Education as Political Mediation: Identity, Language, Curriculum, and Leadership in Policy-Heavy School Systems

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ABSTRACT:

Education constitutes a central arena in which state power, national identity, language ideology, and social inequality are produced, negotiated, and reproduced. From the perspective of political sociology, schooling functions not only as a system of knowledge transmission but also as an ideological and selection apparatus that legitimizes social stratification through discourses of meritocracy, curriculum design, and language policy. This study develops an integrated theoretical framework to examine how macro-level state ambitions are translated into meso-level school leadership practices and micro-level classroom enactments within policy-heavy and centralized education systems. Drawing on political sociology of education, theories of nationalism and citizenship formation, language policy and planning, curriculum theory, and educational leadership studies, the paper conceptualizes education as a key mechanism of nation-building and social reproduction. It analyzes how national identity is constructed and normalized through curricular knowledge, language-in-education regimes, and everyday school practices, while also interrogating the ideological tensions embedded in these processes. Particular attention is given to language policy as a political technology that can produce either additive or subtractive bilingualism, with significant implications for equity, cultural recognition, and educational access. Central to the analysis is the role of school leaders as meso-level policy mediators. Rather than viewing policy implementation as a linear process, the study foregrounds leadership as an act of sensemaking, interpretation, and negotiation shaped by institutional constraints, accountability pressures, and local contexts. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is employed as a cross-cutting analytical and normative frame to reveal the contradictions between holistic,

future-oriented educational goals and performance-driven, examination-oriented reform logics. Through global comparative insights, the study identifies recurring risks in centralized systems, including symbolic compliance and narrow instrumentalism, while highlighting leadership strategies that enable critical adaptation and equity-oriented enactment. By centering the mediating role of school leadership, this paper offers a meso-level analytical lens for understanding the complex intersections of identity, language policy, curriculum reform, and leadership in contemporary state-led education reforms, with particular relevance to the Chinese context and broader comparative education research.

Keywords: School leadership; National identity; Language-in-education policy; education enrolment; inclusive education system

1. Introduction

Education has never been a politically neutral enterprise. Far from serving merely as a technical system for knowledge transmission, schooling constitutes a central arena in which states seek to cultivate national identity, regulate linguistic and cultural diversity, shape citizens' values, and reproduce or reconfigure social hierarchies. From a political sociology perspective, education operates simultaneously as an ideological apparatus and a mechanism of social selection, embedding dominant narratives of meritocracy, citizenship, and belonging while often obscuring the structural conditions that generate inequality. Understanding contemporary education reform therefore requires moving beyond pedagogical debates toward a deeper examination of how state power is articulated, mediated, and enacted through schools. In policy-heavy and centralized education systems, this dynamic becomes especially pronounced. States articulate ambitious macro-level goals—such as national unity, social stability, modernization, and ideological coherence—through curriculum standards, language policies, and accountability mechanisms. Yet these ambitions rarely translate directly into classroom practice. Instead, they are filtered through layers of interpretation and negotiation, revealing a persistent gap between policy intent and lived educational realities. This gap is not accidental but structural, arising from the interaction between centralized governance, local contexts, and human agency within schools.

At the heart of this translation process lies the meso-level of educational leadership. School leaders are not passive implementers of policy but active sensemakers who interpret, prioritize, and adapt state mandates within the constraints of resources, school culture, teacher capacity, and community expectations. Their work is inherently political, involving constant navigation between compliance and adaptation, ideological alignment and pedagogical integrity. How leaders manage these tensions profoundly shapes whether reforms result in superficial symbolic compliance, narrow instrumentalism, or meaningful educational change. This study brings together several strands of theory to construct an integrated analytical framework for examining these processes. First, drawing on political sociology of education, it conceptualizes schooling as a site of social reproduction, highlighting the role of ideology, hidden curriculum, and meritocratic discourse in legitimizing inequality. Second, theories of nationalism and citizenship formation illuminate how education functions as a key technology for constructing national identity, through curricular narratives, language regimes, and everyday school rituals. Third, language policy and planning perspectives reveal how language-in-education choices reflect deeper ideological positions, producing either additive or subtractive forms of bilingualism with significant implications for equity. Fourth, curriculum theory provides tools for analyzing the curriculum as both a political text and an enacted practice, shaped by tensions

between qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Finally, educational leadership and policy enactment theories foreground sensemaking, mediation, and agency in translating policy into practice. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is introduced as a cross-cutting conceptual frame that sharpens this analysis. By emphasizing systems thinking, anticipatory competence, normative reflection, and collaborative action, ESD exposes the limitations of performance-driven and examination-oriented reform logics. It offers a normative lens through which to assess whether education systems are cultivating not only compliant and skilled individuals, but also reflective, responsible, and critically engaged citizens capable of addressing long-term societal challenges. Through global comparative insights, the study situates these dynamics within a broader international context, demonstrating that while national histories and ideologies differ, the fundamental tensions between state control, educational equity, and local agency are widely shared. By focusing on the mediating role of school leadership, this paper proposes a meso-level analytical lens for understanding how identity, language policy, curriculum reform, and leadership intersect in contemporary education systems. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing China's ongoing education reforms, while also offering transferable insights for other centralized and policy-intensive contexts.

