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**Policies and Practices of and Conditions for
Professional Development for Middle Leaders in
Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges**

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the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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Abstract

Previous studies have confirmed that middle leadership can have a positive impact on institutional governance and change. However, related theoretical conceptions were developed in Western contexts, raising questions about its suitability for Asian contexts, including China, where education systems are highly centralised. Reform efforts in professional development for middle leaders (PD for MLs) lack an informed view through the absence of empirical research in China. There is a reliance on learning from the experience and achievements of research on PD and MLs conducted in other countries. Notably, differences in social background and organisational characteristics make it ineffective to draw on practical experience from Western countries directly. This runs counter to contemporary understandings of the importance of context for system improvement efforts. Conducting localised research in China is therefore a key to institutional reform and enhancing the quality and training of educational institutions.

This study, positioned in Chinese higher vocational colleges (CHVCs), attempts to explore analysing the PD and capacity-building issues for MLs in the Chinese hierarchical education system. Specifically, this study aims to answer two main research questions: 1. What is the status of current provision for PD for MLs in CHVCs? 2. In what ways and to what extent do institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture influence PD for MLs in CHVCs? This study adopted a qualitative phenomenology approach and research methods include document analysis of policies from central, provincial, and institutional level, as well as semi-structured interviews with MLs from sampling CHVCs in Shandong Province. Grounded theory coding method is adopted as a generic approach to organise and interpret the data. On the basis of drawing a basic blueprint for PD for MLs in CHVCs, this study further explores the specific ways in which organisational conditions promote or hinder PD for MLs.

By juxtaposing research findings from different dimensions, this study analyses three basic manifestations and characteristics of professional development in CHVCs. Moreover, the combination of documentary data and interview data with middle leaders, five potential implementation challenges are identified - unbalanced allocation of learning resource, conflict of structural arrangements, internal tension between autonomy and control, ignorance of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) practice, and ambiguous assessment of learning outcomes. This study further demonstrated that the role and conditions of institutions are clearly relevant to the middle leadership construction and the realisation of the institutional governance vision. As such, the mitigation of such challenges can be explained by collective endeavours involving leadership, structure and culture at institutional levels. The findings emphasise the importance of effective institutional leadership in developing PD for MLs practices in CHVCs, and how organisational structure and culture fundamentally shape the form and implementation of PD. Understanding these Chinese-based factors in professional development can help further enrich the knowledge base that has traditionally been generated in non-Chinese contexts.

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Finally, I want to say to my grandfather in heaven that I am living a good life, but I miss you so much. I hope you can see my progress.

Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Ni Zhang

Signature: Ni Zhang

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------------|---|
| MLs | Middle Leaders |
| PD | Professional Development |
| CHVCs | Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges |
| ILs | Institutional Leaders |
| OS | Organisational Structure |
| OC | Organisational Culture |
| PLCs | Professional Learning Communities |
| TRGs | Teaching-research Groups |
| MTSs | Master Teacher Studios |
| MLCs | Middle Leaders Communities |
| STCs | Second Tier Colleges |
| EIP | Experience and Information Presentation |
| CVs | Collegial Visits |
| SRL | Self-regulated Learning |

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 An Overview of This Research

This study is to explore middle leaders' capability-building and leadership construction from professional development participation and how institutional factors influence on the process in the Chinese hierarchical context. Middle leaders (MLs) are the main participants in the practice of distributed leadership theory. In order to adapt to and meet the needs of educational reform and governance capacity improvement, the bulk of studies focus on the capacity-building and development of other participants in leadership practice, such as middle leadership (Bryant, 2019), project leadership (Murphy and Curtis, 2013) and teacher leadership (Chen, 2022). Among them, some leadership workload has been transferred from institutional leaders to MLs in practice; at the same time, the strategic leadership role of MLs in the pursuit of continuous improvement in educational institutions has been discussed by scholars and researchers (Maddock, 2023). Correspondingly, there has been increased research interest in MLs to achieve continuous professional development (PD) in educational institutions. Synthesis of leadership theory and PD literature indicates that leadership construction and development occur in and are affected by the workplace (Lillejord and Børte, 2018, 2020). That is, the role of the uniqueness of organisational conditions in PD needs to be taken into account when developing and enriching leadership theory rather than seeking a one-size-fits-all formula that applies to all conditions.

Given the importance of considering context, clarifying how these theories relate to specific social contexts is the starting point for much of the existing research when exploring the application and development of distributed leadership and PD in non-Western societies (Lu and Smith, 2021). However, reform efforts in PD for MLs lack an informed view through the absence of empirical research in China. There is a reliance on learning from the experience and achievements of research on PD and MLs conducted in other countries, such as US (Davis-Salazar, 2023), UK (Preston and Floyd,

2016) and Australia (Butler, 2019). Notably, differences in social background and organisational characteristics make it ineffective to draw on practical experience from other countries directly this runs counter to contemporary understandings of the importance of context for system improvement efforts. Conducting localised research in China is therefore a key to institutional reform and enhancing the development of educational institutions. This study, positioned in Chinese higher vocational colleges (CHVCs), attempts to explore analysing the PD and capacity-building issues for MLs in the Chinese hierarchical education system. Based on drawing a basic blueprint for PD for MLs in CHVCs, this study further explores the specific ways in which organisational conditions promote or hinder PD for MLs, including institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture. This study contributes to filling the research gap about PD in the Chinese educational environment. Correspondingly, it introduces the practical experience of PD from the Chinese mainland to an international audience, which is especially meaningful for Western countries increasingly aware of the importance of MLs and their PD. Such empirical research could contribute to the limited number of non-Western-centric studies which dominate the international literature.

1.2 Research Context and Background

1.2.1 Policy Background

Vocational education in China is a significant part of the education system and one that has seen more investment in recent years. The law on Chinese vocational education explicitly clarifies that vocational education in China aims to equip students with the comprehensive qualities of professional ethics, professional culture, and professional knowledge and technical skills, required for the pursuit of a certain occupation or professional development (MOE, 2022a). Compared with Western countries, the development history of Chinese Vocational and Technical Education is relatively short. At the beginning of the 1980s, in order to adapt to economic and social changes and the

urgent needs of the social economy, the first batch of Chinese higher vocational colleges (CHVCs) were established. After 30 years of vigorous expansion, a vocational education system with Chinese characteristics has gradually formed (Wu and Ye, 2018), which includes vocational schooling and vocational training (MOE, 2022a). Specifically, vocational schooling can be divided into the secondary and higher levels, while vocational training involves training before employment, apprentice, on-the-job training, re-employment training, entrepreneurship training, and other vocational training (MOE, 2022a). The positioning of different types of vocational schooling in the Chinese education system is shown in Figure 1. Among them, CHVCs offer three years of schooling and cultivate technical and skilled talents for the front line of production in industry and enterprises. Such talents possess specialised knowledge and technology, as well as corresponding operational skills. In recent years, as industrial upgrading and economic structural adjustment have continued to accelerate, the demand for technical and skilled talents in all walks of life is more urgent, and the status and role of vocational education are becoming increasingly prominent (GOV, 2019).

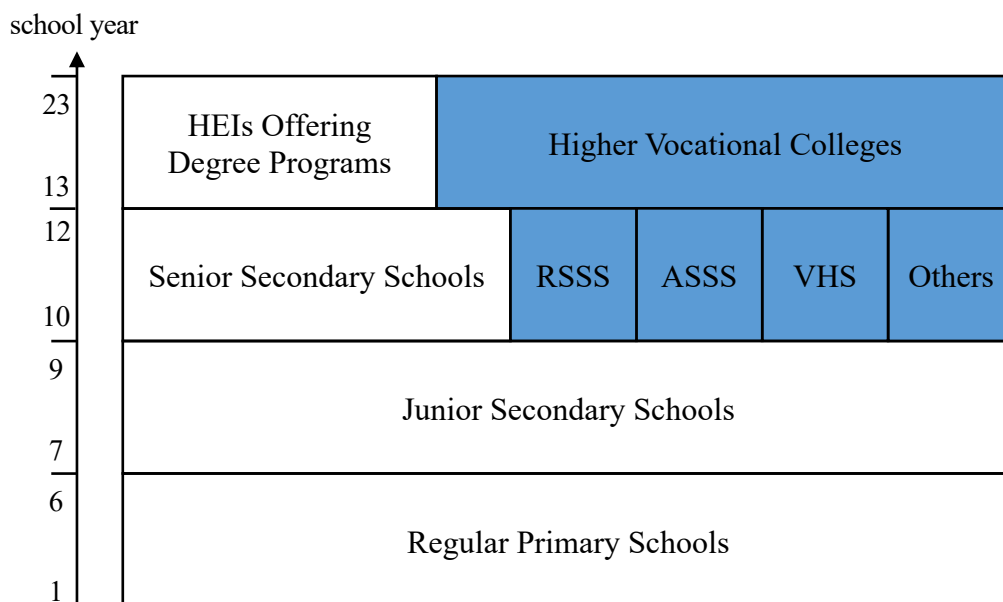


Figure 1: National system of education

Source: 2022 Education Statistics Data. (MOE, 2023a, 2023b).

Note: School year 10-12 (blue) refers to secondary vocational education. *RSSS* Regular Specialised Secondary Schools, *ASSS* Adults Specialised Secondary Schools, *VHS* Vocational High Schools

In this case, the national government made the decision to select several CHVCs for key investment to speed up the construction progress. This is considered a strategic deployment to actively respond to competition in vocational education and adapt to social and economic development (MOE, 2019). To this end, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance in China jointly issued a list, which are major units belonging *High-level Vocational Colleges and Specialty Construction Plan with Chinese Characteristics (Double High-levels Plan)* in 2019. Among them, a total of 56 high-level vocational colleges are selected, including 10 CHVCs at A-level, 20 CHVCs at B-level, and 26 CHVCs at C-level. In the context of the implementation of *Double High-levels Plan*, a series of supportive, effective, and innovative top-level designs have been put into use, including construction principles, development visions, process management, supervision and assessment. Notably, some policy texts explicitly encourage local governments to decentralise power to the institutional level (MOE, 2019), with a clear tendency to reinforce the role of CHVCs-led. As the highest level of vocational school education in China, the development experience and management approaches of such CHVCs have learning significance for other CHVCs.

1.2.2 Professional and Academic Context

Middle leadership and the academic debates surrounding it are a sub-set of educational leadership theory, a field that has been subject to extensive discussion and controversy (MacBeath, 2004; Gunter, 2005; Bush, 2008). The utilisation and conceptualisation of terms are consistently developed and updated under the influence of changing policy and social developments. As the focus of research shifts from institutional affairs to individuals (principals), the concept and models of educational leadership have become rich and continue to increase. Among them, distributed leadership theory, as the result of the decentralisation of management and reflection on solo leadership, has been of interest to researchers, policymakers, practitioners and educational reformers around the globe (Harris, Jones and Ismail, 2022). Based on the theoretical lens of distributed leadership, leadership can be constructed and learned (Gronn, 2010). That is, different

actors in leadership practices can draw on different means to enhance their expertise and thereby achieve policy aspirations and institutional change. As a result, international research has shifted from clarifying practice formats and patterns to exploring the competence construction of leadership practice participants in different contexts. Among them, MLs are seen as the organisational members most likely to take on more leadership workloads in practice. However, academic research on middle leadership in education does not have the same theoretical foundation as institutional leadership (McCulla and Degenhardt, 2016), due to the inadequacy of conceptualisation of MLs and middle leadership (Cranston, 2006; McCulla and Degenhardt, 2016; Dinham, 2016).

As indicated by Maddock (2023), predominantly Eurocentric perspectives - named *Western perspectives* in Chinese literature - limit global insights into how social, cultural, economic, and political conditions, traditions and environments influence academic middle leadership. In the process of introducing and applying them to the Asian context, the issue of matching or fitting such concepts, structures, and practical content with the local social culture has been a focus of discussion among Asian scholars (Hairon and Dimmock, 2012; Hairon and Tan, 2017). Considering the particularity of the Chinese hierarchical context, many Chinese scholars realise the importance of improving the leadership level in educational institutions, the effect of relying solely on descriptive research and summarising the political wisdom and experience from successful leaders is limited (Hu, 2012). After introducing the theory of distributed educational leadership into China, recent studies have attempted to integrate distributed leadership into theoretical and empirical research in the context of Chinese higher education (Lu and Smith, 2021). Different from the controversies and ambiguities in Western literature, the scope of MLs in higher educational institutions (involving CHVCs) is clearly defined in Chinese context - MLs are an essential part of the organisational bureaucratic structure that occupies formal leadership positions and are empowered with position authority (Wilson and Xue, 2013; Lu and Smith, 2021). It has been shown that MLs can be explained and understood drawing on distributed

leadership theory (Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain, 2011; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017).

However, research surrounding MLs and middle leadership in Chinese higher education is still limited even when the scope is clear. Existing research indicates that some jobs are essentially work experience sharing or insightful articles in the non-empirical lens (Tang, 2022). Some empirical research tends to explore the role of middle leadership in teacher professional development and organisational change (Zhang, Wong and Wang, 2022), while the consensus among existing research on middle leadership is limited to the multiple dimensions and complexities of roles and environments (Schloss and Cragg, 2013; Gmelch and Buller, 2015; Thornton et al., 2018; Maddock, 2023). Although the important role of middle leadership in institutional governance and development processes has been evidenced (Harris and Jones, 2017; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017), the support for leadership training and development in higher education institutions is insufficient (Tang, 2022; Cai, 2019). The lack of academic, well-matched PD and ongoing learning to prepare and iterate the capability construction of MLs is a problem that exists in both theory and practice. This problem is more prominent in the context of Chinese higher vocational education (Zhang, 2015). The PD demands and needs, formats and preferences, operating mechanisms, and influencing factors of MLs are unclear. In order to investigate the current situation of PD for MLs and analyse its influencing factors, the structural position of MLs in CHVCs needs to be clarified.

1.2.3 MLs in CHVCs

As an important part of the national school education system, CHVCs has a formal organisational structure, administrative hierarchy, and operational mechanism. Commonly, the positional and administrative hierarchy, as shown in Figure 2, involve senior leadership teams (principal and vice-principals), middle leadership teams (deans and directors, vice-deans and vice-directors), and basic staff (front-line teachers and

administrative staff). Among them, professionals working in CHVCs possess significant duality (GOV, 2019; MOE, 2022b), including undertaking theoretical teaching work and qualifying industry (enterprise) practical experience, as the statutory task for CHVCs is to cultivate high-quality skilled talents for society (MOE, 2022a). Based on this, the relevant departments of the Chinese government encourage different stakeholders from society to jointly participate in the construction and development of CHVCs. As a crucial connecting part of the leadership collective, MLs' work involves both internal construction and external collaboration, as well as teaching and management.

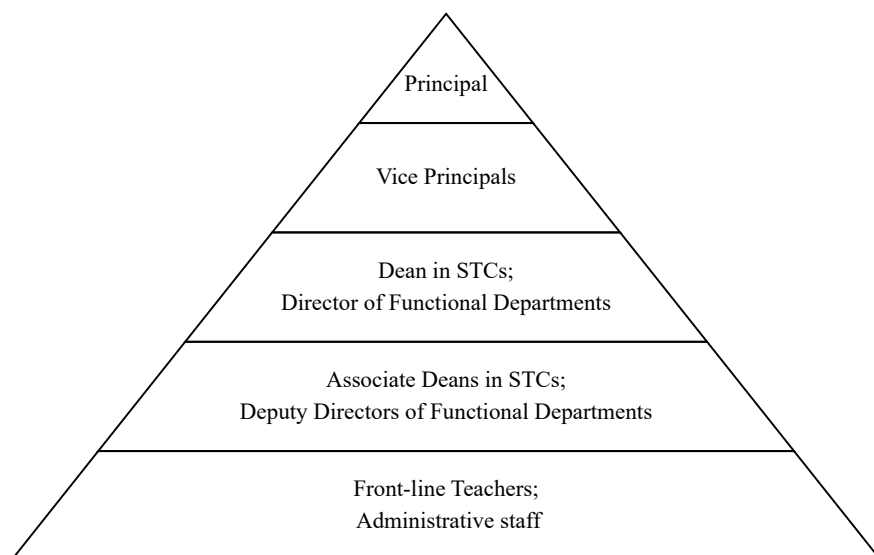


Figure 2: The administrative hierarchy in a CHVC

Similar to universities, CHVCs have a large scale and complex management, which makes it impossible to rely solely on the principal and vice-principal to complete all management and leadership mandates. In this case, the CHVCs set up functional departments and teaching units (Second Tier Colleges) according to the relevant policy requirements issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the provincial Department of Human Resources and Social Security (MOE, 2022a). Although the number of functional departments and functions in Second Tier Colleges (STCs) are not exactly the same, the basic middle management units and leadership

positions are shown in Figure 3. The principal is the administrative head of CHVC, while the vice principal is responsible for different affairs, leading administrative departments, and contacting with STCs. According to relevant policies and guidance (MOE, 2021), individuals occupying formal leadership positions in middle management units are MLs in CHVCs - including (Vice) Deans in STCs and (Deputy) Directors of functional departments. Such MLs are collectively referred to as middle cadres or department-level cadres in official documents. They have a clear scope in government policies and regulations and undertake the management functions of functional departments and STCs (MOE, 2022a). MLs receive vertical management and supervision from the principal and vice-principal, while claiming, assuming, and being distributed a variety of administrative mandates.

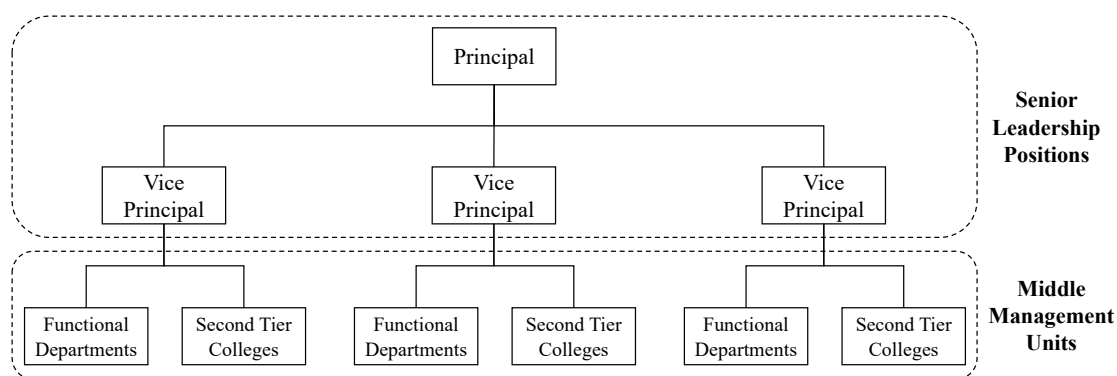


Figure 3: The management structure in a CHVC

In addition to vertical management and accountability, there is horizontal interaction and alignment between MLs in different formal positions in work content and functions aspects. Figure 4 give an example to show the interaction and cooperation among MLs from different functional departments and STCs. Notably, the different offices on the outermost level in Figure 4 refer to functional departments in CHVCs, while Dean and Associate Dean are middle leadership positions in STCs. Indeed, MLs in functional departments are responsible for specific administrative and communal affairs at the institutional level, such as human resources, teaching management, and financial management. In contrast, MLs in STCs take over the different administrative and communal affairs at the departmental level, thereby ensuring the basic operation of the

STCs. It means that there is close cooperation and mutual supervision among MLs responsible for specific domains. For example, the Associate Dean in STCs responsible for teaching and research management often collaborates with the head in the Office of Academic Affairs or Academic Research Office to complete a specific mandate or project. Such type of collaboration is mostly project-oriented or problem-based. With the release and implementation of *the Quality Improvement Plan (2021-2025)*, the principles of hierarchical classification and precise policy implementation have been clearly put forward (MOE, 2021). It is worth considering how MLs in CHVCs constructs its own capability and then improves the level of institutional governance to meet the new needs of social development.

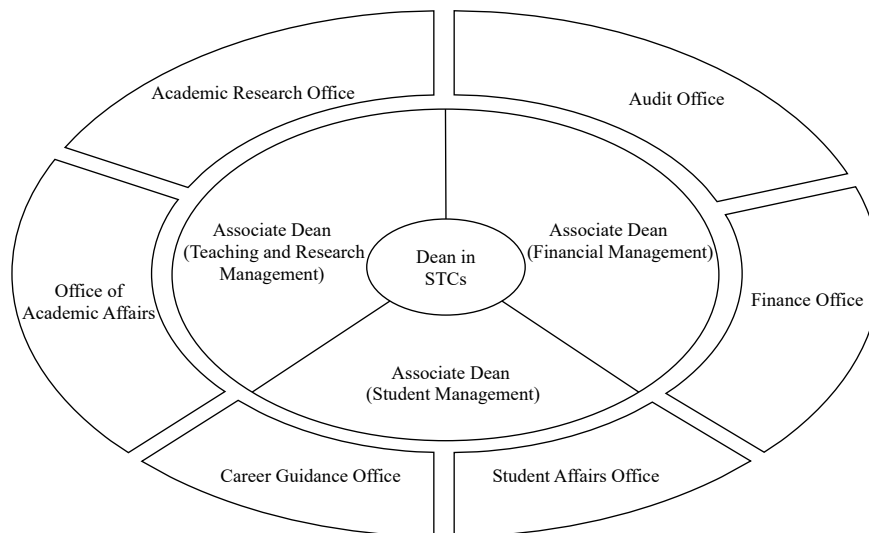


Figure 4: Horizontal interaction and alignment among MLs

1.3 Motivation for This Research

Since this century, distributed leadership is regarded as the preferred leadership theory playing a crucial role in educational organisations (Harris, 2004; Bush, 2013; Lu and Smith, 2021). International research on educational leadership has emphasised capability-building as the most useful antidote or corrective to ‘heroic individualism’ (Gronn, 2010). Distributed leadership and the leadership of one person can also coexist. In this context, the practice and development of distributed leadership theory in a

centralised context deserves further study. As a country with obvious centralisation and authoritative cultural characteristics, the construction and development of leadership based on the Chinese context is still unclear, especially regarding vocational education settings. In addition, the motivation for this study is closely related to my previous work experience. In 2018, I joined a higher vocational college in Shandong Province as a teacher. I have to admit that this is my first contact with vocational education. Before I joined the workforce, I still had stereotypes about vocational education. I thought that the contribution and significance of vocational education to society were far less important than general higher education. As my routine work progressed, I discovered that the potential and role of vocational education exceeded my expectations. The college where I work has a strong enterprising atmosphere. Gradually, this environment also affected me and changed my impression of vocational education. As the content of my work, I was exposed to more policy documents and implementation strategies, which further strengthened my understanding of the development prospects and importance of the field of vocational education. I started observing the work environment and different organisational members at work. As a front-line teacher teaching human resource management, I am sensitive to the behaviours and attitudes of different members in the institution. My colleagues were very united and had a strong sense of belief and purpose. Among them, my superior leader - a deputy dean of a STC - has a heavy workload and pressure. Despite this, she is still keen to participate in some learning activities to improve her personal abilities. At the same time, I can also feel her rejection and complaints about some activities. I am curious about the difference between these activities, and why she would have two opposite attitudes towards different events that are also learning activities. Inspired by my personal experience and thinking, the issue of PD for MLs in Chinese higher vocational education institutions was identified as the core of this study.

1.4 Research Questions and Methodology

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the current status of PD for MLs in Chinese hierarchical contexts, and then discuss how different factors at the institutional level affect PD for MLs. Specifically, this study aims to explore the specific ways in which institutional factors support or hinder the initiation and maintenance of PD for MLs on the basis of analysing the policy aspirations and practical experiences of MLs capacity building in CHVCs. Built on findings from prior research conducted on PD and institutional features, this study selected institutional leadership, organisational structure and organisational culture as three institutional factors that influence PD for MLs. The core research questions of this study include:

1. What is the status of current provision for professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?
2. In what ways and to what extent do institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture influence professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?

A note on terminology that pertains to the whole thesis must be made to clarify what MLs refers to in Chinese contexts. Distinguished from the ambiguity and controversy about the scope of MLs in the Western context, the bureaucratic structure of Chinese educational institutions has a clear definition of MLs. In CHVCs, people who occupy formal leadership positions in functional departments (such as the Academic Affairs Office) and Second Tier Colleges (such as the School of Education) are classified by policy as MLs. They are integrated into the national civil service. Additionally, the direct translation of PD in Chinese is *Zhuanye fazhan*. However, this phrase has different practices and understandings in the Chinese context, emphasising the development of a discipline or cluster. This research focuses on the ongoing development and learning of individuals after they begin their working lives.

The social constructivism paradigm ontology and epistemology are the premises of this research. This study belongs to the category of qualitative research and uses phenomenological research methods to explore the current status of PD for MLs in Chinese hierarchical educational institutions and its influencing factors. Specifically, this study collected data through different research methods, such as document analysis, policy text analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory analysis was used as a general approach to tease out and interpret the data. As a qualitative study operating within the social constructionist paradigm, the goal of this study was to rely on the interviewees' or participants' perceptions of the research phenomenon. Analysing various experiences and subsequently deriving or synthesising a conclusion, rather than starting from a matured theory as the entry point.

1.5 Significance of This Research

With the rise of research on distributed leadership on a global scale, the focus of some international studies has shifted from principals to other leaders in leadership practice, which aims to explore the construction methods and mechanisms of leadership at the institutional level (Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain, 2011; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). Among them, the importance of MLs in organisational change and governance capabilities has been widely recognised (Harris and Jones, 2017; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). However, there is a lack of research on the application and localisation of theories developed in Western societies in the Chinese hierarchical environment. Considering the relatively centralised educational management system in China and collectivist cultural characteristics, it means that the influencing factors and mechanisms of PD for MLs in hierarchical educational institutions may differ from those in Western countries. This study responds to the call for literature review and this need to explore MLs' capability-building and leadership construction from PD participation and how institutional factors influence the process in the Chinese hierarchical context. The study, notably, does not concern itself with ascertaining or evaluating specific PD activity's effectiveness; instead, it is to gain

insights into how MLs construct their leadership and build their capability from PD participation and the influence of institutional factors on the PD process. This study contributes to the Chinese perspective in this field, enriching the theoretical research on middle leadership and PD.

The study makes three contributions to a burgeoning stream of research on middle leadership and PD. Firstly, this study elucidates the specific connotation of middle leadership, as a shifting configuration of role-sets, from PD participation. By integrating instructional leadership and transformational leadership, this study comprehensively interprets the content and goals of MLs' capability-building and proposes an identification method to determine the relevant knowledge and skills they need. Secondly, this study confirms the specific pathways of MLs' capability-building and their characteristics and challenges in practice. This study suggests that the combination of formal and informal PD formats can play a positive role in MLs' capability-building in a hierarchical context. In the process of participating in different PD activities, this study analyses the rules followed by MLs and the communities formed or participated in, thus identifying five challenges. In this sense, this study expands the research on the role of PLCs in the field of PD for MLs. Finally, by focusing on institutional conditions, including institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture, this study fills the gap in the knowledge base regarding the collective impact of different contextual factors on PD for MLs. Among them, the agency interacts with different conditions to influence the bottom-up changes from MLs. This study emphasises that when conditions along the three dimensions in educational institutions are aligned, organisational environments can work synergistically to overcome adverse conditions and generate genuine learning and collaboration. Such insight can help Chinese policymakers develop appropriate interventions and strategies to support PD for MLs in crucial positions of distributed leadership that cultivate MLs' change for effective teaching performance and high-quality institutional governance.

1.6 Thesis Structure

The remainder of this thesis is divided into eight chapters.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 critically reviews the core theories and concepts of this study - leadership theory and professional development. These two chapters first review the development of leadership theories and major leadership models in the international literature. Key concepts regarding middle leadership and MLs are introduced in detail within the perspective of distributed leadership theory. In order to explore the issues of MLs' capabilities and capability-building, the concept of professional development (PD) has been introduced. The theoretical perspectives of international research on PD and the current research status of PD for MLs in China and the West are critically reviewed. Subsequently, previous research surrounding the institutional factors that influence the PD for MLs is reviewed in detail.

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth discussion of the methods of this study. The basic paradigm underpinning this research is explained by introducing the ontology, epistemology and learning belief of social constructionism. At the same time, this chapter elaborates on the appropriateness and implementation procedures of the data collection and analysis tools selected for this study as a phenomenological study. Data management methods, ethical considerations and validity issues that may arise during the research process are then introduced.

Considering the main research questions of this study, Chapter 5 and 6 respectively present the research findings. Based on the analytical framework of this study, in Chapter 5, the status of the current provision for PD for MLs in CHVCs is parsed from three perspectives - typical formats, learning content, and operational mechanisms. Subsequently, Chapter 6 reveals and discusses how institutional conditions, including institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture, influence MLs to initiate and sustain PD.

Based on the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5 and 6, Chapter 7 combines the analytical framework in literature review to analyse the data of this study. It is to explore the policy aspirations and practical needs surrounding PD for MLs in China. Practical challenges faced by PD for MLs are explained in detail. At the same time, based on the path of institutional conditions affecting PD for MLs, the process by which these factors synergised affect the phenomenon of PD for MLs in Chinese hierarchical contexts is revealed.

Chapter 8 concludes the main research findings and contributions of the study. It provides implications for theory and educational practice. Subsequently, the limitations of this study are discussed, and recommendations for further research are provided. The final part of this chapter is a reflection on the development of the researcher.

Chapter 2 Literature Review: Research on Leadership

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, previous research on educational leadership in this study is reviewed. Firstly, educational leadership in a broad sense is introduced to provide a comprehensive understanding. The conceptualisation of educational leadership is examined first, and then two critical theories - instructional leadership and transformational leadership - are explored. Secondly, an important theoretical perspective on distributed leadership is discussed. The second section ends with an examination of existing empirical research on distributed leadership in non-Western contexts with hierarchical environments. Thirdly, the literature related to middle leadership and MLs in higher educational institutions is discussed, with specific reference to the importance of middle leadership construction and institutional support in the process. The theoretical perspective adopted for this research is identified.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Educational Leadership

Since the last century, researchers in different fields have been enthusiastic about leadership research in their areas, publishing different perspectives (Bass, 1990). Discussions about leadership and the need for effective leadership have gradually become a common focus in different fields (Gumus et al., 2018). In parallel to that, within the broad field of education, educational leadership remains contested (Gunter, 2004, 2005, 2012; Gunter and Ribbins, 2003). Prior to the 1990s, there was a lack of empirical evidence to support either the promoted nature or extent of impact of educational leadership (Bush, 2008). Some researchers reflected on theoretical controversy and practical limitations through a series of research reviews. On the one hand, scholars attributed the controversy to a lack of sustained programmatic research to explore causal connections among environmental factors, leadership practices, and school teaching (goals). On the other hand, some scholars believed that the obstacles to

progress in educational leadership research were rooted in the confusion and strong subjectivity of underlying definitions. This slow progress was partially alleviated by the turn of the 21st century. More robust studies and research findings with relevance to practice have emerged in the field of educational leadership.

2.2.1 Conceptualisation of Educational Leadership

As a field of study and practice (Bush, 1995; Heck and Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger and Chen, 2015), knowledge claims and specific practices of leadership are discussed. Among them, the usage and conceptualisation of terminology has been continually developed and updated. Associated with organisational matters of operation and development in educational institutions have been labelled in various ways at different times - educational administration, educational management, and educational leadership (Gunter, 2004). From the 1990s, management was redesigned as technology and system maintenance, and leadership was re-identified as directly related to change and motivation (Gunter, 2004). In time, the term educational leadership became the dominant label and paradigm (Burton and Brundrett, 2005). By its very nature, the form and focus of leadership (management, administration) activities have changed (Gunter, 2004).

In the last two decades, little consensus has developed in the literature on the concept of educational leadership, its importance, role, or associated training (Connolly, Connolly and James, 2000). This is perhaps unsurprising when one considers that there is no consensus, sole definition or interpretation of educational leadership in the literature (Bush, 2008). Indeed, key points across three broad perspectives are identifiable in the international literature, comprising a spectrum of views:

- First, as mentioned above, educational leadership is usually normatively incorporated into themes and discourses related to organisational reform and effectiveness (Gronn, 2009). In this context, Sergiovanni (2005) further clarified

the viewpoint that educational leadership was equivalent to change and defined leadership as a force and ways that can protect, adjust or strengthen the existing conditions within educational institutions, associated with leaders who can bring about change.

- Second, educational leadership is considered to be related to social influence. This view is widely also recognised in non-educational fields (Bush and Glover, 2003; Kruse, 2013). Based on previous research, Leithwood and Riehl (2005) defined the core of educational leadership as the process of mobilising and influencing members within an institution to achieve the organisational vision and goals. Similarly, Spillane and Coldren (2015) defined leadership a relationship of social influence. When leadership is placed in a relationship of social influence, expertise constitutes the basis of authority rather than title or position (Timperley, 2009).
- Third, educational leadership can be construed as comprising a configuration. Due to the diversity of leadership manifestations, Gronn (2010) clarified educational leadership as a shifting configuration of role-sets. He further explained that leadership comes into play when adjustments and schedule were required in practice to accomplish a task. This role was understood as a function, which is closely related to decision-making.

While the concepts of leadership and educational leadership remains murky, a range of literature revolves around (understanding or identifying) what leadership is appropriate for schools and what leadership practices contribute to achieve organisational goals (Crawford, 2012; Gumus et al., 2018). Before the mid-1980s, limited by methodological tools (Jacobson and Cypres, 2012), no specific research on leadership models appeared in the literature during this period. However, some scholars were aware to a certain extent of the profound impact of the specificity of educational settings on theoretical application and leadership practice. By the mid-1990s, they began to explore specific leadership models in educational institutions. Leadership models have become rich and continued to grow, which was dubbed *adjectival leadership* by

Leithwood (1999). Early developments in leadership theory, such as traits, behaviours, and situations, provided the basis for discussions of educational leadership theory.

As shown as Table 1, more powerful and diverse conceptual and methodological tools have been clarified and applied to the field of educational leadership research over the past three decades. The systematic review found that instructional leadership, as one of the oldest models of educational leadership, dominated relevant research for the 25 years until 1995 (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Hallinger, 2014; Bush and Glover, 2014; Gumus et al., 2018). Influenced by external policy reforms, the number of relevant studies has increased significantly after a decade of stagnation. In contrast, research on transformational leadership has been discussed in educational research over the past 30 years (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 1999), which emphasises the profound impact of leadership on followers through the establishment of an organisational vision and culture, organisations, and society. After entering the 21st century, research on distributed leadership has gained prominence globally and has become the most discussed contemporary leadership model in educational research. Notably, in addition to the US, related studies are gradually emerging from Europe (Gronn, 2003; Gunter, 2004; Torrance, 2013), Asia (Li, Hallinger and Walker, 2016; Liu and Hallinger, 2018a) and Africa (Grant, 2008; Bush, Kiggundu and Mooros, 2011). These well-grounded conceptualisations of leadership have been overwhelmingly used in the international literature, in which these models were combined with concepts of institutional governance and improvement (Harris and Jones, 2017; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017), professional autonomy (Kennedy, 2014), and managerialism (Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2006; Maddock, 2023).

Table 1: Basic leadership theories used in this study

| Leadership Theories | Definitions | Representative Scholars | Focus or Assumptions |
|-----------------------------|---|----------------------------|--|
| Instructional Leadership | Instructional leadership is recognised as a normatively desirable role, but the concept of instructional leadership is ambiguous. | Hallinger and Murphy, 1985 | Principal-centred; Interpreted as being top-down and directive; Three key dimensions: Defining the School's Mission, Managing the Instructional Program, and Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate |
| Transformational Leadership | Leadership is an organisational entity to emphasise the distribution and source diversity of leadership; | Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000 | Unfixed leadership behaviours; Focusing on bottom-up participant to stimulate change; Four management dimensions: Staffing, Instructional support, Monitoring school activities, and Community focus |
| Distributed Leadership | Interdependent interactions of members within an educational institution | Spillane, 2006 | The <i>leader plus</i> aspect; The practice aspect |
| | A form of leadership in which learning is shared and knowledge and meaning are co-constructed | Harris, 2005 | Breaking the traditional formal position system within educational institutions to attract expertise; Developing the leadership of organisational members through leadership capacity building |
| | Leadership may be reframed in a way that regarded it as fluid and learnable rather than fixed | Gronn, 2000 | The leadership framework changed by the contours of that configured practice evolves; The content of capacity building related to knowledge base (work-related competencies); Articulating a basis for differentiating hierarchical levels |

The structural positions and roles of MLs present a need for, and demands of, learning on the part of individuals coming into the position or role (Franken, Penney and Branson, 2015). In view of the structural positioning and roles of MLs in CHVCs, their basic work has been clarified in Chapter 1. Specifically, from the perspective of work content, the work of MLs in CHVCs includes teaching and management; from the perspective of work direction, MLs are faced with challenges in working up, down, and across structures and networks; and from the perspective of work scope, their work involves collaboration within and beyond institutions they serve. Overall, the work of MLs involves different fields simultaneously, including maintaining a high emphasis on teacher professional growth and student learning and highlighting the priority of management and political work (Walker and Qian, 2015; Zhang and Pang, 2018). That is, they simultaneously need to possess exceptional expertise and skills in a single field as well as initiate and drive change within the institutions by establishing a commitment to collective success, and hence building and delivering a shared vision. In light of this consideration, to answer the position demands and practical needs of PD for MLs, taking instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership as the outset, this study reviews relevant theoretical and empirical studies.

2.2.2 Research on Instructional Leadership

The term instructional leadership derives from North America. Similar terms include pedagogic leadership and curriculum leadership. As the oldest model linking leadership and learning, early understandings of instructional leadership centred on principals and teaching (Bush and Glover, 2014). It was widely disseminated during the 1980's that principals played a strong and directive role in the effective school development process to improve schools, especially teaching (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985). In this context, policymakers in the US who were searching for policy tools that would transform schools identified instructional leadership as a normatively desirable role. A range of policies have been introduced to encourage principals to fulfil this role. Correspondingly, policymakers regarded the selection and training of principals as one

of the means to implement large-scale educational reforms. At the academic level, despite the attention of scholars, before the 1980s, there were no coherent models and validated instruments for instructional leadership study. Scholars summarised the basic work and tasks of instructional leaders as the key leverage for change, while the concept of instructional leadership was ambiguous.

Several notable models of instructional leadership have been proposed in the literature and the most cited one was developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). The concept of this model proposed three dimensions around the principal's instructional leadership role, which are defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate. These dimensions specifically encompassed ten leadership functions. It is worth noting that this concept was still principal-centred. Furthermore, the instructional leadership model has been interpreted as being top-down and directive (Hallinger, 2005). Based on this instructional leadership model, Hallinger (2001) proposed the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) in annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. As the PIMRS instrument became more widely known, a large body of empirical research suggested that there was little evidence to support the view that principals engaged in hands-on observing and supervising classroom instruction (Hallinger and Heck, 1996). Indeed, principals have indirect effects on teaching in schools through their behaviours acting on school and classroom conditions, especially school culture. Among them, the role of vision and purpose was consistent with leadership research outside the field of education (Kantabutra, 2010).

Despite instructional leadership having prominence in the field of educational leadership, some scholars have questioned its focus and assumptions (Cuban, 1988; Barth, 1990; Lambert, 2002). Instructional leadership has been criticised on two grounds. Firstly, it has been seen as more focused and prominent on teaching rather than learning or learning outcomes (Bush, 2013). This was not in line with the focus on students' learning performance emphasised in policies. Secondly, another major

impediment to effective instructional leadership was trying to make principals solely responsible. This ignored the role of other leaders in practice, such as vice-principals, middle leaders, department chairs, teachers which led to instructional leadership being criticised within the heroic model of leadership. Scholars reflected on and developed instructional leadership. Hallinger and Heck (2010) pointed out that leadership in managing teaching and learning activities in educational institutions was more conceptualised as leadership for learning or learning-centred leadership, which is widely used in the 21st century. Bush (2020) emphasised that instructional leadership has been replaced by learning-centred leadership in the UK and elsewhere. The five principles put forward by MacBeath and Dempster (2009) when defining leadership for learning directly address the above two weaknesses of instructional leadership, emphasising shared leadership and focusing on learning.

2.2.3 Research on Transformational Leadership

Distinguished from instructional leadership which emphasises the purpose and direction of leading, transformational leadership focuses on leading processes. In the 1990s, transformational leadership was introduced into the field of education and received widespread attention and application (Hallinger and Heck, 1996). Scholars identified that the transformational leadership model had two noteworthy features. First, the transformational leadership model did not fix leadership behaviour and power in a single person (such as the principal). Instead, leadership-related power was attributed to individuals or groups that could motivate members to commit to a collective vision (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000). Second, the model focused on bottom-up participation (rather than top-down management) within a hierarchy to lead and stimulate change (Day et al., 2001; Jackson, 2000). Indeed, the transformational leadership model elucidated leadership as an organisational entity to emphasise the distribution and source diversity of leadership. It focused on understanding the individual needs of organisational members and developing a school culture that effectively promotes personal commitment, capacity and growth (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood

and Sun, 2012). Voices from different stakeholders came together to engage in institutional improvement. Principals were required a higher tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty and had the ability to deal with emergencies (Jackson, 2000). As such, skills and management training courses based on capacity development appeared to be of limited use (Hallinger, 2003).

The transformational model was considered by scholars to be flexible, responsive and context-specific (Hallinger, 2003). However, scholars have still questioned this model when reviewing and developing it. First, some scholars suspect that transformational leadership was a tool for leaders to control teachers (Chirichello, 1990). As mentioned above, the model focuses on the role of culture and values on organisational members. Critics argued that the values here belonged to the leader or policymaker. They promoted and required members within organisations to follow such values. Therefore, personal values had the potential to be subjugated to or imposed on external values (Bush and Glover, 2014). Second, the change pursued by the model was not genuinely educational change (Bottery, 2001, 2004). Educational institutions are an important part of the national education system. When organisational members identified with external values and become followers, change was negotiated by leaders and followers. Indeed, this change had strong political dimension (Bush, 2020). To some extent, transformational leadership still came with heroic undertones.

Since the 1990s, the research of educational leadership has grown rapidly. Scholars have taken a keen interest in different types of leadership, corresponding leadership behaviours, and their interaction with the environment. The discourse completed the transition from administration to management to leadership. As the new century dawned, the conceptualisation and empirical study of two conceptual models in educational leadership research helped scholars explore and analyse leadership behaviours in effective schools. They gradually found that the ideal of the solo leader could not achieve the expected organisational goals in practice. For example, Hallinger (2003) explicitly agreed with the argument that past understandings of school

leadership have failed to meet two functional tests: that leadership promotes organisational improvement, and that it is sustainable for the leaders themselves. Searching for a new structure in the field of educational leadership as a framework which encompasses broader concepts and leadership behaviours became an urgent task in the field. In this, distributed leadership was identified as an emerging theory that is able to answer such questions.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Distributed Leadership

In the 1990s, given the global shift to devolved school governance, the educational institutions in almost all Western countries were undergoing a transformation from hierarchical management to autonomy (Carvalho and Santiago, 2010). The devolution of governance to school level allowed educational institutions to have more autonomy in management and requires institutions themselves to take more responsibility for continuous improvement (Pollitt, 2003). Under the influence of market mechanism and New Public Management, educational institutions paid attention to performance appraisal, standards and competencies, and quality assurance system (Torrance, 2013). There was a growing awareness that conceptualised models of leadership that focus on the individual (usually principal) did not deliver significant results in terms of sustained change. Scholars questioned the positioning of the principal as a lone ranger, noting that no single leader can lead an organisation alone (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). After the failure of high-profile superheads in England, people began a move away from models of solo, heroic, charismatic leaders (Gronn, 2003).

The emergence of distributed leadership as a concept was the result of the decentralisation of school governance and reflection on the limitations of solo leadership. When distributed leadership was first articulated and interpreted, it represented the antithesis of the past focus on sole, individual leadership. After scholars and practitioners realised the limitations of solo leadership, they built a leadership theory around horizontal and vertical leadership in educational institutions, based on a

distributed perspective. In such a context, the underlying assumption was that there existed a repository of leadership for assigning leadership to organisational members (Camburn et al., 2003). Correspondingly, policymakers advanced the process of workforce reform by raising expectations for all organisational members, which was an intuitive reflection of distributed leadership in policy discourse (Torrance, 2012). Notably, it was considered by education practitioners and policymakers to be an effective strategy in defusing the principal recruitment and retention crisis, as the greater the pressure on principals, the more they would actively demand decentralisation (Gronn, 2003).

