dynamics, I was able to illuminate how the duo management framework, in its function as an intermediary, influences intercultural relations and school performance and, how expansive learning might take place to resolve tensions and generate improvements.

7. Analysis of results

For structured and unstructured observations of daily school life, the management team's meetings, class incidents, I concentrated on identifying the members of the activity systems in the school. Through the mapping of relations between the different parts, and not least through the identification of contradictions in and between the parts, I could arrive at an answer to the first research question. Examination of school policy, curriculum documents, communication practices, and reports also provided a picture of what the school had aimed to do and wanted to achieve, this set of analyses was particularly important in responding to the second research question. The history of the school and its two types of leadership and management set-ups were also considered. History is a key principle in CHAT because it is through history that the dialectical movement of the constitution of contradiction and changes takes place. A response to the third research question was developed by examining the history of the school. By analysing these processes, I have been able to illuminate the mediating function of the dual management practice as

a mode that governs the intercultural relations and that has an effect on the school as a whole and how expansive learning can address tensions for change. Hence, I am able to offer the recommendations below:

8. Recommendations

Following the analysis and in an effort to respond to the three research questions presented in this paper, some suggestions are made for Chinese international schools where a regular dual management and leadership model might be applied and where CHAT may be used as a prism:

- **Develop Bicultural Leadership Capability:** Develop local talents and expatriates and invest in their development in the domain of cultural fluency, adaptability, empathy and conflict resolution. This will allow them to work more efficiently across cultural divides and exploit them as an asset.'
- **Formalize Intercultural Communication Guidelines:** Define clear communication guidelines recognizing and valuing alternative communication styles (direct versus indirect, low-context versus high-context). Promote active listening, afford the possibility of clarification and take advantage of visual materials to reduce misunderstanding.
- **Facilitate Intentional Intercultural Interaction and Collaboration:** Establish and maintain programs and activities to foster regular and constructive intergroup and intercultural interaction and collaboration among students, faculty, and staff members representing the racial/ethnic heritage of students and recruit faculty, staff members and students. This might involve cross-cultural project teams, mentorships, and cross-cutting professional learning communities that are consistent with the notions of distributed leadership.
- **Inherit Cultural Tradition and Spirit:** Inherit both Chinese and Western cultural essence and educational concept in the daily work of the school system. This equitable practice, based on the school's "East Meets West" vision, upholds the school's distinctiveness and broadens understanding of a variety of viewpoints.
- **Systematically Resolve Conflicts:** On the basis of the content of the activity system, we regularly examine it for potentially arising contradictions, especially for cultural and dual management contradictions. Use a formal process, like Engeström's expansive learning cycle in **Figure 4** below, to collaboratively explore these tensions and co-create new insights.