2. Results

2.1 Political Sociology of Education & the State–School Nexus

From the perspective of political sociology, education is not a neutral endeavor but a critical nexus where state power, ideology, and social structures are produced and contested. Schooling functions as a complex ideological and selection apparatus, serving the dual purpose of disseminating knowledge while simultaneously perpetuating existing social hierarchies. This process begins with ideology, which, as Marxist theory suggests, allows education to function as a powerful tool for maintaining inequality. It promotes the dominant narratives of the ruling class, which can obscure systemic inequities and foster a false consciousness among marginalized students, a critique that remains highly relevant in contemporary educational discourse (Sharma, 2023). This ideological function is often masked by the pervasive belief in meritocracy. As Batruch et al. (2022) argue, the conviction that schools offer a level playing field legitimizes social and income inequalities by downplaying the profound role of privilege and structural barriers in personal achievement. Consequently, education, under the guise of fairness, ultimately reproduces existing social stratifications, effectively serving dominant interests (Zhu, 2024).

This reproductive function is further reinforced through the hidden curriculum, the unspoken norms, values, and expectations embedded within educational contexts. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, scholars have shown how educational institutions perpetuate class structures by privileging the cultural capital of dominant classes (Farid et al., 2021; Reay, 2022). Concrete mechanisms such as selective admission processes that favor students from more educated backgrounds (Thomsen, 2018) and school tracking systems that segregate students based on perceived ability (Reichelt et al., 2019) serve as powerful tools of social sorting. The effect is amplified as families leverage their cultural, social, or financial capital to secure educational advantages for their children, making education both a potential vehicle for upward mobility and a potent mechanism for the reproduction of class differences (Guo, 2022; Guo et al., 2021). By perpetuating narratives that frame failure as a personal rather than a systemic issue, these ideological undercurrents effectively mask the socio-political dimensions of educational inequity (Burak, 2020).

Within this framework, broad state goals such as national unity, social stability, and economic modernization are translated into specific educational aims. States universally leverage education as a primary instrument for achieving these societal objectives, often through centralized policy mandates designed to create standardized and unified educational systems (Burde, 2007; Vodenko, 2019). However, the

implementation of these top-down policies invariably reveals a significant gap between state ambitions and local realities. This policy-practice gap represents the disparity between the intended outcomes articulated in policy documents and the on-the-ground experiences of schools. As Spillane (2005) emphasizes, local school districts and their leaders act as crucial mediators, interpreting and enacting state mandates in ways that are shaped by their unique contexts. This process of translation often leads to varied, and sometimes divergent, implementations of educational standards.

Educational leaders are thus positioned as pivotal figures who must navigate the complexities of translating abstract political goals into the daily routines of school life. The success of this translation is fraught with challenges and is contingent upon numerous factors, including resource availability, teacher training, and the existing school culture (Sacre et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2010). International examples, from disability policy in Malawi (Wånggren et al., 2022) to digital technology integration in Norway (Madsen et al., 2019), demonstrate that the effectiveness of even well-defined policies often diminishes when confronted with the realities of the classroom. Therefore, understanding the state-school nexus requires a language that captures this political salience, recognizing that leadership is not merely administrative but a deeply political act of interpretation, negotiation, and mediation between centralized state objectives and the complex, lived realities of school communities.

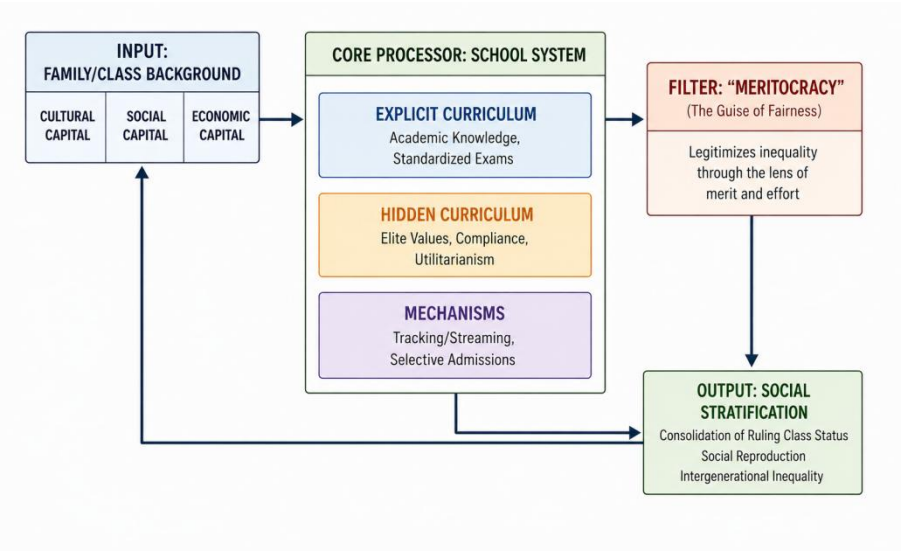

Figure 1 A Conceptual Framework of Education as a Social Reproduction Cycle

2.2 Theories of National Identity & Citizenship Formation

The formation of national identity and citizenship is a central project of modern schooling, mediated through a complex interplay of theoretical constructs and institutional practices. Foundational to this field is the classic dichotomy between civic and ethnic nationalism, which provides a starting point for understanding how belonging is defined. Civic nationalism is conventionally understood as an identity based on shared citizenship and collective political values within a defined territory, while ethnic nationalism is grounded in common ancestry, culture, and language. However, this neat binary has been subjected to extensive critique for its failure to capture the nuanced realities of national identity. As Roshwald (2015) notes, the sharp distinction is often overly simplistic, as most nationalisms contain both civic and ethnic elements in varying degrees.