Despite the concepts of shared, democratic and participative were misunderstood to be used interchangeably with distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005), distributed leadership had become the term of choice within the field of educational leadership. Distributed leadership theory provided a new perspective on a familiar theme. However, as a concept, the process of conceptualising and theorising distributed leadership was problematic. In the two decades that followed the foundational and seminal work of Spillane et al. (2001), the literature was replete with contestations and debates around the definition of distributed leadership. Conceptual plurality and the absence of a clearly defined model led to various conceptual confusions (Torrance, 2012). Spillane and colleagues provided and utilised distributed perspectives for leadership practices to emphasise the interactions between tasks, organisational processes, and relationships that occur in educational institutions. In common with most scholars, the outset and position in Spillane's work was concerns about the effectiveness of principals' leadership practices (Spillane and Diamond, 2007), which triggered their commitment to developing a more integrated understanding of leadership as a practice. Spillane (2006) argued that leadership practices were considered as interdependent interactions of members within an educational institution. The perspective of distributed leadership include two levels, namely *the leader plus aspect* and *the practice aspect* (Spillane, 2006).

Firstly, *the leader plus aspect* suggested that in educational institutions, except for the principal, other leaders occupying formal positions, such as deputies and MLs, were equally important. This aspect was further interpreted to acknowledge the work of all individuals involved in leadership practice and not just limited to leaders (Spillane and Orlina, 2005; Harris and Spillane, 2008). The operation of multiple sources of leadership in educational institutions had become the focus of discussions on distributed leadership theory. *The leader plus aspect* was regarded by scholars as one of the key characteristics of organisational change. Secondly, *the practice aspect*, as Spillane's particular contribution to the field of distributed leadership, emphasised interaction rather than action in leadership practice, and the impact of leadership practice on the improvement of educational institutions. This aspect focused on the products of interactions among leaders, followers, and situation within educational institutions (Spillane et al., 2011). That is, the leadership practice was expanded to include two or more participants. According to the leadership function or routine, three types of co-performance were identified as collaborative, coordinated and collective patterns (Spillane and Orlina, 2005).

Harris (2005) agreed with Spillane (2005) on *the leader plus aspect* and suggested that there were multiple leaders at multiple levels. Harris (2004, 2008) highlighted distributed leadership as a way to help build capacity within schools and emphasised the importance of identifying, developing, and retaining potential leaders. She believed that as a particular way of thinking about leadership, distributed leadership advocated breaking the traditional formal position system within educational institutions to attract expertise (Harris, 2004). Meanwhile, distributed leadership was viewed as a form of leadership in which learning is shared and knowledge and meaning are co-constructed (Harris, 2013). It was necessary to develop the leadership of organisational members through leadership capacity building as the means of school improvement (Harris and Lambert, 2003). That is, leadership practices were constructed in the form of interaction and joint action to build school capacity. It implied reconfiguration and reconceptualisation of leadership practices. Notably, this conceptualisation required

policymakers and formal leaders to be adept at building relationships. Because the form of practice at work in distributed leadership was based on relationships rather than organisational structures or boundaries (Harris, 2009).

Gronn (2000) focused on the relationship between centralised hierarchies and distributed practices. He pointed out that the longer-term utility of leadership was dependent upon distributed forms that more accurately recognise the division of labour rather than organisational structure, as not all actions within educational institutions were causally linked to leaders (Gronn, 2003). After years of theoretical and empirical research, Gronn (2010) reached the important conclusion, distributed leadership practices do not disdain formal processes and structure, but complement them to accomplish tasks more effectively. He interpreted this way of thinking as hybridity or a hybrid leadership mix, which meant that the reality of leadership practices involved more than one form functioning at the same time (Gronn, 2009). The binary divide between distributed and solo leadership does not exist in practice and analysis. In addition, Gronn (2000) pointed out that leadership may be reframed in a way that regarded it as fluid rather than fixed. In this connection, his emphasis on capability-building aimed to foster and sustain the perception that leadership was learnable and therefore possible for members to master. Gronn (2010) switched his focus squarely on the leadership of schools and on the capabilities that leaders require to lead learning.

In this context, Gronn (2009) was sceptical of normative work in research. A prerequisite here is that Gronn (2010) construed leadership practice as a shifting configuration of role-sets. The leadership capability framework changed with the development of the contours of that configured practice, which need to reflect that versatility. Accordingly, a fixed capability framework or statement was meaningless. Gronn (2010) illustrated that the scope of leadership capabilities is that leaders need to be able to demonstrate their capability cognitively, ethically and emotionally. Notably, he did not clearly define the framers of the leadership capabilities. One thing that is certain is that assuming the standards and capability writing was done independently

by the government, the capability of leaders would be a reflection of political interests. Furthermore, Gronn (2010) attempted to clarify the content of capability-building. The key issue here was related to the knowledge base, which included general knowledge, domain-specific knowledge and mixed knowledge. The knowledge tended to be in the category of competencies related to the job. The answer to this issue was highly summarised in his work that leaders have to be able to do something if they are to maximise their effectiveness in leading student learning.

Based on the discussion of the relationship between distributed leadership practices and hierarchical contexts, empirical research on the application and development of distributed leadership in non-Western contexts with hierarchical environments has gradually attracted the attention of researchers. Empirical studies have found that distributed and hierarchical forms of leadership are not incompatible, yet the specific allocation processes and mechanisms differ in different countries. For example, leadership practices in Malaysia are distributed through the promotion of local governments (Bush and Ng, 2019), while in China, this distribution practice is accomplished through delegating responsibilities from formal leaders (Lu and Smith, 2021). As such, distinguished with an emergent property in Western literature (Bennett et al., 2003; Gronn, 2000), conceptualising leadership distribution as an allocative practice is likely to be seen as more appropriate for centralised contexts (Bush and Ng, 2019; Lu and Smith, 2021). In this situation, distributed leadership works more successfully when formal leaders allow and support it (Harris, 2005). Tian et al. (2016) regard formal leaders as important gatekeepers who either encourage or discourage others from leading and participating in organisational changes. In essence, these empirical studies resonate with the work of Woods and Gronn (2009) and Tian et al. (2016), which implies a hybrid of the hierarchical and heterarchical leadership approaches.

Broadly, existing empirical research has confirmed the effects of distributed leadership on organisational improvement (Louis et al., 2010; Camburn and Han, 2009; Hallinger

and Heck, 2010) and student achievement (Harris and Muijs, 2004; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Day et al., 2009). The synthesis of distributed leadership in Western and non-Western literature indicates that although distributed leadership responded to the concern about solo leadership, it still faces critique. Firstly, limited research focused on other participants in distributed leadership practices. Since 2010, emerging evidence has attempted to demonstrate the relationship between distributed leadership and some other factors do so via the juxtaposition of various variables revolving around the school principal and the teachers (Harris, Jones and Ismail, 2022; Mifsud, 2023). In contrast, there is still a gap in the research on other participants, such as deans and associate deans. Secondly, the pathways and contents of capability-building for different participants in distributed leadership practice remain ambiguous. A coherent knowledge foundation regarding leadership capability building has yet to be formed. More importantly, the social and cultural contexts of different regions influence the perception and practice of distributed leadership (Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2006). There is currently no distributed leadership model applicable to all contexts (Mifsud, 2023). Given the multiple sources of such influencing factors, empirically studying distributed leadership still needs to cope with various challenges.

2.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Middle Leaders and Middle Leadership

Distributed leadership has been interpreted in some international literature as encompassing different significant manifestations and forms, such as the concept of teacher leadership and middle leadership (Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain, 2011; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). According to Harris et al.'s (2019) systematic review of the knowledge base surrounding MLs and middle leadership in educational institutions, there remains ongoing interest in the role of MLs and leadership practices. However, compared with other areas in the field of educational leadership, the theoretical and empirical research base on middle leadership is still weak. This has led researchers to argue that the current knowledge base on middle leadership remains unconvincing and incoherent. Notably, there is limited internationally (English

language) published literature on middle leadership based on the mainland Chinese context. Contributing to a greater conceptual and theoretical understanding of middle leadership and developing empirical research in diverse contexts would seem both urgent and imperative (De Nobile, 2018).

2.4.1 Conceptualisations of Middle Leaders and Middle Leadership in the Western Literature

Under the influence of managerialism and neoliberalism, the demographics, environment, and organisational aspirations of higher education are changing rapidly (Maddock, 2023). Higher educational institutions have greater managerial authority and are under increasing pressure regarding marketisation and performance (Kruse, 2022; Butler, 2020), which leads to an increase in the workload of the executives in institutions (Butler, 2020). In this context, research around leadership in higher education has greater emphasis on collective or shared leadership approaches to adapt to and respond to external challenges (Bolden et al., 2015; Kezar and Holcombe, 2017). Among them, distributed leadership theory brings the potential for institutional improvement (Hairon, Goh and Chua, 2015; Kezar and Holcombe, 2017). Senior leaders allocated some leadership loads to MLs to alleviate their own pressures (McCulla and Degenhardt, 2016; Dinham, 2016; Irvine and Brundrett, 2016). This trend extends beyond schools to higher education, where MLs are increasingly being asked to take on something far-reaching that significantly impacts higher educational institutions and students and thus has become a key focus of academic research and development (Harris and Jones, 2017; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). Whilst the research context of the term middle leadership can refer to both educational institutions and entire national education systems (OECD, 2015), this study focuses on middle leadership within higher vocational education institutions.

Given the greater maturity of teacher leadership theory, early research around middle leadership has drawn on findings from teacher leadership research (Bassett and Shaw,

2018; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019; Grice, 2019). Despite the body of empirical work that has accumulated, there remains controversy and ambiguity about who the MLs are and what they do (Maddock, 2023). Commonly, researchers use positionality or structural position to define middle leadership and MLs (Schloss and Cragg, 2013; Buller, 2015; Harris et al., 2019; Maddock, 2023). That is, the position and post in the linear and hierarchical institutional structure are vital criteria for defining MLs (Franken, Penney and Branson, 2015). Researchers position MLs between the senior leadership team and the front-line teaching staff (Fleming, 2014; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman, 2015; Gmelch et al., 2017; Tay et al., 2020). Franken, Penney and Branson (2015) pointed out that MLs in higher education occupied a wide range of formal positions, such as heads or chairpersons of departments, heads of schools, faculties and other academic units. Notably, although MLs are defined as ‘in middle’ positional space, the role descriptions assigned to MLs are ambiguous (De Nobile, 2018; Maddock, 2023).

In the context of higher education, especially in universities, the role of MLs has evolved from teacher-in-charge to the manager in an administrative position, further to the leader in institutional improvement (Lipscombe, Tindall-ford and Lamanna, 2023). Some researchers attributed this shift to New Public Management (NPM) practices (Floyd and Preston, 2018; Butler, 2020; Kruse, 2022). Maddock (2023) agreed and further emphasised the role and duties of MLs generally aligned to management, administration, leadership and academic duties (Scholss and Cragg, 2013; Gmelch and Buller, 2015; Thornton et al., 2018). That is, in addition to traditional academic roles, MLs need to demonstrate more vital management skills. Existing research on the description of MLs’ management capabilities is complex and diverse. For example, Floyd and Preston (2018) highlighted that based on the distributed leadership perspective, MLs, particularly Associate Deans, leading strategic cross-department initiatives is the key to department management and budget responsibility. Butler (2020) as well as Bryant, Wong and Ames (2020) found that MLs require the ability to build formal and informal relationships and complex communication skills to manage

complex social interactions. Kruse (2022) concluded that MLs need a broader range of abilities and competence, including responsibility for department, college, and university governance, teacher and student affairs, budgetary management, and community involvement. In short, the roles of MLs vary widely, and even within the same institution, MLs do not have a uniform or single role description (Kruse, 2022). Hence, the researchers call for putting the roles and responsibilities of MLs in context (Lipscombe, Tindall-ford and Lamanna, 2023).

Based on the aforementioned definition and role of MLs, existing research proposed that middle leadership practice commonly involves handling the business of the department and ensuring the academic mission is achieved (Kruse, 2022). MLs are regarded as both buffer and bridge, responsible for connecting senior leaders and front-line teachers for information sharing and communication (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer and Ronnerman, 2020; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman, 2015). Irvine and Brundrett (2016) clarified that they often lead in one context and follow in another. That is, the practice and work of MLs are highly complicated in linear and hierarchical organisational structures (Branson, Franken and Penney, 2016). Such complexity was mainly manifested in accountability and the multifaceted relationships that MLs navigate and negotiate, involving organisational structures and networks of professional and power relationships: up, down, and across the organisation (Grootenboer, 2018; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). Performativity and accountability have been considered MLs' primary responsibilities in practice (Franken, Penney and Branson, 2015). However, recent research showed that whether line management (Bryant, 2019; Farchi and Tubin, 2019), balancing the needs of stakeholders (Irvine and Brundrett, 2016), or direct responsibilities (Koh et al., 2011), increased accountability and performance management lead to tensions between a collaborative and supportive work environment and a supervisory relationship (Grice, 2019; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Lamanna, 2023).

In previous reviews, Bennett and colleagues (2007) identified two key tensions for those occupying middle leadership positions. On the one hand, there was a tension between the expectations placed on MLs from across the school and their loyalty to the departments they were responsible for. On the other hand, there was a tension between the growing school culture of line management within a hierarchical framework and the development of professional cooperation within teams. Franken, Penney and Branson (2015) and Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Lamanna (2023) proved that such tensions can also be used to explain the internal challenges MLs face in higher education. In addition, some researchers have found that MLs in higher education institutions face the challenge of balancing leadership and academic responsibilities (Aitken and O' Carroll, 2020; Freeman, Karkouti and Ward, 2020; Maddock, 2023). Due to excessive administrative mandates, MLs juggle the challenges of leadership and academic responsibilities with little time for academic research, potentially leading to *the death of an academic career* (Chilvers et al., 2018). Kruse (2022) listed other tensions balanced within three key themes (task, organisation, and relationship). These tensions and challenges require MLs to have significant personal energy, reflection, analytic skills, sound judgment, and communication proficiency (Kruse, 2022). However, there were limited (ongoing) PD opportunities for MLs to support their capability-building on entering, assuming, or conducting existing roles (Maddock, 2023; Harris, Jaremus and Gore, 2024). They were found neither to have the total certainty nor the exceptional capability required to cope with these leadership transitions or their complex role relationships. As a consequence, researchers have more recently shifted their focus to explore the capacities and capability building aspects of MLs' roles.

A distributed perspective on leadership in higher education institutions has meant that MLs are highly likely to be individuals for whom workload has been transferred, and leadership has been distributed to them (Bryant and Walker, 2022; Kruse, 2022). Considering the critical role of MLs in decision-making and implementation, studies conducted to date have identified that higher education institutions should pay more attention to the capacity-building and PD of their MLs. Indeed, many researchers have

identified that institutions can and should give more support to MLs when they are elected, promoted, or recruited into that role (Franken, Penney and Branson, 2015; Bryant and Walker, 2022; Kruse, 2022; Davis-Salazar, 2023). Qian and Walker (2020) further identified that principals play a crucial role in cultivating the necessary structures and conditions for PD in schools when analysing conditions for professional learning communities. Furthermore, Bryant et al. (2020) noted that PD and in-service learning for MLs should be closely aligned to the overarching vision of school improvement and as such, providing formal and regular learning opportunities facilitated the contribution of MLs to organisational improvement. Kruse (2022) emphasised that providing professional learning opportunities for MLs should become a routine, both in relation to leadership knowledge and skills, and to teaching and learning.

In summary, existing research has identified the critical position of MLs in schools and higher education institutions, highlighting their potential as innovators and facilitators of organisational development. Middle leadership in higher education institutions should be understood as a highly complex endeavour, conducted within a complex environment, requiring new knowledge and enhanced capabilities. That is, MLs play a key role by developing and building personal competencies in administrative decision-making and instructional leadership at the organisational level, aligning leadership practice to expectation, and implementing policy (Bryant, 2019; DeNobile, 2019; Edwards-Groves et al., 2019). Higher education contexts would do well to consider the implications from the work of Bryant and Walker (2022) who suggested that the PD of all teachers, especially MLs, should be a priority for principals. This argument aligns with studies of instructional leadership that identified nurturing and developing individuals as central to principal leadership practices (Boyce and Bowers, 2018). Considerations for the content of MLs' capability-building and learning will be reviewed in Chapter 3.

2.4.2 Conceptualisations of Middle Leaders and Middle Leadership in the Chinese Context

In the Chinese higher educational context, research on middle leadership has progressed in relation to understanding leadership roles and behaviours, and identifying successful middle leadership practices. However, since China is a non-English-speaking country, there are a large amount of hidden literature in the existing knowledge base. That is, much research on middle leadership in the Chinese environment is written in indigenous languages, which is not acknowledged internationally (Hallinger and Chen, 2015). In this study, these materials are also included in the scope of the review to provide a more powerful starting point for research on the development of middle leadership in China. Indeed, this study sets out to make a modest but unique contribution to the field, by giving a voice to the findings of researchers working in China, and by drawing from understandings in both Western and Chinese contexts.

The conceptualisations, roles, practices, and dilemmas of middle leadership in the English language literature have been discussed in detail above. Compared with its attention in Western society and academia, the amount of research on middle leadership in China, especially in the context of Chinese higher education, is still limited. From a macro perspective, the Chinese education system is considered hierarchical and centralised. The top-down governance model requires MLs in critical positions to play a role in meeting external expectations. Nonetheless, the lack of research on middle leadership in the academic field is under-appreciated by some researchers. In addition to master's and doctoral dissertations, many studies on middle leadership in China were non-empirical in nature (Tang, 2022), which means these studies lack theoretical or data support and only express the author's viewpoint. More importantly, most of the existing research is broad research, which is simply combined with related theories. It has led to existing research, both in Chinese and English, being fragmented and not developed into a systematic theory based on the Chinese context.

Similar to the earlier research focus within the Western literature, the dominant themes of middle leadership research in China involve role conflict, competency requirements, scope of responsibility, and summaries of successful leadership experiences (Lee and Ip, 2023). Among them, some works here are essentially work experience sharing or professional experience articles through the non-empirical lens, identifying that MLs have sophisticated roles and job complexity. They explain top-down decisions and express bottom-up concerns (Duan, 2015; Hu, 2015). Zhang (2016) believed that in the Chinese environment, in addition to maintaining an educational role, MLs also play the role of policy implementer, departmental strategy makers, and organisational information communicators (*middlemen*). Notably, in higher education, many MLs are experts in academic fields. They play a professional leadership role in advancing teachers' professional learning. The researchers found that successful MLs facilitate teacher professional development by creating and maintaining a collaborative school culture. Accordingly, they are defined as organisational culture developers, teaching facilitators, and curriculum coordinators (Li and Han, 2021; Liu, 2021).

Studies on the responsibilities and capabilities of MLs has developed in recent years. These studies focus on leadership ability, academic ability, personal traits and social ability (Zhang, 2015). Specifically, as members of the leadership team, they are required to systematically think and demonstrate flexibility to adapt to organisational development, guiding and motivating teachers to achieve the organisational development vision (Li, 2013). Xie (2014) and Luo (2015) proposed that MLs need to have sufficient disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical skills to supervise teachers' work and support teachers' ability for improvement. Meanwhile, Luo (2015) emphasised that successful MLs need to possess outstanding interpersonal skills, in order to cultivate and maintain relationship networks. However, these capability requirements face many challenges in practice. Huang and Chen (2019) pointed out that MLs need to negotiate and compromise to maintain complex relationships. Due to the heavy workload, it is difficult for MLs to have sufficient time to perform each leadership responsibility effectively (Tang, 2022). More robustly, there is insufficient

support for leadership training and development in higher education institutions (Tang, 2022; Cai, 2019).

Although the above studies are all non-empirical, they inspire empirical research. However, the development of empirical research on middle leadership in China is problematic. A lack of clarity in the conceptual framing of middle leadership with scattered focus has led to various research confusions. The studies were categorised based on four key themes: model studies, role studies, competency assessment studies, and enhancement studies. Significantly, both researchers and practitioners are aware of the critical role of MLs in practice for teachers' professionalism and institutional improvement. Some English-language literature based on the Chinese environment mainly explores and measures the influence of MLs on teachers, especially at the level of teacher learning and teachers' professional learning communities (Tian, 2007; Zhang, Wong and Wang, 2022).

By reviewing related leadership theories, Zhou (2009) combined the challenges faced by local university leaders in the stage of popularisation of higher education and proposed a leadership model for middle university leaders (Deans of Second Tier Colleges) consisting of five parts, namely, strategic leadership, leadership for change, leadership for learning, leadership for communication, leadership for ethics and culture. Similarly, the research focus of Wang (2013) was also on deans in second-tier colleges. He divided the middle leadership model in colleges and universities into nine important components: educational concepts, basic qualities (with professional knowledge and management knowledge as prominent features), and academic ethics. Han (2014) used quantitative research methods to determine the scale of MLs' role behaviour in university, including five dimensions: communicators, strategic actors, executors, leaders and innovators. This study emphasised that the role of MLs who work in functional departments and second-tier colleges have structural differences. Specifically, the head role of the functional department focuses on strategic participants and communicators, and the deputy is mainly a communicator and innovator; the head

role of the college focuses on strategic participants and leaders, and the deputy is mainly a communicator and executor.

Lu et al. (2011) conducted an empirical study on the competency characteristics of MLs (division-level cadres) in colleges and universities from the perspective of competency evaluation. The findings of this study identified a competency model including 12 competency indicators, including political democracy, professional skills, relationship coordination, and adaptability. According to the literature analysis and Delphi feedback method used, Hu (2012) divided the competencies required by MLs into eight parts: behavioural demonstration, leading development, and practical education. Based on this, Hu's study constructed a leadership evaluation index system for MLs in Chinese higher vocational colleges. The research focus of Guo (2014) was to construct a competency model of university MLs, using behavioural event interview. This study constructed a ML competency model containing six specific characteristics, including two parts: the specific competencies (leadership, management capacity, and coordination capacity) and the common competencies (adaptability, executive power, and organisational spirit). Yu (2022) focused on the basic status, existing problems, research focus in China and internationally, and the competency characteristics that middle cadres should have in colleges and universities, deriving a competency model for middle cadres in colleges and universities that includes four dimensions.

The review of this literature identifies that even though the studies involved different topics in middle leadership research, researchers emphasised or called for a focus on the training and capacity building of MLs in higher education. Researchers have gradually realised the importance of MLs in Chinese higher education institutions. Different role divisions and model constructions provide the basis and measurement tools for the selection, appointment, training, and scientific evaluation of MLs. At the same time, some Chinese literature has begun to discuss how to cultivate and enhance middle leadership. However, these studies are still at the non-empirical research stage. There needs to be a clear and in-depth explanation of the PD and learning issues for

MLs in Chinese higher education institutions. This implies confusion and ambiguity in the field of middle leadership research in China. Inherent controversies aside, the existing research on the training content and evaluation system of MLs can be used as a reference for this study. The following will provide a detailed review of PD theory as well as existing research on PD for MLs.

2.5 Conclusion

Synthesis of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership literature indicates that the development of theories of educational leadership has been discussed at the core of principals or teachers (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood and Sun, 2012), even in the context of distributed leadership theories (Harris, Jones and Ismail, 2022; Mifsud, 2023). Emerging empirical studies emphasised collective or shared leadership styles to adapt to and respond to external challenges (Bolden et al., 2015; Kezar and Holcombe, 2017). However, limited studies have explored the leadership practice of MLs and their role in educational institutions (Harris and Jones, 2017; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). Accordingly, beyond traditional academic roles, MLs need to demonstrate management skills to handle multi-dimensional administrative and management mandates as they occupy formal administrative positions. One of the valuable consensuses is that MLs are being distributed more leadership workload (McCulla and Degenhardt, 2016; Dinham, 2016; Irvine and Brundrett, 2016) and is facing challenging mandates and environments (Branson, Franken and Penney, 2016; Grootenboer, 2018; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). It remains unclear how MLs reinforce capability-building within a hierarchical context and the factors that influence this process. Given that the higher education environment is only likely to become more complex (Butler, 2019), exploring the capability-building of MLs is imperative.

From the perspective of distributed leadership theory, middle leadership can be constructed and developed through learning (Gronn, 2010). However, so far, there is no

complete and appropriate framework to explore MLs' capability-building from learning, as well as the critical elements and the transformative process of learning for MLs' change in the Chinese hierarchical context. Based on the structural positions and role responsibility of MLs described in Chapter 1, this research will comprehensively use instructional leadership and transformational leadership to explore and interpret the competency demands and practical needs of MLs (learning content), as the structural positions and roles of MLs present a need for, and demands of, learning on the part of individuals coming into the position or role (Franken, Penney and Branson,2015). In order to further explore the capability-building and learning process of MLs, this research introduces the term professional development, which will be reviewed in detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 Literature Review: Research on Professional Development

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews research on the main themes of professional development. This chapter consists mainly of three parts. Firstly, basic topics related to PD, including concepts, construction methods, and influencing factors, are thoroughly reviewed, specifically referring to the institutional context in which MLs work and PD occur. As the main dimension of the influencing factors at institutional level, institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture are each reviewed. Secondly, this part discusses the Chinese and foreign literature related to PD for MLs in the context of higher education. The contents and formats of PD for MLs are discussed first, and then the corresponding research on the relationship between PD for MLs and influencing factors at the institutional level is discussed. Finally, it reviews the basic characteristics of hierarchical institutions in a Chinese mainland context and identifies gaps left by existing research. The theoretical perspective and analytical framework used in this study are clarified to fill these gaps.

3.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Professional Development

Professional development, continuing professional development, and professional learning are fluid concepts which suffer from conceptual ambiguity and imprecise definitions (Turner and Simon, 2013; Czerniawski, 2023). Some researchers recognised a transition process in the terminology from (continuing) PD to professional learning in the international literature (Donaldson, 2010; Watson and Michael, 2016), with a correspondingly evolving focus from the transferability of technical aspects to the transformative nature of professionals and their practice (Kennedy, 2005). Whilst there are nuances in the definitions and usage of these terms by many researchers, the common denominator is that these concepts refer to the intentional, continuous, and systematic process of individual learning (Stoll and Earl, 2011; Collin, Van der Heijden

and Lewis, 2012). The term PD is used in this study, with the relevant research in the international literature reviewed from three dimensions: conceptualisation, construction, and influencing factors. What is noteworthy is that existing research mainly focuses on the field of non-vocational education as well as Chinese higher vocational education is one part of higher education in China. Therefore, this section highlights on international research on PD in higher education institutions.

3.2.1 Conceptualisations of Professional Development

Internationally, the term PD is typified by *conceptual vagueness* (Coffield, 2000), although PD is regarded as an important component of improving institutional performance in empirical studies (Hargreaves, 1994; Bolam, 2000). Kelchtermans (2004) focused on the interaction of PD with the environment, interpreting this concept as a learning process that meaningfully interacts with time and space, leading to improvements in educators' professional practice and thinking. Conducive conditions are needed for this kind of interaction to be effective otherwise PD cannot have a long-term impact on them (Lydon and King, 2009). Spillane and colleagues (2011) defined PD as a theory of action that aims to improve students' learning outcomes by acquiring new knowledge and skills. Sharma and Bindal (2013) emphasised that PD is a lifelong learning process that requires systematic planning and continuous improvement based on personal knowledge, beliefs and perceptions (Mitchell, 2013). Mansour et al. (2014) highlighted that teachers' reflection and assessment of their PD needs and attitudes towards PD projects are equally important.

Commonly, the abovementioned conceptualisation of PD mainly involves two types of focus -attention to individual change and attention to organisational impact. Day and colleagues describe PD as a portmanteau term requiring hugely complex intellectual and emotional endeavour (Day and Sachs, 2009), which benefits individuals, groups, or organisations by participating in learning activities (Day, 2002). It is also referred to as a process and activity that aims to improve educators' professional knowledge, skills

and attitudes, thereby improving student learning (Guskey, 2000). The viewpoint is that Fraser et al. (2007) define and distinguish the key concepts of professional learning that focus on changes in teacher's professional knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours, which PD emphasises that qualitative shifts in aspects of professionalism and thus have a positive impact on institutional change. This study, using the term PD, focuses on the involvement of diverse learning activities as a means of individual capability building, and further explores the impact of the learner's position and the organisational environment on PD.

Despite the importance of PD in improving classroom teaching and organisational progress has been recognised, research on the quality and impact of PD has been disappointing (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Van den Bergh, Ros and Beijaard, 2015), implying that educators perceived PD activities as ineffective (Hanushek, 2005; Opfer and Pedder, 2011). Researchers have developed research approaches around identifying the key characteristics of successful PD to improve the effectiveness of PD programmes and activities. Recently, consensus on the elements includes content focus, sustained duration, and opportunities to integrate new knowledge into classroom situations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Tannehill et al., 2021). Calleja (2018) added two key elements, namely understanding the reasons for teacher transformation and the learning transformation process. Although there appears to be consensus on PD characteristics (Desimone, 2009), the different situational, contextual, and ecological literature put forth that researchers are still unable to predict PD based on these characteristics (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). It is mainly because PD - including teaching and learning - is contextually situated (Timperley and Alton-Lee, 2008; Opfer and Pedder, 2011). Literature review shows that the lack of consideration of professional life and working conditions of PD research often falls into two dilemmas.

First, it is problematic to generalise personal PD needs (Czerniawski, 2023). Although the revision of professional standards becomes the construction of PD in ways that improve teaching practices (Forde et al., 2015), PD needs and demands vary depending

on the position of individuals and the context in which the learning activity takes place (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Czerniawski, 2023). Specifically, educational institutions of different natures or stages, such as primary schools and universities, have different PD needs for their faculty (Menter, 2018). Second, the effectiveness and persistence of PD in practice remain a challenge (Girvan, Conneely and Tangney, 2016). Understanding of the characteristics and content of high-quality PD among researchers lacks consistency and is not replicable (Lawless and Pellegrino, 2007; Opfer and Pedder, 2011), as PD is not a single event but a complex nested system (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). PD activities disconnected from teaching practice and context are often criticised as too fragmented and unable to provide sustainable guidance (Abakah, 2019; Abdulrazak, 2020). Importantly, some research defined PD narrowly as formal learning opportunities, while others interpreted it broadly to include formal and informal learning activities (Czerniawski, 2023). The delivery methods and formats of PD will be reviewed in the following section.

3.2.2 Constructions of Professional Development

In the field of educational research, PD is still considered one of the most critical ways to improve the quality of teaching in schools (Cordingley, 2015; Melesse and Gulie, 2019). Similar to its conceptualisation, much of the literature revolved around teachers' professional practice and work in schools (Fraser et al., 2007; Bausmith and Barry, 2011; Hairon and Dimmock, 2012; Qian and Walker, 2021). Researchers explored specific forms of PD constructs and published research on various PD models and pathways. For some instance, Lipowski et al. (2011) distinguished two formats of PD, including formal courses (in-service programs) and informal learning opportunities (experiential learning); Hadar and Brody (2017) categorised PD programmes and models into individual self-study and formally designed programmes and activities. These studies aimed to enhance individual expertise, skills, attitudes, and beliefs to improve practice in specific learning programs or activities (Fraser et al., 2007). This literature review found that the research on the model and pathways of constructing PD has gone through

a process of development from formal, personal, and external to informal, collective, and self-initiated.

Traditional PD has primarily reflected a one-time training model (Friedman and Phillips, 2004), the main activities including training meetings, seminars, and formal course practice, which bring about limited learning opportunities. These activities are based on a common assumption that learning is an individual cognitive process. Learners here, such as teachers, regarded as passive recipients, are able to achieve improved cognition and practice immediately after engaging in this process (Bausmith and Barry, 2011). However, the empirical research findings identified that the traditional model of PD has not achieved the desired results in practice. Accordingly, the traditional model has been criticised for its mechanical view of learning (Simon and Campbell, 2012). Researchers have realised that various programmes or activities are needed to facilitate PD, focused on interaction with the environment and cooperation with others in specific contexts. Common new activities imbuing these principles include peer observation, professional dialogue, reflection groups, professional learning communities, and personal learning networks (Borg, 2015). Notably, the rise of these PD activities does not mean the disappearance of traditional activities, as the learning and teaching of some knowledge and skills are still valued (Kennedy, 2014). As such, Abakah (2023) emphasised that the selection and combination of PD activities in practice depend on the goals, content, and implementation environment.

In addition to abovementioned formats, the role of professional development communities (PLCs) in the process of personal PD has attracted widespread attention and discussion internationally. The concept of PLCs comes from learning organisation (Senge, 1990) and community of practice theories (Wenger, 1998). It is interpreted to mean that educators develop individual and collective teaching capabilities through participation in routine activities such as collaborative dialogue to reflect on past experiences and actively attempt different teaching strategies to improve student learning (Stoll et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017; Vangrieken

et al., 2017). A synthesis of the literature suggests PLCs generally have five main characteristics - shared values and vision; collaborative activities; reflective professional inquiry and dialogue; collective responsibility for student learning; de-privatisation of teacher learning (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008; DuFour and DuFour, 2013). Emerging empirical research illustrated that when PLCs are effectively developed and supported, PLCs can significantly and systematically contribute to teachers' professional learning and student achievement (Hairon and Dimmock, 2012; Lomos, 2017; Qian and Walker, 2021; Zheng, Yin and Liu, 2021).

Notably, although policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in many countries have recognised the pivotal role of PLCs in individual PD, establishing and maintaining effective PLCs is still regarded as a challenging endeavour (Qian and Walker, 2021; Chen, 2022). Simply bringing teachers together does not ensure that teacher professional development and learning are achieved (Van Es, 2012). One prominent challenge frequently mentioned in existing literature concerns how to balance the teacher-led initiatives of PLCs with the hierarchical nature of educational institutions (Harris and Jones, 2010; Lieberman et al., 2011). Hairon and Dimmock (2012) enumerated different reasons that hinder the effective implementation of PLCs in institutions, such as lack of learning resources, incompatible organisational structures, impermeable learning department boundaries, individualism, and lack of organisational trust. Hairon and Tan (2017) further explained the importance of constructing supportive organisational conditions and its key characteristics, including being community-based, job-embedded, linked to students' outcomes, continuous, reflective and inquiry-based. Essentially, these factors involve organisational structure, culture, and relationship conditions (Walker, 2012), and the critical person responsible for establishing and shaping these conditions has been shown to be the principal (Qian and Walker, 2021). Therefore, institutional leadership, organisational structure and cultural conditions are seen as essential factors for PLCs to support individual PD successfully.

It should be noted that the discussion of constructing PD among researchers is accompanied by questions about different forms of learning programmes or activities. Among them, an overlooked issue is how PD activities operate in different contexts and what impact they have on learners. As PD activities are embedded in a specific context, the operation of PD activities is influenced by contextual conditions and influences learning from PD (Eun, 2008; Al-Mahdi and Al-Wadi, 2015). Some researchers attempt to summarise successful experiences in the design or operation of PD activities (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017; Desimone, 2009; Tannehill et al., 2021). However, most of the summaries and generalisations focus on the design of PD activity content, arrangement of activity formats, evaluation of activity effectiveness, and operation of PLCs (Zheng, Yin and Liu, 2021; Abakah, 2023). Despite available experience and contributions, few studies have focused on the fundamental operational processes of PD activities beyond PLCs. Research from Ghana emphasised that PD should not only be established in the training sector of educational institutions but should become a part of the routine practice of educational institutions (Abakah, 2023). Thus, it is necessary to explore further the internal conditions of educational institutions in which PD activities occur.

3.2.3 Influencing Factors on Professional Development at Institutional Level

In the early 2000s, one line of research explored the factors that influence educators' level of PD levels and participation in PD programmes and activities in educational institutions. Some findings revealed that personal factors, such as self-efficacy, professional agency, teaching enthusiasm, will affect individual attitudes and behaviours towards (participation in) PD (Clarke, 2002, Van Petegem et al., 2005). More recently, researchers have found that the effectiveness of PD largely depends on workplace conditions in educational institutions (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Louws et al., 2017), whereas individual factors play a moderating role in the influence of organisational conditions on PD (Hallinger, Piyaman and Viseshsiri, 2017; Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016; Li and Hallinger, 2016). A literature review found that

organisational conditions - a collection of organisational factors - in educational institutional settings can be differentiated into structural, cultural conditions, and characteristics of institutional leadership, which can stimulate or hinder educators' learning and work (Louws et al., 2017; Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020; Qian and Walker, 2021). That is, a set of organisational conditions, such as leadership practices, organisational structures, and cultural norms, encompasses various factors that influence PD (Admiraal et al., 2016; Stosich, 2016; Schipper et al., 2020). These three distinct yet interactive aspects are considered to significantly impact an individual PD. Policymakers, researchers, and educational practitioners worldwide are increasingly concerned with arranging or creating a range of enabling organisational conditions to facilitate individual PD.

In recent years, the literature has provided a wealth of strong evidence regarding the impact of institutional leadership on individual PD and practice (Liu and Hallinger, 2018a). The common premise of these studies is that professional development is considered a critical aspect, linking institutional leadership with student learning and organisational improvement. Based on this, a group of researchers explored the impact of pathways between leadership and PD, recommending promoting socially constructed PD in educational institutions (Li, Hallinger and Walker, 2016; Liu and Hallinger, 2018a). In addition, part of the literature focuses on the concept of PLCs, considering schools or professional groups as potential PLCs, positioning principals as key facilitators influencing the maintenance and enhancement of PLCs (Tam, 2015; Vanblaere and Devos, 2016; Vangrieken et al., 2017; Admiraal et al., 2021). These findings suggested that leadership that motivates, supports, and sustains individual PD has a knock-on effect on teaching quality, student learning, and institutional progress. Accordingly, learning-centred leadership has received increasing attention due to its focus on individual learning and instructional improvement.

In many leadership theories, the conceptualisation of institutional leadership and the construction of leadership roles are relevant to PD (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Liu

and Hallinger, 2018a). Combining early instructional leadership with transformational leadership, learning-centred leadership was conceptualised as a process whereby institutional leaders engage in intentional efforts to inspire, guide, direct, support and participate in teacher learning with the goal of increasing professional knowledge, and ultimately promote student learning and organisational effectiveness (Saphier, King and D'Auria, 2006; Hallinger, 2011; Cravens, 2014). It proposed that the main ways institutional leaders influence PD through practice include vision enactment, learning support, program management, and modelling (Hallinger and Liu, 2016; Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016). In further, one of the key features is capability building to facilitate learning for all members of educational institutions (Leithwood, Patten and Jantzi, 2010; Qian and Walker, 2013; Heck and Hallinger, 2014). In short, institutional leaders set a shared vision for learning in the institution and commit to building an enabling environment that supports PD, while they share rich learning experiences and resources and serve as role models in the PD process.

In addition to the direct impact on PD, institutional leaders affect PD by influencing the construction and development of PLCs. PLCs, as a desirable infrastructure for supporting institutional reform and improvement, are regarded as being able to compensate for the limitations of traditional forms of PD and share features of effective teacher professional development (Lee and Kim, 2016; Hairon and Tan, 2017; Vangrieken et al., 2017; Qian and Walker, 2021). Notably, Dimmock (2016) demonstrated that an effectively functioning PLC relies on supportive institutional leadership. Institutional leaders are able to use formal structures in their organisations to develop planning, decision-making, and procedures that benefit PLCs (Leithwood, 2007; Walker, 2010). Institutional leaders support the effective implementation of PLCs by nurturing shared values and notions and shaping a culture of trust and collaborative learning (Dimmock, 2016; Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017). Institutional leadership, a key indicator of PLCs, plays a critical role in interpersonal relationships (Bryant et al., 2018). The work of Qian and Walker (2021) reaffirmed that institutional leaders can

influence PLCs by building and shaping structural, cultural, and relational institutional conditions.

Whilst some research findings presented that effective PLCs and other PD activities achieve personal capability building with the support of institutional leaders, there are still challenges in the specific practice process (Lieberman and Miller, 2011; Hairon and Goh, 2017; Vangrieken et al., 2017). Among them, challenges are often discussed in the literature related to organisational structures and systems. Opfer and Pedder (2011) clearly pointed out that research on PD in educational institutions does not consider how learning activities and opportunities are embedded in the work framework. That is, the organisational structure and context in which PD occurs should be brought into the discussion. Szelei, Tinoca and Pinho (2019) proposed that rational structural arrangements, such as transparent communication and equal opportunities to contribute, might reduce individual anxiety about cooperation within educational institutions, thereby promoting overall collaboration. Louws et al. (2017) explained that these organisational structural elements related to PD include resources, time, space, task variation, workload, evaluation and feedback. In short, organisational structures in the literature are closely related to learning opportunities.

In the literature on PD, descriptions of organisational structures include schedules of PD activities (Muckenthaler et al., 2020), proximity to colleagues' workspaces and collegial availability and support (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Admiraal et al., 2021), and accessibility of resources and support (Szelei, Tinoca and Pinho, 2019; Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020). Essentially, these studies sought to identify the impact of optimising organisational structure on learning opportunities and their specific pathways. Pedder (2006) argued that organisational structures and practices facilitate and constrain PD. Opfer and Pedder (2011) used the theoretical lens of learning organisation (Senge, 1990) when explaining the impact of organisational structure on PD. They emphasised the role of embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning within the organisational structure. In recent studies, Admiraal et al. (2021) further

verified the impact of change in organisations on PD. Researchers proposed (re)organising the organisational structure with teams, sections and/or departments. They advocated two types of interventions related to changing the organisational structure to enhance PD - developing PLCs on a school-wide basis and establishing independent departments (*School Academy*) responsible for PD activities. By reorganising the organisational structure, institutions aimed at stimulating teacher collaboration (in class preparation, teaching and class review), making meetings more directly relevant to teachers' work and creating shorter lines of management responsibilities.

In addition to structural elements related to learning opportunities, the impact of a hierarchical top-down system and power division in organisational structure on PD is also an aspect discussed in the literature (Hairon and Goh, 2017; Hairon and Tan, 2017). This effect is related to the nature of PD. According to James and McCormick (2009), professional autonomy is an essential condition for PD. They believed that institutions should have an organisational structure that supports PD, in which individuals have the opportunity to reflect on and plan their PD from their own needs. This bottom-up change is recognised as a powerful driver for effective and continuous PD (Lieberman and Miller, 2011). However, initial PD programmes or activities are embedded in bureaucratic management and hierarchical structures (Lieberman and Miller, 2011; Kennedy, 2014). Researchers have found that control, supervision, and accountability from the outside may overlook the actual needs of individual PD, weaken teacher autonomy, and hinder innovative practices (Toole and Louis, 2002; Hairon and Goh, 2017; Hairon and Tan, 2017). In response to this conflict, some researchers suggested that improving teacher appraisal policies and empowerment mechanisms can make the institution a supportive environment for PD (Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017; Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020; Qian and Walker, 2021).

Although supportive organisational structures are important for PD, it is apparent that focusing solely on organisational structures can result in short-lived and superficial

educational changes (Creemers, 2002; Walker, 2012; Qian and Walker, 2021). Some researchers have explored school culture's impact on PD. Among them, a common explanation of school culture comes from Maslowski (2001), promulgating that school culture refers to the basic assumptions, norms and values, and cultural artifacts that are shared by school members, which influence their functioning at school. Indeed, school culture is a kind of organisational culture, which is gradually cultivated and formed over a period of time, embodied in cooperation, trust and learning in which can shape the behaviour of people in an organisation (O' Reilly, 1989; Rashid, Sambasivan and Johari, 2003). The abovementioned division corresponds to the three levels of school culture classified by Schein (1985). According to Schein (1985, 2010), organisational culture can be divided into three levels, namely artefacts, values and basic underlying assumptions. Some studies have focused on whether the above three levels of organisational culture directly or indirectly impact PD and how that affects unfolding (Walker, 2010; Zhu, Devos and Tondeur, 2014; Louws et al., 2017; Admiraal et al., 2021).

First, at the level of the artefact, researchers discussed how physical components of the organisational environment, such as architecture and infrastructure, facilitate or limit PD (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Admiraal et al., 2021). The research conclusion of Jurasaitė-Harbison and Rex (2010) clearly stated that physical and social environment in institutions promotes professional interactions. Additionally, some effective PD literature reviews pointed out that such enabling organisational culture is reflected in the organisational structure (Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017). Second, values in the literature are closely related to goals that institutional leaders consciously shape and publicise. Research indicated that a clear sense of direction and purpose in educational institutions influences personal values and development direction (Day et al., 2010; Admiraal et al., 2021). At the same time, educational institutions with a positive learning culture value teacher learning and development and invest much time, energy, and financial resources in supporting the PD of all members (Sebring et al., 2010). Third, the subtle influence produced by basic assumptions - consisted of unconscious, taken-

for-granted beliefs - takes time to cultivate and develop (Zhu and Engels, 2014), ultimately shaping and reflecting the behaviours of people in that organisation. Researchers have discussed the relationship between multiple specific factors and PD at the level of basic assumptions, such as trusting relationships (Knapp et al., 2010; Li, Hallinger and Walker, 2016), and collaboration (Weiner and Higgins, 2017; Torres, 2019; Walker, 2020). An atmosphere of open collaboration and trusting relationships are strongly associated with opportunities for PD, especially informal learning (Jurasaitė-Harbison and Rex, 2010).