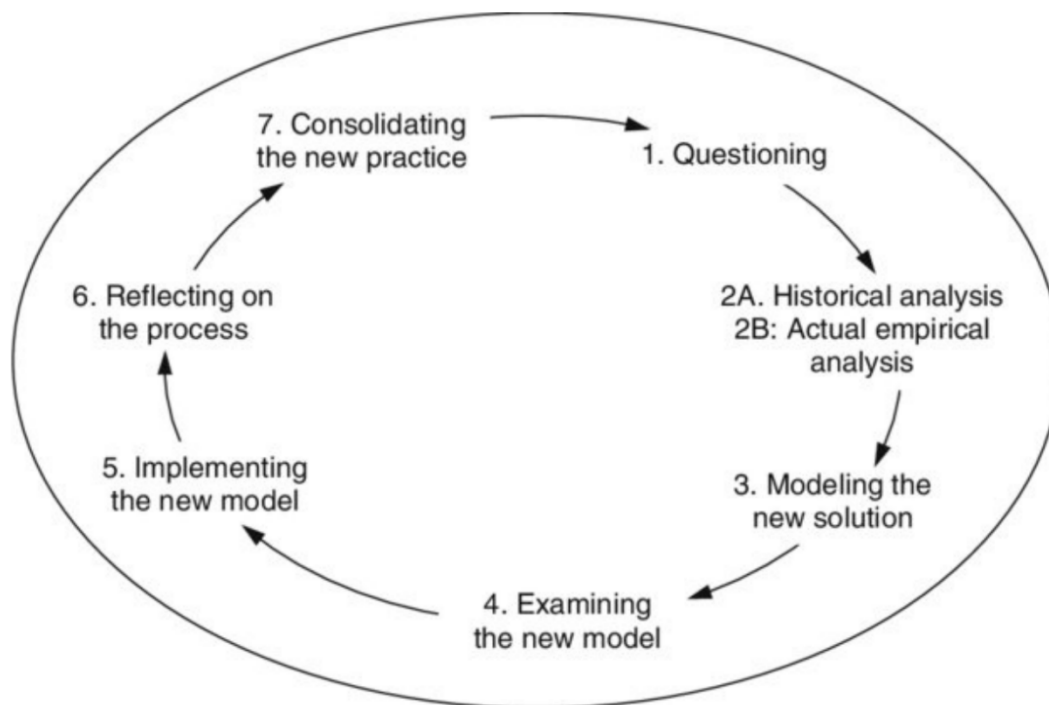


Figure. 4 The expansive learning circle. Source: Engeström (2001).

Here below is a breakdown of each component of the dynamic learning circle (1-7):

1. **Questioning:** First is to identify and challenge current practices within the activity system. In a dual-administered international school, this involves acknowledging potential paradoxes, particularly with regard to cultural divides and dual management arrangements.
- 2A. **Historical Analysis:** This involves studying the historical genesis of the activity system to see how the present contradictions have arisen. For the Chinese international schools, this would mean having to reflect on the historical development path of the school's dual management and the principles it has been led by.
- 2B. **Actual Empirical Analysis:** This entails studying the present empirical condition of the activity system. In particular, taking account the tools, rules and the division of labour as mediating factors, I would include field observations, such as everyday life experience at school, leadership meetings, work in the classroom, and study of documents (school policy and curriculum, communication plans and reports) to understand how tools, rules and division of labour influenced actions and relationships, and how contradictions were initiated.
3. **Modelling the New Solution:** At the solution phase of the process (contradiction solving), collaboratively generate a new model or solution to resolve our specific observed tensions, based on our analysis of the opposing forces. This may be related to innovation in communication, collaboration or to leadership standards, within the co-management model.
4. **Examining the New Model:** An alternative new model is then tested and developed. This critical analysis is necessary to verify the new solution and to present satisfactory solutions to the paradoxes.
5. **Implementing the New Model:** This next phase represents implementation of the new model into the activity system. It is here that theoretical answers are validated in reality.
6. **Reflecting on the Process:** Post-implementation, a process-wide introspection is done. This means assessing the new practices and assessing what went well and what can be done better.
7. **Consolidating the New Practice:** Lastly, if the new model is found to be effective, it becomes a part of the standard practices of the activity system. This results in the change and development of the activity system.

By implicitly adhering to the principles of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, a Chinese international school of dual management structure is able to systematically examine its operations, confront inherent dilemmas and make use of its distinctive leadership structure in a strategic manner to support the development of strong intercultural collaborations that will facilitate growth and obtain superior school effectiveness and student achievement.

9. Conclusion

The Cultural-Historical Activity Theory discussed in this paper successfully offered a broader and more investigative framework to explain how one of Management and Leadership's (dualistic) dynamics in a Chinese international school can sustain enhanced performance through the intercultural relationship. As an activity system, evaluation was conducted in the school system, which interacts as a complex constellation of subjects, objects, tools, rules, community and division of labour in effecting the aim of developing the whole student and achieving organization success.

A model of dual leadership, representing two principals and two IB program coordinators, of a sample school (Chinese and foreign) was proven to be effective. When two leaders possess bicultural competence where they can successfully negotiate multiple cultural contradictions, a split leadership model becomes rich ground for growth. This is done by using the contrasts in culture for innovation, encouraging teamwork and establishing an adaptable climate that respects diverse opinions. The establishment of intercultural relationships is both an end in itself and an intermediary by-product in this activity system, which results in increased cognitive and problem-solving skills, team work, as well as academic and organizational skills. But the contradictions are endemic to a system that has trouble making up its mind between one culture and two managers. These might include conflicts about how leadership

should look, preferred communication tastes or simply expectations informed by different cultural backgrounds. The strength of the CHAT model as suggested in this article is its ability to identify these contradictions as drivers of change. By acknowledging and dealing with these tensions, the schools can develop their activity system through expansive learning processes of critical reflection, modelling new practices, and their successive implementation. This dynamic adaptation enables dual management to shape the quality and depth of the borrowing and lends a strategic character to intercultural mixing, pushing relations forward beyond the point of cohabitation to full integration and synergy geared towards the attainment of positive educational outcomes.

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