The limitations of this dichotomy become particularly apparent when examined through a critical lens. From a postcolonial perspective, Tinsley (2018) argues that the purportedly universalist claims of civic nationalism can

obscure subtle patterns of racial and cultural exclusion, thereby reinforcing existing power dynamics. This critique is echoed in studies of diverse societies where the ideal of a unified civic identity often clashes with the potent realities of ethnic politics, suggesting that these two forms of nationalism can both contrast and coalesce within a single national framework (Pandey, 2024). Consequently, scholars have increasingly argued that the civic-ethnic paradigm is an ethnocentric construct that inadequately captures the global spectrum of nationalist sentiments (Heiskanen, 2023), pointing instead to the existence of hybrid identities that challenge traditional dichotomies by encompassing both civic and ethnic elements (Si & Wu, 2025).

To better grasp the social construction of nationhood, it is necessary to move beyond formal political definitions toward more sociological concepts. Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" remains indispensable, suggesting that nations are cultural artifacts created through shared narratives, symbols, and media that foster a collective identity among individuals who will never personally meet. This sense of imagined fraternity is sustained, as Michael Billig argues, through "banal nationalism," wherein the nation is unobtrusively flagged in the daily life of its citizenry through mundane rituals, symbols, and habits of language (Samuel-Lajeunesse et al., 2012). These concepts reveal how national identity is not only declared in grand political gestures but is constantly and quietly reinforced in everyday life. As an alternative to identities grounded in territory or ethnicity, the theory of constitutional patriotism has also emerged, positing that political attachment can be based on a shared commitment to liberal democratic principles and constitutional values, offering a more adaptive and inclusive model of belonging (Tabachnik, 2018).

These theoretical constructs are made tangible within society through what can be termed education's identity technologies, the fundamental mechanisms through which national identity and values are transmitted and reinforced. These technologies include official textbooks, school rituals, moral and patriotic education, and the overarching school culture. Textbooks, in particular, serve as primary cultural artifacts that normalize a specific vision of the nation, presenting historical narratives and societal values that align with state interests (Gotling, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). This content is explicitly supported by moral and patriotic education embedded within the curriculum, which aims to cultivate citizens committed to national ideals through the promotion of specific virtues, values, and civic duties (Kosheva & Kovalevskyy, 2018; Petrov et al., 2021). The affective dimension of identity is further cultivated through school rituals, such as flag-raising ceremonies and national day commemorations, which engage students emotionally with national narratives and instill a sense of shared belonging (Batareina & Korobchenko, 2022). Together, these technologies work within the broader school culture to create an environment where the national ideology is both taught and experienced. However, these technologies are not without contestation, raising ethical questions about the balance between fostering patriotism and encouraging the critical thinking necessary for a robust civil society (Hand, 2010).

2.3 Language Policy & Planning (LPP) and Language-in-Education

At its core lies the exploration of how language choices are formulated and implemented, impacting everything from national identity to individual opportunities. The core of the LPP comprises three interconnected activities: status planning, concerning the social status and official use of a language; corpus planning, concerning the structure and standardization of the language itself; and acquisition planning, concerning the ways in which the language is taught and learned, primarily through the education system. These planning efforts are not neutral; they are driven by underlying language ideologies—the prevailing beliefs and values about the language and its users—and implemented through language management processes. These management strategies can view language as a problem to be solved, a resource to be nurtured, or a right to be protected (Selmier et al., 2014).

China's approach clearly views language as an important social resource and a crucial tool for political engagement, a process heavily influenced by the promotion of socialist core values at all levels of education and society (Tian, 2024; Xue et al., 2023). According to Lei Ping (2025) language is the most important matter to be given the importance when comes to matter of education however currently is becoming increasingly prevalentand also has provided with a lot of innovative methods to develop certain important matters such as learner motivation by using this types of tools can able to make learners to understand the language much better.

The ideological underpinnings of a state's language policy have profound implications for how multilingualism is treated within its education system. A key distinction arises between additive and subtractive bilingualism. Additive bilingualism, which encourages the development of a second language while maintaining and valuing the first, fosters cognitive flexibility and cultural richness. In contrast, subtractive bilingualism occurs when the acquisition of a dominant second language comes at the expense of the student's mother tongue, often leading to cultural dislocation and linguistic insecurity (Børhaug & Manral, 2024). The choice between these approaches is a direct reflection of a state's language ideology. Policies that result in subtractive bilingualism, such as the erosion of minority language use in educational settings, reveal an ideological stance that prioritizes linguistic homogenization for geopolitical or national unity goals (Jia & Pai, 2021).

In response to the inequities produced by subtractive policies, pedagogical theories and practices have emerged that align with an additive, resource-oriented view of language. Translanguaging, for instance, conceptualizes multilingual speakers as possessing a single, integrated linguistic repertoire and argues for pedagogical approaches that allow students to draw on all their linguistic resources to make meaning (Menon & Pallavi, 2022). This practice directly challenges monolingual classroom ideologies and validates students' complex identities. Translanguaging is a core pedagogical principle within the broader policy framework of Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). MTB-MLE is an educational model that uses a child's first language as the initial medium of instruction, building a strong foundation for learning additional languages. Research consistently shows that MTB-MLE not only improves academic performance and social cohesion but also enhances students' confidence and sense of belonging by valuing their linguistic and cultural heritage (Ancheta & Ochoco, 2024; Narvacan, 2023; Sultana, 2021).