Synthesis of organisational culture and PD literature indicates that emerging studies incorporate the implication of PD into conceptualisations of organisational culture. For example, Walker (2010) interpreted learning culture as a synergistic effect created by establishing and embedding a set of interrelated conditions which facilitate and encourage PD as part of a career. Furthermore, Qian and colleagues divided a set of interrelated conditions into visible components, visible but intangible components, and invisible components based on a literature review (Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017). Indeed, in many literature on professional development, cultural conditions in schools were regarded as a mediating or enabling means through which school leaders impacts improvement in teaching and learning (Walker, 2012; Li, Hallinger and Walker, 2016; Wang, 2018). Building cultural school conditions are conducive to improving social capacity in schools (De Neve and Devos, 2017). Recently, a growing body of research confirmed that fostering learning culture facilitates to build the capacity to initiate, support and sustain individual learning (Furner and McCulla, 2019). In particular, it is crucial to develop a shared vision (Admiraal et al., 2021), trust (Louis, 2008; Li, Hallinger and Walker, 2016), and professional relationship (Knapp et al., 2010; Walker and Qian, 2018) to promote an ongoing, meaningful professional development in schools.

This literature review reveals that the effectiveness of individual PD is highly dependent on work environment (Borko, Jacobs and Koellner, 2010; Louws et al.,

2017). The main reason for this is its ability to provide formal or informal learning opportunities for PD (Little, 2012; Kyndt et al., 2016). While a growing body of research addresses the critical relationship of organisational conditions in the work environment - leadership practices, organisational structures, and cultural norms - to PD, they are limited in two ways. On the one hand, most studies only focus on a specific condition at the organisational level. For example, the work of Jurasaitė-Harbison and Rex (2010) aimed to explain the influence of organisational culture on informal teacher learning; Hallinger and colleagues (2017, 2018) committed to revealing the specific pathways by which institutional leaders and their practices affect PD. This specific aspect of research limits policymakers, researchers, and practitioners' overall understanding of the organisational conditions for PD, although such research is conducive to in-depth study. On the other hand, limited research has examined the mechanisms by which different aspects of organisational conditions interact and influence PD. As mentioned above, individual factors have been used in recent studies as an important mechanism for organisational conditions affecting PD (Hallinger and Liu, 2016; Zheng, Yin and Li, 2019). However, research gaps remain regarding how the interaction and intersection of institutional leadership, organisational structure and cultural conditions collectively affect PD.

3.3 Professional Development for Middle Leaders

As explained in detail above, MLs are in a critical position to provide important organisational linkages upwards, across and downwards (Grootenboer, 2018). They are required to perform various tasks (Bassett, 2016). What needs to be considered is how to support MLs to master and lead in meeting the challenges of complex and transforming higher education environments (Butler, 2020). Kruse (2022) and Irvine and Brundrett (2019) argued that it is wise for institutions to take MLs entry, guiding, and mentoring more seriously and offer them formal and regular learning opportunities. Instead, some researchers asserted that MLs' work content and scope is broad and trivial thus preventing effective capacity building and training (Lillejord and Børte, 2018,

2020; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Lamanna, 2023). In this part, the essential viewpoints of PD for MLs from Western and Chinese perspectives will be reviewed in detail separately.

3.3.1 Western Perspectives on Professional Development for Middle Leaders

Despite the growing research on ML, there are few research on the PD content, method of delivery and preferences, and support conditions for MLs (Lillejord and Børte, 2020; Lipscombe, Tindall-ford and Lamanna, 2023; Bryant and Walker, 2022). More importantly, these limited studies seem to share similar conclusions, that MLs lack opportunities for PD and available support (Bassett, 2016; Bassett and Shaw, 2018). Indeed, the existing offerings and research related to PD for MLs are insufficient to prepare MLs in schools to adapt to the complexity of their roles (Dopson et al., 2019; Morris and Laipple, 2015; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Lamanna, 2023). MLs even expressed that they have done little to prepare for their administrative role (Gmelch et al., 2017). This inadequacy of training and professional or peer support made the position becoming isolated and lonely (Taggart, 2015). MLs are eager to obtain intellectual support opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their duties (Gmelch, 2016; Davis-Salazar, 2023), as the shift from departmental administration to institutional governance in terms of structural, interpersonal, and individual aspects has led to leadership and management of MLs being complicated in an unprecedented way (Floyd and Preston, 2018; Freeman, Karkouti and Ward, 2020). Such complexity has implications for the PD demands and needs of MLs (Davis-Salazar, 2023).

In view of the strategic and operational functions performed by MLs in the context of administration and institutional governance, research in universities - the institutions dedicated to public education and PD of employees - attempted to clarify the PD demands and needs of MLs who serve the institution and colleagues, even suspension of academic career (Davis-Salazar, 2023). In Australia, Butler (2020) based on the lens

of the self-determination theory and identified three competences of MLs responding to the increasingly complex demands of higher education, including problem-solving skills, high levels of communication and critical thinking. In New Zealand, Thornton (2020) discussed four key aspects of professional learning and development for middle leadership, three of which relate to Gmelch's CAL Model (skill development, conceptual understanding, and reflective practice) (Gmelch and Buller, 2015), the fourth is the head of the learning community that emerges from the data analysis process. In the United States, Brinkley-Etzkorn and Lane (2019) identified three critical findings regarding PD needs - skills and knowledge related to management and leadership, skills and knowledge related to fiscal policy and practice, as well as tools, experiences, or resources that are consistent at the system level. Recently, Davis-Salazar (2023) argued administrative decision-making as a learned skill and PD themes, including learning 'how the university works', 'how to manage people', and 'how to manage self'. In short, PD demands and needs here are distinguished from the specific skills of principals (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman, 2015) or the skill sets of teachers (Irvine and Brundrett, 2016), which lead to the need for more targeted and specialised PD opportunities for MLs (Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky, 2020).

Notably, laissez-faire approach to management and leadership development was found to violate the values and purposes of higher education (Gmelch, 2015; Kruse, 2022). Instead, MLs' own capability-building and leadership development can be learned or enhanced by participating in different types of PD opportunities (Bryman, 2007). Commonly, PD activities for MLs in higher educational institutions involve formally planned PD activities and are deeply embedded on-(or in-)-the-job activities (Parise and Spillane, 2010). On the one hand, formal PD activities include workshops, professional conferences, training courses, and participation in professional organisations (Gmelch and Buller, 2015; Gmelch et al., 2017; Shirrell, Hopkins and Spillane, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2020; Thornton, 2020). On the other hand, on-the-job PD activities occur at the workplace. It often depends on professional reflection and interaction with others (leaders and/or colleagues) (Preston and Floyd, 2016; Inman, 2009, 2011; Irvine and

Brundrett, 2019; Lumby, 2019; Butler, 2020). Its specific forms also include focused discussions, giving and receiving feedback, peer observations, information sharing, and professional learning communities (Bassett and Shaw, 2018; Bryant and Walker, 2022).

Brinkley-Etzkorn and Lane (2019) pointed out that capability building and PD for MLs involve multiple areas, such as higher education, professional and institutional development, human resource management, and leadership research. Particularly in the context of the changing context of higher education, PD demands and needs are evolving more complexly in response to the multiple identities of MLs (White, 2014). Indeed, research based in the UK (Creton and Heard-Lauréote, 2021), New Zealand (Thornton et al., 2018), and Australia (Butler, 2020) illustrated that the most time-consuming tasks and most significant challenges are being identified as managers and being required to develop administrative leadership skills. Accordingly, a series of research results highlighted that PD for MLs prioritises practical on-the-job experience and informal guidance (Scott et al., 2008; Preston and Floyd, 2016) over formal leadership training (Inman, 2009; Butler, 2020; Lillejord and Børte, 2020; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Lamanna, 2023). Researchers advocated capability-building and PD for MLs to be seen as a recursive and reflective process (Connaughton, Lawrence and Ruben, 2003) rather than a few hours or a week of workshops or formal training programmes (Butler, 2020). Inman (2009) and Butler (2020) emphasised that PD for MLs focuses on building formal and informal relationships and networks with others in a specific context, thus developing the special skills needed to manage complex social interactions. That is, while all forms are valuable, capacity building through temporary or incidental external PD programmes may be less effective if disconnected from the work environment (Spillane, Hopkins and Sweet, 2018).

A literature review found that both MLs and the agencies they serve have a responsibility to fulfill this role via PD, particularly the latter in terms of balancing tensions faced by MLs (Kruse, 2022; Preston and Floyd, 2016). Recent research findings illustrated that, MLs believe that their development and self-efficacy are highly

dependent on the support of senior leaders (Bryant, 2019). Institutional leadership teams can realise their potential in PD for MLs in various forms, such as inviting MLs jointly design PD programmes (Bassett and Shaw, 2018), building a reservoir of experiences for MLs (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019), designing school-based programmes closely aligned with school priorities (Bryant and Walker, 2022). Yet international research has demonstrated that support from principals is often ad hoc or even ineffective (Gurr, 2019; Lillejord and Børte, 2020). To prevent MLs' learning and development are not left to chance, Gurr and Drysdale (2013) recommend that principals promote and support middle leadership development through a collaborative culture, organisational policies and structures. Some studies confirmed that PD for MLs should be structured and nurtured in such a way that integrates them into day-to-day life and work, involving reshaping the organisational structure (Bryant and Walker, 2022), re-definition of MLs' team roles and interaction with others (Bryant, Wong and Adames, 2020), constructing trust relationship (Bryant, 2019; Leithwood, 2023), and fostering a collaborative atmosphere (Leithwood, 2016). Notably, existing research focuses on the role of a specific institutional factor, and how different institutional conditions in higher educational context affect PD for MLs has not been clarified.

3.3.2 Chinese Perspectives on Professional Development for Middle Leaders

In a culture of *institutional neglect* for leadership training, universities typically rely on accidental leadership development for MLs (Grove, 2016). However, the importance and significance of an effective leadership training and development programme in educational institutions to equip leaders with the skills to meet emerging challenges cannot be underestimated (Wilson and Xue, 2013). As mentioned above when reviewing MLs and middle leadership, this corpus of knowledge in the Chinese context is largely hidden from international audiences. Indeed, research on middle leadership in the Chinese higher education context has to some extent deepened the understanding of middle leadership enhancement for successful schooling (Tang, 2022). A review of PD for MLs literature illustrates that research in China focuses on and explores the

specific content, forms, pathways, and underlying perceptions of PD for MLs in educational institutions. These studies help provide a reference for practitioners and researchers internationally.

Distinguished with the vigorous development of research in Western contexts, empirical research on PD for MLs based on the Chinese educational settings is relatively limited. Most discussions on this topic are still dominated by non-empirical studies (Xu and Qin, 2010; Xie, 2013; Wang, 2015). More recently, some empirical evidence gradually emerged (Guo, 2014; Gu, 2020; Mao, 2021; Chen, 2023). The literature review shows that policymakers, researchers, and practitioners have recognised the increasing complexity and challenges MLs face regarding roles, competencies, and functions. Accordingly, educational institutions are expected to develop and implement strategies and approaches to support middle leadership to ensure the effective performance of middle leadership (Yang and Yang, 2006). For example, Wang (2015), in exploring effective training models, suggested collaborating with other educational institutions and local education authorities to design training related to the work of MLs. It is important to note that leadership development content is highly controversial in research in Chinese educational settings.

Controversies about learning content mainly arise from the gap in individual learning needs. International evidence recommends that institutional leaders adopt different strategies to align learners' learning needs with institutional expectations (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood and Sun, 2012). In China, a favourable trend is that educational institutions are progressively responding to the needs of institutional leadership teams by offering different training based on experience and providing more experiential learning opportunities (such as field trips) (Wilson and Xue, 2013; Ma, 2019). However, researchers pointed out that most training programmes, especially external formal learning activities, focus on transmitting theoretical knowledge rather than developing strategy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Huang and Wiseman, 2011; Wilson and Xue, 2013; Mao, 2021). Specifically, Wilson and Xue

(2013) argued that the government strictly controls training agendas, and trainers and participants do not have a say in the direction and content of the training. When analysing the problems existing in the training of deans of second-tier colleges, Mao (2021) pointed out that the training content surrounding middle cadres lacks pertinence and practicality. Such lack means that existing thematic training cannot be effectively tailored to the problems encountered by MLs in practice.

Another theme for PD for MLs in Chinese higher education institutions is learning forms and pathways. Some researchers describe various forms of improving middle leadership competencies and how to prepare better and support MLs (Wilson and Xue, 2013; Wang, 2015; Mao, 2021). Similar to international research findings, the forms of middle leadership development include formal training and informal learning. As a traditional form of development, formal training includes lectures, seminars, and workshops (Chen et al., 2013; Wang, 2015). This type of learning style has a long history of development in Chinese higher education settings, which is the most common. In contrast, most discussions of informal learning in the literature are dominated by criticism. In other words, informal learning has not received enough attention in China. Wilson and Xue (2013) proposed that formal learning structures have the potential to promote more informal learning opportunities. However, policymakers, researchers and MLs overlook the opportunities for sharing, reflection, cohort bonding and networking that accompany formal learning programmes. Therefore, the forms and pathways of PD for MLs in the Chinese context rely heavily on formal learning programmes.

In this situation of decoupling learning content from needs and a single learning format, a similar conclusion in the existing literature is that MLs have different perceived levels of PD. The empirical findings of Wilson and Xue (2013) showed that apart from recognising the temporary effects of learning activities, the majority of MLs are sceptical about the impact of formal training on real leadership enhancement or its impact on organisational improvement. This view was reconfirmed in the study by Chen et al. (2019), which examined training systems. The main reason for this involves

two components. On the one hand, as mentioned above, formal training agendas focus on policy awareness and policy implementation, which results in the personal needs and priorities of MLs being largely marginalised (Wilson and Xue, 2013; Mao, 2021). On the other hand, most research results stated limited leadership training opportunities for MLs in Chinese higher education institutions (Ma, 2019; Chen, 2023).

Overall, research based on PD for MLs in Chinese higher education institutions has a solid non-empirical tradition. This type of non-empirical research is a preliminary form of inquiry that contributes to developing the Chinese knowledge base. In spite of developments, at least three critiques about leadership development programmes have been reported: decoupling learning content from needs, a single form of learning, and limited learning opportunities. To some extent, these issues led participants to question the effectiveness of PD. In addition, some researchers have proposed coping strategies and suggestions after realising or identifying problems in PD. For example, Chen et al. (2013) proposed the introduction of professional standards and supervision systems for MLs to regulate leadership behaviours; Gu (2020) and Ma (2019) suggested improving the incentive mechanism and using different measures to motivate MLs to improve their leadership capabilities proactively. In essence, these researchers acknowledged that the content of such strategies and recommendations impacted individual PD. The following is a detailed literature review of the factors influencing PD for MLs.

3.4 Influencing Factors of Professional Development for Middle Leaders in the Chinese Context

In the Chinese context, there is a strong tradition of school-based faculty learning practices. According to international research findings, the effectiveness of individual PD depends mainly on workplace conditions (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Louws et al., 2017). As detailed above, institutional leadership characteristics and structural and cultural conditions can stimulate or hinder individual PD. However, existing research confirms that institutional leaders in non-Western societies such as China understand

and implement leadership theory and individual PD in very different ways. These differences may be influenced by entirely different cultural, political, and educational traditions (Walker and Qian, 2018). As such, the influencing factors of institutional conditions on PD for MLs in the Chinese context will be reviewed in detail.

3.4.1 Institutional Leadership and PD

As mentioned above (see section 2.6.1), most studies on the PD for MLs included discussions of senior leaders or principals (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). Findings based on Chinese research suggested that MLs believe that their development and self-efficacy are highly dependent on the support of institutional leaders. Notably, existing research tends to describe specific practices of institutional leaders, such as principals, including mentoring, coaching, shadowing, and designing school-based development programmes. Recently, an analysis by Bryant and Walker (2022) suggested that the institutional leadership team realises the potential for PD for MLs by designing school-based programmes closely aligned with organisational priorities. However, few studies in the Chinese mainland literature have investigated in depth the specific ways by which institutional leadership supports and sustains PD for MLs.

In a landmark study, Leithwood and colleagues (2010) emphasised that similar leadership concepts and behaviours can be interpreted and implemented differently in different sociocultural and institutional contexts. That is, different environments and settings shape the leadership practices of institutional leaders. Academically, a widespread leadership style is paternalistic leadership in the Chinese context (Tan and Dimmock, 2014). Specifically, in Chinese educational institutions, leadership is viewed as a father figure and is expected to guide, protect, develop, and care for subordinates (Farh and Cheng, 2000; Mao, 2021). Meanwhile, subordinates or lower-level organisational members show loyalty and deference to the leader (Farh et. al., 2008; Tan and Dimmock, 2014). That is, institutional leaders in China are viewed as having

a more authoritative status on campus and tend to enjoy a range of political privileges. Subordinates' admiration for institutional leaders is often related to seniority, power, and authority rather than expertise or collaborative spirit (Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020). The officialdom-centered style of administration entrenched in educational institutions has been criticised as a threat (Li and Li, 2016). In this context, institutional leaders have full authority to lead members' learning activities (Walker and Hallinger, 2007; Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017; Liu and Hallinger, 2021).

More recently, empirical research that connects institutional leadership with individual PD in China is gradually increasing (Mao, 2021; Bryant and Walker, 2022). Specifically, principals' leadership practices support individual learning and teaching improvement through different strategies or approaches, such as contributing trust relationship (Liu, Hallinge and Feng, 2016), setting challenging but achievable goals (Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020), and recognising, appraising and rewarding personal outstanding teaching performance (Zheng, 2019; Qian and Walker, 2021). Indeed, the specific practice of principals motivating, supporting, and sustaining individual PD has a long history in the Chinese context (Qian and Walker, 2021), as Chinese principals play an essential role in a traditional top-down approach of sending teachers for training (Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017). These traditional practices appear to incorporate elements that overlap dimensions associated with instructional and transformational leadership (Liu and Hallinger, 2018a). The research findings from Qian and Walker (2021) confirmed that Chinese principals simultaneously display two sets of competencies, including maintaining a high priority on teacher development and student learning and emphasising the priority of management and political work (Walker and Qian, 2015; Zhang and Pang, 2018). Furthermore, the literature review reveals that although the term professional learning communities (PLCs) is not widely used in China, there is a strong congruence between what institutional leaders intentionally advocate and the core of PLCs in Western literature (Qian and Walker, 2021).

In addition, synthesis of the literature on leadership and organisational culture and structure suggests that leadership plays a vital role in ensuring the coherence of individual learning programmes by establishing supportive organisational structures and culture. Specifically, Qian, Walker and Yang (2017) used a case study to explore institutional leaders' strategies to establish and maintain a positive learning culture in the Chinese context. The findings suggested that institutional leaders increase individual confidence and sense of belonging by articulating and championing shared goals and values and cultivating trusting relationships within institutions. Qian and Walker (2021) emphasised the role of principals in building the infrastructure and culture required for effective collaborative learning when exploring how principals can establish a campus environment conducive to PLCs. On the one hand, the principal's job is to routinise the collaborative learning activities that take place in the PLCs to reinforce the importance of PD structurally; on the other hand, principals support the building of a shared, accessible, and constantly updated professional knowledge base in the PLCs by investing time and effort, which is conducive to shaping institutional members' focus on learning.

3.4.2 Organisational Structure and PD

The organisational structure of Chinese educational institutions has been regarded as hierarchical and centralised (Tang, Lu and Hallinger, 2014). Hierarchy, as one of the most prominent features in Chinese organisational environment (Hofstede and Bond, 1988), is a deep-rooted regular pattern in the education system that is difficult to change (Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020). Bush and Qian (2000) highlighted that Chinese bureaucratic educational structure is formed in a traditional hierarchical system and implemented in a top-down manner with an emphasis on command and control to achieve effective management in educational institutions. Given the hierarchal educational system, the roles, positions, and responsibilities have been defined clearly both at the departmental and university levels (Lu and Smith, 2021). Zhang and colleagues confirmed the impact of the hierarchal educational system and structure on

the development characteristics of PLCs in educational institutions (Zhang and Pang, 2016; Zhang and Sun, 2018). Synthesis of the organisational structure and PD literature suggests that the impact of organisational structure (such as hierarchical framework, accountability) on individual PD is mainly closely related to learning opportunities. This is mainly due to learning opportunities embedded in supportive organisational structures (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Admiraal et al., 2016).

As mentioned above (see section 3.4.1), principals routinise learning activities by creating aligned structures and processes to create a supportive environment for individual learning. Prior studies in China have identified a set of structural arrangements to ensure and expand individual learning opportunities (Liang et al., 2016; Huang, Pang and Huang, 2022). Specifically, Qian, Walker and Yang (2017) argued that institutional evaluation systems can be modified to continuously encourage teachers to learn and improve. The quantitative research findings of Huang, Zhang and Huang (2020) indicated that supportive workplace learning and change environments are equipped with the right amount of time and space, appraisal policies and empowerment mechanisms. These supportive resources are conducive to expanding the overall learning opportunities that have significant effects on professional learning and development. This finding was reconfirmed in the study of Huang, Pang and Huang (2022). However, existing empirical research mainly focuses on specific formats of learning opportunities in educational institutions and examines their role in teacher learning (Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020; Chen, 2022). More research should be carried out to explore the association between overall learning opportunities in institutions and learners with different identities.

In addition to a series of structural arrangements to expand learning opportunities, researchers engaged in heated discussions around the impact of PLCs, as part of the formal structure of Chinese educational institutions, on individual professional learning. Although the term PLC does not often appear in Chinese policy, the practice of collaborative learning and inquiry has a history of more than seven decades in China

(Chen, 2022). In the Chinese context, the most common PLC is Teaching-research Groups (*jiaoyanshi*, TRGs). TRGs regularly hold a series of PD and learning activities that comprise iterative cycles of collaborative teacher lesson planning, peer observation, feedback, and revision (Zhang and Sun, 2018; Qian and Walker, 2021; Chen, 2022), which is highly institutionalised in China. Notably, TRGs are rooted in the top-down teaching research system and supporting infrastructure has been established nationwide (Sargent, 2015). In this case, connections and cooperation between Chinese educational institutions can be effectively realised. Evidence suggested that due to the institutionalised practice of TRGs within Chinese educational institutions, teachers have more opportunities to share and learn from each other than their Western counterparts (Wong, 2010; Zhang and Pang, 2016).

However, disputes and debate about the practice of PLCs in China have always existed (Wong, 2010; Chen, 2022). Firstly, based on the definition and nature of PLCs targeted in the Western literature, some researchers question whether TRGs are not a form of PLCs. In China, TRGs are not set up spontaneously by teachers but are intentionally arranged and promoted uniformly under the guidance of the education administration, which is inconsistent with PLCs developed in Western contexts are voluntary, teacher-driven, and loosely organised (Vangrieken et. al., 2017). As Wong (2010) explained, PLCs practice in China is an artificial community with a clear structure in which collaboration among teachers has been integrated into the operation of the educational institutional system. Thus, TRGs have obvious administrative qualities and are mandatory (Chen, 2020). This leads to the second criticism from researchers that the institutionalised practice of TRGs hinders individual PD and learning (Zhang and Wong, 2018). On the one hand, some studies concluded that artificially designed learning communities are part of a top-down management system, leading to a shift of learners' attention from learning to administrative matters related to accountability (Wang et al., 2017). On the other hand, the cooperation and learning in TRGs have administratively mandated properties, which is questioned as hindering individuals' initiative to participate in learning activities (Zhang and Pang, 2016).

Overall, research based on the Chinese context acknowledges the supportive and nurturing role of organisational structure in individual learning (Zhang and Pang, 2016). However, most literature on PD focuses on specific activities or programs in isolation while ignoring or simplifying the impact of learners' backgrounds and contexts (Chen, 2022). The knowledge base rooted in China has not resulted in a deep understanding of how PD is enabled or constrained by structural conditions in higher educational institutions (Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020). In terms of MLs, there is currently no suitable framework to explain the role of structural conditions in their learning and capability-building process. Meanwhile, as a characteristic practice of PLCs in China, TRGs not only perform the function of teaching and inquiry as a professional group but also assume the management function as an administrative organisation (Zhang and Pang 2016; Wang et al., 2017; Qian and Walker, 2021; Chen, 2022). It is unclear whether PLCs impact the overall learning opportunities of MLs, which deserves further investigation.

3.4.3 Organisational Culture and PD

The comprehensive review above shows that particular leadership practices and institutional frameworks in educational institutions reflect the uniqueness of the Chinese context. By its very nature, such uniqueness is deeply rooted within cultural contexts. Bush and Qian (2000) emphasised that understanding culture in applying Western theories is critical to explaining Chinese phenomena. They proposed theories of leadership and culture in the field of Chinese education. Among them, the four essential characteristics of Chinese culture include *worshipping tradition*, *adoring authority*, *emphasising ethical and moral self-cultivation*, and *stressing collectivism* (Bush and Qian, 2000). Emerging empirical research explored the impact of organisational culture on MLs values and assumed ways of doing things in higher education institutions. Some researchers criticised organisational culture in China as a cultural barrier that impedes individual PD activities within educational institutions

(Wong, 2010; Zhang, Yuan and Yu, 2017; Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020). Yet how organisational culture affects PD for MLs is unclear.

Collectivism is considered one of the most essential core values in the Chinese context (Bush and Qian, 2000; Hofstede, 2003). It emphasises the importance of cooperation, team cohesion, relationship maintenance, and harmony building (Ho and Tikly, 2012). In educational institutions, researchers have observed the pursuit of collective well-being by organisational members and the absolute subordination of individual freedoms to collective interests (Cheng, 1996; Liu and Hallinger, 2021). Correspondingly, balancing collective interests with individual needs is considered one of the tensions faced by MLs (Kruse, 2022). China-based research literature pointed out that collectivism provides favourable preconditions for developing organisational conditions that promote personal learning (Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020), especially in PLCs. Zhang and Pang (2016) and Chen (2022) confirmed that collectivism traditions in educational institutions facilitate the institutionalisation of TRGs practices, as members are more likely to recognise the value of collaboration and become accustomed to collective learning activities. Drawing on a cultural perspective, the collectivistic cultural characteristics embodied by TRGs are similar to the characteristics of PLCs in Western literature, such as shared vision and values and collaborative learning (Bush and Qian, 2000; Zhang and Sun, 2018; Chen, 2022). Individuals with clear collective goals are more likely to see the need to continuously develop their knowledge and skills (Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016; Wang, 2018). In turn, this formal organisational structure with embedded PLCs provides enabling conditions for cultivating a positive learning culture (Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017).

In addition to collectivism, interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) are another critical cultural element of Chinese educational institutions, which embodies a key organisational goal of Chinese Confucian society - harmony (Qian and Walker, 2021). As reviewed above, one of the core tasks of MLs in higher educational institutions is building and maintaining networks and relationships: up, down, and across the

organisation (Luo, 2015; Walker and Qian, 2018; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). In Chinese educational institutions, harmonious relationships that are values-based, learning-focused, human-centred and action-oriented are regarded as the necessary conditions for effective collaborations (Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017), which is conducive to construct a positive learning culture (Walker, 2010). Emotional bonds, mutual trust, and shared commitments between individuals working in institutions with a positive learning culture are key drivers of effective collaborative learning (Qian and Walker, 2021). In contrast, the authoritarianism that accompanies hierarchy results in a relationship between followers and leaders characterised by respect, fear, awe, compliance, and obedience (Farh et al., 2008; Liu and Hallinger, 2021). Chen (2022) criticised such relationship for its tendency to neglect individual opinions and needs.

Synthesis of the organisational culture and PD literature illustrates that researchers often use cultural conditions as a crucial approach for institutional leaders to promote PD (Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017; Qian and Walker, 2021). Nonetheless, there are criticisms of the role of cultural conditions in PD. For example, administrative authorisation and control, compliance with authorities, herd mentality, and conflict avoidance have been proven to cause mutual learning and cooperation among members to tend to be superficial rather than truly effective cooperation (Wong, 2010; Zhang, Yuan and Yu, 2017; Chen, 2022). Accountability and organisational hierarchy easily lead to misunderstandings and distrust among institutional members (King and Bouchard, 2011). Indeed, these cultural barriers are essentially a set of negative values, rules, and norms constraining personal learning behaviours within educational institutions (Schein, 2010). How individuals internalise cultural conditions is the key reason for changes in their learning behaviour, rather than the cultural conditions themselves (Bandura, 1986). Although some papers in Chinese discussed how organisational culture influences leadership and learning behaviour (Wang and Qin, 2010; Tao, 2011; Zheng, 2012), there is limited research linking these factors and little empirical support in China. More importantly, the existing research around PD focuses

on teacher learning. The dual identity of MLs in Chinese higher education institutions has not been valued, which is worth further study.

3.5 The Analytical Framework to Bridge the Gaps

In various contexts, researchers have persuasively discussed the practice of distributed leadership in higher education institutions (Harris, 2004; Spillane, 2006; Gronn, 2010). However, there are gaps in existing research regarding different participants in leadership practice, especially MLs. More studies are needed to explore the process of MLs' capability-building and how institutional conditions work together to exert effects on the process. In order to bridge the research gap, this study combines leadership theory with the term PD to construct an analytical framework, attempting to understand the process of MLs' capability-building in the Chinese context from PD participation and explore the role of other contextual factors. Specifically, this study is based on distributed leadership theory, synthesising instructional leadership and transformational leadership, and then introducing PD to explore the specific content and approaches of MLs' capability-building. Notably, this study specifically focuses on the set of rules followed by MLs participating in PD activities and PD activities occurring, conceptualised as operational mechanisms, which is related to the Chinese practice of distributed leadership that determines the division of labour of MLs. More importantly, MLs and these PD activities are embedded in a certain social environment that promotes or hinders individual behaviour. Considering the particularity of the Chinese context, this study comprehensively uses institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture to deeply analyse the impact of contextual conditions on the process of MLs' capability-building. The analytical framework will guide the analysis of the current status of PD for MLs and their relationship with contextual conditions in this study.

Distinguished from the proposition of solo leadership, distributed leadership theory emphasises that leadership as a shifting configuration of role-sets can be learned and is

not fixed (Gronn, 2010). In this sense, relying solely on one theory to explain the connotation of middle leadership emphasises a certain aspect of its characteristics, which has a limited impact on understanding its knowledge base. This is particularly important for MLs located in positions of numerous relational connections. Given the existing research findings and the structural positions of MLs in CHVCs, this study synthesises instructional leadership emphasising the top-down support of leaders on teaching and transformational leadership prioritising the means for leaders to establish capabilities for bottom-up change in institutions, to analyse and understand the general knowledge of MLs' capability-building (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000). Based on this, the concept of PD is combined with the aim of further exploring the specific formats of MLs' capability-building. From the social constructivist lens, individuals create meaning through interactions with each other and with the environment in which they live (Amineh and Asl, 2015). That is, interaction is not only a vital manifestation of distributed leadership practice (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2013), but a key pathway for capability-building (Vygotsky, 1978). PD for MLs is conceptualised in this study as the social interactions and professional behaviours that MLs exercise within the workspace proactively constructing knowledge and skills to improve individual leadership practice, thus achieving institutional change, while the process of MLs' capability-building means participating in social activities such as interaction and collaboration to construct the category of competencies related to the job.

In addition, researchers attempted to summarise the characteristics of successful PD activities or programmes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Tannehill et al., 2021; Tay et al., 2021). Yet the different situational, contextual, and ecological literature illustrated that the successful experience is unable to be fully replicated and applicable to other contexts, as PD are not static or rigid (Ivic, 2000). Accordingly, further examination is still needed on how PD activities occur in the Chinese context to understand the relationship between various PD activities MLs participating and MLs' capability-building. Based on early empirical analysis results, different distributions and

configurations led to different impacts on school improvement, particularly student achievement (Leithwood, Mascall and Strauss, 2009). This study draws on the perspective of distributed leadership theory and its practice in China to further explain the relationship between MLs' capability-building and operational mechanisms involving norms followed by MLs in participating in PD activities and their division of labour with other participants (such as IL, colleagues, and external stakeholders). Among them, the content and findings related to individual subgroups formed by the interaction between ML and other participants will be discussed based on professional learning communities (PLCs) (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008; DuFour and DuFour, 2013).

Besides this, PD is regarded not just as a separate activity undertaken for its own sake but rather as a process which occurs in a sociocultural context (Al-Mahdi and Al-Wadi, 2015). According to the social constructivist perspective, rich settings of social interactions are conducive to constructing knowledge and developing skills (Ivic, 2000). This is mainly due to the contextual conditions in educational institutions that include various background influences shaping PD and leadership behaviour (Eun, 2010; Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020). Thus, this study further explores the impact of the institutional environment in which MLs work and PD activities occur on PD for MLs. Researchers have identified that arranging or creating a series of shared institutional conditions, including institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture, that promote or hinder PD embedded within institutions (Louws et al., 2017; Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020; Qian and Walker, 2021). However, previous studies have only focused on linking a particular condition to PD, and the knowledge base has yet led to a deep understanding of how PD for MLs is enabled or limited by different aspects of institutional conditions. This study comprehensively takes the three independent and interacting conditions to explore how three dimensions of institutional factors affect PD for MLs and whether there are internal interactions. Such insight can help enact appropriate interventions and strategies to support and facilitate PD for MLs that nurtures MLs change for effective institutional governance.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter introduces the term PD based on the theory of distributed leadership. The literature review from this chapter shows that it is critical to acknowledge that PD is a complex nested process and contextually situated (Timperley and Alton Lee, 2008; Opper and Pedder, 2011). The different situational, contextual, and ecological literature emphasises that research on PD without consideration for professional life and work conditions often falls into dilemmas. Given the position of MLs in higher education institutions and the complex environment they face, it is necessary to develop specialised professional development programmes and activities to support MLs' capability building and leadership development. However, academically, the specific learning content, formats and its operational mechanisms, and influencing factors of PD for MLs are still unclear, especially in hierarchical systems.

Overall, based on leadership theory, this research introduces the concept of PD and creates an analytical framework to explore PD for MLs in the Chinese hierarchical context. Among them, the researcher draws on social constructivist lens and integrates different leadership theories to explore and interpret how MLs developed from PD activities to construct middle leadership, including typical formats, learning content (changing areas), and the operational mechanism of the activities in a hierarchical context. Based on this, this research delves into the specific pathways and mechanisms of the influencing factors at the institutional level on PD for MLs. The part of analytical framework employed in answering the second question in this research was built on findings from prior research conducted on PD and institutional features including institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture (Louws et al., 2017; Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020; Qian and Walker, 2021). Exploring practices and experiences from the context of the Chinese hierarchical system can provide effective references for international educators.

Chapter 4 Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In China, research on professional development for middle leaders (PD for MLs) is minimal. Scholars are accustomed to classifying the PD for MLs directly as the PD for teachers. In fact, this simplistic generalisation is potentially risky. The content and the required workability of MLs are not the same as those of ordinary teachers. This research focuses on the PD for MLs in Chinese higher vocational colleges. The detailed research design and research procedures will be introduced below.

This chapter details the process of solving the research questions and achieving the research purpose of this study. First, the ontology and epistemology stances underpinning that support this study are discussed. The reasons and process for using qualitative phenomenological research in this study are then explained. On this premise, the research instruments used in this study, involving the data collection and analysis tools, and the data collection and analysis process are introduced in detail. At the same time, data management methods were used throughout the study. Finally, this chapter discusses potential ethical considerations during the research process.

4.2 Research Aim and Questions

This research is positioned in the Chinese higher vocational education colleges (CHVCs). Based on the analysis of the current situation and differences in the PD for MLs in CHVCs, the purpose of this study is to explore the factors that affect the PD for MLs in the organisational dimension. By analysing the current situation and exploring the influencing factors, the researcher attempts to give specific professional opinions on the formulation of CHVCs policies on the PD for MLs. This study is designed to address a knowledge gap about professional development for MLs in Chinese

educational environment under the new reform, and it facilitates the overall progress of middle leadership in CHVCs.

Research questions:

1. What is the status of current provision for PD for MLs in CHVCs?
2. In what ways and to what extent do institutional leadership, organisational structure and organisational culture influence PD for MLs in CHVCs?

4.3 Research Paradigm

A paradigm is defined as a philosophical framework that describes assumptions about reality, knowledge, ethics, and systematic inquiry (Mertens, 2012). It embodies the researcher's values and beliefs (Kuhn, 1962), which influence how to think about a problem or issue (Mertens and Hesse-Biber, 2012). It has an irreplaceable role in the integrity of the research process (Creswell, 2013). The research was designed to understand how participants perceive and participate in PD and to explore its influencing factors at the institutional level. The study aligns itself with the social constructivism paradigm and the basics of the paradigm are detailed below.

Similar to research methods, paradigms come in different institutions of thought, such as positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, feminist theory, and pragmatism (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006; Creswell, 2009). Specifically, positivism emphasizes identifying causal relationships and their effects. Researchers perform hypothesis and theory testing by focusing on variables and applying interventions. The logic of this verification is deductive. In contrast, interpretivism and constructivism advocate understanding phenomena that people observe and interpret to generate or construct new knowledge and theories. Researchers focus on cultural, structural, institutional, and functional relationships. The logic contained therein is inductive. Overall, the methods

employed by positivism are premised on scientific realist ontology and epistemology, while interpretivism and constructivism are premised on subjective relativistic ontology and epistemology (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Furthermore, these fundamentals also align with a common view that qualitative research may stem from interpretive paradigms and constructivism but quantitative research from positivist, post-positivist and scientific paradigms (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2010).

Social constructivism emphasises the role of interpretation and perception, which means reality is created and developed through an interpretation of the world and a denial of universals. The research aim of this paradigm lies in the understanding of the society of human experience (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Further, the basic viewpoints of social constructivism include the following aspects. Ontology denies the existence of a unified objective world, arguing that reality is plural and mutable. Epistemologically, the view of social constructivists embodies subjectivism, which holds that knowledge is not the objective reflection of the subject on the object but the creation of the subject. Therefore, research aims not to seek absolute truth but to seek diverse understandings of the world.

Ontologically, social constructivism believes that the nature of reality is subjective, conceived and personal (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). However, this does not mean that they are entirely random or arbitrary and thus cannot be recognized. It emphasizes that reality is not just there for people to be discovered, but “created” in a sense by introducing a “structure” (Mertens, 2010). Furthermore, social behaviour follows socially constructed criteria. According to this ontological assumption, MLs’ involvement in PD activities constitutes reality. Furthermore, social constructivism holds that reality has multiple versions, which embody its subjectivity. This research deciphered MLs’ subjective perceptions of PD and then examined multiple influencing factors. In fact, social constructivism is oriented towards the social alterability of things or knowledge itself (including its processes and outcomes), rather than pursuing a single right and wrong to represent reality. Research under this paradigm emphasises a

bottom-up exploratory research approach in answering research questions, which requires the researcher to construct reality based on the data obtained from field studies.

In epistemology, social constructivists are not constrained to express knowledge and cognitive subjects in a one-to-one correspondence. Because they believe that knowledge is not passively acquired by individuals but is the result of active construction by cognitive subjects (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). People should question existing knowledge rather than submit to a single relationship between the reflecting and the reflected. Social constructivism advocates that the cognitive subject is not a single individual but a community composed of individuals embedded in and influenced by social and cultural conditions. The meaning between individuals is constructed through interactions with others and formed by historical and cultural norms that operate in individual lives (Crotty, 1998). That is, even when associated with the same phenomenon, individuals from different cultures or generations may construct meaning in various ways. Based on this, cognitive activity is regarded as a social behaviour influenced by social history and cultural traditions (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). In this research, the researcher focused on the interactive processes in which interviewees participated, as well as the dominant environments in which they lived and worked, in order to understand and interpret their attitudes and behaviours.

Based on social constructivism, learning and development in practice are regarded as a social behaviour, a process in which learners and mentors collectively construct knowledge in specific contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivist scholars believe learning is a positive process (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000). Learners should learn to actively discover and internalise concepts, then reflect and construct new knowledge that can be applied to different situations (Amineh and Asl, 2015). According to Wertsch (1997), social constructivism encourages and rewards learners to actively understand their learning based on their social and cultural background. The background of learners has been proven to help shape their capability to create, discover, and understand knowledge (Amineh and Asl, 2015). In this sense, it is necessary to

consider the learner's situation, such as beliefs and knowledge level, during the learning process (Eun, 2008, 2010). In addition, social constructivist scholars emphasise the necessity of collaboration among learners and social practitioners (McMahon, 1997). Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasised that the relationship between practitioners and their corresponding realities, social organisations, and the political economy they operate is vital and effective in practical experience. In further terms, learning should include both knowledge and practice.

Jones, Torres and Arminio (2013) emphasised that a philosophical perspective should be reflected in all aspects of research design. Thus, social constructivism, which places emphasis on the understanding of the world they live in (Creswell, 2016), is chosen as the epidemiological foundation for this research. Based on participants' different experiences, the researcher attempted to understand the current status of middle leadership construction in the Chinese hierarchical context from the perspective of MLs participating in PD. Meanwhile, this research further explored and analysed the institutional factors that affect PD for MLs, providing a framework for PD for MLs. This perspective will be conducive to developing appropriate intervention measures to support the capability building of MLs, thereby enhancing institutional governance and promoting organisational change. Given that this study attempts to explore the basic status of PD for MLs and explain the meaning individuals assign to PD for MLs in a hierarchical context, a qualitative approach best suits the landscape of this research. The method used in this study is as follows.

4.4 Qualitative Research Methodology

When researchers observe a phenomenon in educational research, they consider specific means and data to understand the situation. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods are valid paths (Creswell, 2013). This research aims to explore the basic blueprint of professional development for MLs in CHVCs and explain its influencing factors, and the qualitative approach best fits the current approach. While quantitative

purists believe that qualitative research cannot accurately identify causal relationships and look for probabilistic causes, Maxwell (2008) and Johnson and Christensen (2019) recommended that qualitative research plays a role in exploring how and why a phenomenon occurs.

The literature review found that there are a few pieces of literature focusing on this field in this study. In this case, researchers need to explore participants' experiences in context to form new theories (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013). Depending on the purpose of this research and the specific research question, the researcher needs to develop the theory further to strengthen interpretation. In general, researchers often describe the world through variables in the natural sciences. They attempt to explain and predict various aspects of the world by clarifying relationships between variables (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Quantitative research often starts with a hypothesis. Qualitative research generally holds that human choices and behaviour should be examined under natural conditions. Researchers gain insight into the subjective dimension of the research phenomenon by approaching the research subject. In contrast, qualitative research focus on the whole of the studied phenomenon and its components and influencing factors by combining pattern regularity with contextual complexity (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Therefore, qualitative research can gain a more comprehensive and complete understanding of PD phenomenon regarding MLs in CHVCs and can more effectively answer complex research questions.

The educational world is multilayered and full of contradictions, complexities and interrelationships (Johnson and Christensen, 2019). As a form of social inquiry, qualitative research works well for researchers to interpret and understand phenomena, behaviours, attitudes, and intentions (Hammersley, 2013). This approach is able to answer the research question of this research comprehensively. Faced with the complex environment of higher vocational education in China, qualitative research that relies on direct experience and meaning provides a more reliable understanding than numerical data for explaining research phenomena. Specifically, as one of the major qualitative

research approaches, phenomenological research was used as a specific research method in this research, explained in detail below.

4.5 Phenomenological Research

Determining which of the approaches to qualitative research to use is critical in guiding research toward its goals. This research only explored the experience of MLs participating in PD and the ways in which they participate and are influenced. This is a “what” and “how” question that the phenomenological approach lends itself well to addressing (Moustakas, 1994). As one of the five main qualitative research methods, phenomenology describes the shared meaning of a particular phenomenon or behaviour that individuals experience in their lives (Hammersley, 2013; Denscombe, 2014). This description comes from the individual values, attitudes, perceptions and experiences (Denscombe, 2014). In turn, through careful recall and informative representation of the experience by the participants, researchers attempt to describe and explain how the phenomenon under research exists and is maintained (Moustakas, 1994). On the basis of sufficient data, the researchers emphasise finding commonalities among different participants when they experienced specific phenomena. To this end, phenomenological research is seen as categorising or abstracting an individual’s direct experience of a phenomenon into a comprehensive description of its universal nature (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Academically, phenomenology as the methodological approach encompasses different types within the framework of different paradigms. Several different styles called “new” phenomenology and “traditional” phenomenology have been discussed. Traditional phenomenology, founded by Husserl, assumes that there are commonalities among multiple instances of the same phenomenon. Researchers look for this commonality to explain the underlying structure of the phenomenon under study (van Manen, 2016). The commonality here is what phenomenologists call the essence of human experience, which is universal and exists in transcendental experience. In contrast to traditional

Husserlian phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology is interested in people and situated, interpreted, and particular lived experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Different individuals may have varying experiences with phenomena. The new phenomenology aims to explore the shared experiences of different groups, rather than seeking transcendental experiences that span all groups (Johnson and Christensen, 2024). It is suitable for investigating an individual perception of a particular situation (Smith, 2008). In general, phenomenological research aims to reveal the internal structure of common meaning, not to prove the existence of certain situations. Both “new” and “traditional” phenomenological studies are valid, and the significant differences between these two mainly focus on reflexivity and cultural issues.

Firstly, new phenomenology adopts a hermeneutic approach which emphasises reflexivity and involves the reflection and interpretation of experience in research (Caelli, 2000; Dowling, 2007). In traditional phenomenology, the essence of the phenomenon under investigation may be revealed through the process of phenomenon reduction (Crotty, 1996). However, this process often comes with practical and ethical issues (Dowling, 2007). In this sense, valuing the role of reflexivity in interpreting data is an appropriate development, as it embraces a human science perspective of intersubjectivity methodologically and philosophically (Dowling, 2007). Secondly, the way in which cultural issues are viewed is another significant feature of new phenomenology. Distinguished from traditional phenomenology, which ignores cultural issues, the analysis focus of new phenomenology is to describe the life experiences of participants in a cultural context rather than their universal significance (Caelli, 2000). The descriptions here seek descriptions from the personal perspective of the individual and acknowledge methodologically historical constraints on the researchers themselves and others’ interpretations (Racher and Robinson, 2003; Dowling, 2007).

In practice, phenomenology serves as a powerful method for understanding and gaining insight into individuals’ motivations and behaviours (Lester, 1999), aiming to

emphasise and determine how individuals perceive specific phenomena. Furthermore, phenomenology enables in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences and perspectives in their natural environment, and uncovers the fundamental structure of meaning (Gary, 2009). It distinguishes it from other qualitative research methods, such as grounded theory, although both research methods have some similarities, such as both starting from data and using inductive, iterative data analysis methods. Yet grounded theory aims to develop a theory rooted in - grounded in - data and involves sampling a large number of participants (Charmaz, 2014). There is a gap between this and the research objective of attempting to construct a rich and detailed picture of the phenomenon under investigation in this research. Considering the particularity of the research aims and context, the researcher adopted new phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology. By bringing individual experiences to the forefront, the researcher documented and analysed their experience and feelings in detail and explored the meaning of PD for MLs in Chinese hierarchical context.

Overall, phenomenological research is rooted in the participant's direct experience of the world, and its salient feature and core is the emphasis on the individual subjective experience (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). In order to achieve a comprehensive interpretation of individual experience, researchers often need to touch upon different data sources during the data collection phase. Among them, the more common method is to conduct in-depth interviews with participants. In this process, participants' descriptions of reality reflected individual construction and focused on the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman, 1967). Marshall and Rossman (2016) argued that detailed descriptions help researchers grasp and understand the nature of the meanings given by participants. Through multiple rounds of data collection processes and phenomenological reflection, the complexity of the experience was revealed rather than a single summative definition. Finally, the researcher completed a written comprehensive description of the research phenomenon based on the basic structure. This step was the presentation of the essence of phenomenology. The complete research producer will be shown in the following sections.

4.6 Sampling and Participant Recruitment

The quality of qualitative research is closely related to the sampling strategies employed by researchers. It is due to the sampling directly derived from the participating population of the research phenomenon (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). In this research, the selected research samples were from China. According to the aim and questions of this study, data can be divided into two parts: primary data and secondary data. The primary data from original sources were obtained. Primary data were collected from 15 participants via semi-structured interviews. In addition, secondary data were sourced for analysis from official documents relating to PD policies. Given the special nature of qualitative studies, below is a detailed explanation of the sampling method, including the context (Chinese higher vocational education), the target participants, the reasons for and use of selection.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance in China jointly issued a list, which are major units belonging to *High-level Vocational Colleges and Specialty Construction Plan with Chinese Characteristics* in 2019. There are 197 colleges and universities in the *Double High-levels Plan* construction list. Specifically, there are 56 institutions in high-level college construction and 141 institutions in high-level professional specialty construction. Among them, four CHVCs in Shandong Province are selected for high-level college construction in total. Shandong Province is in a developed area along the eastern coast of China. As one of the major education provinces in China, the total number of applicants for the college entrance examination in Shandong Province in 2021 reached more than 795,000. According to official statistics, 35.24% of students enter CHVCs to receive vocational education. Higher vocational colleges in Shandong Province attach great importance to the PD of incumbents and invest a lot of money in cultivating their professional skills. Considering the representativeness, feasibility and accessibility of the sampling, the researcher selected aforementioned four CHVCs located in Shandong Province from the high-level college construction list.

The advantage of using primary data is that the researcher can obtain information and data directly from respondents. Primary data sources provide the researcher with greater control. The researcher can choose more feasible sampling methods to obtain high-quality data and solve research problems. Commonly used sampling methods can be divided into two categories, namely probability (random) and non-probability (non-random) sample (Cohen and Holliday, 1979, 1982, 1996). Among them, each type of the way of obtaining samples follows its sampling strategies and principles in this process. Because the random sample is drawn from a broad population, it has a lower risk of bias and a higher representation. Nonetheless, there is sampling error in random samples. In contrast, although some researchers have accused it of being a deliberate choice not representative of the wider population, non-random samples can be targeted to meet the requirements of researchers and provide greater research depth. Given the specificity of the research questions in this research, most random samples may not provide specific and valid information. Therefore, this research used snowball sampling as the sampling method to reach people who have an in-depth knowledge of a particular issue by virtue of their professional role, power, or experience (Ball, 1990). The specific sampling design is as follows.

This research used snowball sampling as the main method of reaching participants. This is a way of enriching the sample using participants' social networks and relationships. Such relationships may be based on friendships or colleagues, which to some extent, effectively limit the asymmetric power relationship between researchers and participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). In addition, many scholars have acknowledged its role in those studies that need researchers to work with hard-to-reach populations as samples (Teddlie and Yu, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Flick, 2009). Researchers and participants have a clear delineation of roles in the sampling process. Before sampling begins, researchers confirm who are the participants they directly invite (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018), and participants can be considered gatekeepers to subsequent participants. In this research, MLs, as powerful elites, belong to hard-to-reach groups (Noy, 2008). Therefore, the researcher used snowball sampling

methods to conduct exploratory semi-structured interviews with samples and obtain qualitative data from them. This enabled the researcher to learn directly from the MLs the current situation and basic influencing factors of the PD for MLs in CHVCs. Combining primary data results with literature review, the outline of the second-round interviews related to PD for MLs was formed. Next, the researcher sought participants from the first-round interviewees to participate in the followed-up interviews voluntarily. After finishing all the data collection work, the researcher analysed and compared the influence degree of each factor.

Flick (2009) pointed out that the fundamental goal of the sample selected in qualitative research is to provide comprehensive and relevant information. The size and type of each sample in research are determined around the research question (Teddlie and Yu, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). This is, the sample size is not specified and determined in qualitative research, and suitability for research purposes is the primary condition (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). In this research, due to the large number of MLs in CHVCs, it is impractical to randomly select a sample and spend time testing it. Therefore, according to the research aims and overall design, the researcher interviewed 15 MLs at four CHVCs located in Shandong. In light of all of them from in the *Double High-levels Plan*, such geographically close colleges helped to ensure that the sample represents a similar level of PD for MLs in CHVCs. The linear sequential snowball sampling method was devised. Specifically, the researcher first identified three individuals in college A who match the characteristics of the research subjects. Then, the original three participants as introducers recruited other twelve elite from college B, C and D to participate in the research. This sampling design facilitated finding participants who answer research questions from different perspectives. In other words, the data given by the participants within the sample were non-homogeneous. It effectively avoided possible biases in the sampling process to a certain extent, namely prevent over-sampling and under-sampling.

4.7 Methods and Instrumentation of Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of three phases in this research. It facilitated the dual exploration of this research under both wide-angle and narrow-angle lenses. The researcher had the opportunity to understand the background and current status of PD for MLs in CHVCs and explain the specific factors that influence MLs' participation in PD. As mentioned above, this research selected four comprehensive CHVCs in Shandong Province as sample colleges. The researcher collected documentary data and conducted formal interviews in four CHVCs. Among them, College A provided pilot study samples.

Before the formal start of the research, the researcher completed a detailed Application Form (see Appendix 1) for ethical approval to seek research approval from the ethics committee. During the first phase of the research, official policies and institutional documents on the PD of incumbents from MOE, Shandong Provincial Education Department and Personnel Division in CHVCs. In the second phase, the researcher contacted the heads of the Office of Academic Research in the four CHVCs for cooperation and support. After approval, the researcher contacted three MLs in CHVC A through the email addresses published on the official website to ask if they would like to participate in the pilot study. Notably, the pilot study was carried out to ascertain the timing and suitability of Phase 2 and 3. These three MLs worked in a same college (CHVC A) but at different secondary colleges or departments. They were asked to complete the interview and gave their own suggestions to help the researcher revise it. The pilot test was carried out immediately after Ethics Committee approval has been given. The findings in the pilot study informed the preparation for data collection of Phase 2. Subsequently, the researcher used snowball sampling to enrich the sample size. If a ML refuses, the researcher would continue to contact others to reach the initial target number of direct contact. The relevant information and documents of this study were attached to the email. After obtaining the agreement of MLs, the researcher began to schedule interviews and conduct face-to-face interviews. Finally, in the third phase,

the researcher organised the second round of interviews based on the analyse results of Phase 1 and Phase 2. The followed-up interviews mainly focused on discussing the findings emerging from former phases. The details of the three phases are as follows:

Phase 1: Document Collection

The main task of this stage was to collect and analyse the existing national and regional policies and official documents at institutional level, aiming at a more stereoscopic description of the PD provision of MLs in CHVCs. Specifically, this phase consisted of two parts. Firstly, the researcher focused on policy documents related to MLs released by authoritative departments in the past decade. Conducting policy searched on the official websites of The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, the Ministry of Education of China, and the Shandong Provincial Department of Education using keywords such as “middle cadres”, “department level cadres”, “training”, and “vocational education”. According to the principles of authority, relevance, and normativity, 17 national and two provincial-level policy documents were included in the initial selection scope. By scanning the basic content of the documents, a total of 11 policy documents related to MLs and their PD were ultimately selected. The summary table of policy documents is shown in Table 2. Among them, the first and second documents are the basic requirements and content of the new vocational education reform released by the central government, in which the macro development requirements of the leadership team in CHVCs were clarified. The third to ninth documents are related to requirements and instructions issued by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with other administrative departments regarding the PD of teachers and all faculty in vocational education institutions. The tenth document is the training plan released by the national training base. As the only official report from a provincial administrative department, the eleventh document reported on the annual development of vocational education in Shandong Province.

Table 2: Policy texts used in the study: national and provincial level

| Full Title | Signifier |
|--|-----------|
| Notice from the State Council on the Issuance of <i>the National Implementation Programme for Vocational Education Reform</i> | GPT1 |
| General Office of the State Council and General Office of the CPC Central Committee, issued <i>Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education</i> | GPT2 |
| Notice from the General Office of the Ministry of Education on <i>the accreditation of Double-Position teachers in vocational education</i> | GPT3 |
| Ministry of Education and other nine departments on the issuance of <i>the Action Plan for Improving the Quality and Excellence of Vocational Education (2020-2023)</i> | GPT4 |
| Implementation plan to deepen the reform of the construction of a Double-Position teaching force for vocational education in the new era | GPT5 |
| Notice from the Ministry of Education and Other Six Departments on the Issuance of <i>Measures for the Promotion of College-Enterprise Cooperation in Vocational Schools</i> | GPT6 |
| Guiding Opinions from the Ministry of Education and Other Six Departments on <i>Strengthening the Reform of the Teacher Team Construction in Universities in the New Era</i> | GPT7 |
| Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance on the Implementation of <i>Teacher Quality in Vocational Colleges Improvement Plan (2021-2025)</i> | GPT8 |
| Notice from the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of <i>the National Programme for the Construction of Teaching Innovation Teams for Teachers in Vocational Colleges</i> | GPT9 |
| National Vocational College Principal Training (Cultivation) Base 2022 Training Plan | GPT10 |
| Shandong Province Higher Vocational Education Quality Annual Report (2022) | PPT1 |

Table 3: Policy texts used in the study: institutional level

| Full Title | Signifier |
|---|-----------|
| Application proposal from CHVC A for <i>construction projects of high-level vocational colleges and professional with Chinese characteristics</i> | CPT-A |
| Application proposal from CHVC B for <i>construction projects of high-level vocational colleges and professional with Chinese characteristics</i> | CPT-B |
| Application proposal from CHVC C for <i>construction projects of high-level vocational colleges and professional with Chinese characteristics</i> | CPT-C |
| Application proposal from CHVC D for <i>construction projects of high-level vocational colleges and professional with Chinese characteristics</i> | CPT-D |

By scanning documents, guidelines and instructions from governments were sorted out. The key points for local governments to formulate and issue relevant policies according to the regional development needs were also summarised. Meanwhile, the attention support approaches and financial investment for the PD of incumbents formulated at the institutional level according to the relevant national and regional requirements are gradually clarified. At this step, these documents from authoritative institutions were used to provide policy context and background information for this research, thereby suggesting key points for discussion in the subsequent interview design. For example, it was mentioned in national policies that “(institutions should) organise training activities for CHVCs principals and middle cadres” in GPT4 (MOE, 2020). Correspondingly, questions 5 to 10 in the interview outline (Appendix 8) aim to explore the PD activities in which MLs authentically participate, focusing on training activities and project design. Based on understanding the basic attitudes and guiding opinions of government policies related to PD for MLs, the researchers searched for relevant institutional documents on the official websites (personnel departments) of sample CHVCs using keywords such as “middle cadres”, “training”, and “learning activities” (as shown in Table 3). In addition to providing background information, documentary data at the institutional level focuses on specific measures and practices within

institutions, reflecting the implementation of policies at the institutional level. As such, in the subsequent data analysis process, documentary data was also used to supplement semi-structured interview data in support of triangulation (Bowen, 2009). Further investigation is needed if the policy is missing or contradicts the interview data.

Phase 2: Semi-structured interview

The second phase involved qualitative interview work. The main data collection tool is the semi-structured interview. Interviews are a flexible and widely used data collection tool. It is not a simple conversation but an interaction that researchers have carefully designed to fit the purpose (Gary, 2013). Because interviews are conducted between interviewer and interviewee through multiple sensory channels. Hochschild (2009) pointed out that interviews can explore specific issues in-depth, which is a feature that is difficult to have in written questionnaires. At the same time, researchers can gain further insights into people's thoughts, behaviours, opinions, and values as well as explain how and why people frame their thoughts. Among the various interview types, the level of instruction and control of the semi-structured interview is suitable for influencing factors, which is beneficial to provide the interviewee with sufficient space to answer relevant questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2010). Given topics and open-ended questions to be answered by respondents, this research used semi-structured interviews to collect data on personal PD experience and factors influencing the PD for MLs. The questions revolve around three themes that were significantly relevant to the literature review.

Table 4: Demographic information of the 15 participants

| Name | Gender | Current position | CHVCs | Y1 | Y2 | Y3 | Y4 |
|--------|--------|--|-------|----|----|----|----|
| May | Female | Associate Dean | A | 6 | 6 | 6 | 23 |
| Aimee | Female | Dean | C | 6 | 17 | 25 | 33 |
| Frank | Male | Director of Scientific Research | B | 2 | 15 | 24 | 29 |
| Flora | Female | Director of Academic Affairs | A | 4 | 9 | 12 | 17 |
| Steven | Male | Director of Personnel Services | A | 6 | 10 | 15 | 28 |
| Ellen | Female | Associate Dean | B | 5 | 5 | 16 | 18 |
| Peter | Male | Associate Dean | A | 6 | 10 | 14 | 17 |
| Evan | Male | Dean | B | 2 | 14 | 14 | 20 |
| Grace | Female | Director of the Double-High Plan Construction Office | B | 2 | 11 | 16 | 30 |
| Martin | Male | Dean | C | 2 | 25 | 28 | 32 |
| Gary | Male | Director of the Double-High Plan Construction Office | A | 5 | 5 | 10 | 15 |
| Lucy | Female | Associate Dean | C | 1 | 1 | 4 | 16 |
| Jeff | Male | Deputy Director of Development Planning Division | D | 3 | 5 | 6 | 9 |
| Lily | Female | Associate Dean | D | 4 | 7 | 8 | 13 |
| Mike | Male | Deputy Director of Academic Affairs | D | 1 | 1 | 7 | 8 |

Note: *Y1* Years in current position; *Y2* Years in middle leadership position; *Y3* Years in administration; *Y4* Years in education

As is shown in Table 4, the researcher invited 15 participants to conduct face-to-face interviews in their familiar environment to obtain high-quality interview results and demonstrate respect for the participants. The researcher developed a detailed interview schedule and confirmed dates with the participants. Considering the high workload and limited time of MLs, the interview outline was revised repeatedly, and it was finally determined that the three parts contained 24 questions (see Appendix 8). This phase aimed to address the following issues:

1. The personal information of the participants was collected. It included personal work development process and experience. Such data were crucial for understanding the diverse backgrounds and career trajectories of the participants.
2. The participant's experience and specific formats of participation in PD were answered. It reflected specific initiatives by CHVCs to support PD for MLs. At the same time, the frequency of participation and the degree of motivation reflected the participants' attitudes toward PD.
3. Influencing factors of PD for MLs in CHVCs were listed, which revolved around three potentially relevant themes mentioned in the literature review: institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture. It was because official documents represent, to some extent, the institutional plans and projected goals for PD. The specific implementation situation and effects needed to be obtained from the participants' opinions.

Each semi-structured interview took 50 to 60 minutes. First, the researcher proactively provided research information to build trust and rapport. Before starting the formal interviews, the researcher asked participants for basic personal information in order to activate schemata. Meanwhile, participants were invited to share their PD experiences and perspectives from their experience. The next step was to enter the formal semi-structured interview. In this phase, based on individual circumstances, participants were

asked what institutional-level factors affecting their participation in PD. These factors might be positive or negative. The questions at this stage revolved around aforementioned three themes. Specifically:

1. Personal Background and Experience: The topic aimed to understand the participants' attitude to PD in their past work. The interview started with basic personal information. Attitudes towards PD were drawn from participants' descriptions of relevant past experiences.

2. Institutional Leadership: It was to explore the specific impact of institutional leadership on PD for MLs. The researcher focused on institutional leaders' attitudes toward PD for MLs by understanding the relationship between participants and their leaders. At the same time, the researcher emphasised how institutional leadership influenced the research phenomenon.

3. Organisational Structure: This topic deal with specific organisational structure types.

4. Organisational Culture: The evident influence of the cultural dimension on teachers' professional development has been repeatedly demonstrated in international literature. Exploring the way in which institutional culture playing a role in PD for MLs was the third part of influencing factors.

Data analysis and collection are not separate (Maxwell, 2013). Especially in the qualitative research stage, the researcher alternated between data collection (semi-structured interviews) and data analysis. The researcher used a recording device to record the interview and generated interview notes during the interview. After the conclusion of each interview, the interview notes and audio recordings were preliminarily analysed. The researcher uploaded the interview recordings to transcription software to complete the transcription and first data scan. When conducting interim analysis, memos and notes were made combined with interview

notes to track and capture the researcher's analytical thinking about the data (Groenewald, 2008). In view of the large volume of transcriptional data, researchers need to group and compare data by category (Maxwell, 2013). This research used grounded theory coding method as the analytical strategy. The specific procedure is described in detail below. After uploading the transcript to NVivo for overall data analysis, emerging categories gradually became apparent after the first round of data scanning and analysis. The researcher prepared the second scan of the original data. The researcher grouped topics with contiguity relationships and constructed new lists. Finally, combining research questions, literature reviews and analytical frameworks, the researcher analysed all themes to generate a list of factors influencing PD for MLs.

Phase 3: The follow-up interview

The third phase aimed to use member checking as a validity check (Johnson and Christensen, 2024), and further explore the key degree of each influencing factor on the research phenomenon. This phase occurred when the researcher returned the results of the first round of interview data analysis to the interviewees for verification. Specifically, after completing the initial data analysis, the researcher returned the preliminary analysis results of the interview data to the interviewees via email for review and invited them to participate in a second round of interviews. After receiving a positive response, the researcher scheduled an interview with the interviewee. All 15 participants from the first round of interviews accepted the invitation for the second round. Each interview lasts 30-60 minutes. The beginning time of the second round was one month after the last interview in the previous round.

The format of semi-structured interviews continued to be selected as the data collection tool in this phase, and the principle remained to respect the interviewees' wishes. The topic guide was determined by the second stage data analysis results. The interview questions mainly involve the interviewee's evaluation of the data analysis results and the discussion of underlying reasons, such as "Whether this description meets your

expected expression”, and “How do you view this analysis result”. In addition, in the practical process, interviewees often could revisit more details of their experiences based on preliminary data analysis results and provide supplementary data. Such an original participant review of the explanation of the experience and the description of the basic structure of the experience is helpful for the validity check of this research (Johnson and Christensen, 2024). It could be “mulling over”, “reliving”, “prioritising”, or “clarifying”. It is worth noting that, the data collection process in the third phase was similar to the second phase, which was deemed not to fall outside of their comfort zones, and it facilitated the opportunity for deeper reflection and obtaining insights into internal conversations.

4.8 Data Analysis Procedure

In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis alternate in the research process. Saldaña (2021) pointed out that the qualitative analysis process is a cyclic development process. As part of the transition between raw data and nascent theory, researchers’ strategies and specific methods for data management and processing are determined by the nature and purpose of the research (Patton, 2015). Coding is one of the common methods of qualitative data analysis. It provides data (such as interview transcripts, documents, pictures, videos) with tools for detection, classification, development, construction, and other analytical purposes (Saldaña, 2021; Charmaz, 2014). Whether or not to code data is based on the specific context and personal values. This research was a phenomenological study based on the social constructivism paradigm, aiming to construct a basic blueprint for the PD for MLs in CHVCs and explore its common meanings. As an essential link between data collection and meaning interpretation (Charmaz, 2001), coding can effectively help the researcher find answers to research questions. The specific coding strategy and data analysis process will be explained in detail below. In this research, the grounded theory coding method (Charmaz, 2014) was applied to all forms of data. The justifications and application procedures, including the coding strategy, of this method will be discussed in detail.

As an important link between data collection and interpretation of meaning (Charmaz, 2001), this research adopted the grounded theory coding method as the general method for data analysis. The main advantage of grounded theory coding lies in its flexibility and interactivity. On the one hand, it requires researchers to maintain an open attitude and flexibly apply appropriate coding strategies during the coding process (Charmaz, 2014). On the other hand, when grounded theory coding is selected, researchers are brought into an interactive space (Charmaz, 2014), in which continuous interaction and comparison with data can help researchers solve new analytical problems encountered. Charmaz (2014) emphasised that grounded theory coding promotes the study of actions and processes by examining, analysing, and interpreting how individuals respond to events, what meaning they have, and how and why these actions and meanings evolve by breaking down data into components. Hence, through grounded theory coding, the researcher can not only study typical formats, learning content, and operational mechanisms of PD for MLs in the Chinese context but also explore the specific ways institutional factors from different dimensions play a role. When analysing documentary and interview data, this research followed a sequence of three stages of grounded theory coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

4.8.1 Document Data Analysis

In this research, the analysis of policy documents was the first stage of data analysis was the first stage of data analysis, as policies issued by governments at all levels provided an environment for PD for MLs. Documents in educational research can take a wide range of forms, such as national or institutional texts by official records or issued (large-scale databases, policies, regulations), routine documents developed by organisations (memoranda, case records), and private documents (diary, Email). Through the collection of different documents, researchers incorporate the documents into the research data for analysis, making qualitative research more abundant. Among all document types, official documents as a social product with value reflect

institutional and social settings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). That is, document analysis can better reflect the context.

Bowen (2009) pointed out that document analysis includes skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation. In this research, skimming and reading government policy documents were the first round of data analysis. Accordingly, its purpose is to provide the macro background and necessary information for the research and then understand the policy aspirations of PD for MLs on the Chinese mainland. Meanwhile, as explained in the previous section, policy documents are conducive to designing semi-structured interview questions in the future, as they can help researchers capture interview key points (Bowen, 2009). After completing this step, the researcher collected and scanned documentary data published by sample CHVCs to understand the institutional environment in which the interviewees are located. It should be noted that the researcher focused on official documents as sources of information rather than the process of making them. In addition to providing the necessary background, documentary data serves as supplementary data in subsequent data analysis to further explain and analyse interviewee behaviour and attitudes. Thus, based on the research aim and analysis content, the researcher chosen the grounded theory coding method as the preliminary intermediary of research to identify specific circumstances regarding PD for MLs.

Considering the total amount of qualitative research data to be analysed, the researcher chosen NVivo software as a tool to use in the data storage and analysis process. It was susceptible to track the database formed in this research. Notably, the selected policy documents were not imported into Nvivo during the first round of scanning documentary data. This is mainly because this round of skimming and reading aims to quickly grasp the basic situation and relevant key points of PD for MLs rather than seeking to deconstruct and interpret the documents. Considering the role of documentary data in this research, after the second phase of interview data collection, the selected 11 government policy documents and four institutional policy documents,

along with 15 interview transcription data, were imported into Nvivo and nodes were generated. Correspondingly, the grounded theory coding method was applied to documentary and interview data analysis. Conducting data analysis on policy documents and interview transcripts at the same stage is beneficial for ensuring consistency in the meaning of coding and keeping coding simple, direct, and relevant (Charmaz, 2014). More importantly, juxtaposing data from different sources in phenomenology is instrumental in answering and corresponding to two important research questions - what interviewees have experienced and which situations or conditions have influenced their experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This is important in phenomenological research.

Table 5: An example of initial coding process: Policy Document

| Policy Document | Conceptualisation | Categorisation |
|---|--|---|
| <p>According to the needs of the school running and development and based on the principles of <i>strengthening theory, strict management, and emphasising effectiveness</i>, (training courses) follow the development laws of middle cadres, carefully selecting training content, and highlighting the timeliness and applicability of training and learning content; (training courses) focus on enhance the personal occupational abilities and professional qualities of middle cadres, strengthening their sense of responsibility, reform, and innovation awareness, promoting the improvement of internal governance system, stimulating the vitality of vocational colleges, and leading the high-quality development of vocational education. (GPT 11)</p> | <p><i>Serving institutional development;</i></p> <p><i>Well-structured PD activity;</i></p> <p><i>Focusing on solving practical problems;</i></p> <p><i>Taking into account both ability and awareness;</i></p> <p><i>Serving institutional governance</i></p> | <p>Compliant-driven Outset</p> <p>Administration-led Procedure</p> <p>Leadership Competency</p> <p>Leadership Competency</p> <p>Compliant-driven Outset</p> |

It has been mentioned above that the data analysis process is cyclical. Specifically, the grounded theory coding method mainly consists of three iterative coding stages. These three stages are initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014), depending on the degree of fit and abstraction of the data. The first cycle in the coding process is the initial coding, involving individual words, lines or paragraphs, which pushes the research further towards the core code. At this stage, the researcher adopted the process coding strategy and in vivo coding strategy from the original policy documents to ensure the original meaning of the document data, as shown in Table 5. As the second cycle of the grounded theory coding method, focused coding and theoretical coding further coded and correlated the node generated in the previous phase. Notably, the researcher comprehensively compared and recoded nodes from policy documents and interview transcriptions in these two phases. The focused coding example and process will be presented in the following interview data analysis process (Table 7 to Table 10).

4.8.2 Interview Data Analysis

Interview data analysis was the second part of data analysis. The researcher employed snowball sampling to recruit 15 eligible MLs for constructing interviews. Although there were only 15 participants in this research, the interviews were conducted in two rounds. Before conducting interview data analysis, a necessary preparation was interview data transcription. Crabtree and Miller (2023) referred to transcription as a complex task. The difficulties encountered by the researcher in this work included how to retrieve efficiently valid information and how to design accurate translations of the interview content. In order to closely convey the meaning of the original documents and accurately reproduce the validity of the interviewee's statements (Abfalter, Mueller-Seeger and Raich, 2020), the researcher chose to continue using Chinese to complete the data analysis work. Since the research aims and questions have been clarified, the data transcription and analysis were carried out concurrently with the data collection to form an effective cycle (Charmaz, 2014).

In practice, all policy documents and interview transcriptions were inputted into Nvivo for easy management, retrieval, and comparison. The researcher first inputted the policy text into Nvivo. Subsequently, the recordings of each interviewee were converted into interview transcripts, which were then imported into Nvivo and named by the interviewee's pseudonym. It should be noted that the researcher generated transcriptions and imported them into Nvivo immediately after completing an interview rather than importing them after all interviews had finished. Interview data analysis began immediately after interview transcription. This approach can ensure that the direction of subsequent interviews is more accurate through timely analysis, at the same time, it can also avoid redundant and missing data. As mentioned above, the grounded theory coding method involved two cycles and three stages. Specifically, researchers may use only one method at different stages or use multiple methods to refine the phenomena and processes in the data (Saldaña, 2021). This research flexibly applied the specific methods of grounded theory coding proposed by Saldaña (2021) and Charmaz (2014). The whole process is explained below:

Initial coding

In the initial coding stage, the researcher remained open-minded and made specific coding choices consistent with the research question. Multiple coding strategies were employed to stick closely to the data (Charmaz, 2014), such as In Vivo coding, Process coding, Descriptive coding, and Emotion coding. Specifically, process coding (also named action coding) used gerunds to restore the words and deeds of the interviewee, conveying a strong sense of action and sequence (Glaser, 1978). In vivo codes from raw data helped the researcher preserve the meaning of respondents' opinions and behaviours. Notably, these two coding strategies mentioned above often occur simultaneously in analysing data related to interviewees' memories and narration of personal experiences, and descriptive coding was often used to explore the process of influencing factors found in the data (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher progressively followed up on codes that indicated that they fit the data. The codes generated at this

stage are provisional and data-based (Charmaz, 2014). Table 6 provided an example of an analysis of interview quotes to illustrate the coding strategy used in this stage. Among them, the researcher constructed three initial codes involving two coding strategies to analyse the quote, such as emotion coding (*don't like*), and process coding (*Communicating with stakeholders beyond CHVCs*). This stage provided a precise treatment of the material and pointed out areas that required further clarification and explanation. Especially the initial coding of policy documentary data not only provided clues for subsequent interview data collection, but also allowed comparison between the two.

Table 6: An example of initial coding process: Interview Transcript

| Text | Initial Coding | Focused Coding |
|---|---|--|
| <p>In the college where I work, I am responsible for social services. I always have a lot of meeting arrangements to communicate with different enterprises. The learning activities sometimes conflict with my original work schedule. To be honest, these trainings cannot help me achieve high quality cooperation with enterprises. So I don't like participating in such activities. (May)</p> | <p><i>Communicating with stakeholders beyond CHVCs;</i></p> <p><i>Conflicting with original work schedule;</i></p> <p><i>Don't like</i></p> | <p>Conflict of structural arrangements</p> |

Focused coding

The second cycle of grounded theory coding involved focused coding and theoretical coding. Through reorganising and reanalysing initial codes, the researcher condensed the vast array of initial analytic details into a main dish (Saldaña, 2021). The focused coding stage still followed the strategy from the first coding cycle and categorises the

coded data, which aimed to develop categories. For example, communicating with stakeholders beyond CHVCs and conflicting with the original work schedule in Table 6 were merged and relabelled as *a conflict of structural arrangements*. At this stage, comparability was achieved by comparing the code with other participants' data or codes and transferability was carefully evaluated (Saldaña, 2021). In other words, the researcher considered the correlation between concepts or categories, thereby enhancing the correlation between data and categories. This stage aimed to identify codes with stronger analytical capabilities (Charmaz, 2014). It was worth noting that some codes may be discarded during this process as they are far away from the study's core findings (Charmaz, 2014). Reserved parts were aligned with the research questions and were related to relevant literature. The focused coding process is shown in the Table 7 to Table 10.

Table 7: Primary category formed by focused coding: PD Activities for MLs

| Theme | Main Categories | Corresponding Categories | Explanation |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| PD Activities for MLs | Typical Formats | Experience and information presentation | The traditional format of training and learning that focus on teaching skills and transmitting experience or information |
| | | Collegial visits | The collective learning format to conducting boundary-spanning sharing (formal and informal) |
| | | Coaching | The informal PD format of actively seeking help and support from others in routine work |
| | | Self-regulated learning | Learning activities independently completed by MLs spontaneously using different learning tools |
| | Learning Content (Changing Areas) | Pedagogical basis | Involving frontline teaching abilities and educational laws |
| | | Subject knowledge and skills | Involving academic knowledge and skills at the theoretical level and occupational knowledge and skills at the practical level |
| | | Leadership competency | Involving administrative mandates and team collaboration |
| | Operational Mechanisms | Compliant-driven outset | Strong motivation to serve the institutional development |
| | | Administration-led procedure | Initiated by departments and embedded in the administrative mandate system, with collective learning as main formats |
| | | Multi-level learning platforms | Professional learning communities guided by different tasks and goals |

Table 8: Primary category formed by focused coding: Institutional Leadership

| Theme | Main Categories | Corresponding Categories | Explanation |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Institutional Leadership | Constructing Learning Vision | Development awareness reinforcement | Expanding the scope of collective responsibility to strengthen development awareness |
| | | Development goal setting | Developing appropriate goals to avoid PD for MLs running counter to policy aspirations |
| | | Development path clarification | Phasing separation to ensure the operability of the learning vision |
| | Building Learning Communities | Providing support resources for traditional PLCs | Drawing on administrative authority to integrate resources |
| | | Ensuring development space for MLCs | Guiding MLCs to play a role in institutional progress |
| | Optimising Learning Environment | Human resources support | Effective human assistance to expand learning resources and opportunities |
| | | Financial resources support | Providing enabling funding and financial conditions to support PD practice |
| | | Logistical resource support | Logistics resource management to serve PD practice for MLs |
| | Regulating Learning Activities | Learning content design and planning | Maintaining an equilibrium between top-down PD mandates and bottom-up PD requirements |
| | | Learning process organisation and management | Administrative coordination and supervision to play a supporting role |
| | | Learning outcome summary and feedback | Using results and feedback to provide guidance for the next step of PD design |
| | Setting Learning Role-model | Becoming learning role models | The transfer of leadership work and wisdom |
| | | Identifying learning role models | Sharing personal effective experiences to enhance collective wisdom |

Table 9: Primary category formed by focused coding: Organisational Structure

| Theme | Main Categories | Corresponding Categories | Explanation |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Organisational Structure | Formal Management Structure | Restructuring Second Tier Colleges (STCs) | Building institutes based on professional groups to weaken the boundaries between departments and strengthen cross-departmental exchanges among MLs |
| | | Adjusting functional department settings | Establishing a special department to take charge of PD work |
| | Organisational Operating Mechanisms | Empowering STCs vertically | Setting up governance structures such as academic committees to reduce administrative procedures and bureaucratic burdens for MLs |
| | | Clarifying the functional positioning of internal institutions horizontally | Standardising the scope of ILs' power and clarifying the boundaries of MLs power to prevent from transitional administrative interference |
| | Multiple Connection Systems | Governance system | Valuing MLs' expert status in governance to protect their professional autonomy |
| | | Incentive system | A coherent accountability and honour system to strengthen MLs' motivation to participate in PD |

Table 10: Primary category formed by focused coding: Organisational Culture

| Theme | Main Categories | Corresponding Categories | Explanation |
|------------------------|--|--|--|
| Organisational Culture | Spiritual and Ideology Level: Leading by Value | Development vision | Pursuing a common development vision and value conducive to awakening personal development awareness |
| | | Organisational innovation awareness | Strengthening awareness of innovation to avoid the dilemma of seeking compliance |
| | | Interpersonal relationships | Harmony, mutual trust, tolerance, and loyal interpersonal relationships to ensure smooth interactions |
| | Institutional Level: Standard Orientation | Behavioural norms (formal norms) | Behavioural norms internalised as personal norm awareness and further externalised into reasonable behaviour and actions in PD |
| | | Traditional customs (informal norms) | Properly utilise the influence of traditional culture to support PD |
| | Material Level: Infrastructure Basis | Propaganda carrier | Values and knowledge disseminated through material media |
| | | Physical environment related to PD and humanistic care | Basic workplace conditions related to PD and humanistic care to strengthen sense of responsibility |

As shown in Table 7 to Table 10, after focused coding, the basic status of PD for MLs had been formed into three main categories: typical formats, learning content (changing areas), and operational mechanisms of PD activities within the hierarchical context; the institutional factors that affect PD for MLs had generated five main categories under the theme of institutional leadership, three main categories under the theme of organisational structure, and three main categories under the theme of organisational culture. Since focused coding has already started research with a clear research

framework, no new theory was generated at this stage. However, such a framework provided a higher theoretical starting point and research inspiration for this study. According to distributed leadership theory and social constructivist epistemology, influencing factors at institutional level involving institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture exerted a vital role in the process of individual PD. According to this perspective, the researcher organised the above three dimensions into the conceptual framework of this research to guide meaningful exploration in the Chinese hierarchical context.

Theoretical coding

The theoretical coding phase followed focused codes to move toward discovering central and core categories that identified the research topic (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical coding mainly analyses the relationship between different themes and main categories (Saldaña, 2021). Based on the core theme of the research question, the researcher integrated and developed the main categories into a structure and then developed it into a coherent storyline that can summarise all phenomena (Charmaz, 2014). That is to say, theoretical coding is the foundation of initial codes and displays their relationships rather than replacing substantive codes. Notably, this research did not pursue the development of original theory applicable to all contexts. As indicated by Hennink et al. (2011), research that applies pre-existing theories in different contexts or social circumstances or that elaborates or modifies earlier theories can be just as substantive. In this research, it was important to explore how PD for MLs operates in a hierarchical context and how institutional-level factors influence PD for MLs. This stage condensed and strengthened the work the researcher had already done as it highlights what is found to be important in the emerging analysis. These codes added accuracy and clarity to this study. In fact, although this study did not achieve a major theoretical breakthrough through theoretical coding, there were still new empirical findings that have made certain theoretical contributions based on the original research.

Memo writing

Memo writing ran throughout the process in the above three coding stages. Reflective memo writing is both a code- and category-generating heuristic (Saldaña, 2021). During the initial coding phase, the researcher flexibly used different coding strategies to conduct detailed line-by-line initial coding. Among them, memo writing had become the key to linking data and codes. In the second coding cycle stage, memo writing provided useful thinking and connection for different categories of explanations. The researcher can easily enter relevant explanations, comments, and descriptions into Nvivo. The researcher's reflection by analysing memo writing, coupled with a second coding cycle, would condense the amount of process code, and reanalyse the initial work. Table 2 provided an example to demonstrate memo writing.

Table 11: Researcher memo

| Research Memo Data |
|--|
| <p>Interview data:</p> <p>In fact, for us, the basic work is still teaching and educating students, but our class teaching content is different from general higher education, and a large proportion of the content is skills teaching and development. This means that our teaching ability can be roughly divided into theoretical teaching ability and practical teaching ability. But the work related to classroom teaching and students does not stop there, it can be divided into very detailed. Basically, these competencies are always aimed at students. However, I undertake a large amount of administrative work, which prevents us from investing a lot of time in improving our personal teaching and research capabilities. For me, this is a shame. (May)</p> <p>Researcher Memo:</p> <p>Based on job content, teaching competencies take students development as the core and are disassembled into many components. However, administrative work hinders capacity development.</p> |

4.8.3 Translation Process

As mentioned above, this research is rooted in the Chinese Mainland, a non-English-speaking country. In this research, two types of data sources, including policy documents and interviews, were presented in Chinese. The problem of equivalence, for example, linguistic equivalence, conceptual equivalence, and meaning equivalence, needs to be fully considered (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). As such, the translation process will be explained in detail. As the translator, the researcher completed the translation work.

Firstly, the researcher chose to use the original language (Chinese) as long and as much as possible, especially during periods of communication with the interviewees. In the early stage, the researcher first used English to complete ethical approval work and design interview questions. This is conducive to maintaining consistency with the previous extensive literature review work. Against this background, the first round of the translation process was to translate the English version of the interview outline and related documents into Chinese. When contacting potential interviewees in the future, the researcher sent both Chinese and English versions of the Interview Outline, Consent Form, Privacy Notice, Participant Information Sheet, and Ethics Approval Letter from UoG via email to facilitate their reading and decision-making on whether to participate in this research. Subsequently, the researcher chose to conduct two rounds of interviews in Chinese. This is mainly due to the fact that using the interviewees' native language for interviews can provide linguistic comfort to the interviewee, thereby creating higher-quality results (Abfalter, Mueller-Seeger and Raich, 2020).

Secondly, regarding the documentary and interview data analysis, the researcher still used Chinese to ensure the original meaning expressed by policies and interviewees as much as possible. That is to say, the second round of translation process was to translate the Chinese analysis results into English. In the later stages, the researcher adopted more intuitive and meaningful hermeneutic translation methods to create understanding

through language (Steiner, 2013). Such a translation method focuses on keeping the meaning faithful to the original context, which is in line with the purpose of this research, which is to focus on the special context of China. More importantly, the researcher attached great importance to the intended meanings of policies and interviews rather than pursuing pragmatic equivalence. In this regard, the Chinese and English literature review conducted by the researcher provided assistance in understanding and translating the original data, as the researcher were already familiar with the expressions used in existing studies in Chinese. Meanwhile, the researcher invited participants to review the analysis results in both Chinese and English versions to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis results and translated versions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

3.8.4 Making Sense of Evidence

The grounded theory coding method was used throughout the entire data analysis process. Still, the presentation of research findings was not entirely consistent since the logic of the evidence statement is based on the research question, aiming to answer the current situation (what) and influencing factors (how) of PD for MLs through the relevant experiences of MLs. More importantly, this research involved two data sources. Due to the different nature of the data, the presentation of evidence varies.

Policy documents and interview transcriptions do not have a one-to-one correspondence when presented as quotations. This is mainly due to the following two reasons. Firstly, the selected policy documents mostly guide or demonstrative policies, with macro planning and expective guidance as the main focus. As the subject in action, the interviewee recalled, described, and evaluated their personal experiences during the interview, mainly based on subjective feelings. These two types of data cannot be completely consistent in content. Secondly, in the Chinese context, policy documents have special writing formats, and their coverage and scope of application vary depending on the publication department. For example, national-level policies, as the

highest guiding texts, have the widest applicability and universality, as they are aimed at the whole country. Regional policies or institutional documents are based on the regional characteristics of the applicable region with more distinctive and detailed contents. In contrast, personal PD experiences, especially informal learning activities, cannot be fully presented in policy documents. Thus, documentary data will appear as supplementary data in Chapters 5 and 6.

It should be noted that, besides the above two objective reasons, the gap between policy documents and interview data, such as missing or other contradictions, deserves further exploration for its deeper significance. This became a crucial step in constructing meaningful discussions in this research. The evidence on the current provision for PD for MLs will be presented in Chapter 5, and the relevant evidence on its influencing factors will be proposed in Chapter 6. According to the research findings of two progressive research questions, a comprehensive comparison and discussion will be presented in Chapter 7.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

Potential ethical issues should always be considered in social science research. This study was conducted with the ethical approval granted by the College of Social Science Ethics Committee in the University of Glasgow (See Appendix 1). The form included details of the study, such as research purpose, research procedures and data protection. In addition to Application Form, semi-structured interviews questions outline in its English version, consent form, participant information sheet, privacy notice, and data protection impact assessment were attached for further reference. Ethical approval (See Appendix 6) was granted in June 2022, and then the researcher took the research forth in China. During the research process, the researcher followed ethical codes and regulations.