Ultimately, the constellation of policies, ideologies, and practices that constitute a nation's language regime has critical implications for equity. A regime that imposes a dominant language while devaluing others creates significant barriers to educational access and success for marginalized linguistic communities, thus functioning as a mechanism of social reproduction. The classroom teacher becomes a crucial agent within this regime, as their language proficiency and pedagogical choices mediate the effects of macro-level policies. An educator proficient in students' languages who employs inclusive strategies like translanguaging can create a more equitable learning environment, fostering deeper engagement and understanding (Zhang et al., 2023). Conversely, a teacher who enforces a strict monolingual policy, willingly or not, becomes an instrument of a subtractive and inequitable system. Therefore, analyzing a nation's language-in-education policy requires examining the constructs that guide Mandarin promotion versus minority language maintenance, and more importantly, the specific mechanisms from teacher training to pedagogical frameworks like MTB-MLE that produce either equity or inequity for students.

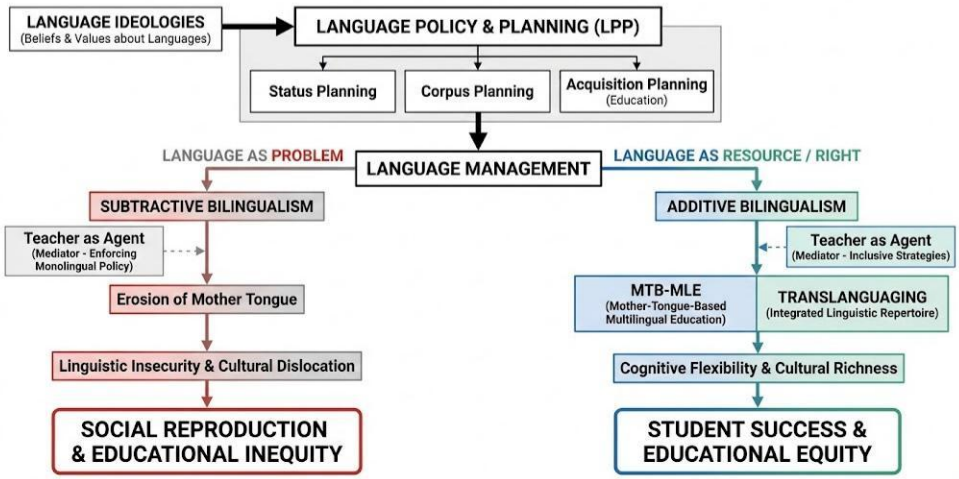

Figure 2 LPP and Language-in-Education

2.4 Curriculum Theory & Reform

The field of curriculum theory provides the essential language for understanding how educational knowledge is selected, organized, and transmitted. It moves beyond the simplistic view of curriculum as a mere list of subjects to be taught, instead framing it as a site of social, political, and pedagogical contestation. The historical trajectory of curriculum studies reveals a progressive deepening of this understanding, moving from prescriptive, technical models to more critical, sociologically-informed frameworks that are indispensable for analyzing contemporary reforms.

The foundations of modern curriculum thought can be traced to classic models that grappled with the fundamental structure of educational experience. Ralph Tyler's highly influential objectives-led model, for instance, conceptualized curriculum design as a linear, rational process aimed at achieving predefined learning outcomes. This product-oriented view was challenged by theorists like Lawrence Stenhouse, who argued that curriculum should be understood as a process, emphasizing principles for teachers to explore and test in their classrooms rather than predetermined ends. Joseph Schwab further complicated this by proposing a practical approach, viewing curriculum as a dynamic conversation among teachers, students, subject matter, and the milieu, requiring constant deliberation and adaptation. These foundational debates established a core tension between curriculum as a pre-specified product and curriculum as a situated, emergent process.

Building on these foundations, sociological theories offered a more critical lens, exposing the hidden structures of power and control embedded in curricular choices. Basil Bernstein's concepts of 'classification' and 'framing' are paramount here. Classification refers to the strength of the boundaries between different subjects or categories of knowledge, while framing refers to the degree of control that teachers and students have over the selection and pacing of what is learned. Together, they reveal how the very structure of the curriculum can subtly reproduce social hierarchies by valuing certain forms of knowledge and pedagogical relationships over others. This sociological perspective is complemented by Michael Young's influential concept of "powerful knowledge," which argues for the curriculum's essential role in providing all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with access to specialized, abstract knowledge that transcends their everyday experience. For Young, a key purpose of schooling is to ensure equitable access to this powerful knowledge, empowering students with new ways of thinking about the world.

Gert Biesta (2010) provides a vital contemporary framework for synthesizing these ideas by proposing that education always serves three overlapping and often competing functions:

qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Qualification refers to the transmission of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that qualify students to do something, such as enter a profession. Socialization is the process by which students are integrated into existing social, cultural, and political orders. Finally, subjectification describes the process of becoming a subject, an individual with agency, autonomy, and the capacity for critical, independent judgment. This tripartite framework allows for a nuanced analysis of any curriculum, revealing how it simultaneously attempts to equip, integrate, and emancipate the learner.