4.9.1 Informed Consent

The informed consent principle concerns autonomy, which arises from the participant's right to freedom and self-determination (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). In educational research, informed consent emphasises the process by which individuals choose whether to participate in this research after being informed of the content and requirements of the research, involving all factors that may affect the research (Diener and Crandall, 1978). In other words, informed consent equals informed refusal. According to the definitions from Diener and Crandall (1978), this research followed competency, voluntarism, complete information and comprehension.

Specifically, the interview subjects for this study were MLs from Chinese higher vocational colleges. As mature and judgmental individuals, the researcher made a series of preparations in the early stages to ensure that participants fully understood the content and potential risks of the research. Participants received complete research information and ethical approval before participating in this study. After receiving positive responses, the researcher followed the principle of full details and sent the completed version of the interview outline in Chinese and English and relevant attachments to these potential participants via email. It should be noted that after identifying the sample colleges, the researcher did not initiate a top-down administrative process to contact MLs but instead adopted a snowball sampling method. This ensured that independent judgment and decisions are made with full knowledge and understanding of the process, rather than succumbing to pressure to participate. This was in line with the principle of voluntary participation.

4.9.2 Privacy, Anonymity, and Confidentiality

This research strictly followed the principles of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality in the ethical code. As indicated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), privacy touches every aspect of research. Diener and Crandall (1978) proposed three elements

involved in privacy, the sensitivity of the information being given; the setting being observed; and dissemination of information. Based on the research questions, the researcher designed the interview outline without political or religious considerations in this study. During the data collection process, it was generally chosen to be in a conference room to ensure that the process is not interrupted. Regarding information dissemination, confidentiality and anonymity were inevitable results.

To protect data security and participant privacy, the researcher explained the plan for the retention and disposal of the collected personal data in this research in detail when contacting potential participants. According to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of University of Glasgow, any information relating to a data subject which can be identified, directly or indirectly by that information, including name, pseudonymised data, staff number, location data and others, were uniformly destroyed at the end of this research. This research includes three phases. Since the researcher needed to perform a comprehensive analysis of different types of data when the research enters the data analysis and discussion, personal data had irreplaceable value in the later stages of the research. Therefore, the researcher disposed of the personal data together at the complete conclusion of the study. A shredder destroyed the paper version of personal data, and the electronic version will be deleted using secure deletion software.

Throughout the research, the researcher was required to keep clear and accurate records of the procedures followed and the results obtained, including interim results. Among them, the degree of anonymity reached de-identified samples or data. The researcher used aliases to eliminate means of identification. Research data other than personal data remained securely held by the researcher for ten years after completing the research. The researcher held research data and securely stored it at the University of Glasgow, in electronic files and on Microsoft OneDrive, to be available by password only and with data encrypted. If there was any problem with either of the ways, the researcher still had a data reset. These research data had long-term value. It may underpin a publication or thesis or form the basis of a future funding application in the future.

4.9.3 Health, Safety, and Security

The participants in this study were adults with independent judgment and rich work experience, thus the potential risk for health, safety and security is minimal. Despite this, before starting the study, the researcher prepared the contact information of professionals in the field of emotion or health in case of need. On the one hand, the selection of all interview places is based on the opinions of the interviewees, which helps to put them at ease and non-threatening during the interview. On the other hand, if participants disclosed emotional, psychological, health, educational or other problems (social or economic) during the research, the researcher would stop asking questions immediately and provide effective information and solve the problems in time. At the same time, relevant staff would be contacted in a timely manner to conduct a comprehensive inspection of the participants. In addition, the informed consent form was provided to participants before interviews.

4.10 Research Validity

Validity in qualitative research involved the appropriateness of the purposes of the participants, the participants, and the data collection methods used to capture those purposes. Maxwell (1992) believed that *understanding* is a more appropriate term in qualitative research than *validity*. At the same time, he proposed five types of validity as the basis of *understanding*. Combined with the research questions and purpose, this study followed descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, and generalisability. It should be clarified that the author, also the researcher, of this research was a lecturer at CHVC A. Although CHVC A participated in this research as one of the sampling CHVCs, the research design, data collection and analysis were conducted independently. The researcher followed the ethical standards during the research process. To avoid predispositions and potential biases as much as possible, the researcher has been actively engaged in self-reflection throughout the research to manage that.

Throughout the research process, the researcher stayed true to the data collected and committed to reproducing the collection process. Based on participant descriptions and documented in the policy text, the researcher fully and accurately reported the individuals who participated and the events that occurred during the study phase. Among them, the researcher flexibly used auxiliary tools and other recording equipment to quickly record the interview process. By generating transcripts of the interviews and incorporating field notes, the researcher recorded complete information from the data collection phase in detail. After the transcription of each round of interviews, the researcher took the initiative to check the accuracy of the information with the interviewees to be as faithful as possible to the original data. Also, the researcher used explanatory notes throughout the research process to effectively and accurately explain the situations and events captured during data collection. In chapter 4 of this thesis, a large amount of primary data, such as policy text excerpts and interviewees' original words, were quoted directly to ensure fidelity to the original text (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995).

In addition, the researcher constructed a conceptual framework as the research guide by reading a large amount of theoretical and empirical research literature before collecting data. However, this study was not a direct transfer across contexts. The researcher took complete account of the specificities of the research context and uses a conceptual framework to analyse the data. It should be noted that the sample colleges in this study are all from Shandong Province. Although this study did not pursue generalisations beyond context, its findings had a certain degree of transferability, especially in the Chinese hierarchical context. That is, the findings had the potential to help international audiences understand other similar situations in China. This was related to the researcher's personal experience. As a teacher with two years of work experience in a higher vocational college in Shandong Province, the researcher had the ability to explain educational phenomena in the Chinese mainland and the broader context. In addition, ongoing academic reading would also be beneficial in improving the persuasiveness of the explanations in this study.

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the research methods and specific processes of this study, aiming to provide an overview of how to conduct empirical research in hierarchical educational institutions in China. Chapter 5 and 6 will present the research findings in detail.

Chapter 5 Research Findings: Current Provision

5.1 Introduction

The former chapter has introduced how the research questions are addressed in this research. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 present the main findings related to the auxiliary research questions proposed in Chapter 1:

1. What is the status of the current provision for professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?
2. In what ways and to what extent do institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture influence professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?

The findings are based on the qualitative data collected from the documents and semi-structured interviews. The findings were mainly generated by Nvivo, as previously explained in the methodology chapter.

This chapter attempts to answer the first research question. As described in section 3.8.4, the researcher juxtaposes documentary data and interview data for analysis and presentation, in order to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the theme. In this context, the researcher used the documentary data to examine the interview data and vice versa. The data analysis process was only concluded when all the evidence from policy texts and interview data formed a unified picture of the professional development provision for MLs.

Based on the research question and analytical framework, the research findings in this chapter consist of three parts. In the first part, as a mediating tool for MLs' capability-building and learning, the typical formats of PD for MLs are fully presented. By its very nature, these 4 formats of PD activities include formal and informal learning, collective

and individual learning. The second part focuses on the learning content of MLs from PD activities, involving educational basis, subject knowledge and skills, and leadership competency. Based on the first two parts, the operational mechanism of PD activities for MLs in CHVCs is clarified in the third part. This part mainly includes the complete chain of PD activities from driving outset, learning platforms, and implementation procedure, which are embedded in the national PD system and equipped with complete auxiliary systems to support the operation of PD activities. In short, this chapter presents documentary data and interview data on PD for MLs to understand how MLs capability-building and learning occur from PD participation.

5.2 Typical Formats of PD for MLs in CHVCs: Oriented by Capability-building Aims

Combination of documentary and interview data found that formats of PD for MLs include experience and information presentation (EIP), collegial visits (CVs), coaching, and self-regulated learning. What is noteworthy is that existing formats of PD for MLs are still dominated by formal collective learning activities, while data analysed from the interviews revealed that MLs in CHVCs prefer informal PD activities, such as vertical conversations and boundary-spanning collaboration.

5.2.1 Experience and Information Presentation

The documentary data identified that as a typical format of PD in the Chinese educational context, EIP is still widely used in PD for MLs. This study summarises formal collective learning programmes or activities as experience and information presentation (EIP), taking teaching skills and delivering experience or information as main PD themes. According to the length of learning, EIP can be divided into short-term EIP (fragmented workshops and training meetings) and long-term EIP (on-the-job degree promotion, course package). Despite differences in programme or activity duration, the documentary and interview analysis results highlighted three characteristics of EIP as a format of PD for MLs in CHVCs - with well-articulated

structures occurring within and beyond CHVCs, combining online and offline approaches.

Data analysed from the interviews revealed that short-term EIP dominates the practice of PD for MLs. Mike mentioned in the interview that his understanding of PD is equivalent to seminars or training workshops. Although this is a narrow interpretation of PD, it also reflects that short-term EIP is in practice the main means for MLs to participate in PD. Documentary data from CHVCs stated that the whole process of such one-shot PD activities is carefully pre-designed, from convening before the outset of learning to the outcome after the end. Its learning resources are provided internally by CHVCs or by different stakeholders. Short-term EIP is regarded as one of the main ways external institutions can participate in institutional development. At the same time, the latest policy text also pointed out that adding audio and video technology reduces the threshold for MLs to participate in PD and the cost of CHVCs organising learning activities. While MLs acknowledge the advantages and potential of short-term EIP in enriching learning opportunities, interviewees in this study also expressed concerns and concerns about this type of PD activity:

In my opinion, the power of this one-time learning activity is closely tied to the topic. Because most of the activities are just one-hour condensed introductions, they may inspire me but cannot really help me cope with my work tasks. The effect would be limited, especially when the learning content is theoretical knowledge. (Jeff)

Jeff questioned the effectiveness of short-term EIP, as it lasts too short to prevent in-depth discussion or communication. Meanwhile, he mentioned the impact of theme and content on practicality. Interview data provided that MLs consider short-term EIPs with themes of theoretical knowledge and policy interpretation as ineffective in constructing the skills and abilities needed for routine work. In addition, Steven expressed issues regarding the assessment of short-term EIP:

Lectures and seminars are the most common learning opportunities in my daily work. But, the effect of this kind of learning activity is difficult to evaluate. Because we were only notified to participate in the activity and use attendance as the assessment criterion. In fact, there is no clear assessment standard for how to apply learning results to work. (Steven)

In essence, Steven believed that such type of PD activities misses the purpose of MLs learning - capability building and institutional governance promotion. The interview data illustrated that most short-term EIP learning outcomes are applied without a complete assessment system in practice. Current assessment relies solely on learners' attendance. The institutional absence provides obstacles to real learning in the view of MLs, which will be explained further in the discussion chapter. In contrast, long-term EIPs have clear assessment and evaluation standards and are closely related to degrees and domain-specific certificates:

From 2007 to 2011, I studied for a PhD at a top Chinese university. CHVC A gave me a lot of support during my study. My college retained my position at that time and gave me a stipend. (May)

The degree study experience May mentioned is a form of long-term EIP. This type of PD lasts several years and adheres to strict degree-granting standards. The data from the policies proposed that CHVCs encourage faculty, including MLs, to complete long-term EIP to build personal capabilities. At the same time, stakeholders are also required to provide corresponding learning opportunities and positions to jointly support individual long-term PD. Similarly, there is also a course package from which MLs can obtain a domain-specific qualification or license after completing a series of courses and passing assessments. Notably, although the policy text stated that such EIP has high-quality learning resources, participation of MLs is limited by objective factors in practice:

I cherish this learning opportunity because it helps me construct a complete knowledge system. But I am also responsible for provincial research projects and the double-high construction work of our CHVC. So, I prefer to choose learning projects that can directly help my work in a limited time. (Lucy)

Both Lucy and Jeff above emphasised that MLs give priority to PD programmes or activities that are suitable for routine work needs. Not only that, Lucy also briefly introduced some of the other tasks she had undertaken during the interview. By its very nature, it revealed that MLs are assigned high workload in practice. Analysis results combining text and interview data identified that the continuously increasing workload of MLs in their routine work hinders their participation in PD, which has a stronger impact on self-study in the following.

5.2.2 Collegial Visits

Findings from intensive analysis of policy texts (GPT2, GPT3, GPT5, GPT6, and GPT8) and interviews presented that CVs are also a typical PD format for MLs with a well-designed framework. In this study, CVs refer to the collective learning format to conduct boundary-spanning dialogue, observation, communication, and sharing. Notably, the boundaries here can be between institutions, departments, or grades. In other words, CVs occur within and outside CHVCs. Compared to the EIP above, CVs are considered by MLs to be more flexible, as they include small-scale formal learning activities as well as informal interactions and observations.

Documentary and interview data revealed that CVs occurring outside CHVCs are a common and effective form of PD for MLs. Essentially, this is an inter-institution approach to experiential and technical learning. Consistent with EIP, CVs have rigorous design and practice procedures at their nascent stage. As explained above, authoritative agencies have invested in and deployed a complete PD system and PD service system within the national education system, which has structures and procedures to support

boundary-spanning cooperation and exchanges. Among them, as a form of PD embedded in the system, CVs rely on the design and infrastructure of the system to complete practice. The data from the interviews provided that CVs occurring outside CHVCs are popular with MLs:

Taking me as an example, my colleagues and I formed a delegation to study at CHVCs with a higher level of development. Learning content is advanced practice. Or, we learn relevant development experiences based on our own challenges or difficulties. This kind of learning is more targeted. I prefer these types of learning activities. (Flora)

In addition to Flora, eight MLs expressed positivity about participating in CVs across institutional boundaries during the interviews. Ellen further gave a specific explanation:

Although such a visit requires both participants to complete a formal preparation process, the study programmes are varied and can be adapted to our wishes. Formal seminars are generally accompanied by free discussion. I can discuss with relevant experts based on actual needs. The last programme I was responsible for was completed with the CHVC we visited. (Ellen)

Interview data analysis showed that interviewees regard CVs as a more interactive learning format, rather than passively accepting spoon-feeding training. Combining Flora and Ellen's perspectives, CVs outside CHVCs focus on the specific issues and challenges in learners' routine work during the design process. Meanwhile, informal learning activities in CVs, such as field observations and interactions, provide MLs with more practical and direct learning content. In addition, the extract from Ellen mentioned that CVs can also be a starting point for building trust and cooperative relationships. In this sense, CVs are vital for MLs to build capabilities by developing and maintaining positive social relations and networks.

Besides CVs outside CHVCs, CVs in CHVCs are also one of the formats of PD for MLs. The interview data pointed out that such CVs occur between leadership collectives in departments or secondary colleges, including both vertical and horizontal conversations. That is, the boundaries spanned by CVs in CHVCs exist between departments. The interview data foregrounded that CVs facilitate collaborative and flexible working relationships across hierarchies and traditional boundaries. As a format of collective learning, MLs believed that mutual learning and experience sharing between departments is the main measure to realise the development vision of CHVCs:

In fact, most learning opportunities do not require blindly developing external resources. Mutual learning between departments is very useful. As MLs, other department heads and I strive for the same organisational development goals. The work we do is more closely connected. (Grace)

As Grace emphasised, even if they occupy different positions, MLs with a common vision can achieve common learning through communication. Peter pointed out that MLs with collective consciousness are more likely to establish cooperative relationships with other colleagues:

We agree that the development of an organization cannot be accomplished by one department alone. More importantly, we have a strong atmosphere of learning together. Therefore, our communication and cooperation are all-round, and there will be no impermeable or stratified boundaries in CHVCs. (Peter)

The preceding quotes revealed that collective values and awareness play an active role in CVs across departments. This was reflected in the interviews with all MLs in this study. MLs are accustomed to participating in collective learning activities and recognise the role of collective beliefs and capacity in the pursuit of continuous development. Furthermore, Peter also pointed out the positive impact of the learning atmosphere and traditional practices on CVs in CHVCs. In essence, the impact of

organisational climate and aforementioned values on MLs' participation in PD are both organisational cultural factors, and the ways in which they influence PD for MLs will be discussed more fully in sections 6.4 and 7.4.3.

5.2.3 Coaching

Distinguished with the various collective PD formats mentioned above, coaching is an informal format of PD that actively seeks help and support from others in routine work. The data from the interviews found that this kind of PD, taking others work experience and leadership behaviour as learning resources, has a faster effect on progress. As an individually driven type of PD, it mostly takes place in the workplace and unlimited by location or scale. The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that institutional leadership teams (such as principals and vice-principals) and other MLs play the role of coaches in the routine work. In this sense, coaching also includes both horizontal and vertical types.

The interview data stated that MLs experience temporary maladjustment after being promoted to a new position and thus learning leadership wisdom from experienced institutional leaders to cope with challenges. In this case, ILs assume the role of coaches. Indeed, the relationship between ILs and MLs in coaching does not lead MLs to enter the traditional expert-novice relationship, as MLs also have rich work experience and great leadership potential. ILs rely on their personal abilities and leadership experience to provide reference opinions to MLs or mobilise resource within their own scope of authority to jointly solve problems. What is noteworthy is that MLs warned in interviews about misinterpreting coaching as administrative intervention, due to the inherent hierarchical relationship between ILs and MLs.

Sometimes the opinions given by my leader would be understood as requirements or tasks, otherwise I am not politically astute enough to deal with managerial stuff.

But, I understand that they only provide an idea for my current work. So, I would remind myself to avoid taking advice from ILs as a task. (Mike)

According to the above quote from the interviewees, although coaching is initiated from the bottom up, authority from ILs may become the stimulus for compliance with middle leadership practices, leading to this type of PD becoming an administrative intervention. Empirical evidence from this study show that the concern is consistent with Chinese educational systems and contextual factors, which are explained in Chapter 6. Nonetheless, six other interviewees also expressed the positive role of ILs as learning resources in coaching. In addition, MLs' recognition of coaching in personal ability construction also includes other colleagues occupying leadership positions at the same level, as this is the interaction and learning based on partnership:

What impressed me most was that I was responsible for part of the preparation work in the double-high plan. In the early stages, I didn't really understand the job requirements. While reviewing many documents, the deputy dean of another college also shared her writing experience in completing this work with me. I feel that our colleagues are very unsparing and generous with each other. (Evan)

The interview data presented that in the process of achieving individual development, MLs in CHVCs selflessly share their personal experiences to achieve common progress. The coaching Evan mentioned occurs when completing joint work. Not only that, the interview data show that this kind of coaching may also arise from spontaneous interactions in routine life or accompany formal collective activities. As mentioned in the former, due to the similarity of the positions occupied in the organization, coaching on practical work experience can effectively provide a reference for MLs' decision-making or execution. In turn, such reciprocal learning behaviour can also strengthen the partnership between MLs. In order to maintain and strengthen such communication, an online community has been established among MLs. In contrast, the coaching in online communities is questions, sharing, and discussions initiated by MLs:

We often consult each other and ask questions in the WeChat group, which is very convenient. For example, when I first took charge of the annual appraisal work, I was unfamiliar with the specific process. I asked my colleagues in the Scientific Research Department via WeChat group to share their past progress and arrangements. (Lucy)

Eleven interviewees indicated that they preferred horizontal coaching with peers accompanying with peer observations across departments or institutions. The manner in which MLs are able to enrich leadership experience that can be applied to routine work received strong recognition from interviewees. Notably, most of such horizontal coaching occurs through different types of professional learning communities (PLCs) that are described fully above. Compared with traditional PLCs that focus on teaching, MLs priority coaching that take place in position-based PLCs, as it aims at coping with leadership work or administrative mandates.

5.2.4 Self-regulated Learning

Comprehensive documents (GPT8 and all documents at institutional level) and interview data show that in practice, PD activities that are spontaneously completed by MLs independently using different learning instruments are defined in this study as self-regulated learning (SRL) involving self-reading, distance learning, and online courses. This format of PD is oriented to the authentic needs of MLs, and they have complete autonomy. From a macro perspective, the policy texts on PD for MLs issued by governments at different levels all involve the requirements and expectations for faculty to carry out independent learning. However, the data from the interviews explicitly presented that although MLs are aware of the importance of PD and ongoing learning, in practice, it is inimical to have extra time to complete SRL apart from collective PD activities. This is especially obvious in MLs that face heavy workloads:

To be honest, in the early stages of my middle leadership position, I had an ideal plan to complete PD activities after getting off work. However, this plan has never been implemented. Because I was assigned too much administrative work. (Flora)

Flora clearly expressed her expectations and negative emotions about SRL. The interview data identified that MLs' workload squeezes out the energy and time involved in PD activities, especially SRL. Given that working time and even part of their breaks are occupied by different administrative tasks and bureaucratic procedures, MLs need to spend time outside of work to carry out SRL. When there are scheduling conflicts, SRL is generally the first part to be sacrificed:

Last year I planned to complete an online learning project to improve my academic skills. One day, I had to postpone the lesson activities because the Education Bureau suddenly issued a task within my scope of responsibilities and I couldn't refuse. (Lily)

The preceding quotes state that SRLs are in a weak position in the face of administrative directives or bureaucratic tasks, as MLs prioritise completing assigned work. It is also reflected in the research results on the PD procedure mentioned above, which will be discussed more fully in section 7.3.

Furthermore, data analysed from the policy texts and interviews revealed that influenced by the socio-cultural background during this study, SRL, as the main format of PD, was widely used by MLs during the pandemic. Interviewees have gradually become accustomed to using software and learning resources on social media to conduct online PD activities and interact with others. By its nature, these learning resources are all asynchronous communication. During this period, traditional PD programmes were also moved online using synchronous communication tools (such as video conferencing). Utilising such tools helps PD so that MLs are not blocked.

However, interviewees also mentioned that using new learning instruments would bring additional workload:

Since the coronavirus outbreak, we have had a mass suspension of classes. I am 52 years old. With the help of my daughter, I learned to use apps such as Online Classroom. Although I am proficient in carrying out distance learning activities and handling official affairs online, I still think that learning new software requires extra effort. (Aimee)

Aimee pointed out in the interview that learning new instruments to carry out SRL creates an additional burden and can easily lead to negative clarity. The interview data identified that the popularity of online learning tools helps MLs reach more learning resources. Nonetheless, the activity of learning new instruments or operation sequences is also PD in nature. In this sense, MLs prefer traditional SRL without requiring new instruments.

This section combines documentary and interview data to explore the macro design of PD for MLs within the Chinese hierarchical education system. Data analysis findings illustrated that the term MLs have a clear scope, but there is no complete government document specifically planning PD for MLs. In practice, since MLs assume multiple roles, many of the requirements in policy texts apply to PD for MLs. In this case, this study found that authoritative agencies use professional standards to put forward policy aspirations for MLs, aiming to serve institutional governance and development. Interview data revealed that a common practice is to embed PD for MLs in institutional bureaucracies to promote the practice process through administrative instructions. It would be conducive to protect MLs' opportunities and rights to participate in PD. Meanwhile, the deployment and investment of authoritative agencies in the national education system provide an enabling external setting for MLs to construct learning and cooperative relationships across borders, which helps mobilise social resources to support PD for MLs. However, interview data also stated that such a top-down approach

exacerbated the contradiction between administrative control and professional autonomy. It results in the inherent driving force from MLs being squeezed, even creating short-lived and superficial learning and cooperation. Considering PD embedded in and socioculturally shaped by specific settings, which factors from CHVCs influence the current provision will be further explored in Chapter 6.

5.3 Learning Content for PD for MLs in CHVCs: Based on Structural Positions of MLs in CHVCs

In order to determine the learning situation and capability-building of MLs participating in PD activities, interviewees were asked to describe the abilities required to complete routine work as well as which PD activities they were willing to participate in again. They further explained the reasons for their choice during the interview process. It is apparent that despite varying PD activity formats being chosen, MLs use effective or useful to explain their reasons for choice, which means that participating in PD activities can enhance the abilities they need. In other words, the learning content from PD activities increases or changes the professional knowledge, skills, or attitudes of MLs, thereby meeting their routine work needs. Findings from the document analysis process show that the capability demands of MLs from policy aspirations appear in different policy documents and are subject to assessment and supervision by departments at different levels, as MLs assume dual roles as experts and leaders (belonging to civil servants) and their work involves multiple fields within and beyond CHVCs simultaneously. At the same time, research has illustrated that the genuine needs of interviewees for capability building are not entirely consistent with the ability requirements of policies, which results in collective learning activities organised according to policy requirements being unable to effectively meet the actual needs of MLs.

5.3.1 Pedagogical Basis

The findings of this research elucidated that as a bottom-line requirement applicable to all faculty and staff, the pedagogical basis can be effectively strengthened through formal, collective PD activities. The pedagogical basics here include the laws of teaching, laws of school-running, and policy requirements. As clarified in the section 1.2.3, the scope of MLs and their role responsibilities have clear boundaries in relevant policy texts. As a part of the leadership collective in educational institutions, MLs play a vital role in the process of school-running. They are required to master pedagogical knowledge and the current education policies of the country. In this research, knowledge and skills that have been changed and developed through formal, collective PD activities are conceptualised as the pedagogical basis, which is one of the main learning contents of PD activities for MLs in practice. The documentary data highlights that the reform of teaching methods that meet the characteristics and needs of vocational education requires MLs to have a solid knowledge of education and follow objective personal growth laws:

Teaching abilities (of educators in CHVCs) involve the ability to learn theoretical knowledge and practical techniques, the ability to improve teaching methods and innovate practical teaching, the ability to develop teaching materials, and the ability to formulate academic training plans. (GPT4)

The policy text provides the scope of educational knowledge and skills required in classroom teaching. It should be noted that in addition to theoretical knowledge, applying practical skills related to education in routine work has received attention, as MLs are assigned a small amount of frontline teaching work, and some MLs are responsible for teaching and research management. This point was also confirmed again in the interview:

One of the main contents of the training activities we participate in is teaching. Teaching skills cannot be ignored cos it has nothing to do with personal positions. For me, I need to complete the teaching tasks required as a subject teacher and assess and supervise the classroom quality of frontline teachers in the entire STC. I am very happy that the organisation I work for often organises relevant training sessions and seminars, especially on classroom evaluation. (Ellen)

The analysis of the findings highlights that the development of MLs involves not only student learning but also the professional growth of frontline teachers. This is mainly due to some MLs being assigned to manage and guide teachers' professional learning and development. Consistent with the emphasis on educational knowledge in the policy, they need to reserve relevant educational foundations to professionally complete routine work. In addition, as part of the administrative collective, mastering the educational laws and policy requirements related to school-running is also considered as a part of PD for MLs in CHVCs:

For example, before we start our recruitment process, I need to clearly understand the types of talent required by each department and the organisational development policies. Only in this way can we plan, organise, command, and control the talent resources that affect organisational performance while also ensuring that the relevant work processes comply with policy requirements. These policies have a strong guiding role in our work. (Steven)

Interviewees affirmed the importance of basic knowledge, rules, and pedagogy-related skills in their routine work. National authoritative departments have issued policies requiring MLs to prioritise the improvement of pedagogical foundations, aiming to manage and support teaching and learning in educational institutions from different dimensions. In practice, MLs participate in and learn from PD activities such as seminars and lectures, which focus on the fundamental laws of education - including teaching and school-running - as well as interpreting education policies. Overall, PD

activities focused on teaching can help MLs better complete front-line teaching work and enhance the effectiveness of teaching management and training for novice teachers, while learning centred on school-running support MLs play a potential role in organisational governance and change processes. Essentially, such collective PD activities promote the construction of the pedagogical basis of MLs. In addition, the analysis of the findings highlights that besides pedagogical knowledge and skills, improving teaching quality is also closely related to the subject knowledge and skills of the teaching staff.

5.3.2 Subject Knowledge and Skills

This study indicates that MLs have increased disciplinary knowledge and skills through PD participation, consisting of academic knowledge and skills (at the theoretical level) and occupational knowledge and skills (at the practical level). This is mainly related to the expert identity and work context of MLs. On the one hand, as MLs who have been promoted through outstanding teaching, research, and practical achievements, they are often required to utilise their professional knowledge to lead the continuous development of the discipline (such as scientific breakthroughs, guiding novice teachers). On the other hand, as a bridge between the industry and the profession, MLs are expected to develop and coordinate different resources both on and off campus to jointly accomplish the task of vocational education and training skilled talents to serve regional economic development. In this sense, data analysed from the interviews revealed that there is numerous learning opportunities aimed at updating MLs' knowledge reserves and vocational skills, which meet the policy aspirations and ability requirements in documentary data:

(Training contents) incorporate national occupational standards, national professional teaching standards, vocational skill level certificate standards, industry and enterprise advanced technologies into compulsory training modules to enhance the ability to implement both education and training. (GPT8)

The preceding excerpt elucidated that relevant policies explicitly incorporate subject knowledge and vocational skills into PD content, which is consistent with the nature of vocational education. Notably, the professional standards, teaching standards, and certificate standards here are essentially professional standards. The interview data identified that such practice of clarifying PD goals and guiding learning activities based on professional standards is considered common in practice by interviewees:

If carefully compared, it is easy to find that the themes of learning activities organised by CHVCs generally correspond to requirements from policies and standards. That is, formal learning activities organised by institutions often seek compliance with policy or standard requirements. So, we must participate in such activities with strict attendance. (Steven)

In response to this, another interviewee provided further evaluation:

I need to emphasise that this type of activity (well-structured collective learning activity) is also effective. For example, the visit I participated in last year to a CHVC in Jinan aimed to learn from the other experiences in building a marketing training base. I think it's very rewarding. After the visit, I proposed dividing the training base into three different modules based on the actual situation, which significantly improved the efficiency of the training work. (Ellen)

Based on the views of the interviewees and a comparison of documentary and interview data, the study's findings identified that the aspirations and requirements reflected in professional standards guide PD design and implementation, particularly in the selection of learning themes. Participating in various academic exchange activities has brought academic theory and knowledge accumulation to MLs under the guidance of professional standards. Furthermore, as experts in different industries, MLs are expected to lead professional teams to transform theoretical knowledge into practical technology. In this sense, CHVCs collaborate with enterprises and industries to design

and organise PD activities in different disciplines and fields, which in turn becomes the main way for MLs to increase and update their occupational knowledge and skills. Notably, in addition to subject knowledge and skills, interviewees also emphasised skills such as building interpersonal relationships within professional teams, which were included in this study as leadership competency related to school-running and public affairs.

5.3.3 Leadership Competency

The research findings stated that MLs can enhance individual leadership competency through PD participation. The leadership competency here refers to the skills and influence required to complete work related to institutional governance, school-running, and public affairs, including execution ability, management ability, and skills for network construction. Although leadership competency is a part of the learning content required for middle leadership positions and practical needs, all interviewees emphasised the importance and urgency of strengthening their relevant skills. The fundamental reason they explained is that administrative and management work is the most time-consuming task and the most significant challenge for MLs. The documentary data clarified that the positioning of MLs in bureaucratic institutions occupies the dual roles of civil servants and industry experts, which is considered a prerequisite for designing PD for MLs:

(Training will) focus on improving the personal professional ability and quality of MLs, enhance the sense of responsibility, overall situation, reform and innovation, promote the improvement of the internal governance system, stimulate the vitality of CHVCs, and lead the high-quality development of vocational education. (GPT10)

The documentary data provides a macro description of the learning vision of the leadership collective in CHVCs, including MLs. Besides positional requirements from

official policies, interviewees indicated that participating in PD activities can meet PD's authentic needs to varying degrees based on their work experience:

Some explanatory training is effective for me, such as analysing certain assessment points. Because this concentrated explanation and answer can effectively help me learn how to complete a certain task with the least amount of time. (Mike)

The macro guidance of documentary data also mentions corresponding content requirements in terms of such formal and collective PD activities:

(Training programmes for leaders should) systematically summarise policy documents related to the construction of teaching force, comprehend the core views, sort out the main points of the policies, and implement them in practice. (GPT7)

The interviewees acknowledged the role of collective PD activities in enhancing execution ability, as such activities can help MLs understand and deconstruct tasks correctly. As a crucial intermediate part of the bureaucratic structure, MLs need to complete a large amount of policy implementation work and execute institutional leaders' decisions. Leadership behaviour that conforms to political and procedural norms is one of the occupational requirements for MLs as civil servants. Meanwhile, 12 interviewees explicitly stated that interactions between peers or experts and novices around experience sharing help improve management ability:

I am very willing to communicate with Dean Qi as he was the Associate Dean I am occupying. He always gives me a lot of practical experience, especially in dealing with teachers' emotional issues. It is precisely because of his reminder that I learned about the personalities and strengths of different teachers before starting work, which would help me allocate work. (Lucy)

The sharing of such experiences and methods is crucial for MLs that need to handle and manage complex relationships in their routine work. Distinguished with execution ability, when entering the leadership team with outstanding professional and research achievements, MLs are more frequently seeking to achieve departmental development goals via a defined development pathway that focus on how to construct collaborative relationships with subordinates, peers, and stakeholders. Corresponding management ability (such as handling emergencies, configuring routine work) and skills for network construction (such as effective communication, building trust) have become the authentic requirements of PD for MLs. Analysis of the findings highlights that, in addition to informal social interaction and dialogue, MLs can transmit and construct the boundary-spanning collaboration and coordination capabilities necessary to perform administrative management functions through participating formal, collective PD activities. Gary described their learning scenarios via collegial visit:

I am looking forward to studying and visiting companies or high-quality CHVCs again. Once, a vice dean demonstrated that she had jointly developed a matrix diagram with a partner company to manage the progress of teachers' work. After the visit, I also used this visualisation approach to reorganise the available resources required for the declaration work at that time and sent them to the department and STCs, which helped us complete the work ahead of schedule. This approach has also been used to today to facilitate resource utilisation and avoid overlap and repetition. (Gary)

In addition, Grace mentioned how to manage subordinates in special situations, such as handling emergencies or easing conflicts:

I once had a conversation with a vice dean in charge of student management during a visit, as he used to study in psychology research. He mentioned the experience and approach of leaders when teachers or students encounter changes, that is, humanistic care must be given top priority. I think it's important to share this experience with

each other. People are not machines; we need to deal with various issues that are not mentioned in professional standards or manuals. (Grace)

According to the interviewee's perspective, skills and abilities related to managing complex relationships can be constructed and developed through formal accompanied with informal exchange opportunities, and informal PD activities. It is apparent that situational social interaction mediated MLs' learning and capability-building in the context of PD participation. MLs learn knowledge and skills in different aspects from formal or informal activities. Among them, when the learning content from PD is directly related to middle leadership practices or meets individual practical needs, the capability-building of MLs becomes possible. It should be noted that the data from the interviews found that participating in different formats of PD activities does not guarantee equal effectiveness in MLs' capability-building. For example, in terms of leadership competence construction, interviewees acknowledged the positive role played by collegial visits and informal interactions (conceptualised as coaching in this study), but expressed disappointment with the learning outcomes of traditional lectures. The research findings show that it has to do with how PD activities MLs participating are structured and organised. Therefore, the following section will analyse how PD activities occur in context and explore the relationship between their operational mechanisms and PD for MLs.

5.4 Operational Mechanisms of PD for MLs in CHVCs: Embedded in National PD System

The research findings show that MLs comply with a series of requirements and norms during their participation in PD activities and PD implementations. Education departments in China rely on administrative power to construct a top-down training system with hierarchies aimed at achieving the PD goals set in the policy. This study emphasises that as part of the leadership collective, in addition to self-regulated Learning, the collective PD activities in which MLs participate are embedded in a

national training system and subject to top-down control. In practice, most PD activities that MLs participate in aim to achieve the institutional development vision as the primary goal. These PD activities are often issued, executed, and assessed as administrative instructions. Notably, given their expert identity and leadership position, MLs are empowered to incorporate individual needs and preferences to some extent into the themes of PD activities. However, such authority is limited, especially regarding high-risk accountability, and the positional authority of MLs still needs to be subject to top-down institutional arrangements.

5.4.1 Compliant-driven Outset of PD for MLs

The findings highlighted that a strong motivation to comply requirements and serve institutional development is the outset for the design and arrangement of PD programmes for MLs. MLs were assigned a large number of administrative mandates and leadership work in practice, which involved handling complex work tasks and coordinating complex interpersonal relationships. Correspondingly, different departments and institutions hold MLs accountable for their work in accordance with policy requirements. Similar to these administrative mandates, conducting and participating in PD activities were included in the supervisory and assessment standards of authoritative departments for CHVCs and individuals, including frequency, theme, and even format. Analysis findings combining text and interview data identified that in order to ensure full coverage of opportunities for faculty in CHVCs to participate in PD, authorities have established minimum standards:

The teaching team in CHVCs conducts practical training in enterprises or training bases for at least one month every year. It implements a 5-year cycle of the full-staff rotation training system for teachers. (GPT1)

In practice, as their teaching identity, MLs were included in teaching team and referred to these learning opportunities as training mandates that serve institutional development goals while adhering to national standards:

(Training courses arrangement) is to promote the modernisation of the governance system and governance capabilities of CHVCs, combined with the requirements of the construction tasks of CHVCs, and focusing on obstacles and challenges existing in the field of governance of CHVCs. Designing training courses should consider three levels - educational mission, governance system and governance capabilities. (GPT10)

The above excerpt came from a policy text issued by a national training base. The training courses arrangement for MLs emphasises the setting of learning content to serve institutional governance and development. This was also confirmed in the interview:

There are many learning activities that we need to participate in at work. Take the regular special training programmes designed for all MLs each summer as an example, the ultimate purpose of these activities is to improve the governance and management capabilities of the leadership team in CHVCs. This is also what national policy requires of us. (May)

Research findings presented that PD programmes or activities generally conform to both government policy aspirations and the political vision of institutional development. In other words, PD for MLs assumed the obvious priority position of political work in the design and initiation of the nascent stage. Accordingly, the setting and arrangement of learning programmes in the documentary data involved a lot of content related to policy interpretation and professional standards learning to pursue compliant development. Furthermore, empirical evidence from this study foregrounded that the

design of PD for MLs is closely related to the practical challenges or staged goals experienced in the development process of CHVCs:

One of our development priorities is to build high-level CHVCs, which is our development task at this stage. That's why I've spent the past six months poring over numerous policy documents and learning from what works in other CHVCs. (Gary)

By its very nature, such close relationship reflected the embeddedness of PD for MLs within the context of practice. The data from the interviews found that PD for MLs focuses on responding to and solving the challenges and tasks in the development process of CHVCs. In this process, learning and mastering policy guidance effectively avoided practical work deviating from assessment requirements, while mature leadership experience is conducive for MLs to deal with challenges encountered during institutional development. As Gary mentioned, using effective experiences and practices from other educational institutions as learning themes is also an important part of PD programmes. Interviewees interpreted this demonstration as prospective learning addresses possible barriers in moving to the next stage of development, coming from practical experiences of other developed CHVCs. The direct sharing and learning of governance and leadership experiences was affirmed by MLs, which was interpreted by MLs as being able to effectively cope with real administrative tasks. Notably, in the light of the outsets that cater to institutional development needs and policy requirements, interviewees in this study expressed concerns about whether PD activities meet their personal development needs:

It seems to me that a lot of learning content is stuck at the theoretical level, which cannot help me in my daily work. On the contrary, genuine learning should help us improve our ability to deal with problems. In other words, the setting of learning topics should listen to the opinions of learners. (Lucy)

The preceding quotes from interviews highlighted that PD for MLs fail to pay enough attention to the genuine needs of MLs to set learning content or guide learning direction. Four interviewees expressed an emphasis on the practicality of PD and pointed out the lack of such practicality in existing learning programmes or activities. They believed that awakening participants' professional agency and autonomy for PD is the vital to ensuring the effectiveness and practicality of learning activities, rather than passively learn skills and knowledge in specific activities. Interviewees further explained the negative consequences of ignoring genuine learning needs in practice, such as feeling stressed and superficial learning. Such conflict between top-down control and bottom-up needs will be discussed in detail in in section 7.3.3.

5.4.2 Administration-led Procedure of PD for MLs

Findings from this study demonstrated that the implementation procedure of PD for MLs also exhibits political characteristics, as its practical process in CHVCs is dominated by the administration. Specifically, the feature mainly includes three domain-specific, initiated by departments, embedded in the administrative mandate system, and collective learning formats.

Empirical evidence from policy text and the interviews revealed that the organisers or initiators of these activities come from stakeholders within and beyond CHVCs. In view of the complex work content and settings of MLs, the improvement of their knowledge and skills involves different dimensions and categories. One of the initiatives for stakeholders to participate in the development of CHVCs is to jointly organise PD activities, which is both a policy requirement and in line with actual needs. Based on the policy text, the practice of encouraging different stakeholders to participate in PD aims to mobilise different learning resources to support PD:

The leadership team's learning often requires the collective promotion of different forces, such as the government, enterprises, and research institutions. One of the

most obvious benefits is that we enjoy resource support from different institutions.
(Evan)

Despite this, such approach of multiple departments or stakeholders being empowered to organise PD activities can be susceptible to inappropriate learning arrangements in practice:

I often encounter a situation where a certain learning activity conflicts with my original schedule. In this case, I may be absent from study activities to complete my work. Conversely, if the learning activity explicitly requires MLs to participate, then I need to adjust my plans. (May)

The experience mentioned by May in the interview can fully reflect the difficulties in the implementation procedure of PD for MLs. Different stakeholders within an activity often have different norms to guide them within their activity. It should be noted that in the absence of systematic coordination and planning, the PD implementation in practice would encounter obstacles in terms of logistical conditions, such as time conflicts. Although the newly established Teacher Development Center attempts to alleviate this conflict, interviewees pointed out that learning arrangements still overlap. As such, how to respond or adjust when caught in a conflict deserves sophisticated attention. May outlines two common practices in routine work. Under normal circumstances, MLs choose to give up learning activities and give in to work. There is a special situation when learning activities are given the characteristics of administrative mandates by institutional leaders, personal plans are subject to the administrative arrangements of the learning plan. That is, the PD here is included in the administrative mandate system and is obviously mandatory. Research findings show that the approach is beneficial to the advancement of PD in practice:

In order to ensure the smooth development of training activities and the participation of MLs, a common practice is to require MLs to participate in training activities as

a task (*tong zhi*). Accordingly, some attendance results will be included in the annual assessment. (Ellen)

The findings highlighted that the implementation of PD for MLs in CHVCs is often conveyed top-down through the hierarchy in the form of administrative mandates. That is, MLs passively receive administrative instructions about PD and then follow the requirements to complete specific learning tasks. The practice was controversial among interviewees. On the one hand, interviewees mentioned that the use of administrative means to promote PD practices can ensure the development of PD activities and the basic right of MLs to ongoing learning. On the other hand, some interviewees believed that passive participation in PD programmes or activities does not meet real needs and even increase the workload of MLs. In the interview, Steven regarded this kind of administrative pushing as administrative intervention:

In my opinion, there is an inherent logic that precisely because existing training activities are top-down, administrative power is needed to promote their development and ensure participation. However, if it is an initiative initiated by MLs, such administrative intervention is not required. (Steven)

Steven attempted to explain the reasons for using administrative instructions to promote PD practice. Furthermore, he highlighted the negative consequences of this practice:

Treating learning activities as administrative tasks will bring us certain benefits. However, it can only guarantee the attendance of learners, but cannot accurately assess the learning effect. More importantly, our application for off-site study also requires a series of approval procedures. It will undermine our motivation. (Steven)

Steven pointed out the disadvantages of relying solely on administrative instructions to promote PD. The data from the interviews found that more than half of the interviewees clearly expressed their approval of this practice, especially in PD activities involving

the participation of authoritative agencies. Substantial public resources have been mobilised to support PD for MLs. However, MLs caution that administration-led procedures may come with additional burdens, such as complex budgeting processes and duplicative accountability. Such bureaucratic burden that they had been blind to easily led to administrative pushing being seen as administrative intervention. As such, designing coherent and consecutive practical procedures is one of tasks in managing the operation of PD for MLs, which will be discussed in section 7.4.1.

5.4.3 Multi-level Learning Platforms of PD for MLs

Analysis of the findings presented that CHVCs still use professional learning communities (PLCs) as the typical PD platform. The platform here refers to an integrated environment with the necessary tools, resources, and services for the learning process. The interview data found that MLs generally recognise the value of collaboration and have a long tradition of collective activities. In practice, MLs are incorporated into traditional PLCs, such as Teaching-research Groups (TRGs, *jiaoyanshi*), Master Teacher Studios (MTSs, *mingshi/dashi gongzuoshi*). Such PLCs are embedded in the national education system, which is divided into national, provincial, municipal, and institutional levels. It is worth considering that this study also identified a type of PLCs that exist outside the bureaucracy, which are conceptualised as middle leaders communities (MLCs). The findings highlighted that both types of PLCs play a vital role as platforms and pathways for PD for MLs.

Research findings show that MLs belong to different traditional PLCs based on the disciplines and the construction needs of professional groups. Traditional PLCs here have a well-articulated structure and have achieved a highly-institutionalised practice. Its operations are constrained by the control and accountability of superior departments and authorities. In this sense, the carefully designed collective learning activities they organise regularly are political and mandatory. Nonetheless, the focus of these activities

is not on administrative work or leadership positions, but on teaching knowledge and skills:

I am also the person in charge of the first batch of MTSs in Shandong Province. MTSs form teams for projects and professional groups. What I need to do as a host is to help other members improve their personal abilities. Although I gained some experience, the focus was not on developing or improving my abilities. (Aimee)

What is noteworthy is that traditional PLCs offer learning opportunities that focus on the teaching role and expert identifies of MLs. The position of MLs in PLCs includes host and member. On the one hand, as the host of PLCs, MLs need to use leadership experience and professional knowledge to be responsible for the professional growth of novice teachers and other members. On the other hand, as members of PLCs, MLs are able to share personal experiences and provide professional judgment in collaborative and reflective discussions. Furthermore, the data from the interviews proposed that there is a type of bottom-up PLCs in the Chinese hierarchical context to support PD for MLs. This type of PLCs is based on administrative positions at the same level, but do not have administrative authorisation and standardised structural frameworks. MLs may gradually approach each other in routine work due to handling different parts of one task, or they may form PLCs through beneficial interactions in PD activities artificially arranged. This study conceptualises the type of PLCs as middle leaders communities (MLCs):

We are all MLs and deal with similar work, so communication is easy to make sense. We have a chat group (on WeChat, a social media) composed of CHVC's MLs in which we often share the latest information or discuss problems encountered at work. Such frequent interaction makes us trust each other more. (Frank)

Although MLCs do not appear in official policies, interview data in this study confirmed that such PLCs play an active role in PD for MLs, as corresponding PD

activities focus on leadership practice and management work. Based on interview data, MLCs are jointly constructed by MLs with shared vision, which focuses on institutional governance and development. They take collective responsibility for institutional development and improvement as part of the leadership team. At the same time, professional activities in MLCs are not a one-time event. These activities focus on collaboration, interaction, and reflection. Compared with contrived learning communities, MLCs are more spontaneous. Research findings illustrated that MLs provide a large number of positive experiences regarding collaborative learning and experience sharing with other MLs in their routine work. Given similarities in positions or levels, MLs in CHCVs are often more likely to resonate with each other during the process of de-privatised exchange. Such resonance supports MLs to spontaneously approach and form a community, aiming to capability-building around authentic work content. However, CHVCs do not fully realise the role and potential of MLCs, resulting in such position-based PLCs not receiving targeted support from institutions:

Organisational support for us is often mixed in with other administrative work. It can explain why the collective requirements and support for MLs always appear in the policy text as a certain part. In this case, we need to work hard to gain support from CHVCs or authority agencies. (Grace)

Compared to traditional PLCs embedded in bureaucracies, MLCs unnamed explicitly in official documents do not receive adequate support and resources. Interviewees pointed out that when systems and policies cannot provide guarantees and constraints, the allocation of learning resources can only be based on enabling cultural conditions, such as the values in CHVCs and the trust relationship between MLs and institutional leaders (ILs). At the same time, Grace expressed that the development of this kind of bottom-up PLCs also requires the autonomy of members. That is, when MLs take the initiative to awaken the awareness of ILs to value PD for MLs, the conditions required by MLCs as PLCs might be provided in time. However, there is a risk that the support

of MLCs would be overly dependent on the subjective wishes of ILs in the hierarchical structure, which will be discussed in section 7.3.4.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings answer the first research question from three aspects: typical formats, learning content, and operational mechanisms. The empirical evidence from this study shows that PD activities in practice often take formal and collective formats. Most of these activities are guided by policy aspirations and rely on administrative approaches to implement and promote, which means that most of the opportunities MLs face are to catch up with different policy initiatives. In contrast, interviewees are more inclined to organise and participate in informal PD activities to meet their leadership development needs in establishing, developing, and managing interpersonal relationships. Notably, it does not mean that formal PD activities are ineffective in the capability-building of MLs. This study comprehensively analyses policy aspirations and practical needs, combined with the learning outcomes from PD activities, to confirm the abilities required for MLs in CHVCs, involving the administrative and instructional identities undertaken by MLs. Among them, the development of pedagogical basis and subject knowledge and skills is more susceptible to obtain from formal PD interactions. In addition, this study confirms the existence of PD activities (CVs) that combine formal and informal formats, which interviewees believe can better achieve the goal of capability-building. Overall, this suggests a strong tendency among the participants to engage in PD activities related to administrative mandates in practice. In other words, the existing support for MLs' capability-building has not yet shifted towards the instrumental side of the spectrum, that is, effectively completing work and solving practical problems, but rather intellectually engaging with teaching, institutions, and society. The specific pathways in which institutional conditions affect PD for MLs will be further demonstrated in chapter 6.

Chapter 6 Research Findings: Influencing Factors

6.1 Introduction

Attention now turns to the findings related to institutional factors and PD for MLs in CHVCs. This chapter presents the main findings related to the second research question proposed in Chapter 1:

- 1. What is the status of current provision for professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?
- 2. In what ways and to what extent do organizational structure, institutional leadership and institutional culture influence professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?

As described in the methodology chapter, the research findings are based on qualitative data collected from documents and semi-structured interviews and mainly generated by Nvivo.

This chapter explores in what ways and to what extent three factors at the institutional level influence PD for MLs. The findings highlight that the theme of institutional leadership which influences the PD for MLs consists of five main components, specifically: constructing learning vision; building learning platforms; optimising learning environment; monitoring learning activities; and setting learning role-model. The ways in which organisational structure influence PD for MLs including formal management structure, organisational operating mechanisms, and multiple connection systems. Organisational culture affects PD for MLs through three levels - spiritual and ideological level, institutional level, and material level. Overall, it goes on to explore the influencing pathways of institutional factors on PD for MLs through juxtaposing analysis of related policy documents and personal PD experience.

6.2 Institutional Leadership and PD for MLs in CHVCs

According to official documents published by the Ministry of Education, the president is positioned as the principal responsible person in Chinese higher educational institutions. Senior leadership, formed by the university/college president and his/her team play an essential role in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation of various strategic and operational affairs within each institution. The findings from the interview and document analysis would suggest that Institutional Leaders (ILs) specifically exert influence on PD for MLs through the following five ways: constructing the learning vision, building the learning platform, optimizing the learning environment, monitoring the learning program, and setting learning role-models.

6.2.1 Constructing Learning Vision

The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that ILs help MLs construct and establish a learning vision, which focuses on the desired outcomes produced by different stakeholders collectively exploring the potential of MLs. Distinguished from the organisational development vision, the learning vision focuses on personal competence building and sustainable progress. As mentioned in section one, the policy aspirations for PD for MLs in the policy text serve the overall development of CHVCs and ignore the bottom-up actual needs. Interview evidence from this study illustrated that ILs effectively integrate practical needs with professional standards by helping MLs construct a learning vision, which avoids MLs falling into an unnecessary dichotomy and conflict. Specifically, constructing a learning vision includes development awareness reinforcement, development goal setting, and development path clarification.

The interview data identified that ILs take development awareness reinforcement as an outset in constructing a learning vision for MLs. Regard in this, the typical approach taken by ILs is to assign more leadership mandates to MLs, making MLs aware of the

importance of their positions and the gap between job requirements and personal abilities. Documentary data stated that in contrast to one voice (*Yiyatang*, comments only from principals) - an administrative method in past China - ILs realise the importance of collective endeavours in institutional governance. Accordingly, allocating more leadership workload to MLs is the main measure for ILs to expand the scope of collective responsibility, as MLs occupy vital positions and link ILs and front-line teachers. Interview data from MLs showed that they often viewed such kind of assuming leadership workload as a trust from ILs, which can effectively mobilise their initiative:

As the dean of the STC, I know that power must come with responsibility. I must take on more responsibility. This responsibility is related to the development of the college and frontline teachers in my STC. In this case, I need to learn more and more advanced management knowledge and professional knowledge to lead my STC and teachers to improve together. (Aimee)

According to Aimee, taking on more leadership roles means MLs occupy a more critical position in institutional governance, which places new demands on MLs' capabilities. Interview data revealed that escalating workload contributes to MLs' realising that continuous PD is the key to coping with new risks and challenges in their work. This awareness strengthening is different from the aforementioned training tasks embedded in the administrative framework, which emphasises the professional agency of MLs in PD. Besides this, analysis results combining text and interview data identified that ILs relying on administrative power to tilt resources to PD can also strengthen the MLs' development awareness:

At the end of last year, ILs proposed increasing investment in training programmes for all faculty and staff. This year's financial report shows that the budget for training and learning is significantly higher than in the past, and more emphasis is placed on overseas training projects for MLs and backbone teachers (referring to

teachers who possess high teaching abilities and shoulder the responsibility of cultivating novices). This level of support is advantageous. (Lucy)

The data from the interviews revealed that ILs adopt different methods to increase investment in faculty PD, including PD for MLs. The financial support mentioned in the quote is also a typical means, which will be explained in section 6.2.3. As a kind of political wisdom, MLs can rethink the meaning of PD from such focused support measures and thus effectively use enabling policies to promote their capacity building. After strengthening the development awareness of MLs, the findings from the interview analysis presented that jointly setting learning goals between ILs and MLs is an essential step in constructing a learning vision:

We generally use a combination of symposiums and one-to-one communication to set personal development goals with ILs jointly. The role of ILs in this process is generally that of guidance and assistance. They listen to our ideas while giving sound advice from a big-picture perspective. (May)

The preceding quotes illustrated that ILs avoid PD for MLs work against policy aspirations by guiding MLs to develop appropriate learning goals. Section one has explained in detail the guiding role of professional standards in PD for MLs and the practice of PD programmes being embedded in the bureaucracy and promoted as administrative mandates. An apparent misunderstanding is to forcefully align the PD goals of MLs with the development visions of CHVCs. Interviewees indicated that explanations and guidance from ILs could prevent this dilemma. On the one hand, ILs interpret government policies, institutional positioning, and development vision to MLs; on the other hand, ILs broaden channels to collect the learning needs of MLs and further incorporate them into PD goals and plans. Interview data showed that this kind of joint participation in the setting of learning goals can weaken the negative emotions caused by administrative instructions:

For the same learning task, issuing an administrative instruction requiring me to complete it and having us discuss the method of achieving it together are two different feelings and effects for me. So, the current virtuous cycle is that we respect the authority of ILs, and at the same time, ILs respect our opinions, which makes me more enthusiastic about learning. (Flora)

As Flora emphasised in the learning goal-setting stage, respect and attention from ILs can effectively stimulate the initiative of MLs to participate in PD. As a vital measure to reconcile the contradiction between personal development needs and institutional development vision, ILs guide MLs to formulate learning goals on the basis of respecting individual wishes, which helps to generate authentic learning and cooperation in PD programmes embedded in the organisational framework. In further terms, such leadership behaviour also facilitates establishing trust relationships between ILs and MLs, which will be explained in section 6.4.1.

The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that clarification of the development path is also one of the measures taken by ILs to construct a learning vision in the nascent stages. Distinguished from specific PD programmes or activity planning, the path clarification here focuses on the phased separation of ILs' above development goals to ensure the operability of the learning vision. Findings from the document analysis process stated that the split of learning vision and development goals in practice is closely related to the phased construction tasks of CHVCs. This is mainly due to the fact that MLs occupy key formal positions in CHVCs, claiming or being assigned corresponding organisational construction tasks. The interview data identified that helping MLs identify specific learning goals in different task contexts is a way for ILs to integrate their learning vision with their routine work, which is conceptualised in this study as the clarification of development paths:

In the past few years, our CHVC has applied for the titles of the national quality specialist higher vocational colleges and the double-high colleges. As a member of

the application team, I need to complete different tasks assigned me by ILs. Therefore, in the process, I improved my ability to complete one task after another, which brought me closer to my development goals. (Gary)

Including Gary, a total of six MLs pointed out that the learning vision of MLs is gradually realised along with the phased tasks of CHVCs. The interview data stated that ILs ensuring that development goals are flexible and adaptable rather than unreachable can enhance the effectiveness of MLs' learning vision. By its very nature, staged achievable work tasks are considered a powerful driver of effective learning vision and development goals. Correspondingly, organising and participating in some PD programmes that meet the needs of phased work receive the shared attention of MLs and ILs. The role of ILs in PD projects will be explained in detail below (see section 6.2.4).

6.2.2 Building Learning Communities

Coding and analysis found that *Pingtai* is a concept commonly used by interviewees. This imprecise term is directly translated as the platform. Based on the content and ideas covered in the Chinese interviews and documents, this study uses the term Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to refer to *Pingtai*. PLCs is a promising infrastructure of PD for MLs occurring in CHVCs. Its specific operational characteristics and significance have been explained in detail above. The interview and document analysis suggest that there is a close relationship between ILs and the building and sustaining of PLCs in CHVCs. That is, ILs can stimulate MLs to participate in PD activities by building learning communities. The specific methods include providing support resources for traditional PLCs and ensuring development space for middle leaders communities (MLCs).

Analysis results combining text and interview data identified that ILs rely on administrative authority to integrate resources and provide the necessary support for

MLs to participate in the operation of traditional PLCs. Documentary data revealed a variety of PLCs embedded in organisational frameworks and with well-designed structures in CHVCs, which is one of the key ways for MLs to participate in PD. In this study, such PLCs are classified as traditional PLCs and undertake both PD and administrative tasks. Interview data stated that as part of the bureaucracy within CHVCs, designing more coherent and streamlined procedural work to build an enabling foundation for PD activities is one of the tasks of ILs routine work. The enabling foundation here focuses on the efforts of the operational mechanisms provided by traditional PLCs for holding PD activities, such as project application process and logistical conditions support. Interviewees explained the role of ILs in the operation of traditional PLCs during interviews:

Taking the master teacher studio in our CHVC as an example, ILs provided strong support during its construction, such as coordinating social resources and introducing high-quality courses. They also took the lead in formulating work codes for the studio's daily operations and intentionally optimised procedures in terms of financial support and material procurement. (Aimee)

The data from the interviews explicitly presented that ILs positively impact PD for MLs in terms of routinising PD activities and simplifying bureaucratic procedures by redesigning the operating mechanisms of traditional PLCs. This is conducive to alleviating the additional burden of MLs participating in PD in PLCs, which will be discussed further in the organisational structure section. As Aimee mentioned, ILs provide guidance for the operation of PLCs at a relatively macro level and coordinate related resources according to routine needs. Among them, as an essential bridge between the inside and outside of CHVCs, ILs play a pivotal role in connecting and utilising external resources to support the construction of PLCs. The first half of this chapter has fully explained that the policy aspirations of different stakeholders - government, business, and other universities - collectively support the development of CHVCs. Interview data stated that ILs, on behalf of CHVCs, actively develop

complementary resources to support the construction of PLCs in the process of building cooperative relationships with stakeholders:

ILs can work with other institutions on behalf of CHVCs. This kind of cooperation can bring new resources to our development and learning, which is often done in teams or projects. For example, my teaching and research department has jointly completed developing a national-level project with a CHVC in Liaoning Province. It is meaningful to me and my colleagues. (Evan)

The interview data from this study emphasised that in practice PLCs are important platforms for ILs to develop and rationally arrange social resources to support PD for MLs. As highlighted in section one, PD for MLs in CHVCs involves different dimensions and themes. In this sense, gathering learning resources from different levels and achieving reasonable allocation is the prerequisite for effectively using these resources. The interview data revealed that traditional PLCs are an effective channel for connecting with external learning resources, as traditional PLCs have the dual attributes of developing PD activities and administrative management. It is also worth noting that using learning resources in different traditional PLCs requires professional judgment, while ILs play a supervisory role rather than intervention. This has been shown to be possible through decentralisation, which will be explained in section 6.3.2 when discussing the empowerment of STCs.

In addition to its impact on the operating mechanism and resource integration of traditional PLCs, the interview data stated that ILs could protect the development of MLCs from unreasonable squeeze and then guide them to play a role in institutional progress. Compared with traditional PLCs, MLCs have a more obvious voluntary and ML-driven nature. As PLCs outside the formal organisational structure, MLCs do not have an administrative authorisation and standardised framework. As such, when systems and policies cannot provide guarantees and norms, MLCs can only be built on enabling organisational conditions, such as the values of ILs and the trust relationship

between MLs and ILs. The data from the interviews found that intentional advocacy and attention from ILs can be beneficial to the institutional development of MLCs in practice:

Three other colleagues and I jointly form the secondary college leadership team (*Ban zi*) and are responsible for all college affairs. Accordingly, we often have small meetings to discuss specific issues. ILs fully respect the results of our discussion, which directly motivates us to find learning role models further and actively contact each other to organise field learning. ILs will also encourage and support these learning activities. (Ellen)

The interview data identified that positive attitudes from ILs are conducive to protecting the professional authority and agency of MLs in such PLCs, thereby effectively promoting learning behaviours in MLCs. By its very nature, PD activities that occur in MLCs are often oriented toward authentic problems encountered by MLs and focus on practical, experiential learning, which is widely prevalent among MLs. Interview data illustrated that MLs regard respect and affirmation from ILs relating to PD activities in MLCs as the stimuli where the desires for ongoing learning arose. In this sense, PD in MLCs and the support of ILs form a virtuous closed loop that can effectively satisfy the PD needs of MLs in their routine work. Interaction and sharing in MLCs are also conducive to establishing trust-based interpersonal relationships, leading to authentic cooperation. However, some interviewees accused MLCs of over-reliance on the subjective wishes of ILs and expressed concerns that are grounded in a leadership team that is respectful at best and hierarchical at worst:

Our small informal team among MLs had no formal support from our CHVC. I mean the kind of support that a teaching and research office receives. This means that if the principal or other leaders do not agree with our (MLs) informal communication, we can only focus on those learning lectures in the lecture hall. (Peter)

The data from the interviews found that compared with the institutionalised practice of traditional PLCs in CHVCs, MLCs that have yet to clearly appear in official documents can only rely on the awareness of ILs and the learning atmosphere in CHVCs. The latter will be explained in detail in section 7.4.3. What should be emphasised here is that when ILs ignore PLCs outside the organisational framework, such communities would not receive sufficient support and even their development space would be limited. That is, establishing enabling institutional conditions in institutions helps to routinise and institutionalise the work related to allocating learning resources, which will be discussed in detail in the discussion chapter.

6.2.3 Optimising Learning Environment

Analysis of the data from the policy texts and the interviewees respectively highlighted ILs have an impact on PD for MLs by adjusting the learning environment consisted of PD-related institutional conditions in CHVCs. Specifically, building supportive conditions is mainly related to resource integration and allocation, emphasising human, financial, and logistical resources. Human and substance resource are considered by the interviewees to be a necessary condition for PD practice. The role of ILs in bringing in external resources has been demonstrated above when explaining building learning communities. In further terms, integrating available resources inside and outside CHVCs and committing to maximise the benefits of various resources, is perceived as a way ILs affect PD. This is mainly due to the fact that embedded with a distinctive historical and political orientation, principals and their teams are resource managers of CHVCs.

The policy text and interviews combined revealed that providing human support is one of the vital measures for ILs to optimise the learning environment in CHVCs. The human resources here mainly involve two parts, expert resources and staff related to PD practice. For example, a common practice to improve the level of trainers is to cooperate with stakeholders to introduce external expert resources, including industry

experts, business managers, and well-known scholars, as part of the trainers of MLs. According to the practical needs of PD for MLs, ILs integrate expert resources from different fields and combine their advantages to adopt appropriate PD formats:

After several rounds of consultations, our leaders decided to reach a cooperative relationship with a top university in China. We invited experts from the university as keynote speakers to train our cadres. In addition, we also form a curriculum development team with experts from the university to develop teaching resources for leadership development jointly. (Ellen)

In addition to joining the team of trainers and co-developing teaching resources mentioned by Ellen, document analysis found that ILs take on the responsibility of managing, allocating, and improving resources to further support PD for MLs that occur in the workplace.

(ILs should) rely on the close cooperation of enterprises and technical backbones, artisans, and technicians to optimise the collegial part-time teacher talent pool, formulate the *Part-time Teacher Talent Pool Management Measures*, and explore effective part-time expert management and assessment methods. (CPT-A)

The document analysis results identified that ILs uniformly manage and rationally allocate human resources in accordance with system requirements and procedures. The impact of corresponding systems and procedures on PD for MLs will be explained in detail in section 6.3.3. What is noteworthy is that administrative staff in CHVCs servicing for expert resources and PD programmes also serve as an integral part of the human support provided by ILs in practice. Specifically, strengthening staff's coordination and management capabilities related to PD programmes or activities is one of the conditions for high-quality PD to operate in a coordinated manner as a whole. The data from the interviews explicitly presented that a sufficient number of administrative staff with clear responsibilities is a pivotal guarantee for the efficient

implementation of PD, as the PD practice process involves a series of procedural tasks that need to be completed by administrative staff.

In addition to human resources, interviewees generally believed that financial resources, as one of the necessary resources for PD for MLs, have an irreplaceable impact on PD. The analysis results on the specific impact methods illustrated that financial resources, including funds and financial systems, play a role in two aspects of PD - investing funds to directly support PD for MLs and using funds to improve other PD-related conditions. Analysis results combining text and interview data identified that ILs rely on their authoritative financial investment in PD to promote or hinder the practice of PD programmes and the enthusiasm of MLs:

We have a standardised declaration process for our study away. Generally speaking, our CHVC has a larger budget for our training. Since introducing the new policy, the funding declaration process for learning activities has been significantly simplified. I can feel the support and assistance provided by ILs to encourage our learning. (Peter)

The preceding quotes revealed that ILs increase financial investment in PD to support MLs' participation in PD programmes. Interview data presented that such direct support expands MLs' opportunities to participate in PD without additional financial burden. At the same time, seven interviewees interpreted the increase in funding as ILs' emphasis on PD for MLs. In particular, the bureaucratic procedures associated with the use of funds are simplified, which provided a more efficient learning environment and reduces burnout and stress among MLs. Furthermore, based on interviews and document analysis, ILs' practice regarding utilising funds to optimise learning environments also includes improvements to learning equipment and infrastructure. these supporting learning conditions are collectively referred to as logistical resources. ILs continuously improve the logistics resource management and service system to provide services for professional development:

After the establishment of the Teacher Development Center, ILs proposed that the east wing of the administration building be designated as an area for PD activities. In addition, we formulated plans and purchase relevant equipment in accordance with national requirements to provide a high-quality learning platform for training and learning activities. (Martin)

Data analysed from the interviews revealed that ILs improve the external environment in which learning activities occur by investing in new equipment or upgrading existing resources, which helps foster meaningful collaboration and improve the learning efficiency of MLs. Notably, logistical resources cover the material base needed for education and teaching activities in CHVCs, involving buildings, teaching equipment, office equipment and others in this study. Interviewees mentioned the convenience of organising and participating in learning activities by improving various logistical conditions. In addition to physical infrastructure improvements, the interview data also stated that ILs proposed improving network equipment to support the construction of virtual learning platforms. MLs believed that the allocation of this virtual learning platform and resources also needs to be taken into consideration by ILs.

6.2.4 Regulating Learning Activities

Analysis of the data from the policy texts and the interviewees respectively highlighted that the main task of ILs in the learning activities of MLs is *Jianguan*, encompasses a range of macro-control approaches but generally refers to a more holistic control which centres on management and supervision. *Jianguan* here is translated as regulating. Specifically, ILs monitor and regulate the quality of learning activities through learning content design and planning, learning process organisation and management, and learning outcome summary and feedback. Notably, the specific formats of PD have been explained in detail above, involving traditional pre-designed PD programmes and informal PD activities. In this section, ILs regulate learning activities referring to pre-

designed learning activities, while the role of ILs during informal activities will be demonstrated in section 6.2.5.

The findings in both documents and interview data were that ILs organised special meetings to invite relevant staff and experts to jointly launch the design of learning activities for MLs at the nascent PD stage. As mentioned in Chapter 6 and the constructive learning vision (see section 6.2.1), formal PD that occurs in the workplace is oriented to institutional development needs and professional standards requirements, while ILs can play a vital role in maintaining an equilibrium between top-down PD mandates and bottom-up PD needs. Consistently, ILs' consideration of authentic needs when designing and planning PD programmes or activities affects MLs' enthusiasm, as MLs generally focus on the usability of PD. Interview data showed that effective practices for ILs involved bringing MLs into PD programmes design work after collecting their learning needs and even inviting MLs to directly participate in PD design:

I think the emphasis on ILs is key to ensuring that PD projects accurately meet our expectations and needs. They know our real needs for capacity building, as we have close interactions with ILs daily. In this case, it is support for our PD to take our needs seriously and incorporate them into reference standards when designing attractive activities. (Frank)

Interviewees believed that ILs, by virtue of their authority and responsibilities, can be expected to incorporate the authentic needs of MLs into PD design and planning. A point worth paying attention to here is that ILs need to fully understand or collect the capacity-building needs from MLs, which are closely related to routine work. Analysis results combining text and interview data identified a rich body of opportunities for interaction and communication between ILs and MLs. It provides enabling conditions for ILs to grasp the basic status quo of PD for MLs. The interviews also found that the individual capabilities of MLs are dynamically changing. As such, ILs with

developmental awareness can sensitively capture the changes in MLs' PD needs, and hence emphasising continuous revision and refinement of learning content to suit MLs at different stages. In contrast to this, once ILs ignore such authentic needs and dynamic changes, PD programmes may fall into a one-sided focus on theory learning and policy interpretation that misses the purpose and strategy of PD.

In addition, the interview data also showed that ILs play a supporting role in the organisation and management of PD implementation. Such role of ILs is more focused on administrative coordination and accountability, and their work mainly involves coordinating necessary resources and dealing with emergencies. Aimee likened the role of ILs to that of waiters providing services for MLs' learning and development. ILs utilise their administrative authority to promote PD practice and mobilise social resources to support MLs. However, MLs also warn that when ILs attach too much intervention to the PD practice process, PD would be distorted and manipulated into an administrative burden for MLs, which provides obstacles to the initiation of real collaboration and learning:

In my opinion, many additional things limit my enthusiasm for participating in PD activities, such as the application process, expense reimbursement, and attendance assessment. These procedural contents make simple learning problems complex.
(Steven)

The interview data stated that ILs should focus on constructing necessary external conditions for the implementation and promotion of PD rather than directly intervening in PD activities. Given that MLs in CHVCs have top-down position authority and influence, their status is recognised when it comes to power negotiation and decision-making. However, it is also inevitable that some tasks and mandates tend to fall between the gaps of MLs in different departments, which means ILs, as higher-level leaders are needed to coordinate and avoid tensions. In addition to the resource integration and coordination mentioned in the preceding quotes, the construction of external enabling

conditions by ILs will be discussed more fully in discussion chapter. Furthermore, the data from the interviews explicitly presented that MLs' learning outcomes and feedback are also supervised and summarised by ILs:

The selected MLs go out to participate in high-level training activities, and then share their learning experiences at the workplace. The purpose of this is to achieve common progress of the team. Before the sharing session, I first summarised my learning results to ILs. We work together to sublimate the content of the sharing session based on the actual situation. (Grace)

The data from the interviews found that ILs make further plans to support MLs' participation in PD by promptly grasping MLs' summaries and feedback on participating in PD programmes. Grace recalled the follow-up work of participating in PD activities outside CHVCs. MLs summarise learning outcomes to ILs and promote them, especially after PD projects where only a few MLs participate. Lucy further explained this approach in the interview:

Generally speaking, ILs use the form of conversation to get feedback after the learning activities. A common part of our current learning activities is to score the activity at the end. In fact, this is a participant's evaluation mechanism for the activity. We can also put forward our feelings and suggestions in this evaluation process. (Lucy)

Data analysed from the interviews revealed that ILs have two main purposes for summarising MLs learning outcomes. On the one hand, as leaders of trainees (MLs), ILs promote the development of CHVCs by promoting or applying the learning outcomes of MLs. On the other hand, as organisers of PD activities, ILs take responsibility for the learning output of MLs. The documentary data identified that as the organiser of learning activities, relevant staff are responsible for providing continued guidance after MLs complete PD, aiming to help trainees apply learning

results into practice. ILs lead team members to strengthen the follow-up investigation of students after the learning activities are completed, which is conducive in obtaining an evaluation of PD activities. Based on the feedback and evaluation, ILs organised a special meeting to discuss the optimisation measures of PD programmes and activities for MLs, forming a virtuous cycle with the aforementioned PD design. In this regard, ILs promote MLs' participation in PD by improving the quality of learning activities. Besides the summary and feedback on learning outcomes, interviewees also mentioned the authenticity of feedback and evaluations from MLs, which will be explained in detail later in the section.

6.2.5 Setting Learning Role-models

The data from the interviews explicitly presented that role models serve as learning resources to provide direct experience support and wisdom transfer to MLs in informal PD interactions. Compared with formal PD programmes, informal PD interactions in the workspace are more episodic. According to the explanation about coaching in section one, MLs in informal PD activities regard ILs or colleagues as learning role models. In this sense, ILs have become role models for MLs in informal PD and their rich practical experience and professional skills are seen as learning resources. At the same time, ILs draw on the assessment mechanism to identify learning role models among all members to cultivate MLs' commitment to mutual sharing and continuous learning.

The interview data identified that MLs regard ILs with excellent personal conditions as role models in PD, such as solid knowledge reserve, rich leadership experience, astute political wisdom, and a positive learning attitude. It worth noting that ILs in CHVCs who are promoted from MLs generally have sets of experience of middle leadership work. Although they occupy different positions at the middle level, the work setting and mandates they face essentially involve dealing with complex relationships and coping with institutional pressures. Correspondingly, the practices and wisdom of ILs

are effective experiences for MLs to avoid getting into dilemmas and cope with challenges in practice. The interview data asserted that sharing from ILs and interactions with ILs can directly provide a direct reference for MLs' routine work:

The person most closely associated with my work is the Vice-Principal. When I encounter difficulties, I am used to discussing solutions with him. He would share his previous experiences. Of course, he doesn't just have experience. He has always maintained the habit of reading. I noticed many annotated books in his office, which inspired me. (Lucy)

A strong message that came across in the interviews was that MLs learn and draw on useful practices from ILs' sharing as guidance for their decision-making and leadership behaviours. In addition to Lucy, the other eight interviewees also believed that learning effective leadership behaviours from ILs is taken for granted, as there are relatively more work-based communication opportunities among them. Furthermore, another aspect in the interview data is that ILs gain the trust and respect of MLs through the learning attitudes and behaviours demonstrated in their personal work, and thus enhancing the legitimacy and professionalism of their suggestions. The attitudes and behaviours here refer to ILs' perceptions of their own PD and participation in learning activities. Such personal learning attitudes and behaviours are also one of the stimuli where the desires for MLs' capability building and governance progress arose. The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that besides actively participating in PD themselves, ILs also play a motivating role by identifying other role models from MLs in the workplace:

The CHVC, where I work, have different honorary titles as rewards for high-level performance. In my opinion, the establishment of this honorary title also serves to set an example for others to follow. In daily work, ILs create opportunities for members identified as master teachers or good leaders with rich experience to share their experiences or encourage everyone to observe their results. (Ellen)

The preceding quotes perceived that ILs draw on different evaluation and assessment mechanisms to identify role models and create opportunities for sharing and exchanging. The documentary data identified that faculty members who meet sets of criteria receive material or reputational kudos. Furthermore, the interview data revealed that ILs broaden their advocacy avenues to inspire other MLs, continuously improving their leadership competence. Correspondingly, ILs organise different formats of formal or informal PD activities to transfer effective practices and experiences, such as team building summary meetings and professional dialogue of disciplinary development. The interviewees unanimously believed that after such sharing, there is no loss of the individual wisdom and ability of the role models, but enhance the collective wisdom to improve the level of governance. In further terms, some interviewees pointed out that this kind of interaction is conducive to discovering or sublimating more effective practices:

An experience that deeply impressed me was at a sharing meeting. The principal invited me to share my experience in school-enterprise cooperation, as our department's results regarding this work are the most outstanding in our CHVC. An unexpected gain was that during the free discussion, colleagues from other secondary colleges expressed their personal opinions, which resonated with other MLs. Everyone gave me countermeasures and provided new ideas for my work.
(May)

As May mentioned, ILs create different opportunities for role models to share experiences to achieve collective progress of MLs, which may be accompanied by both innovative and demonstration behaviour. One point worth noting in this regard is that demonstration learning is an important feature of PD activities organised by ILs around role models with a good framework and the purpose of sharing mature experiences. Analysis results combining text and interview data identified that this kind of demonstration learning is a distinct feature of PD practice in the context of Chinese

educational institutions. However, some MLs expressed in interviews the negative impact of ILs as learning resources and initiating PD activities on MLs:

The particularity of our department may determine this. As the director of the Personnel Department, I must attend by default. In private conversations, colleagues from other departments also express similar feelings. Simply put, to avoid losing face (*Mianzi*) of ILs, we must participate in the activities organised by our ILs (Steven).

The quote contrasts with the active learning above. Findings from the interviews show that two interviewees raised issues about invisible compulsion. Distinguished from the time and attendance policy, the invisible compulsion here emphasises that ILs have not issued explicit instructions, but MLs have to participate in certain activities. As mentioned earlier in this section, potential or invisible coercion destabilises the effectiveness and sustainability of learning. In analysing the explanations for this situation the interviewees gave, the influence of cultural factors on MLs was found. This will be explained in more detail in section 7.4.3.

6.3 Organisational Structure and PD for MLs in CHVCs

This study focuses on the field of higher vocational education in China to explore PD for MLs in CHVCs. In this study, the internal structure and operational characteristics of CHVCs constitute the development environment of PD for MLs. The extent of authentic engagement of MLs and the embeddedness of PD in organisational contexts are the basic prerequisites for exploring PD for MLs. The content, standard and form of the PD for MLs all take CHVCs as the essential context. MLs collectively expect a supportive, independent and flexible work and development environment. Findings from the interview and documentary analysis highlight that the impact of the organisational structure of CHVCs on PD for MLs is mainly related to the following

three aspects: formal management structure, organisational operating mechanisms and multiple connection systems.

6.3.1 Formal Management Structure: Integrating Learning Opportunities

The findings of this study identify that the current management structures and institutions in CHVCs based on the Two-tier Management System (TMS) have become open and inclusive while retaining hierarchical management structures, which could promote or hinder PD for MLs. Based on resource allocations (such as participant schedules and location arrangements) are reasonable and conflict-free, the content, development and delivery of different forms of PD activities have been introduced in the previous section. Analysis of the interview data identified that elements and resources embedded in the organisational structure affect the feasibility (whether it can be implemented accurately) and effectiveness (whether it can be used effectively) of PD activities through different factors. That is, the organisational structure provides the necessary organisational conditions for PD activities. To avoid confusion, the relevant elements and their combination that affect the quantity and quality of PD activities are conceptualised here as learning opportunities. Interviewees regarded that at the level of management structure, restructuring Second Tier Colleges (STCs) and adjusting functional department settings could affect PD for MLs by integrating learning opportunities.

As an important area of CHVCs reform, analysis of the findings highlights two types of approach to improving the TMS impact PD for MLs. First, empowering STCs has effectively increased the implementation efficiency of PD delivery, which will be explained in detail in section 6.3.2 below. Second, the reconstruction of STC could effectively weaken subject department boundaries and thus increase learning space and opportunities. This is mainly due to the fact that one of the main practices of CHVCs management structure reform is establishing STCs based on the professional group or cluster structure (cluster-based STCs, *yiqun jianyuan*) (from GPT1 and GPT7). In

CHVCs, a professional cluster comprises multiple related majors and disciplines with intrinsic knowledge relations. Findings from the document analysis process show that cluster-based STCs concentrate resources to accomplish large-scale construction tasks. This approach is different from the previous model of impermeable subject department boundaries, with the professional cluster providing a new model of professional management in CHVCs, emphasising the intersection and common use of resources. The interview data identified that the reconfiguration of STCs brought new opportunities and challenges for individual PD:

As the dean of a reformed STC, my management team members (associate dean) and I have different academic backgrounds. But our majors all correspond to and serve the same industry. This means that, in many cases we are all involved in a service project together. Moreover, the resources of each speciality are managed and used at the professional cluster level. So, we have a lot of space for cooperative learning. (Evan)

Interviewees referred to improved cooperation space after adjusting the organisational structure, resulting from resource integration. Notably, the changes in resource allocation mentioned here do not come from institutional leadership, but are the product of adjusting the internal structure of STCs. The reconstruction of secondary colleges based on professional groups is a progressive process. The documentary data identified that establishing interdependencies among disciplines was crucial to the refactoring process. Given the positioning and functions of CHVCs, an effective way to realise this key aspect is to carry out inter-professional technology research or development projects and allow participants to enjoy the outcome equally. Its specific manifestation is the close cooperation of members from different professions. As explained by the interviewees, the restructuring of STCs allows MLs in different positions to serve the same project, which provides favourable organisational conditions for mutual collaboration and learning among MLs, especially informal learning.

Similarly, in terms of management structure, the restructuring of STCs has been accompanied by a specific approach to fostering Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The vital role of PLCs in the context of Chinese vocational education has been explained in detail above. More emphasis here is placed on communities aimed at expanding the professional and academic knowledge of MLs. This is mainly due to the reconstruction of STCs based on professional clusters requiring the deans and their teams to no longer rely solely on administrative approaches in their routine work. They now need to be more familiar with and follow different disciplines' basic content and internal development logic in professional clusters. Findings from the document analysis process show that the college-level policy regards the development of inter-professional learning organisations as one of the goals of the reform of the TMS in CHVCs:

According to the requirements of professional cluster development and student training, inter-professional teaching organisations are established in CHVCs to strengthen the cultivation of inter-professional and cross-field innovative teams. At the same time, CHVCs establish a supporting inter-professional coordination mechanism to establish an inter-professional and cross-college cooperation platform. (GPT7)

The interviewees also provided their personal experiences, following the implementation of this policy:

At present, our college has established studios in different fields based on the project system. Although these studios are not part of a formal management structure, it provides an opportunity and environment for members from different professional backgrounds to communicate and learn from each other. I feel that there is more freedom of communication between the members in the studios. In our daily work, we know the college's support. However, I think this benefit is mainly concentrated

in social services and scientific research. In terms of administrative capacity, this approach has limited impact. (Grace)

The nature of the policy text and the interprofessional organisations and studios mentioned by Grace are PLCs. Beyond the formal management structure, such PLCs provide an environment and platform for inter-departmental communication that facilitates broader collaboration and learning. That is, PLCs extend the learning environment. Notably, for MLs, the interview findings suggest that PLCs with explicit institutional support focus more on social services and technical research themes. This is felt to be conducive to improving MLs' social service and teaching competencies. On the contrary, PLCs related to team building competencies of MLs, such as the middle leadership communities (MLCs) mentioned above, do not appear as PLCs and receive institutional support in official documents. This point will be explained in detail in the following discussion chapter.

For directors of a functional department and leaders of STCs, the resource integration accompanying the reform of the management structure means changes in learning opportunities. In addition to restructuring STCs, adjusting functional department settings is another way management structures affect PD for MLs. Data from the policy texts revealed that CHVCs added the Teacher Development Centre (TDC) to be responsible for staff PD. The role of TDC was mentioned in optimising the learning environment led by Institutional Leaders (ILs). Its focus is that ILs support PD for MLs by providing the necessary material basis to TDC.

Analysis results combining text and interview data identified that as a part of the bureaucratic system, TDC develops PD plans and manages PD opportunities based on the institutional development vision. Specifically, TDC is responsible for managing and coordinating the institutional conditions and resources required by PD, such as financial assistance, venue reservation, arranging activity time and coordinating participant time. Meanwhile, one of the vital measures to adjust functional departments setting is to

clarify and define the positioning and functions of each department in the context of rules and regulations, which will be explained more fully in section 6.3.2. Based on this, the allocation of responsibilities and the procedure for selecting departments or individuals to fulfil these responsibilities are systematic. According to the interviewees, the effectiveness of PD activities and the motivation of MLs have increased:

Before the emergence of TDC, the learning and training activities we participated in were relatively chaotic. TDC is now responsible for arranging and managing learning matters. We can directly communicate with TDC. In this way, the efficiency has been significantly improved. (Frank)

Frank mentioned the chaos that preceded the change in functional department setting. The interview data stated that the emergence of TDC enabled the content and procedures of PD activities to be effectively managed. What is noteworthy is that Jeff pointed out that this effectiveness is only for teaching-related PD activities, while PD programmes involving administrative and leadership mandates are still under cross-management:

I think our PD activities are divided and managed by different departments based on content, especially for the competencies required for administration. One of the most common phenomena is several workgroups on my QQ and WeChat, and notifications of learning activities or training would appear in these groups. (Jeff)

The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that given that the work of MLs corresponds to different functional departments, they undertake PD arrangements from multiple departments in practice. Although the interview data showed that TDC can effectively alleviate the confusion in PD management mentioned by MLs, PD activities related to leadership experience and administrative skills are content-based and are the responsibility of the corresponding functional departments. The data from the interviews explicitly presented that undertaking notifications from

different departments negatively affects ML's enthusiasm for participating in PD activities and the efficiency of PD activity implementation:

It seems to me that some low errors occur at the event scheduling level. The most apparent manifestation is the repetition of learning topics and content because different departments conduct these two activities. (Peter)

In addition, Mike mentioned the planning issues of PD for MLs:

We participate in many activities, but I don't know if the CHVC has an annual or development stage cycle learning plan for MLs. However, our STC all have plans for certain learning activities. A common practice is to develop learning activities around a specific task or problem. (Mike)

The interview data identified that such cross-management with multi-departmental involvement poses challenges for PD for MLs in practice. On the one hand, the management mode causes MLs to receive information from various functional departments, increasing the work pressure on MLs. On the other hand, the independent organisation of PD activities by functional departments has partially overlapped learning content. Notably, in response to a question about a college-based PD plan, nine interviewees responded to the interview question that they did not know if such a programme existed or if there was no such programme. In contrast, all interviewees were aware of and even participated in formulating the PD plan of their department or STCs. Empirical evidence from this study illustrated that it is closely related to empowering STCs.

6.3.2 Organisational Operating Mechanisms: Regulating the Allocation of Power

The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that the restructuring of the formal bureaucratic structure is accompanied by a power distribution and new

operating mechanisms within the institutions. As aforementioned, before adjusting the formal management structure, CHVCs had fallen into the dilemma of over-emphasis on organisational formalisation and power centralisation. What is noteworthy is that adjustments alone at the organisational structure setting level cannot change the inefficiency of PD in CHVCs. This study highlighted that redesigning power distribution and operations can effectively improve PD practices. Specifically, the organisational operating mechanism affects PD for MLs by empowering Second Tier Colleges (STCs) vertically and clarifying the functional positioning of internal institutions horizontally.