These theoretical lenses culminate in the understanding of curriculum as a dual entity: it is both a political text and an enacted practice. As a political text, the official curriculum embodies the ideological intentions and policy directives of the state, reflecting dominant societal values and goals (Musofer & Lingard, 2020). However, this intended curriculum is never simply transmitted. It is interpreted, negotiated, and ultimately re-made by teachers and students in the dynamic context of the classroom, becoming an enacted practice (Priestley & Philippou, 2018). The persistent gap between policy and practice, where the ideals of reform often fail to translate into meaningful classroom change, highlights the crucial agency of teachers and the powerful influence of local school cultures (Lewthwaite et al., 2014; Yang, 2022). This analytic framework is crucial for reading China's reform trajectory, which has seen a stated shift from rote knowledge transmission toward an emphasis on core competencies, inquiry, and integration. It allows us to ask critical questions about how these reforms are being interpreted and whether they are genuinely shifting practice or being subsumed by the persistent pressures of a high-stakes examination system. The integration of cross-curricular values, such as moral education and ideological-political education, can be analyzed through this lens as a powerful tool of socialization, which must be examined in relation to its impact on the educational functions of qualification and, most critically, subjectification.

2.5 Educational Leadership in Policy-Heavy Systems

In policy-driven, highly centralized education systems, school leaders play a crucial role at the meso-level, responsible for coordinating macro-level national goals with micro-level classroom practices. Their role transcends mere administration, becoming a complex political and cultural activity involving interpretation, negotiation, and transformation. To understand how national identity goals, language policies, and curriculum reforms are implemented at the grassroots level, a theoretical perspective capable of capturing the dynamics of leadership is essential. This perspective can be constructed by integrating existing leadership models with theories of policy implementation and meaning construction.

Leadership literature offers a variety of influential models that illuminate different aspects of the principal's role. For example, instructional leadership emphasizes the principal's direct involvement in core tasks such as instruction, curriculum, teaching, and assessment. Numerous studies have shown that student learning outcomes improve when leaders provide targeted professional development training, foster a collaborative culture, and directly engage in instructional practices (Bendikson et al., 2012; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2013). Complementing this is transformational leadership, which focuses on motivating and inspiring employees toward a shared vision and fostering accountability, often by evoking a sense of moral mission. This approach is particularly important for driving change and can incorporate cultural elements, such as drawing on Confucian traditions to shape leadership practices within a Chinese context (Solansky et al., 2017). According to Vesudevan (2024) higher education institutions should build the elements of strategic connection and objectives for the matter of innovation in terms of education. The practical way of leadership practices into the context of operations

More recent theories have shifted the focus from the individual heroic leader. Distributed leadership, for example, conceptualizes

leadership as a practice spread across multiple individuals and groups within an organization. By fostering shared responsibility, it can enhance teacher ownership, build organizational resilience, and create the conditions for innovation and effective policy enactment (Leithwood et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2025). Expanding the view outward, system leadership describes leaders who not only manage their own schools but also work collaboratively to influence and improve the broader educational system, recognizing the interconnectedness of institutions and policies.

These models provide typology of leadership practices, but the core process through which leaders mediate policy is best understood through the concepts of policy enactment and sensemaking. Leaders do not simply implement policies as written; they actively enact them. This involves a dynamic process of interpretation and translation, where abstract policy goals are made meaningful within a specific organizational context. Sensemaking is the cognitive and social mechanism through which leaders and their staff grapple with the ambiguity and complexity of new mandates, collectively constructing an understanding that guides their response (Jimerson & Fuentes, 2020). In a policy-heavy system like China's, where leaders must navigate central directives, the unique pressures of state accountability mechanisms, the influence of Party committees, and the logic of "campaign-style implementation" (Schnack, 2016; Tan & Dimmock, 2014), this sensemaking function is paramount.

The central challenge for leaders in such regimes is navigating the persistent tension between compliance and adaptation. The pressure for compliance with standardized, top-down directives is immense, often leading to symbolic implementation or narrow instrumentalism that stifles local innovation and fails to address inequities. However, effective leadership for equity and innovation requires creative adaptation, where central policies are thoughtfully tailored to meet the specific needs of the school community (Bush & Ng, 2019; Wang et al., 2022). This is where leadership models converge with the process of sensemaking. By fostering a culture of trust and collaboration (instructional leadership), inspiring a shared commitment to equity (transformational leadership), and empowering teachers to co-own the change process (distributed leadership), leaders can create the organizational capacity to move beyond mere compliance and engage in meaningful adaptation. This integrated, meso-level lens is therefore essential for analyzing how school leaders mediate the complex and often conflicting demands of national identity, language policy, and curriculum reform in their daily work.