The prerequisite for organisational functioning mechanisms in CHVCs is the President Responsibility System under the Leadership of the Party Committee, which is the fundamental system of Chinese higher education institutions. As an offshoot of higher education institutions, the essential prerequisite of organisational operating mechanisms is that CHVCs legally implement this system by law. It means that CHVCs have dual governance of the administration and the party. That is, this is the fundamental reason MLs in CHVCs occupy both the role of experts and the identity of civil servants, and thus the PD content for MLs presents political characteristics. Furthermore, another critical impact on PD for MLs is the procedural work that accompanies PD programmes:

Our daily work, such as going out for training and expense claims, had to go through layers of approval. A job requires the approval and signature of the leaders of several departments. Although we recognise that this is a rigor of approval, waiting for the results to complete this fixed process would take additional time. (Lily)

Lily pointed out that this procedural work is a fixed process. The documentary data identified that the party committee in CHVCs decides on significant issues after collective discussion, such as cadre promotion work programmes and funding budgets. Interviewees acknowledged the advantages of such collective discussion and

centralised review while expressing concerns about the additional burden created by discussions. This outcome could be chiefly attributed to the fact that decision-making processes are accompanied by lengthy procedural work, which engendered difficulty in initiating PD to construct leadership in their routine work. The data from the interviews found that the procedural work can be addressed by empowering STCs:

Now, the rectification measures involving the departmental setup and division of functions within colleges have achieved remarkable results. As the deputy dean of the STC, if I participate in a collegial visit, the approval of the dean of my college is sufficient. More importantly, I can also liaise with external stakeholders on behalf of STC and develop new PD activities meeting our own needs. (May)

The preceding quotes from May revealed that the implementation process for MLs participating in PD programmes or activities is more streamlined and efficient. This is mainly due to the relatively independent autonomy and decision-making power of STCs regarding internal management. As one of the basic work contents, STCs have the power to directly approve the development or learning activities that MLs participate in and provide financial support. At the same time, the interview data also stated that MLs are empowered to develop partnerships with stakeholders outside CHVCs. It means that MLs are able to autonomously choose PD activities to a certain extent, which will be discussed more fully in sections 7.4.2 and 7.4.4. Furthermore, the empowerment is guaranteed in the form of institutional-level policies or systems:

CHVC D implements a flat management model. The TMS and operational mechanism are fully implemented to achieve autonomy in personnel, financial, and management rights for STCs. Meanwhile, CHVCs encourage STCs to achieve differentiated development and gradually realise the transformation from teaching subjects to the main body of school running. (CPT-D)

Analysis of the data from the policy texts and the interviewees respectively illustrated that empowering STCs provides enabling institutional measures for MLs to participate in PD activities. As mentioned by May above, STCs have the power to approve MLs' applications for studying abroad or integrate resources to organise learning activities for MLs. That is, STCs serve MLs' participation in PD activities within a broader scope of power. It effectively reduces the bureaucratic burden. In addition to the current dual governance system, the administrative burden associated with PD may also come from organisational management chaos and unreasonable interference. The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that clarifying the functional positioning of internal departments is another important measure at the organisational operating mechanism level:

CHVC A further rationalises the TMS of the college and STCs, clarifies the responsibilities and authorities of the college and STCs, and forms a management model in which the college makes macro decisions, functional departments coordinate and cooperate, and STCs operate as entities. (CPT-A)

The documentary data identified that defining positions in CHVCs and their corresponding responsibilities is a vital measure to protect PD for MLs from excessive administrative interference, an essential practice of de-administration. Among them, MLs emphasised the role of redefining the relationship between ILs and MLs in practice:

An example from the document is that the ILs responsible for connecting with our college have been changed from the leader in charge (*fenguan lingdao*) to the contact leader (*lianxi lingdao*). As an ML, I usually report the basic situation to them when I participate in PD activities. ILs provide appropriate coordination and arrangements instead of imposing administrative requirements or instructions on me. (Martin)

Analysis results combining text and interview data identified that empowering STCs is accompanied by the definition and restriction of the power of ILs. As emphasised above,

ensuring that ILs use administrative power to promote rather than interfere with PD for MLs is a key link in effectively playing the role of institutional leadership. At the same time, the interview data stated that a clear division of responsibilities among functional departments in PD for MLs can avoid duplication of content and arrangement conflicts to a certain extent:

The practice in our college is that every Wednesday afternoon, cadres (MLs and ILs) are allowed to study and practice. The Human Resources Department completes the arrangement of specific learning places and times, and the learning content is selected by each department and sent to the Human Resources Department. This looks efficient to me. (Frank)

The preceding quotes revealed that PD for MLs can be effectively managed when responsibilities and procedures are clear. What is noteworthy is that clarification of boundaries does not mean that different departments within CHVCs operate independently and even splinter CHVCs. Analysis of the data from the policy texts and the interviewees presented that the TMS redefines the functional orientation and internal relationship of different departments and STCs in CHVCs. Distinguished from the past one-way relationship of command and acceptance, the interaction between departments and STCs has been enhanced. Functional departments coordinate and supervise, while STCs have an operational implementation, feedback and advice authority. Effective communication and consultation between functional departments and STCs are regarded as one of the core features of empowering STCs.

6.3.3 Multiple Connection Systems

Empirical evidence from this study also stated that in addition to management structures and operating mechanisms, other systems and policies that maintain the basic operations of institutions are summarised as multiple connection systems, affecting PD for MLs. Specifically, it involves the governance system (following the principles of

administrative governance by the council, academic governance by the professor, and democratic governance by the committee) and the incentive system. The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that connection systems promote or hinder PD for MLs by dynamically adjusting the organisational conditions required for PD and stimulating the internal drive of MLs.

Findings from the document analysis process presented that as a principle of the governance system in CHVCs, academic governance can effectively ensure that MLs - as experts or scholars - exercise academic power in PD. As aforementioned, MLs also generally occupy the role of industry experts or professional academics. They drew on these identities to become members of the academic committee or the expert advisory committee, playing a vital role in decision-making, deliberation, evaluation and consultation on academic affairs in STCs or CHVCs. The data from the interviews found that the professional judgment from MLs and needs relating to PD can be valued through the committee:

From my personal experience, as a professor and a director of fundamental department, institutional leaders and subordinates all respect my opinions. The proposal of my colleagues and me on the Academic Committee to expand the channels for collecting training opinions has also been taken seriously. (Grace)

The interview data stated that the existing governance system in CHVCs is a promising approach to balancing administrative and academic power. MLs have the positional authority brought by formal positions and also gain professional authority by virtue of their professional abilities. According to Grace, MLs can provide professional opinions and participate in administrative decision-making through the Academic Committee. That is, as a bottom-up voice channel, this approach can in practice prevent academic activities, such as PD, from unreasonable distractions and top-down control. By its very nature, it conforms to the basic characteristics of respect for authority in the context of the Chinese hierarchical system while also reflecting the transformation of authority

from bureaucratic to professional. This point will be discussed in sections 7.2.1 and 7.4.2.

In addition, the combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that the supervision and assessment policy in the governance system is positioned as a guarantee for the orderly and effective progress of all relevant work of PD for MLs. As mentioned above, PD opportunities for MLs are monitored top-down and outside-in supervision to ensure MLs' ongoing learning rights. In addition, data analysed from the interviews revealed that the faculty congress and the council composed of government, industry and enterprises share supervisory powers, and thus playing a vital role in the process of PD design and implementation. Specifically, such impact is mainly reflected in two ways.

Firstly, the distribution of learning resources and opportunities for MLs in different positions is supervised:

The CHVCs where I work focus on building and prioritising the development of two professional groups. Many construction funds were poured into these two STCs to support their development, including PD for MLs. Due to the faculty congress undertakes the supervision of full participation in PD, and thus the basic rights of MLs in other STCs are guaranteed. (Lily)

The preceding quotes revealed that CHVCs incorporate the basic rights of MLs to participate in PD into supervision and assessment standards. CHVCs have a tradition of taking domain-specific sectors or STCs as the development priority. In this sense, monitoring the gap in resource allocation is a vital link to ensure that all faculty have fair access to PD opportunities. In further, as mentioned above, the rotation training system is also conducive to ensuring reasonable allocation and configuration optimisation of PD resources.

Secondly, the quality of PD programmes or activities and the learning status of MLs are assessed:

A current portfolio system is used to record an individual PD. During annual performance appraisal or promotion, the attendance record in the portfolio is one of the important assessment criteria. But I think just like feedback needs real evaluation, the assessment standard should be learning effect rather than attendance. (Peter)

The data from the interviews illustrated that the current assessment method is mainly based on the portfolio system (*dang an dai*). What is noteworthy is that this kind of assessment mainly focuses on attendance records and cannot make reasonable judgments on the learning effectiveness of MLs. The interview data identified that the absence of assessment policies and approaches for learning effectiveness constitutes an obstacle to giving accurate evaluation and feedback, and thus cannot provide a reliable basis for further improving PD programmes. Furthermore, some interviewees also raised evaluations of MLs issues with the authenticity of feedback. This point is related to the habit among CHVCs of maintaining harmonious relationships and avoiding conflict, which will be explained in section 7.4.3.

In addition to the impact of connection systems on the design and implementation of PD programmes, empirical evidence from this study revealed that incentive systems, including accountability and promotion, influence MLs' commitment to PD and ongoing learning. The documentary data identified that CHVCs have a set of top-down individual performance appraisal standards. Given MLs in CHVCs occupy the dual roles of teachers and civil servants, the assessment standards and promotion channels for MLs involve two levels. Specifically, the promotions of civil servants are controlled by local governments, while teachers are classified as teacher groups in CHVCs and follow the indicators in the teacher honorary title system to achieve personal promotion. Data analysed from the interviews stated that the promotion policy in the teacher

honorary title system cannot effectively motivate MLs to invest more energy in PD, as the high-stakes accountability system deters the capacity building efforts made by MLs:

A dilemma I am facing is that I want to pursue promotion to professor which requires excellent research results, but administrative work takes up most of my time. There is no extra energy to improve my research capabilities. The recent PD activities I participated in were all related to policy interpretation, which was very unfavourable to me. (Lucy)

The preceding quotes revealed three contradictory concepts related to research outcomes, administrative mandates, and PD for MLs. First, MLs assume escalating administrative mandates involving supervising and being supervised as well as accountability and being accountable, especially government-led external accountability regarding the role of civil servants, which hampers MLs from diverting their attention from institutional imperatives. In this case, MLs passively choose to complete administrative mandates to meet the behavioural requirements in accountability and supervision while giving up qualified behaviours in the incentive policy, such as academic research and other academic behaviours. More seriously, PD contents and themes for MLs mentioned above focus on theoretical knowledge and policy interpretation, disconnecting with the assessment indicators in promotion policies. Such apparent incoherence creates a situation where MLs can get caught up in a dilemma in maintaining an equilibrium between academic research and administrative mandates, and thus stifling the autonomy and enthusiasm of PD for MLs. By its very nature, incentive systems do not work effectively in PD for MLs. In addition, Flora gave another reason why the incentive policy cannot be implemented:

As department leaders, we proactively give such honourable opportunities to general administrative staff within the department. Dedication is still needed as leaders. But I also got some honours; most of them I received have been for my professional accomplishments, not as a leader. (Flora)

The quotes from Flora also stated that the honours and incentives received by individuals in middle leadership positions do not come from leadership status and corresponding work achievements. In contrast, teaching, research, and social service achievements can bring honour to individuals in positions of MLs. To further complicate the picture, influenced by traditional norms, the honour system within the administrative system defaulted to focus on grassroots staff. That is, incentive behaviours are also influenced by organisational culture, which will be explained in section 7.4.3.

6.4 Organisational Culture and PD for MLs in CHVCs

Analysis of the data from the policy texts and the interviewees respectively highlighted that Organisational Culture (OC) permeates each domain of CHVCs, which would influence in direct or indirect ways the initiation and sustainability of PD for MLs practice. How Institutional Leadership (IL) and Organisational Structure (OS) influence PD for MLs are explained in detail above. Supportive leadership and structural environment have an irreplaceable role in PD. Notably, a sole focus on these two conditions leads to short-lived and superficial personal development and learning. Due to sociocultural contexts and distinctive features in Chinese mainland, diagnosing and understanding the way OC in CHVCs affects PD for MLs is necessary. The interview data stated that the impact of OC in CHVCs on PD for MLs is mainly concerning the following three levels, spiritual and ideology, institutional, and material level.

6.4.1 Spiritual and Ideological Level: Leading by Values

Interview evidence from this study presented that OC at the spiritual and ideological level is interpreted by MLs as the values and beliefs underpinning institutional practices and are accepted and recognised by members of the organisation. As one of the influencing factors in cultivating MLs' learning commitment, faculty of CHVCs make unconscious behaviours or choices in practice. It explained that the interviewees have

some responses they cannot explain and take for granted when answering the interview questions. Analysis results combining text and interview data identified that OC at the spiritual and ideological level in CHVCs mainly affects PD for MLs in three dimensions - development vision, organisational innovation awareness and interpersonal relationships.

The data from the interviews explicitly presented that the shared development vision and value pursuit among CHVCs are conducive to awakening the awareness of personal development. Distinguished from constructing a learning vision in the ILs dimension above, the development vision here focuses on organisational progress. Given that peers occupy different middle leadership positions, MLs undertake different administrative mandates according to the positions which serve a shared organisational development vision. In this sense, MLs occupying vital positions in various departments collectively constitute a powerful driver for the organisational development in CHVCs. The data from the interviews illustrated that a shared organisational development vision is conducive to shaping MLs' attitudes towards work and PD, thereby investing time and energy in participating in PD programmes:

After I joined CHVC A, I gradually formed the principle of completing every job with high quality and pursuing excellence in my work. I always take the initiative to communicate with colleagues in different departments during our meeting break. Because we share a common goal and our sharing is always selfless. (Gary)

OC at the spiritual and ideological level is clearly described in the policy text of the CHVC A:

The college spirit is pursuing Excellence; the college-running philosophy is emphasising both theory and practice, integration of technology and humanities; and the college mission is serving regional economic and social development, and serving the growth and success of students. (CPT-A)

The documentary data identified that CHVC A highly condenses organisational culture and value pursuit into Excellence, which is reflected through construction goals. Juxtaposing data from two sources stated that when MLs in CHVCs identify with the organisational goals, they would internalise them as personal goals and are motivated to work and learn to achieve them. In further terms, MLs proactively adjust their attitudes and behaviours to realise development aspirations in their pursuit of organisational development vision. This situation is not unique to CHVC A. The perceptions about PD of other interviewees from the remaining three sample colleges are influenced by the development vision of their CHVCs. Furthermore, as mentioned in section 4.3.3 regarding MLs' attitude towards PLCs, when they identify with and are committed to realising the institutional development vision, they are more susceptible to value individual work and capacity building since they position themselves as a critical link in the growth of the institution. In this sense, they are willing to pay more attention to their own PD and ongoing learning:

As MLs, we have different divisions of labour, but my colleagues and I hope to build our CHVC into a top-level institution in China. So, it is important that we continue to improve our capabilities and work. We cannot hold the organisation back. (Evan)

Evan pointed out that they pay more attention to their own PD and ongoing learning as they realise that their positions are vital to organisational development. In this study, despite the different work assigned to the interviewees, it is generally accepted to complete department-building tasks, thereby contributing to organisational development. In other words, this is also MLs' self-identification of the value of their routine work. Furthermore, findings from the document analysis process show that the development vision has evident continuity and stability. Given the challenges and risks CHVCs face are changeable, CHVCs update or adjust the staged goals to realise the organisational development vision. The combination of the policy text and the interviews revealed that innovation awareness in CHVCs affects both PD design and

MLs' commitment to participate in PD, which is reflected through individuals' attitudes and adaptability to environmental changes:

Risks and challenges will not go away. I believe the key to development is continuously improving one's ability to withstand risks and adapt to changes. Once MLs occupying important positions in departments or secondary colleges resist development and change, this would often directly undermine the development of the entire organisation. (Jeff)

The interview data stated that participating in PD is an effective means to achieve innovative development and resist risks. In addition to Jeff, six other interviewees expressed similar views. MLs with strong innovative thinking realise the need to look inward to improve and progress their abilities to resist risks. Correspondingly, MLs proactively invest time and energy in PD activities. Data from the interviews revealed that MLs in CHVCs are positively influenced by organisational innovation awareness and internalised it as their innovative thinking. The concrete manifestation of this awareness is that MLs actively seek breakthroughs and progress in routine work, which is conducive to exerting professional agency. In addition to developing vision and awareness of organisational innovation, the interview data stated that trust-based interpersonal relationships could establish safe zones for emotional and cognitive support among MLs, promoting the exchange of leadership experience and professional knowledge. Conversely, breakdowns in interpersonal relationships tend to create isolation among MLs and limit knowledge exchange:

I think the stability and harmony of interpersonal relationships are crucial for our management work. During the period when I started my career, my two leaders had apparent conflicts because of different values. In this environment, personal learning and development were completely impossible. As a result, our college scored very poorly in the annual appraisal. (Lily)

Drawing from personal experience, Lily highlighted the impact of interpersonal breakdowns on the functioning of others in the same workplace. What is noteworthy is that the reason for the rupture mentioned in the quote comes from conflicting values. That is, having shared values and beliefs is one of the foundations of a trusting relationship. Data from the interviews also revealed many trust-building conditions, such as particular job positions, outstanding comprehensive competence, similar work experience, and positive personal emotions. Based on building trust, MLs expressed their willingness to actively participate in collaboration activities and provide learning opportunities and resources for others, as the establishment of trust relationships can ensure smooth communication channels between MLs and others:

What makes me happy is that the relationship between colleagues is very good. As an ML, teachers and peers trust me a lot. Colleagues think I am an expert in professional group construction. They are willing to listen to me share my experience, which makes me feel fulfilled. I am grateful for the trust and happy to share my previous learning materials with them. (Aimee)

As emphasised above, PD for MLs in CHVCs has collective characteristics. Aimee and other interviewees expressed that they are accustomed to participating in collective learning and collaborative activities. In this sense, establishing trusting relationships is a prerequisite to support collaboration. The interview data identified that trust relationship is regarded as the stimuli where the desire for leading and teaching improvement arose of MLs in CHVCs. Such a relationship is conducive to MLs transforming colleagues' experiences into their PD resources and achieving capability construction. By its nature, building trusting relationships with others is one of the ways MLs develop learning resources for individual PDs, which enriches learning opportunities. Notably, preventing MLs from falling into the trap of maintaining a superficially harmonious relationship is a critical link in constructing trust relationships, which will be explained in detail in the following section.

6.4.2 Institutional Level: Standard Orientation

As mentioned in Section one, the Chinese government has invested in the education system to design and deploy the complete structures and procedures needed for PD to work successfully throughout the system. Such structure and procedure take the form of policies to maintain and regulate the practical behaviour of different organisations and individuals within the system. With regard to PD for MLs, a set of systems and standards is driven by MLs' roles and responsibilities in CHVCs, which is highly consistent with organisational values. In this study, cultural conditions at the institutional level refers to faculty voluntarily accepting the constraints of the norms and making legitimate personal behaviours complying with institutional requirements in routine work. That is, the norms in the system have been recognised and internalised as personal codes of conduct. Analysis results combining text and interview data highlighted that institutional culture jointly affects PD for MLs from behavioural norms (formal norms) and traditional customs (informal norms).

Data analysed from the interviews revealed that the behavioural norms in CHVCs cover the entire process of PD for MLs, such as goal setting, implementation process management, and final result assessment and incentives. Distinguished from the guiding role of professional standards in PD for MLs mentioned above, the behavioural norms here focus on the reasonable behaviour and actions of MLs during their participation in PD, thereby ensuring that the results meet professional standards. The interview data identified that behavioural norms are internalised by MLs as personal norm awareness in the long-term development process:

In the early stage, the most obvious thing I felt was that our behaviour had to cater to the system's requirements deliberately. But now, the framework that once constrained us has been integrated into our basic work habits. Even when new standards are introduced, we often discuss new content and quickly compare the behaviour in our work, accompanied by further learning and sharing. (Steven)

Interviewees believed that the influence of behavioural norms on individual behaviour has developed from external constraints to internal drivers. That is, MLs proactively and consciously transform the work requirements in the system into personal behaviour norms, which means that ML already has the awareness to compare its own behaviour with norms and benchmarks. MLs take the initiative to invest time and effort in developing capabilities when work and mandates require more professional behaviour. The interview data stated that participation in PD activities is an irreplaceable way to adapt to higher requirements. Essentially, the formation and strengthening of standard awareness are conducive to stimulating the learning motivation of MLs. Furthermore, analysis of the data from the policy texts illustrated that formal behavioural norms provide a clear path to achieving institutional development vision and shared values, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

In addition to behavioural norms, analysis findings combining text and interview data identified that traditional customs also impact MLs' behaviour in participating in PD via informal institutions. Specifically, these traditional customs, involving collective learning habits, acquiescence to authority, and maintaining a harmonious relationship, are formed in the development process of CHVCs that pervade and influence organisational choices and individual behaviours. The research findings show that collectivism in CHVCs provides enabling prerequisites for MLs to participate in collaborative learning and cultivate bottom-up PLCs:

As middle cadres, we have many learning opportunities. For example, our college often forms delegations to study in enterprises; the college regularly holds reading seminars for middle cadres. In fact, these learning activities are a traditional practice, just like Teaching-Research Groups. I am comfortable with this group learning activity and happy to share the learning results with my colleagues. (Ellen)

As Ellen mentioned, collective learning habits are prevalent in CHVCs. A strong message conveyed by the interview data was that traditional collectivism in China

cultivates a collaborative culture in CHVCs, which is conducive to cultivating MLs' personal sharing behaviours. Research findings regarding to MLCs in section 4.3.3 also confirmed that MLs participate in different collaborative and mutual professional activities to construct leadership in practice. Given similarities in positions or levels, MLs in CHCVs are often more likely to resonate with each other during the process of de-privatised exchange. By its very nature, MLs' recognition of collaboration and PLCs is affected by collective learning habits. In addition, the policy text and interviews combined revealed that maintaining a harmonious relationship and acquiescence to authority as part of traditional customs also facilitate or hinder MLs' participation in PD:

Chinese pay attention to politeness (*ke qi*). For example, we usually give our colleagues a positive evaluation. We prefer to use euphemistics when pointing out the problems of the activities or points that need improvement. After all, the event staff and I meet every day. This tradition is good for getting along with each other.
(Lily)

As Lily mentioned, excessive pursuit of a harmonious relationship creates difficulties for authentic improvement, such as the inability to guarantee the authenticity of feedback and opinions. What is noteworthy is that despite such difficulty is accentuated when it comes to the authority of ILs, MLs are instead positively affected by their authority during the stages of involvement in PD:

The keynote speaker invited by our colleagues is an expert in the field. When I saw the poster, I knew it must be a quality lecture. And our institutional leaders also participated. So, I am also very grateful for the efforts of the staff who organised the event. I am looking forward to our college hosting such learning activities again.
(Lily)

The preceding quotes revealed that MLs respect the authority of ILs and experts and engender trust in corresponding activities. Including Lily, eight MLs evaluated authoritative experts' experience and knowledge-sharing activities in interviews. In addition to ILs' administrative authority, authority here also refers to high-status scholars or senior technicians. Interviewees were generally willing to exchange experiences and learn from authoritative experts and scholars. As described above, in relation to academic governance by professors, the status of professors and scholars in current CHVCs has significantly improved. This shift from the tradition dominated by political games to the default of professorial authority is conducive to ensuring the professional autonomy of MLs, which will be discussed in detail in the section 7.4.4.

6.4.3 Material Level: Infrastructure Construction

It has been explained above how institutional culture embodies the spiritual culture of a CHVC organisation and constrains the individual behaviour of MLs. In contrast, Organisational Culture (OC) at the material level influences PD for MLs in an intuitively accessible manner. Significant investments have been used to improve the campus environment and infrastructure in the Chinese vocational education environment during the past three decades. With the organisational development, the infrastructure and hardware of different CHVCs have formed a distinctive material culture. This study defines tangible cultural entities or artifacts occupying a certain space as OC at the material level. The cultural environment composed of material workplace conditions influences PD for MLs through three dimensions, namely propaganda carrier, physical environment related to PD and humanistic care.

The policy text and interviews combined revealed that cultural entities directly or indirectly affect PD for MLs by disseminating ideas or sharing relevant knowledge. Firstly, analysing the policy texts from the four sample colleges found that various artifacts, such as college slogans and college anthems, were endowed with special meaning and played a symbolic role. Such artifacts condense the concept and spiritual

pursuit. That is, they have the function of promoting the educational philosophy and value pursuit of CHVCs. Secondly, a more direct means of publicity is using media, which involves bulletin boards, college newspapers, official websites and other online media. By publishing quality cases in different fields or disseminating values, the media directly affect the enthusiasm of MLs to participate in PD activities. In view of the function of cultural transmission, these two kinds of cultural entities and artifacts are defined as propaganda carriers:

Our college's management philosophy is posted at the entrance to the administration building. Furthermore, we have an official WeChat account. One of the columns is to push excellent cases of different themes, such as college-enterprise cooperation, professional group construction, international cooperation and so on. Reading these cases makes me feel the gap between us and high-level colleges. The latest policies and excellent cases will give me a sense of urgency to learn. (Gary)

The interviewees explained the awakening of different propaganda carriers for their development awareness. The data from the interviews found that propaganda carriers have the effect of promoting MLs to participate in PD activities by reinforcing values or disseminating demonstration cases. There are two main ways in which such reinforcement works. On the one hand, CHVCs use different vehicles to promote OC related to development and learning to directly reinforce the learning awareness of MLs. On the other hand, shortcomings in personal or college development are identified by publicising excellent cases or programmes in different fields, and thus stimulating MLs to pay attention to the improvement of personal capabilities and governance levels. Meanwhile, the interview data also illustrated that continuous optimisation and improvement of the physical environment is considered by MLs as a vital way to construct a learning culture:

Our college's Teacher Development Centre is located on the third floor in library. This design and planning are to serve the staff learning activities. We are working

on the construction of an online data centre, including an online library and personal digital portraits. Thus, we need to learn how to use online tools. This is a bit of a waste of time. (Jeff)

Regarding the personal digital portraits mentioned by Jeff, correspondingly, the official explanation is provided in the policy text:

(CHVC B) use the online data centre to collect comprehensive information on teachers from four dimensions (teaching ability, research and social service ability, ability to serve students, and comprehensive quality) to form personal digital portraits of all faculty. It helps the college to accurately grasp the status of personal development and then provide services such as online training, resource sharing and career planning. (CPT-B)

This study revealed that CHVCs provide comprehensive services and support to PD for MLs by improving the construction of the physical environment, which is construed as a reflection of the emphasis on personal capability-building in the institutional development vision. The physical environment is endowed with a special meaning consistent with the spiritual culture of CHVCs. As such, being in a material culture composed of different physical conditions, the developmental awareness and learning behaviour of MLs are affected. What is noteworthy is that interviewees mentioned infrastructure indirectly related to PD for MLs. The policy text and interviews combined revealed that workplace conditions associated with humanistic care are conducive to reducing MLs' negative emotions at work. In essence, humanistic care embodies the core idea of being people-centred in CHVCs, which could promote the sustainable development of MLs. The findings of this study show that CHVCs draw on creating a pleasant and comfortable working environment in their pursuit of sustainable improvement to enhance the MLs sense of belonging:

Working in our CHVC, my colleagues and I agree that we have a great sense of well-being. Staff in our college have many benefits. For example, our college has an affiliated kindergarten for kids of all faculty. This is very convenient for me since my job sometimes requires overtime. I feel that our college is effectively solving the faculty's worries. So that we can work and study without any worries. (Lily)

Interviewees cited diverse well-being in CHVCs based on their personal experiences. Eleven MLs (including Lily) mentioned that they felt a sense of belonging and happiness at work. CHVCs organise relevant staff to carry out research activities to understand the difficulties of MLs in work and life and formulate solutions. That is, bottom-up needs from MLs are respected and valued, which will be discussed below. Furthermore, the documentary data identified that as part of infrastructure construction in CHVCs, substantial investment was made in infrastructure construction associated with humanistic care. Interviewees believed that this is beneficial to help enhance college cohesion. In other words, MLs are less susceptible to burnout and pressure. In this context, MLs could devote more time and energy to focus on work and PD.

6.5 Conclusion

The findings presented above further explain that such tendencies of MLs and the implementation process of PD are directly and indirectly affected by institutional leadership behaviour, structural, and cultural conditions. The research findings show that supportive leadership practices from ILs directly promote MLs' participation in PD activities, thereby playing a positive role in MLs' capability-building process. Leadership behaviours that reflect trust relationships and humanistic care are especially conducive to positive social interaction between MLs and ILs in a hierarchical context. Meanwhile, enabling structural and cultural conditions provide the necessary resources and atmosphere for MLs' capability-building. In addition to this direct impact, the research findings identify that institutional conditions affect the design of PD activities and the agency of MLs, thereby influencing PD for MLs. Among them, support from

institutions, such as empowering MLs to participate in PD design, the emphasis from ILs and policy encouragement, and cultivating a learning culture, can strengthen MLs' identification with participating in PD activities and stimulate their agency when participating in PD activities. In further terms, this study also identifies that institutional conditions influence the effectiveness of PD for MLs by influencing the design of PD activities, including typical formats, learning content, and operational mechanisms, stimulating or restricting the agency of MLs. The next chapter will discuss in detail the current provision and influencing factors of PD for MLs in the Chinese context.

Chapter 7 Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This study attempts to explore middle leaders' (MLs') capability-building and leadership construction from professional development (PD) participation in Chinese higher vocational colleges (CHVCs) and to clarify its influencing factors at the institutional level. While general findings have presented in Chapter 5 and 6, this chapter efforts to provide an extended discussion of identified themes with the intention to develop a fuller understanding of the central research questions.

By juxtaposing research findings from different dimensions, the discussion of the research findings in this chapter consists of three sections. In section 7.2, this study reveals the manifestations of PD for MLs in the Chinese hierarchical system, including cross-spanning learning content, hybrid pedagogical formats, and top-down operational mechanisms, and its significance in the context of leadership and PD theory. This study reaffirms that MLs need more opportunities to develop leadership competence in response to their multiple identities and further points out that the combination of formal and informal PD activity formats simultaneously leverages the advantages of institutionalised practice and social interaction to support capability-building in the Chinese hierarchical context. However, this does not mean that PD for MLs in CHVCs is flawless. Based on the research findings, section 7.3 identifies five potential implementation challenges - unbalanced allocation of learning resource, conflict of structural arrangements, internal tension between autonomy and control, ignorance of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) practice, and ambiguous assessment of learning outcomes. Essentially, section 7.2 and 7.3 provide further reflections on the status of MLs from PD participation. The evidence provided in this study illustrates that based on distributed leadership, it is effective to combine instructional leadership and transformational leadership to collectively interpret the connotation of middle leadership and the aim of MLs' capability-building. Considering the leadership position

of MLs and corresponding division of labour is conducive to design and promote PD activities that meet institutional and individual expectations. From the social constructivism perspective, expansion of advantages and the mitigation of challenges can be explained by collective endeavours involving leadership, structure and culture at institutional levels. Section 7.4 discusses the influence of institutional factors on the PD process providing insights into the Chinese context. A visual summary of the findings based on Chapter 5 and 6 is shown in Figure 5.

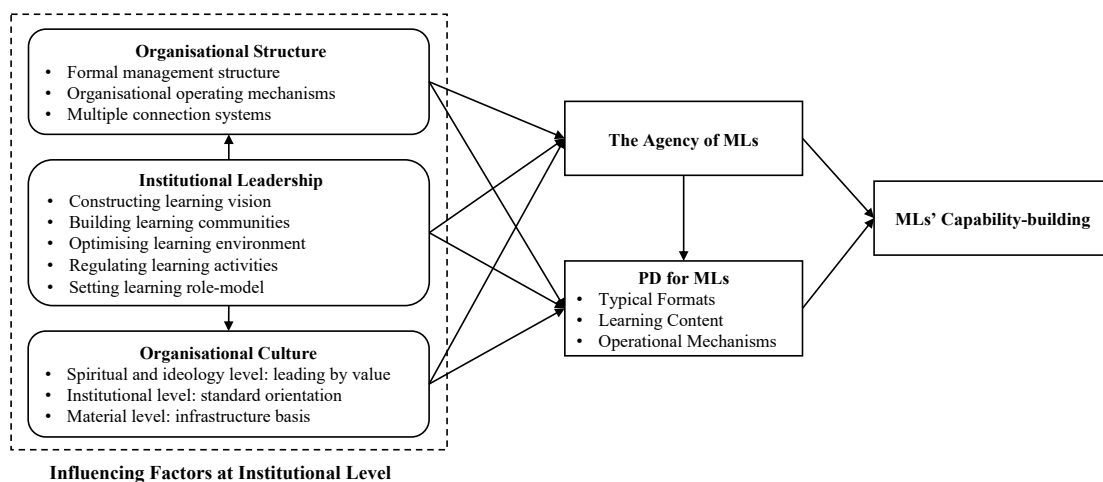


Figure 5: A visual summary of the findings in this study

The research findings show that institutional leadership can exert influence on PD for MLs in both direct and indirect ways. The findings emphasise the importance of effective institutional leadership in developing PD for MLs practices in CHVCs, and how organisational structure and culture fundamentally shape the form and implementation that PD take - assumes major significance in both centralised and devolved systems. Specifically, in addition to the direct impact of institutional conditions on PD for MLs, this study confirms that such conditions in educational institutions affect PD activities and the agency of MLs, thereby exerting an influence on PD for MLs. Revealing how to mediate PD for MLs in a non-Western context, especially China with its particular cultural and institutional background, would help enrich and develop relevant theories.

7.2 Unpacking the Manifestations of PD for MLs in Hierarchical Settings

This study uses leadership theory combined with the term PD as the analytical framework to investigate MLs' capability-building and leadership construction from PD participation, exploring and revealing their capability-building processes in a hierarchical context. The research findings show that MLs participate in various formats of PD activities, which are used to learn and construct relevant knowledge and skills. Based on social constructivist lens, it was applied that social interaction mediated MLs' capability-building in the context of PD participation. Especially, leadership competence related to team building and managing complex relationships can be effectively developed through collegial visits and coaching with strong interactivity and situational characteristics. The research findings also confirm that the characteristics of PD activities occurring and operating in the context of the Chinese hierarchical system play a role in the capability-building process of MLs.

7.2.1 Cross-spanning Learning Content: Composition of Generic Knowledge

The research findings reveal that the learning content of PD for MLs in Chinese higher educational institutions exhibits significant cross-spanning and complexity (Brinkley-Etzkorn and Lane, 2019). MLs in Chinese hierarchical contexts learn and develop multidimensional knowledge and skills through PD participation to meet occupational requirements and practical needs. Specifically, the knowledge and skills here include pedagogical basis, subject knowledge and skills, and leadership competence. The data from this study identifies that MLs generally have a strong foundation in the field of pedagogy and subjects and are conversant about how to strengthen corresponding abilities further. In contrast, they required more guidance and assistance to initiate and drive internal change within the institution by establishing a commitment and effort towards collective success, thereby achieving the shared vision. More robustly, among these abilities, interviewees expressed different learning tendencies based on their work and corresponding needs, focusing on developing certain types or categories of abilities.

In this sense, the content of MLs' capability-building changes with the development of the contours of that configured practice (Gronn, 2010). Accordingly, this study does not attempt to generalise a fixed competency framework applicable to all MLs, instead, to form a generic knowledge base involving different dimensions aimed at effectively understanding the capability-building content of MLs.

Before discussing the generic knowledge, a vital prerequisite is understanding the scope and structural position of MLs in CHVCs, representing the developmental needs and requirements of individuals entering the position or role (Franken, Penney, and Branson, 2015). The research findings show that MLs often have solid professional or academic achievements and play a role in teacher professional growth and student learning while being required to meet political aspirations in the managing plane. This is mainly due to their dual roles as industry experts and civil servants in CHVCs, which are administration-led and associated with strong organisational controls. In the context of the Chinese hierarchical system, the practice of selecting experts to enter the leadership collective and participate in management has a long history (Tang, 2022). Influenced by collective culture, the Chinese education system and institutions attach great importance to the collective efforts and role of leadership collectives. The work of MLs occupying the middle position is oriented towards different directions and deals with a large number of incorporating elements that overlap dimensions that are associated with these work. Generally, evidence from this study reveals that MLs need to face two dimensions simultaneously - one for administrative tasks and the other for instructional work.

Firstly, evidence from this study suggests that MLs' work in the instructional work dimension not only includes frontline teaching but, more importantly, is responsible for managing teaching activities and leading professional teams. In this case, MLs are expected to continuously update their teaching laws (pedagogical basis) as well as subject knowledge and skills. Notably, the teaching laws here involve both student learning and PD of novice teachers, which requires MLs to provide effective

professional guidance and a stable learning environment for both students and novice teachers. Secondly, in the administrative tasks dimension, MLs occupy a formal intermediate position in the bureaucratic structure and bridging between superiors and subordinates, which means they have the authority to influence the policymaking and procedures of departments and institutions. In this study, public affairs related to institutional governance and school-running, such as budget control, talent recruitment, and social services, require MLs to master the school-running laws and policy requirements (pedagogical basis) to provide a stable operational foundation for achieving organisational change. Although these two dimensions seem to require MLs to construct and develop different abilities, their core is designed and implemented around team building - including professional and administrative teams. That is, the ability to manage complex relationships related to people run through the scope of MLs' work (Grootenboer, 2018; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). What makes the situation more complicated is that this study emphasises that MLs are given greater power to engage in direct dialogue and cooperation with stakeholders outside the institution. The capability-building of MLs needs to meet two opposite directions of: internal and external.

On the one hand, MLs hold important positions in the internal governance process. As part of the leadership collective, they undertake more far-reaching management work that significantly impacts institutions to promote educational reform (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). Correspondingly, empirical evidence from this study states that at the institutional level, MLs need to construct and develop exceptional executive and managerial abilities (leadership competence) to achieve the transmission and promotion of information, policies, and strategies between institutional leadership teams and frontline teaching staff. On the other hand, MLs, in the context of the Chinese hierarchical system, also need to connect and communicate with external stakeholders. Due to the fact that all sampling colleges in this study were from vocational education, the role of MLs is particularly evident in the collaboration between educational institutions and external stakeholders to collectively shape goals adapting to the needs

of the educational environment. Correspondingly, the research findings emphasise that skills for network construction (leadership competence) is considered an irreplaceable position for MLs in the field of external cooperation. The critical position MLs occupy in the organisational management hierarchy results in MLs working to meet the needs of polarising demands across all stakeholders within and beyond institutions (Kruse, 2022). Nevertheless, its core is to optimise and allocate resources from different sources within a hierarchical structure to meet individual needs, thereby achieving institutional goals and change. By juxtaposing the two dimensions and two directions mentioned above, a coordinate system for a knowledge base related to MLs is generated to demonstrate MLs' capability-building (shown in Figure 6).

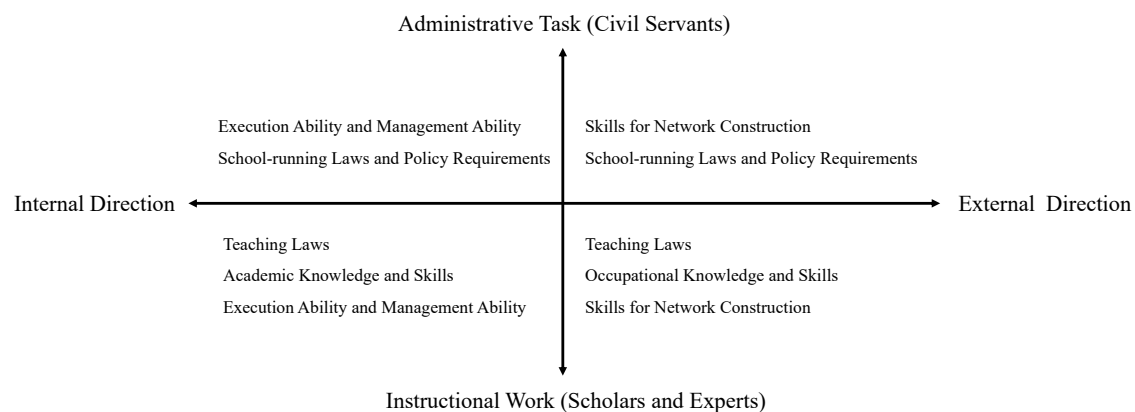


Figure 6: A knowledge base related to MLs' capability-building

This study provides a basic knowledge and a method for judging capability-building content. The findings from this study once again confirm Kruse's (2022) viewpoint that even within the same organisation, MLs do not have a unified and singular role description. Therefore, understanding leadership practice as a shifting configuration of role-playing effectively explains the capacity building of MLs (Gronn, 2010). Specifically, when a ML's mandates mainly involve external and instructional work, their generic knowledge includes teaching laws (pedagogical basis), occupational knowledge and skills (subject knowledge and skills), and skills for network construction (leadership competence). It should be noted that the research findings indicate that it is not accurate to broadly classify the required capability-building

content for MLs based on their department and STCs. On the contrary, it is more reasonable to judge the relevant knowledge and skills required by MLs based on their roles and content in a certain work or project, as in addition to routine work from formal regulations and job descriptions, MLs are assigned additional leadership workloads in practice. In this sense, leadership is distributed at the middle level within Chinese higher education institutions, simultaneously including formal and pragmatic distribution (Lu and Smith, 2021).

Lu and Smith (2021) emphasised that the practice of distributed leadership in China adopts a top-down allocation mechanism. Echoing *the leader plus aspect* proposed by Spillane (2005) and multiple leaders at multiple levels illustrated by Harris (2005), this study once again confirms that Chinese distributed leadership relies on administrative approaches to distribute top-down at different levels, which is consistent with institutional hierarchy. The research findings show that as part of the bureaucratic hierarchy, MLs are empowered to handle complex relationships and are required to possess exceptional leadership wisdom and professional capabilities to take on high-risk accountability. This leadership distribution brings legitimacy to the leadership behaviour of MLs while putting shackles on their autonomy. However, what makes the situation more complicated is that MLs are also expected to complete ad hoc delegation of leadership workload. The research findings illustrate that when additional work is assigned, especially in the role of civil servants, MLs' original work and study plans (such as research and learning) may be changed or even forced to give up. This is mainly due to the fact that leadership distribution is still subject to control by institutional leaders (Walker and Hallinger, 2007; Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017; Lu and Smith, 2021). That is, middle leadership is subject to a top-down arrangement of the hierarchical system. Therefore, once conflicts arise during the PD process, MLs often follow norms and arrangements rather than meet individual needs, which will be further discussed in section 7.2.3.

7.2.2 Hybrid Pedagogical Formats: Pathways for Capability-building

In order to further explore the capability-building process of MLs in Chinese hierarchical contexts, this study introduced the term PD based on social constructivist lens (Vygotsky, 1978), exploring MLs' capability-building and leadership construction from PD participation. The research findings show that MLs reinforce knowledge and skills across different dimensions by participating in various PD activity formats, including experience and information presentation, collegial visits, coaching, and self-regulated learning. Consistent with international research findings (Scott et al., 2008; Preston and Floyd, 2016), interviewees emphasised the strong support from practical on-the-job experience for personal leadership practice, while formal formats, such as lectures, are limited to playing a role in the field of policy and procedural knowledge. However, this study further identified that the current PD activities in which MLs participate in the Chinese context are mainly formal, while informal dialogue and communication opportunities have not received the same attention as formal PD activities. Furthermore, a special finding is that collegial visits, as a combination of formal and informal PD formats, play a positive role in PD for MLs in the hierarchical context, effectively utilising top-down resource supports and constructing bottom-up social interactions.

Based on the analysis and discussion in the previous section, the research findings illustrate that the construction and development of leadership competence, both in the administrative and instructional dimensions, is regarded by MLs as the key to managing complex social interactions and relationships (Butler, 2020). However, this study highlights that the one-shot experience and information presentation completed in the conference room have limited effectiveness in enhancing such competence. On the one hand, such PD activities fail to closely link the learning content with specific practical contexts (Spillane, Hopkins, and Sweet, 2018). In the social constructivist perspective, PD activities are regarded as a process that occurs in a larger context where knowledge is functional for the learner (Al Mahdi and Al Wadi, 2015). That is, such PD activities

are detached from the actual needs of MLs. On the other hand, experience and information presentation lack effective social interaction. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) viewpoint, development originates from the internalisation process of social interaction in which the specific mechanism involved is the concept of regulation, including social interaction, symbolic or cultural tools (Kozulin, 2003). Findings show that in such traditional PD activities, MLs do not have sufficient opportunities to discuss common issues with others, which means that lacking human mediators and social interaction leads to no provision for expanding higher psychological functions that lead to development (Eun, 2008).

It should be clarified that this study does not intend to accuse traditional experience and information presentation of being useless. Interview data shows that such PD activities still effectively increase, update, or change the knowledge of MLs in policy interpretation and procedural knowledge (such as reimbursement processes) (Thornton, 2020). In addition, the research findings illustrate a format of pre-designed and well-structured PD activity mediated by MLs' leadership competence construction, which is conceptualised as collegial visits (CVs) in this study. The research findings elucidate that CVs are a more comprehensive format of PD activity that combines formal and informal, collective and individual learning characteristics. Firstly, as a formal format of collective PD, CVs generally try to solve problems at the level of institutional governance or school-running. The research findings indicate that CVs are designed to learn successful leadership experiences and practices to address or prevent practical dilemmas in governance processes. MLs have a flexible identity in designing and implementing CVs and are empowered and encouraged to participate in the design process. In this sense, linking the authentic needs of MLs with organisational development requirements increases the potential of PD activities to produce positive results in MLs' capability-building (Eun, 2010).