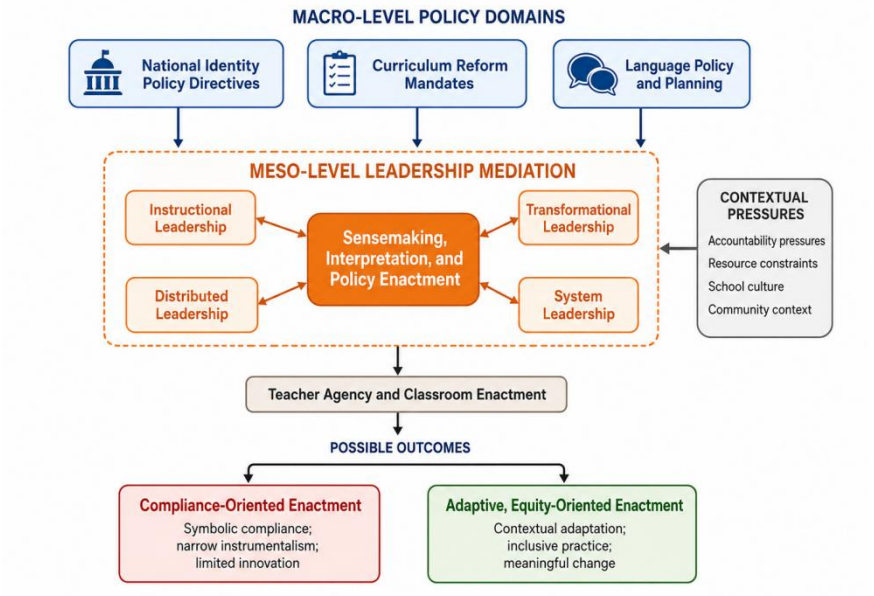

Figure 3 School Leader ship as Meso-Level Policy Mediator

2.6 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a Cross-Cutting Frame

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) serves as a vital cross-cutting conceptual frame, providing both a normative orientation and an analytical tool for contemporary educational reform. It moves beyond being a mere curricular topic to function as an integrative paradigm that re-contextualizes the purposes of schooling in an era of complex, interconnected global challenges. ESD's primary aim is to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to address pressing sustainability issues, thereby demanding a holistic re-evaluation of curriculum, pedagogy, and leadership. This is achieved through the cultivation of a specific set of interrelated key competencies that, when taken together, enable individuals and communities to act for a more just and sustainable future.

Central to ESD is the development of systems thinking, the ability to recognize and understand the complex interconnections between local and global issues across social, economic, and environmental domains. This competency challenges the fragmented, discipline-based structure of traditional curricula, pushing learners to see beyond isolated problems and appreciate how different systems interact and influence one another (Bertschy et al., 2013). Closely related is anticipatory thinking, which involves the capacity to envision multiple future scenarios and evaluate the potential long-term consequences of present-day actions. By fostering this forward-looking perspective, ESD prepares students to navigate uncertainty and risk, a crucial skill that is often contingent on teachers' own perceptions and pedagogical confidence (Mulyadi et al., 2023). These cognitive competencies are guided by normative competence, the ability to collectively reflect on, negotiate, and apply the values and principles of justice, equity, and integrity that underpin sustainability. This dimension requires a capacity for critical reflexivity, empowering learners to question dominant norms and articulate a reasoned ethical stance on sustainability issues (Holst et al., 2020).

However, understanding and values are insufficient without the capacity for action. ESD therefore emphasizes strategic thinking, which entails the ability to collaboratively design and implement innovative actions that advance sustainability. This competency bridges theory and practice, yet it is an area where the professional development of educators often falls short, hindering the effective implementation of sustainability education (Kraker et al., 2017). Finally, none of these competencies can be effectively realized without collaboration, the skill of learning, working, and problem-solving in diverse, multi-stakeholder groups. Collaborative competence is essential for navigating the complex and often contentious process of creating sustainable outcomes in real-world contexts (Wilhelm et al., 2019). The most effective pathways for integrating these competencies often involve transdisciplinary, project-based pedagogies that require significant investment in teacher professional development (Corres et al., 2020; Lohmann et al., 2021).

The true power of ESD as a theoretical lens lies in its capacity to illuminate the tensions inherent in many modern education systems. There is a fundamental conflict between the holistic, long-term, and inquiry-based nature of ESD and the short-term, performance-driven logic of high-stakes examinations. The intense pressure of standardized testing often leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and a focus on rote memorization, directly undermining the development of the critical, systemic, and collaborative competencies at the heart of ESD (Madaus & Russell, 2010).

2.7 Global Comparative Insights: Linking Identity, Language, Curriculum, Leadership

To fully grasp the dynamics of educational policy in a specific national context, it is instructive to situate that context within a broader comparative frame. While every nation’s history and political culture are unique, the fundamental challenges of using education to shape identity, manage linguistic diversity, and direct social change are universal. By examining brief comparative vignettes, it becomes possible to move beyond country-specific anecdotes to identify

transferable mechanisms and recurrent tensions that illuminate the interplay between nation-building, language policy, curriculum, and leadership. A global perspective serves to sharpen our understanding of what is distinctive about the Chinese case and generalizable, providing a more robust analytical framework for the chapters that follow. The central goal is to understand how macro-level state ambitions are translated, mediated, and often contested at the meso-level of school leadership and the micro-level of classroom practice, and to identify the common risks and strategies that emerge in policy-heavy, centralized systems.

The intertwining of nation-building, language policy, and curriculum design is a powerful and recurrent theme in modern statecraft. Education is rarely, if ever, a neutral space; it is a primary arena where the state seeks to cultivate a unified citizenry and a cohesive national narrative. Language, as both a medium of instruction and a potent symbol of identity, is a key instrument in this project. The cases of newly independent or post-conflict states offer particularly stark examples of this nexus. In Ukraine, for instance, language policy since its independence has been inextricably linked to the existential project of forging a national identity distinct from its Russian heritage. As Carlà and Constantin (2025) analyze, the country's evolving language laws, which mandate the primacy of the Ukrainian language in education, are driven by a deep-seated concern for societal security and national consolidation. The curriculum, therefore, becomes a direct vehicle for this political goal, tasked with promoting a specific linguistic and cultural identity as the bedrock of the nation-state. A similar dynamic can be observed in post-independence contexts like Timor-Leste, where the official recognition of Portuguese and Tetum was a deliberate political act aimed at unifying a diverse populace and constructing a shared national identity in the wake of crisis (Wu & Zhang, 2023). In Kazakhstan, the post-Soviet promotion of the Kazakh language through the school system serves the dual purpose of elevating a national identity while attempting to manage the legacy of Russian linguistic dominance (Shakenov et al., 2024). In each of these cases, the state explicitly harnesses status planning (elevating one language over others) and acquisition planning (mandating it through schools) to achieve the overarching goal of nation-building.

However, not all states pursue a monolingual or assimilationist model. Other regimes demonstrate a more pragmatic, managed approach to multilingualism. Singapore stands as a classic example of using a bilingual policy to balance the competing demands of national integration, ethnic diversity, and economic pragmatism. As Anh and Hanh (2020) explore, Singapore's framework strategically positions English as the language of commerce, technology, and inter-ethnic communication, while simultaneously requiring students to learn an official mother tongue (Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil) to maintain cultural heritage. This approach is not a celebration of linguistic diversity for its own sake, but a carefully managed strategy for nation-building that seeks to create a unique Singaporean identity that is both cosmopolitan and culturally rooted. The curriculum directly reflects this ideology, emphasizing intercultural understanding as a core civic competency. This contrasts sharply with contexts where a single dominant language is promoted for ideological unity, such as in China, where the historical promotion of Mandarin has been central to the nation-building project across different political regimes, often at the expense of sidelining minority languages and identities (Daly, 2018). The case of Turkey further illustrates how curriculum and language policy can become an arena for ideological contestation, where competing religious and secular nationalist movements vie to embed their narratives within the educational system (Gülmez, 2017). These cases collectively demonstrate that language-in-education policy is never simply a technical choice; it is a profound political and ideological statement about the nature of the nation itself.

Regardless of whether a state's approach is assimilationist, integrationist, or pluralist, the translation of these grand national projects into educational reality is fraught with complexity and

risk. The implementation of strong state aims, particularly in centralized systems, is consistently challenged by the gap between policy and practice. This is where leadership becomes a determinative factor. Leaders at the school level are not passive conduits for policy; they are active interpreters who must make sense of and enact policies within their specific local contexts. This process is laden with pressures that often lead to predictable forms of implementation failure, most notably symbolic compliance and narrow instrumentalism.

Symbolic compliance occurs when schools and their leaders adopt the superficial trappings of a reform to satisfy external accountability pressures, without fundamentally changing their core practices or beliefs. In a system driven by top-down mandates and performance metrics, it is often safer and more efficient to appear to be compliant than to engage in the difficult, resource-intensive work of genuine change. This creates a disconnect between policy aspirations and classroom reality. As Gibton et al. (2000) found in their study of school autonomy, principals may formally adhere to centrally mandated policies while feeling that the true spirit of the reform such as local empowerment and pedagogical innovation is diminished or lost. This risk is particularly acute in the context of nation-building curricula. A school may dutifully display patriotic symbols, hold required ceremonies, and use the official textbooks, yet the underlying culture and pedagogy may remain unchanged, rendering the policy symbolically present but practically inert.

An equally harmful risk is narrow instrumentalism. This tendency arises when the multifaceted goals of education are reduced to specific, measurable outcomes prioritized by accountability. When national goals are clearly defined and tied to performance indicators, leaders may focus solely on producing graduates who demonstrate the expected results, whether high test scores or outward displays of patriotism, while neglecting broader, more comprehensive educational objectives. As Nurdin (2017) observed in the context of civic education, an overemphasis on cultivating patriotism in students leads to an instrumental approach of rote memorization and ideological conformity, rather than critical engagement with the civic values that underpin a sound democracy. This instrumentalism limits the potential of the curriculum and undermines students' capacity for deep reflection and independent thinking. China's flexible emergency education policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted this risk, as the emphasis on ensuring continued academic achievement could marginalize deep learning and student well-being (Zhang et al., 2020).

Effective leadership strategies in these policy-heavy systems are therefore those that consciously work to mitigate these risks. This requires moving beyond a simplistic dichotomy of compliance versus resistance toward a more nuanced stance of critical and creative adaptation. Leaders must find ways to reconcile external mandates with the authentic needs of their students and communities. A collaborative approach is often key. As Mavrogordato and White (2019) assert, school leaders play a critical role in shaping how policies are enacted, and by engaging teachers, families, and community members in the implementation process, they can build more resilient and equitable practices. By fostering a collaborative culture, leaders can create a space for collective sensemaking, where the school community can work together to interpret state objectives in a way that is meaningful for their local context. This process of navigating the tensions between state aims and local realities is central to leadership in centralized regimes (Bush & Ng, 2019).

In conclusion, these global comparative insights reveal that the enactment of state-led educational reforms is a complex and contested process. The vignettes from various nations show a common pattern of states using language and curriculum as tools for nation-building, but with widely varying approaches and outcomes. The primary risks in this process, especially within centralized systems, are the drift toward symbolic compliance and narrow instrumentalism. By focusing on the transferable mechanisms of alignment architecture, teacher capacity, assessment

coherence, and community engagement, it becomes possible to construct a meso-level analytical lens. This lens, which centers on the mediating role of school leaders as they navigate the currents of policy and practice, provides a powerful framework for examining how national identity, language policy, and curriculum reform are being enacted in the specific context of China.

3. Discussion

The preceding analysis highlights three interconnected unresolved issues. First, there is a conceptual integration gap. National identity, language policy, and curriculum reform are closely linked in educational practice, yet they are often examined through separate theoretical traditions. Language policy shapes belonging and participation, while curriculum provides the institutional space in which national narratives and language ideologies are enacted. Because curriculum is interpreted and reconstructed in practice rather than simply implemented as written (Priestley & Philippou, 2018), these domains need to be understood as interacting policy fields rather than isolated areas of reform.

Second, the synthesis points to a meso-level mediation gap. Centralized policies do not move directly from the state to the classroom; they are interpreted and translated through school-level leadership. Leaders engage in sensemaking, prioritization, and adaptation within particular institutional contexts (Jimerson & Fuentes, 2020). Research on curriculum reform and policy enactment similarly shows that leadership plays an important role in shaping how policy is understood and enacted (Uljens, 2018; Terhoven, 2022). This suggests that leadership should be conceptualized not merely as an implementation factor, but as a central mechanism connecting macro-level policy intentions with micro-level educational practice.

Third, the review identifies an equity-related tension in policy enactment. Language-in-education policies can either support or constrain linguistic diversity, participation, and educational access. Subtractive approaches may disadvantage speakers of less institutionally valued languages, whereas translanguaging and multilingual education provide more inclusive alternatives (Børhaug & Manral, 2024; Jia & Pai, 2021; Menon & Pallavi, 2022). Leadership is therefore important in determining whether centralized policies are enacted through mechanical compliance or adapted in ways that respond to diverse learners and local contexts (Khalifa et al., 2016; Mavrogordato & White, 2019).

A related tension concerns Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD emphasizes systems thinking, reflection, collaboration, and long-term educational purposes, yet these aims may conflict with performance-driven and examination-oriented systems (Madaus & Russell, 2010). Whether such goals become meaningful educational practices depends partly on teacher capacity and institutional support (Corres et al., 2020; Lohmann et al., 2021). Taken together, these issues support the paper's central argument that education in policy-heavy systems is best understood as a process of political mediation across macro, meso, and micro levels, with school leadership playing a key role in translating competing policy demands into institutional and classroom practice.

4. Conclusion

This paper has developed an integrated conceptual framework for understanding education as a process of political mediation in policy-heavy and centralized education systems. Bringing together political sociology of education, theories of national identity and citizenship, language policy and planning, curriculum theory, and educational leadership, the analysis demonstrates that state educational ambitions do not move directly from policy formulation to classroom practice. Rather, they are interpreted, negotiated, and reconstructed across multiple institutional levels.

A central argument of the paper is that national identity, language policy, and curriculum reform should not be treated as separate policy domains. They intersect in the everyday organization of schooling: curriculum provides a major institutional space through which national narratives and values are communicated, while

language-in-education policies influence participation, belonging, cultural recognition, and access to educational opportunities. These relationships become particularly significant in centralized systems, where multiple policy expectations may converge within individual schools.

The paper therefore positions school leadership as a critical meso-level mechanism of policy mediation. School leaders operate between macro-level state objectives and micro-level classroom enactment, engaging in processes of sensemaking, prioritization, coordination, and contextual adaptation. Their role is not simply to ensure compliance with centrally defined mandates, but to negotiate how competing policy purposes can be translated into workable institutional practices. This perspective helps explain why similar policies may generate different educational outcomes across contexts, ranging from symbolic compliance and narrow instrumentalism to more adaptive, inclusive, and educationally meaningful forms of enactment.

The analysis also highlights the importance of evaluating policy enactment in relation to equity and broader educational purposes. Language policies, curriculum priorities, accountability pressures, and leadership decisions can either reproduce existing inequalities or create greater opportunities for participation and recognition. Education for Sustainable Development further illustrates this tension by emphasizing holistic, reflective, collaborative, and future-oriented learning within systems that may simultaneously prioritize measurable short-term performance. Such tensions reinforce the need to examine not only whether policies are formally implemented, but also how they are interpreted, whose interests they serve, and what kinds of educational experiences they ultimately produce.

Overall, the paper contributes a macro–meso–micro analytical lens for examining state-led educational reform. Its principal theoretical contribution lies in bringing identity, language, curriculum, leadership, and equity into a common framework in which school leadership serves as the mediating link between policy ambition and educational practice. Future empirical research can test and refine this framework across different institutional and national settings, particularly by examining how leadership mediation varies according to accountability structures, school contexts, teacher capacity, linguistic diversity, and local community expectations. Such research would further clarify the conditions under which centralized policy produces symbolic compliance, adaptive implementation, or more equitable and sustainable educational change.

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Author Declaration

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