Secondly, CVs provide a reference and opportunity for MLs to reflect on their behaviour patterns. On the one hand, research findings indicate that CVs have strong

boundary-spanning characteristics, which means that MLs are more likely to broaden their horizons by participating in CVs, thereby supporting personal reflection and organisational change (Huber, 2011). On the other hand, CVs provide more interactive and reflective space for MLs, as their occurrence is often accompanied by a large number of informal PD opportunities to observe, converse, or guide activities based on personal needs. Accordingly, participating in CVs is conducive to reflecting on and evaluating the genuine starting and ending points of the zone of proximal development in MLs, which effectively allows for a swifter journey through the zone (Eun, 2010). In addition, the research findings confirm that CVs provide MLs with opportunities to connect with a broader range of stakeholders beyond institutions. In this sense, such boundary-spanning PD activities also manifest in building relationships/networks with non-governmental organisations, consultants, other research institutions, and universities by developing the special skills required to manage complex social interactions (Inman, 2009; Bryant, 2019). That is, network construction is both the content and the pathway of MLs' capability-building. It can effectively balance the development needs of institutions and individuals, starting from identifying a problem that needs to be solved through collective efforts and the social interaction moves to the internal plane, leading to development in the process of jointly seeking solutions (Eun, 2010; Al Mahdi and Al Wadi, 2015; Visone, 2020).

In contrast, informal communication and exchange, conceptualised as coaching in this study, play a vital role in MLs' capability-building consistent with existing literature (Butler, 2020; Lillejord and Børte, 2020; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Lamanna, 2023). The findings from this study confirm again that coaching preferred by MLs has a significant mediating effect on their learning and capability-building. Essentially, MLs actively create space to seek social interaction or cooperation with more capable others in informal PD activities, beginning from practical needs or interests, which helps MLs cope with practical difficulties and reach higher levels of development (Eun, 2010). An interesting finding is that the interviewees in this study indicated they were susceptible to becoming mentors for others or connecting with individuals who could serve as

mentors on different occasions. The reasonable explanation is that the educational institutions where MLs are located and the national education system have formed a complete training system and training service system to support their sustainable development. Such PD activities embedded in the workplace can obtain or be allocated resources that exceed those found by relying on personal social relationships (Wilson and Xue, 2013). The following will further discuss the relationship between the occurrence and operation of PD activities and MLs' capability-building.

7.2.3 Top-down Operational Mechanisms: Norms of Implementation and Participation

Empirical evidence from this study suggests that MLs participating in PD activities embedded in centralised systems follow a set of bureaucratic procedures, identified as norms (such as administrative instructions and attendance assessments), which align with the characteristics of the Chinese hierarchical system and shape the basic implementation process of such top-down PD activities. This study confirms that such an operational mechanism stimulates or limits MLs' capability-building. On the one hand, embedding PD activities into the bureaucratic system provides institutional support for MLs to obtain more enabling and sustainable logistical resources. On the other hand, as emphasised in section 7.2.1, compliance with the arrangement may compromise the individual needs of MLs as they are subject to top-down linear management and accountability. However, the research findings indicate that when MLs are provided or actively developed a space for interaction with other participants in PD activities, MLs have the opportunity to generate authentic sharing and communication under artificial arrangements to reflect on their practices and experiences, thereby meeting individual needs. At this point, MLs and other participants collectively form a powerful community that can develop closer relationships, thus providing strong support for further social interaction.

In China, the top-down education system and supporting infrastructure have effectively strengthened the connections and collaboration between educational institutions and

external stakeholders (Sargent, 2015). This study confirms that PD activities embedded in administrative systems and their institutionalised practices are mobilised and allocated more resources, such as talent, funding, and time (Zhang and Pang, 2016). This type of resource is not limited to the education system, also extends to administrative authority and industry associations, which are beneficial for MLs to quickly find suitable mentors and carry out industry-based activities (such as CVs) in the context of vocational education (Zhou, Tigelaar and Admiraal, 2022, 2023). In further terms, resource allocation and convenient programmes that cater to individual needs support the learning and capability-building of MLs and stimulate their initiative, which will be discussed in section 7.4.4. In addition, this study reveals that embedding PD activities into the administrative mandates system through administrative approaches provide sustained support for PD activities to ensure the coherence of MLs' capability-building. Authoritative departments regulate the participation and support of different stakeholders in individual development within educational institutions through policies and professional standards. Such institutionalised practice of integrating PD activities into administrative mandates is beneficial in avoiding MLs' capability-building being left to chance (Irvine and Brundrett, 2017; Girvan et al., 2016).

Besides providing resource support for MLs' capability-building, the intentional design and organisational structure of PD activities are often questioned for compromising the efforts of MLs who are learning to change (Wong, 2010). However, this study highlights that this artificially arranged approach in the Chinese context is not contrary to spontaneous learning and cooperation in international literature (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017; Vangrieken et al., 2017). The key lies in effectively developing the potential of pre-designed and well-structured PD activities to promote more informal learning opportunities (Wilson and Xue, 2013). This approach aims to nurture the conditions necessary for individual reflection combined with other more explicitly socially oriented PD activities that provide ample opportunities for social interaction (Eun, 2010). In the previous section, this study reiterated that traditional experience and information presentation activities failed to achieve the expected results

due to the passive reception learning nature of the PD format (Sfard, 1998), which means neglecting the process of learners actively participating in social interactions from the perspective of social constructivism (Guskey, 2000). This study has analysed that, using CVs as an example, creating temporal and spatial conditions through administrative top-down approaches is conducive to combining complementary PD formats. In addition, the community formed by MLs and others has also been proven to affect opportunities for social interaction in artificial arrangements.

The research findings indicate that in China, MLs interact with different participants (such as ILs, colleagues, experts, or external stakeholders) in PD activities and collectively form a community. They actively construct or passively integrate into several different communities based on their various identities, in which MLs interact with peers and other factors, thereby influencing the internalisation of knowledge or skills. However, this study confirms that the community formed by MLs and others has a complex impact on MLs' capability-building. When MLs and other participants only gather according to administrative instructions (participating in PD activities) without authentic communication and sharing, the role of the community in MLs' capability-building is limited. On the contrary, the community where MLs are located is recognised as a powerful community, and PD activities play a positive role in MLs' capability-building. In order to deeply understand the impact of community on MLs, this study draws on professional learning communities (PLCs) to identify and explain the characteristics and roles of powerful communities.

A synthesis of the literature suggested that PLCs are regarded as the key to personal reflection and capability-building (Stoll et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017; Vangrieken et al., 2017). In existing research, the commonly used PLCs in China are Teaching-research Groups (TRGs) in the field of teacher professional learning, which are regarded as the Chinese version of PLCs (Zhang and Pang 2016; Chen, 2022). Evidence from this study suggests that MLs are also included in traditional PLCs deliberately arranged under the directive of education authorities, while there also

exists an emerging MLs-oriented PLCs named Middle Leaders Communities (MLCs). Some basic characteristics of MLCs can be summarised from this study. In MLCs, MLs who take achieving institutional development goals as the shared vision consciously carry out communication and collaboration activities. By de-privatised sharing personal experiences and engaging in reflective professional inquiry and dialogue, they draw from their interactions to take collective responsibility for their department or school and its faculty and students. Essentially, such position-based PLCs simultaneously conform to the concepts and characteristics of PLCs in Western literature (Stoll et al. 2006) and the characteristics of the Chinese hierarchical context (Zheng, Yin and Liu, 2020). This study further confirms that when MLs participate in PD activities organised in MLCs or form a community that conforms to the characteristics of MLCs within a PD activity, the community in the activity are identified as a strong community that can effectively support social interaction.

This finding is related to the localisation practice of distributed leadership in China. On the one hand, MLs in MLCs engage in beneficial interactions with others based on individual authentic needs. This is mainly due to distributed leadership in Chinese practice empowers MLs to directly establish relationships with others, such as ILs and external stakeholders. In this sense, MLCs provide space and autonomy for MLs to exert agencies and then play a vital role in improving the skills that MLs need in routine work. On the other hand, MLs actively share their personal experiences and act as mentors to one another throughout the process in MLCs. Despite being in different departments, MLs take on something far-reaching that significantly impacts institutions and students (Harris and Jones, 2017; Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). Given the similarity of positions or levels, MLs are susceptible to reflecting on their practices through others sharing during the experience exchange process, thereby generating resonance. From the social constructivism perspective, such effectiveness stems from the close integration of social interaction content and context (Vygotsky, 1978). In contrast, MLs are included in traditional PLCs as experts, such as TRGs, to help front-line teachers achieve professional growth under the guidance of a set of rules (Chen,

2022). This means that the interaction content and aims within traditional PLCs cannot align with middle leadership development, and the autonomy of MLs is constrained, resulting in limited benefits for MLs in such PLCs.

By comprehensively comparing the roles of traditional PLCs and MLCs in MLs' capability-building, this study confirms that the community in PD activities influences MLs' capability-building by supporting or limiting social interactions. This study further emphasises that the premise for the community here to play a positive role is that the interactive content and aims focus on MLs and are consistent with their needs. Such finding is not limited by the process of community formation, which means that MLCs may have formed during participation in PD activities or emerged in MLs' routine work. That is, whether participating in PD activities in MLCs or forming communities that conform to MLCs characteristics during PD activities, MLs can generate useful social interactions with other participants in formal PD activities and support MLs' capability-building. On the contrary, research findings show that when the content of social interactions within the community runs counter to MLs' needs, or rules in activities hinder social interaction, PD activities have limited effects or are even ineffective in MLs' capability-building. The following section will continue to discuss the contradictions of the process of MLs' capability-building identified in this study.

7.3 Challenges Faced by MLs Participating in PD Activities

Combined leadership theory with the term PD, the previous section discussed the process of MLs' capability-building in the Chinese hierarchical setting from PD participation, involving typical formats, learning content, and operational mechanisms. The research findings state a perceived gap between the PD activities that MLs participate in and their authentic needs of capability-building and learning due to contradictions in practice for MLs participating in PD activities. Specifically, regarding learning content, unbalanced allocation of learning resources leads to MLs' learning in PD activities being truncated, which cannot effectively solve practical problems. In

terms of PD formats, conflict of structural arrangements between different activities requires MLs to make trade-offs, in which MLs often choose to pursue compliance to address high-risk accountability at the expense of individual needs. Turning to operational mechanisms, internal tension between autonomy and control, ignorance of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) practice, and ambiguous assessment of learning outcomes hinder the social interaction between MLs and others and the internalisation process.

7.3.1 Unbalanced Allocation of Learning Resource

This study reveals that the unbalanced allocation of learning resources considerably challenged the effectiveness of participating in PD activities. Available empirical studies have mostly focused on the absence of learning resources within different regions, such as technical, professional, and financial support provided by relevant departments and universities (Newmann, King and Youngs, 2000; Zhang, Yuan and Yu, 2017; Liu and Hallinger, 2018b). By contrast, documentary data from this study illustrated that authorities have realised the importance of in-service and continued learning in educational institutions, and thus, a large amount of resources have been invested to support individual professional learning. However, it does not mean that learning resources are flawless in the process of MLs' capability-building. This study proposes that despite MLs being provided sufficient resources, the urgent needs of MLs have not been effectively met, which reflects the characteristics of an unbalanced allocation of learning resources.

As discussed above, PD content presents boundary-spanning and extensive characteristics based on the learner's identity and job requirements; at the same time, MLs tend to accept more knowledge and experience closely related to routine work and tasks (Bryant and Walker, 2022). However, the findings indicate that from a content perspective, most of the existing learning resources for MLs focus on professional theories and policies. MLs assume different identities in educational institutions

(Fleming, 2014; Harris et al., 2019), while such identity and corresponding workload are not equally divided in a specific practice. Indeed, in Chinese educational institutions, typically characterised as administration-led and associated with strong organisational controls, administrative work and mandates occupy a larger proportion of MLs' routine work. Work related to frontline teaching only accounts for a smaller portion of the total workload. As such, learning resources focusing on pedagogy theory and policy interpretation cannot effectively achieve the learning and development required for the main work of MLs. Notably, this is why PD for MLs cannot be directly classified as teacher professional development. Simple categorisation ignores the complexity of where MLs are located and fails to meet the actual needs of MLs to effectively handle daily tasks, which will be discussed in detail below.

In addition, research findings propose that there are obvious disparities in the distribution of learning resources among different professional groups within the same educational institution. Development practices and processes in the Chinese context often emphasise priorities and hierarchies of necessity to determine the sequence of development and ultimately achieve the macro development vision. In essence, it is congruent with cascade models in Western literature (Kennedy, 2014). At the institutional level, there is also a priority in the allocation and provision of existing learning resources. It leads to an unbalanced allocation of learning resources within the institution. Aligned with the international literature, MLs that are matched with limited learning resources struggle to achieve breakthrough development due to the lack of dialogue opportunities with leading edge (Zhang, Yuan and Yu, 2017). This implies that MLs become homogenous, and their collaboration might bring about conservatism. Furthermore, the findings state that this imbalance can also cause MLs to doubt and burn out the value of their work and even affect interpersonal relationships within the institution. This runs counter to the goal of maintaining harmonious relationships in the mainstream Chinese perception.

In further terms, although located in different regions with close levels of economic development, the distribution of learning resources among institutions also differs. Synthesis of PD and school capacity literature indicates that educational institutions in economically underdeveloped areas tend to be constrained by a lack of overall learning resources (Liu and Hallinger, 2018b). However, this study highlights that there are discrepancies in the effectiveness of leveraging external learning resources provided by stakeholders, which is closely related to institutional conditions. This is not to pursue an absolutist equal distribution but instead to highlight the differences in the capacity of educational institutions to develop and utilise learning resources. As Huang, Zhang and Huang (2020) pointed out, supportive institutional conditions can expand institutional overall learning opportunities on PD by seeking and allocating learning resources. That is, there are imbalances and differences in the utilisation and distribution of learning resources due to the different support capabilities of institutional conditions, which will be discussed in section 7.4.

7.3.2 Conflict of Structural Arrangements

This study points out that MLs participate in different activities with various rules to guide them, which are prone to conflict of structural arrangements that hinder the possibility of MLs participating in PD activities or MLs sacrificing other jobs or learning opportunities. As Wei, Darling-Hammond and Adamson (2010) emphasised, logistical conditions, such as common planning time and space, are prerequisites for meaningful learning and collaboration. Even if there is a consensus on the importance of PD for MLs, conflict of structural arrangements is detrimental to the increase of overall learning opportunities in institutions and even leads to the superficiality of collaborative learning. The findings reveal that conflicts within PD activities and conflicts between escalating leadership workload and PD draw MLs time and energy away from PD.

The findings of this study show that the temporary and one-off characteristics of PD for MLs cause conflicts of structural arrangements between learning activities, which brings confusion and even anxiety to MLs. Specifically, such inappropriate arrangements, such as time and space issues and the duplication of content, make for chaos and disorder in the practice of PD for MLs. According to the research findings, this outcome is chiefly attributed to the fact that MLs need to interface with different departments and stakeholders between and beyond institutions in their routine work. Although the centralised system attempts and is conducive to formulating development plans for MLs, it is difficult to effectively implement and achieve the desired results in practice. This study shows that without systematic learning planning and disposable learning time, MLs rely on administrative instructions to participate in collaborative activities such as theoretical learning and group inquiry. However, collaboration driven by administrative instructions are susceptible to result in the lack of motivation and superficial collaboration of learners (Wong, 2010). At the same time, such an approach intensifies the pressure on MLs, which in turn causes MLs to develop negative attitudes toward PD. This study confirms that MLs are in a passive position in PD programmes and activities; thus significantly reducing the space of social interaction within PD activities. Although activities are designed to enhance MLs' skills or knowledge in specific areas, this easily leads to their frustration and stress with PD.

In addition, the findings from this study reveal that heavy workload and intense pressure hinder MLs' efforts in collaborative inquiry and learning. In line with similar findings of studies in Western societies (Lillejord and Børte, 2020), this study shows that MLs occupying dual positions play a critical role at the administrative decision-making level and in teaching work. The findings illustrate that MLs are assigned and accept jobs that would otherwise belong to institutional leaders, echoing the conclusion from Lu and Smith (2021). They are allowed to participate in decision-making to a greater extent. As such, MLs are overwhelmed by both teaching and administrative duties, and thus making it susceptible to ignore the role of PD. In response to this situation, the findings illustrate that a common practice in Chinese hierarchical contexts is that PD

programmes, especially collective formal learning activities, are incorporated into accountability systems as administrative mandates. These collaborative learning activities are mandatory, such as policy learning lectures. The findings state that due to their mandatory nature, MLs regard such PD as an additional burdens of their job. Whilst it is explained above that administrative pushing goes some way to ensuring regular school-based learning opportunities, this practice increases the workload of MLs and squeezes out the time and space required for informal and personal learning. This study also confirmed that with MLs overwhelmed by their workloads, they have no extra time and energy to carry out learning activities that meet actual work needs. In other words, MLs cannot complete their workload while meeting PD that meets the actual needs of the work.

7.3.3 Internal Tension between Autonomy and Control

The research findings show that MLs participating in PD activities follow a series of norms consistent with the hierarchical system, which clearly contradicts MLs' role in distributed leadership. Essentially, the contradiction mainly manifests as the tension between top-down aspirations and bottom-up needs. The findings indicate that MLs complained that they failed to receive independent decision-making power regarding personal capability-building, while instead tied them up in bureaucratic management knots when formulating PD programmes and succession plans. Such policy approach of exerting strong top-down control and monitoring has been questioned as one of the main reasons for the superficial collaboration and ineffective PD. That is, the tensions that arise when individual-led initiatives conflict with bureaucracy in hierarchical situations can limit the practice of PD (Hairon and Tan, 2017; Chen, 2022). Although the role of external initiatives in promoting PD practice is affirmed above, MLs cannot completely establish learning goals and independently implement the corresponding plan from their own research practices (James and McCormick, 2009). This study highlights that the professional autonomy of MLs is eroded by top-down control and hence to bring with it inherent tensions.

This study shows that PD for MLs is integrated into administrative mandates and adopts operational practices of issuing policy prescriptions, which means that there is a bureaucratic burden, administrative processes, and guidance and supervision from educational institutions and external bureaucracies that come with PD. Furthermore, this study confirms that the tension between the top-down operating mechanism and the professional autonomy of MLs is a reflection of typically characterised as administration-led and associated with strong organisational control in Chinese educational institutions, which brings new opportunities for MLs to launch innovation and capacity-building activities. Here comes the challenge. The operational mechanism here is discussed in two parts: formal learning activities and informal learning activities. Meaningful PD practice must fundamentally be learner-driven (Kennedy, 2015). In light of the Chinese educational institution's hierarchical structure and high power-distance culture (Hofstede et al., 2010), formal PD is embedded in centralised systems and implemented through the hierarchy. Accordingly, it is inevitable that MLs can get caught up in more political aspects of conducting and participating in learning activities. The findings of this study sit comfortably alongside the existing literature on PD and its emphasis on bureaucratic burdens brought by excessive administrative interventions is inimical to the implementation of PD programmes (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). The findings present that although MLs and their departments do have decision-making space regarding PD and adequate financial support, there is still procedural work to complete the layers of approval. Such an overly hierarchical process makes PD affairs bogged down in extra duties. Especially in vocational education settings, PD involves multilevel stakeholders, which means that PD for MLs needs to balance more relationships. It constitutes an obstacle to implementing PD.

The findings also indicate that top-down and outside-in control results in MLs losing their choice of learning content and tools. Essentially, the professional autonomy of MLs has not been effectively practiced and reflected in PD. It results in PD for MLs having the characteristics of serving politics. In line with similar findings of studies in Western societies (Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Lamanna, 2023), this study confirms

that MLs prioritise building capabilities through a set of in-service leadership development practices that depends on professional reflection and close ongoing support for impact (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). However, the common means of supporting learning about MLs in practice remains formal training programmes and theoretical learning involving policy guidelines. The learning content controlled by the authority is highly consistent with the organisational development vision and needs, and is designed to cultivate the ability of MLs to serve the organisation and politics. However, this study shows that there is a clear gap between policy aspirations and practical needs in terms of learning content of PD for MLs. To further complicate the picture, MLs are overwhelmed by their workload and have no extra time and energy to carry out learning activities that meet actual work needs. Thus, the unique set of skills that MLs are expected to possess, such as high-level research capability, interpersonal skills, and even the ability to cope with the administrative load (Murphy and Curtis, 2013), cannot be effectively trained and developed in common PD programmes.

Furthermore, this study confirms that informal PD activities, such as reflective dialogue within the team, are constrained by top-down administrative mandates. This tension could be chiefly attributed to the fact that the conflict of roles and responsibilities of MLs. In the Chinese hierarchical context, MLs occupy established, formal leadership positions and are formally authorised to supervise their peers using professional standards. The findings show that even in hierarchical systems, they still have the power that comes with official line management responsibilities and some positional authority. However, such authority and formal supervision often lead to compliance and the breakdown of trusting relationships (Perloff, 1993; Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham, 2006). In light of this consideration, MLs face barriers to develop informal PD activities based on expertise and trust relationships and even undermine the whole development of institutions. International researchers regarded PLCs as a promising way to mitigate the tension, which is verified effectiveness in balancing top-down expectations and bottom-up demands (Chen, 2022). However, this study reveals that PLCs, closely related to MLs, have not received enough attention.

7.3.4 Ignorance of Professional Learning Communities Practice

The research findings indicate that MLs interact with other participants and form communities while participating in PD activities. The formation of such communities can occur in the incipient or advanced stage of participating in PD activities. For example, MLs follow administrative instructions to join traditional PLCs (such as TRGs and MTSs) as an expert role or professional identity or form emerging PLCs through sharing and collaborating in their routine work, which means that the formation of communities occurs in the incipient stage; While MLs interact with other participants and spontaneously form communities in a PD activity, which means that forming communities occurs in the advanced stage of participating in PD activities. The research findings emphasise that in the Chinese context, the interaction and division of labour among MLs in the aforementioned communities are susceptible to being disconnected from their capability-building content, either in traditional PLCs or emerging PLCs (MLCs). Specifically, MLs face a significant role deviation in traditional PLCs, resulting in the inability to meet their authentic needs in PD activities based on PLCs that are the product of policy prescriptions. More importantly, MLCs that have the ability to meet the authentic needs of MLs have not yet received attention and support in practice. Essentially, this misalignment results from ignoring the role of PLCs practice in the process of MLs' capability-building.

The research findings propose that from the perspective of distributed leadership theory, MLs actively interact with novice teachers in PD activities and take joint actions to complete specific mandates (Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006). On the one hand, as hosts of PLCs, MLs are expected to lead this group of members to complete specific tasks or improve teaching standards consistent with existing research results (Qian and Walker, 2021). On the other hand, influenced by the tradition of collectivism (Bush and Qian, 2000; Hofstede, 2003), even as ordinary members in PLCs, others in the team or community are willing to ask opinions from MLs with rich teaching experience and solid professional knowledge in collective activities. In this sense, ML in traditional

PLC utilises their teaching laws (pedagogical basis), subject knowledge, and management ability (leadership competence) in collaboration and reflective discussions to help novice teachers achieve professional growth. Although interviewees acknowledged that personal progress can also be achieved through mentoring others, such progress does not align with the leadership experience and skills that MLs urgently need. In the context of Chinese hierarchy, MLs are highly expected to be able to handle complex and extensive relationships, especially the coordination between bureaucratic and professional leadership (Zhang, Wong and Wang, 2022). As discussed in section 7.2.3, MLCs play a vital role in developing MLs' leadership competence. However, the research findings indicate that the effectiveness of MLCs existing outside the organisational structure has not received sufficient attention.

On the one hand, activities based on MLCs have not received sufficient attention. The research findings show that MLCs provide sufficient space and autonomy for MLs to exert agency in which different formats of social interaction can effectively compensate for the limitations of traditional formats in PD for MLs (Lee and Kim, 2016; Vangrieken et al., 2017; Qian and Walker, 2021). However, the most common type of PD activity in CHVCs is still well-structured design experience and information presentation focused on theory learning and policy interpretation. In contrast, collaborative and mutual PD activities centered around the bottom-up authentic needs of MLs are not widely available in practice. As a result, although the continuation and application of these traditional formats have achieved some specific development goals, apparent shortcomings such as MLs passiveness still cannot be effectively addressed (Kennedy, 2014). On the other hand, compared to TRGs and MTSs, MLCs that have yet to appear in official documents cannot receive the required support and resources. In the absence of safeguards and constraints provided by institutions and policies, MLCs can only be built on enabling cultural conditions, such as the values in the institution and the trust relationship between MLs and institutional leaders (ILs). That is, when ILs realise the importance of PD for MLs, the conditions required by MLCs as PLCs may be provided in time. However, international research has demonstrated the difficulty in providing

strong support from principals, which is often *ad hoc* (Gurr, 2019; Lillejord and Børte, 2020; Bryant and Walker, 2022). The findings confirm that there is a risk that the support regarding MLCs is overly dependent on the subjective wishes of ILs in the hierarchical structure (Dimmock, 2016).

7.3.5 Ambiguous Assessment of Learning Outcomes

The previous studies, which are chiefly focused on teacher professional learning, generally demonstrate that a system to recognise, appraise and reward teachers' outstanding teaching performance is essential (Hairon and Dimmock, 2012; Qian and Walker, 2021). However, this study provides that, apart from formal learning that awards degrees, most PD activities do not have rigorous assessment methods to measure the effectiveness of transforming learning content into outcome. It engendered difficulty in participating in PD and initiating collaboration even resulting in superficial collaboration and learning. As discussed above, in order to ensure the opportunities for individuals to participate in PD, a common practice in Chinese hierarchical contexts is to incorporate PD into the high-stakes accountability system. On the one hand, participants are held accountable based on attendance results from portfolio system (*dang an dai* system), which serves as a supportive companion system for recording individual PD. On the other hand, the monitoring mechanism for PD programmes or activities focuses on the legality of resource allocation and the orderliness of the implementation process. That is, the existing assessment of learning outcomes for MLs has defaulted that complete attendance records for participation in PD activities are the achievement of learning goals and individual progress. This approach does not provide an effective appraisal of individual learning outcomes and outputs of PD programmes or activities.

The findings state that ambiguous assessment of learning outcomes results in engaging in PD failing to build a strong relationship with career promotion mechanisms and welfare policies. Previous studies regarding middle leader responsibilities have

confirmed that the roles assumed by MLs involve diverse dimensions of management, administration, and academic responsibilities (Huang and Pang, 2016). Among them, the promotion of civil servants is controlled by local governments, while teaching role of MLs are classified as a group of front-line teachers within educational institutions and achieve personal promotion based on the teacher professional/honorary title system, echoing the individuals in higher positions based on research achievements rather than people management in previous research (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). Since the criteria for such promotion tend to be teaching and research achievements, most MLs face the challenge of balancing academic and leadership responsibilities. However, the workload and stress that come with taking on different roles are often undertaken at significant personal expense. As Maddock (2023) emphasised, excessive administrative work results in the death of an academic career (Chilvers et. al., 2018). The findings reveal that some MLs abandon academic skills and careers when they cannot maintain their academic status. In this context, career promotion mechanisms and welfare policy fail to play the desired motivating role in PD. MLs lack the motivation to carry out and participate in academic research work and its corresponding PD activities. As such, even if well-designed learning activities fit career advancement needs specified in the teacher professional title system (Gao, Barkhuizen and Chow, 2011), it will not increase their motivation to participate in PD activities and produce outcomes. Such challenges to PD could be effectively addressed only when assessment and promotion are simultaneously and coherently modified.

In addition to the ambiguity in assessing individual learning outcomes, this study shows that there is also controversy and ambiguity in feedback and evaluation of PD activities. Specifically, programme or event participants, including MLs and event organisers, are unable to give objective and fair evaluations. The findings indicate that a lack of clear advice and timely reflection limits the sustainable effectiveness of PD. It reduces the effectiveness of ML participation in PD, resulting in MLs who are not adequately prepared when entering, enacting and exiting roles. This outcome could be chiefly attributed to PD programmes or activities not achieving a rigorous closed loop in

practice. As Zhang, Yuan and Yu (2017) concluded, individuals in the Chinese context are accustomed to maintaining harmonious relationships and avoiding criticism and conflict. This situation is more prominent for MLs that need to navigate multi-faceted and multi-directional relational networks. This study argues that once MLs are stuck in the quagmire of maintaining superficial harmony, subsequent PD cannot gain effective experience from previous PDs for adjustment and improvement. That is, PD will be trapped at the original level and hence unable to design high-level learning activities. In this case, the attractiveness of the PD to learners suffers a severe loss.

7.4 The Role of Institutions in Professional Development

This study aims to explore the current provision of MLs' capability-building in Chinese settings from PD participation and the influencing factors at the institutional level. Based on finding, the manifestation PD for MLs occupying formal leadership positions in centralised systems and challenges faced by MLs in PD have been discussed above. The findings foreground that the mitigation of such challenges can be explained by collective endeavours involving leadership, structure, and culture at institutional levels, as contextual conditions in educational institutions that include various background influences shaping PD and MLs behaviour (Engeström, Miettinen and Punamäki, 1999; Eun, 2010). This study sits comfortably alongside the existing literature on PD and its emphasis on the importance of institutional leaders (ILs) by building and shaping structural and cultural conditions. This section will analyse and discuss in detail the impact of institutional leaders, organisational structure, and organisational culture on PD for MLs.

7.4.1 Institutional Leadership: Gatekeepers of PD for MLs

A prerequisite that needs to be clarified first is the relationship between ILs and MLs in leadership interaction. It is related to the practice of distributed leadership theory in the Chinese context, which is accomplished through delegating responsibilities from

formal leaders (Lu and Smith, 2021). As discussed in section 7.2.1, experts from the frontline are appointed top-down as MLs by ILs based on their outstanding teaching, research, or practical achievements to share the leadership workload and governance affairs of ILs. MLs are included in the formal structural framework in which the power structure consisted of ILs and MLs is linear and hierarchical. That is, ILs serve as the superiors of MLs and supervise and hold them accountable for MLs. In contrast, MLs are responsible for implementing the policies decided by ILs within their subordinate departments/STCs. Such ‘allocative’ practice of leadership distribution is presumed by Lu and Smith (2021) as more appropriate to the Chinese centralised context. This study further confirms that the division of labour among leadership collectives in Chinese higher education institutions conforms to the characteristics of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2003), while ILs still play paternalistic leadership style to guide others in the core areas of institutional operation, such as the selection and appointment of MLs rather than attraction (Harris, 2004). In terms of capability-building and PD, evidence from this study shows that ILs have the power to lead and participate in PD activities, which positively or negatively impact MLs’ capability-building. Some researchers conceptualise the series of behaviours that ILs focus on organising member learning and consciously guiding, supporting, managing, and supervising as learning-centred leadership (Hallinger and Liu, 2016; Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016). This study confirms that the pathways through which ILs affect PD for MLs include five dimensions.

This study confirms that in the context of the Chinese hierarchical system, ILs utilise a combination of bureaucratic and distributed leadership strategies to support PD for MLs, which is proven in this study to be able to effectively alleviate the tension between control and autonomy faced by MLs. In contrast to the stereotyped description of Chinese paternalistic leadership and the officialdom-centred style of administration entrenched in Western literature (Tan and Dimmock, 2014; Li and Li, 2016), the findings provide that leadership responsibilities, workload, and autonomy are formally distributed through a top-down approach with the support of ILs. Nonetheless, MLs

occupy formal leadership positions and are thus given a certain degree of autonomy to carry out and participate in learning activities. This study emphasises that the autonomy of MLs can be effectively protected with the support of ILs. In line with similar findings of studies in Southeast Asian societies (e.g., Bush and Ng, 2019; Bryant and Walker, 2022), this study confirms that ILs stimulate MLs to be proactive through their leadership behaviours, such as delegating responsibilities and empowering MLs to participate in PD. The manner in which MLs have been identified as a path to implement PD activities in a way that meets individual practical needs. In this sense, trust, affirmation, and initiative from ILs in a hierarchical context can balance control and autonomy. The findings confirm that the hierarchical nature of institutions and distributed leadership coexist in Chinese educational institutions and play a positive role in the PD for MLs process under the conscious guidance from ILs (Lu and Smith, 2021), which adds credence to Bush and Ng (2019) claim that an allocative leadership model may be more appropriate for centralised contexts.

This study provides that leadership practices of ILs based on establishing positive interpersonal relationships and showing high support for PD can strengthen MLs' identification with PD in the Chinese hierarchical context. International literature has confirmed relationship building to be an essential part of ILs' routine work, especially for Chinese principals (Qian and Walker, 2021). The characteristic of this relationship is that it emphasises mutual support between ILs and MLs to carry out joint actions and effective interactions rather than relying on a superior-subordinate relationship attached to a hierarchical framework (Harris, 2009; Spillane et al., 2011). In the context of the Chinese hierarchical system, ILs maintain the characteristics of traditional paternalistic leadership to express their concern to MLs while demonstrating excellent professional knowledge to gain the professional trust of MLs (Tan and Dimmock, 2014). In addition, the findings illustrate that when ILs intentionally reduce the bureaucratic burdens related to PD for MLs or protect MLs' learning and work from excessive administrative intervention, it is also beneficial to foster MLs' authentic engagement and establish genuine collegiality. ILs keep abreast of the learning needs of MLs and remain highly

sensitive to the dependency needs through good interpersonal relationships, which mitigate the conflicts that accompany the tension between control and autonomy. Furthermore, the findings show that forming mutually supportive relationships facilitates the formation of professional learning communities (PLCs) and conducts collaborative activities. Its specific content will be discussed in detail in the organisational structure section below.

The evidence from this study shows that ILs, as one of the learning resources for leadership development for MLs, affect PD for MLs by directly participating in learning activities and constructing effective interactions with MLs. In the Chinese context, relying on positional authority without expertise is not qualified for management roles and administrative work of MLs, a status similar to findings in international research (Harris, 2004). The development content corresponding to the roles and work here is building leadership competencies of MLs and developing expertise to effectively deal with the complexities of their routine work. The findings provide that selfless sharing and direct support from ILs make MLs willing to invest more time and energy in leadership development, as ILs are regarded by MLs as experienced and authoritative learning role models from whom they can acquire practical management experience and administrative approaches. It supports the broader international literature, emphasising the importance of leadership behaviours clearly demonstrating learning in practical and visible ways (Walker and Qian, 2017; Qian and Walker, 2021). That is, ILs are directly involved in PD for MLs. Based on the theoretical lens of distributed leadership, the manner in which ILs and MLs co-construct knowledge is perceived as the key that MLs transform their compelling practical experiences into leadership and pass down leadership wisdom from ILs. However, this transformation is difficult to achieve the desired results in formal course packages or one-shot experience sharing activities (Lillejord and Børte, 2018, 2020). This study shows that informal learning embedded in routine work, such as reflective vertical dialogues and peer observation, can effectively avoid the mindset of MLs passively waiting for instructions from ILs and enhance the effectiveness of leadership capacity building for MLs.

However, the findings reveal that although MLs gain the autonomy to carry out or participate in learning activities by virtue of their inherent position authority, as discussed above, such autonomy is, in many cases, uncertain and given way to other matters. Previous studies have confirmed that the roles, positions, and responsibilities have been clearly defined at the departmental and institutional levels (Lu and Smith, 2021). This study suggests that in the context of the Chinese hierarchical setting, MLs face the high-stakes accountability system, but there is no serious imbalance between accountability and authority, as they occupy formal positions with corresponding authority and are included in the administrative hierarchy. This position authority brings a certain degree of autonomy and other conveniences to PD for MLs. However, the autonomy related to learning is subject to the threat of being violated and revoked by ILs at any time. ILs have a positive influence or negative intervention on topics, formats and even time of PD for MLs within their legal scope of authority. Specifically, the former may be sacrificed when the time or space required for PD for MLs conflicts with other administrative mandates or affairs. Therefore, this finding echoes previous research showing that if PD for MLs only relies on the concepts and awareness of ILs to obtain support and resources, there would be great uncertainty and this support would be challenging to maintain (Bryant and Walker, 2022). Support from ILs is often ad hoc and subject to opportunity. The role of organisational structure in PD for MLs will be discussed in the following section.

7.4.2 Organisational Structure: Generating Learning Opportunities

This study reveals that the organisational structure (OS) ensures that MLs have equal power to access PD and the autonomy to choose learning activities by structuring and routinising learning opportunities. OS in Chinese educational institutions is often reported to be characterised by overly hierarchical and centralised systems and impermeable subject department boundaries (Bush and Qian, 2000; Tang, Lu and Hallinger, 2014); however, the findings of this study present that it inherits experience from its predecessors and is committed to developing itself into an open, diverse

institution. This change is consistent with a set of structural conditions that have been identified in previous research as being able to expand an institution's overall learning opportunities (Zhang and Pang, 2016; Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020). The ad hoc and uncertain nature of support from ILs have been discussed in detail aforementioned, and how to avoid PD for MLs being left to chance and thus safeguarding the sustainability of middle leadership capacity building deserves sophisticated attention. Toward this end, this study reveals that OS plays a safeguarding and coordinating role in PD for MLs by redesigning and adjusting a set of structural conditions involving formal management structure, organisational operating mechanisms and multilevel system guarantee.

The findings reveal that reorganising the department structure on a professional basis can effectively weaken the boundaries of disciplines and departments, thereby reinforcing the feasibility of MLs learning from each other and even boundary-spanning cooperative learning. Valid evidence from this study provides that redesigning and adjusting the management structure to develop flatter organisational structures and strengthen the professionalism of affairs is beneficial to expanding MLs' peer networks. Among them, two specific methods that are widely used in practice include establishing Second Tier Colleges (STCs) based on professional groups and adding functional departments responsible for the PD of organisational members, echoing interventions to change school structures to promote PD in previous research (Admiraal et al., 2021). In essence, such reformative initiative is an effective practice of balancing hierarchy and professionalism in educational institutions (Luo, 2015). The redesigned management structure expands the scope of professional roles to enhance the professionalism of the educational institution while maintaining the necessary management hierarchy. This finding reinforces the point that MLs' work and learning often involve crossing professional, organisational and other boundaries (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011), but further suggests that the redesigned OS emphasises collective accountability and collective endeavours to weaken interdepartmental boundaries under a prerequisite for ensuring the internal structures and procedures needed for the entire organisation to work successfully. It facilitates the establishment of constructive and

flexible working relationships between MLs distributed at different levels within and with other stakeholders from within and outside the educational institution. The findings state that the boundary-spanning practice of MLs is conducive to dialogue and collaboration, which effectively support professional growth and achieve institutional-level improvement and development.

This study states that top-down de-administration initiatives can create favourable conditions for MLs to participate in learning activities. In the Chinese context, redesigning the organisational management structure is accompanied by introducing a series of policies and systems related to the redivision of power and the regulation of utilise. With regard to PD and continuing learning, it mainly includes constraining the administrative power of ILs and empowering MLs and their departments. It aims to clarify and optimise the procedures for MLs to fulfil their leadership responsibilities and engage in professional learning by reshaping interdepartmental partnerships and power relationships between the institutional leadership team and departments. Notably, distinguished from previous studies concluded that the authority of MLs to reach beyond the institutional walls is relatively limited (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013), this study presents that MLs are empowered to develop and coordinate external learning resources. The findings show that this practice can effectively abandon the undesirable practice of allocating learning resources according to administrative levels and protect MLs' autonomy in PD from unreasonable interference by superior leadership wishes and organisational management. In addition, it is also worth noting that the effect of top-down administrative measures in a hierarchical context is obvious and powerful. Such manner in which utilising external administrative approaches promotes decentralisation and deregulation can create a relatively relaxed organisational environment for PD for MLs (Zhu, Devos and Tondeur, 2014), and so effectively mitigate against the bureaucratic burden accompanied by PD. Inherently, ensuring the operational space of STCs and functional departments through institutionalised empowerment, such as decision-making power involving funds, technology, and human resources, is an effective practice of consciously balancing administrative and academic power.

A special finding is the complex role of PLCs in cultivating and expanding structured learning opportunities within the Chinese hierarchical system. The practice of PLCs in China has been shown to be a product of contrived arrangement, simultaneously possessing the instructional exploration functions of professional groups and the management functions of administrative organisations (Zhang and Pang, 2016; Wang et al., 2017; Qian and Walker, 2021; Chen, 2022). In this study, PLCs embedded in OS are referred to as traditional PLCs. This study confirms that traditional PLCs have become a basis and approach for allocating and scheduling resources in a hierarchical context according to their various construction missions. MLs are included in traditional PLCs as professional scholars and industry experts, creating more opportunities for them to interact with others. However, MLs' participation in PD activities in traditional PLCs exhibits strong political characteristics and role deviation. In such traditional, top-down PLCs, PD activities ignore the leadership role of MLs but are accompanied by complex bureaucratic procedures. That is, traditional PLCs have not played the expected role in balancing the tension between individual-led initiatives and administrative hierarchies (Hairon and Tan, 2017; Chen, 2022). However, it does not mean that the role of PLCs in MLs' capability-building is insignificant. This study suggests that there exists a category of MLs-driven and loosely organised PLCs outside of OS, conceptualised as middle leaders communities (MLCs) in this study, remaining sensitive and responsive to the job requirements and practical needs of MLs and compensating for the shortcomings of existing traditional PLCs. This study emphasises that MLCs that have not yet formed institutionalised practices rely on and benefit from the learning culture within institutions, which will be further discussed in section 7.4.3.

The findings provide that coherent and coordinated supervision systems, accountability and motivation can effectively foster MLs' commitment to ongoing PD. As indicated by Lieberman et al. (2011), educational institutions are embedded in the national education policy environment, which emphasises the high-stakes accountability system and rigorous external supervision. MLs undertake escalating routine work involving supervising and being supervised as well as accountability and being accountable,

especially government-led external accountability regarding the role of civil servants, which hampers MLs from diverting their attention from institutional imperatives. More seriously, this study also reveals that these ML mandates of MLs are not fully valued and effectively motivated in the honour system (Krause et al., 2010), making MLs susceptible to stress and burnout. In this case, MLs passively choose to complete administrative mandates to meet the behavioural requirements in accountability and supervision while giving up qualified behaviours in the incentive policy, such as academic research and other academic behaviours. Given the importance of the work assigned to MLs, this study is not a call to weaken the assessment and accountability of their administrative mandates. On the contrary, on this basis, formulating clear rewards for MLs' leadership roles in the incentive mechanism and controlling the leadership workload of MLs effectively contributes to MLs balancing academic and administrative aspects. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that focusing on leadership skill improvement and experience sharing in PD programmes has the potential to protect MLs from superficial learning. At the same time, clarifying the application and assessment of PD learning results, and supplementing it by increasing the corresponding incentive level can also effectively increase the initiative of MLs to participate in PD activities. Put at its simplest, this study foregrounds that MLs' commitment to continuous learning can be effectively cultivated when supervision, accountability, and initiatives are simultaneously and coherently modified.

7.4.3 Organisational Culture: Fostering Learning Awareness

The findings of this study sit comfortably alongside the existing literature on MLs and its emphasis on which strong school-wide cultures condensed in the development process of educational institutions foster effective middle leadership behaviour and ongoing learning awareness (Leithwood, 2016; Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017). Collectivism is considered to be one of the most salient characteristics of organisational culture in China (Bush and Qian, 2000). The findings reveal that benefiting from collectivist values, a collaborative learning culture has been established in Chinese

hierarchical educational institutions, which is conducive to MLs to initiate, support and sustain PD and ongoing learning. This study emphasises that distinguished with the extensive impact of institutional leadership and organisational structure on PD activities, the scope of influence in terms of organisational culture is relatively limited. This is mainly due to the key to the impact of organisational culture on MLs' capability-building lies in MLs' understanding and internalisation of specific conditions. Enabling cultural conditions are formed under multi-dimensional conditions carefully cultivated in institutions and in turn act on the PD of organisational members under conscious guidance. This study uses Schein's (1985, 2010) cultural perspective to explore and propose a new recipe for cultural conditions affecting PD for MLs, involving spiritual, ideological, institutional, and material levels.

In addition, this study suggests that, given the structural position of MLs, they are more susceptible to the influence of collective values in organisational culture and actively align their capability-building with the institutional development vision. In Chinese educational institutions, the infrastructure, institutional norms, and values emphasise collective responsibility and collective endeavours. As formal leadership team members, MLs have close working relationships and smooth communication channels with institutional leaders (ILs). It is susceptible to trust-building and safe zones for emotional and cognitive support between MLs and other leadership members, which is conducive for MLs to have more social interactions with others to collectively construct knowledge and skills. In the process of interactions, the macro development vision and institutional collective values are effectively transmitted and internalised within the leadership collective, thereby playing a guiding and motivating role in PD for MLs. Based on this, this study further confirms that MLs are willing to achieve common progress and institutional progress through reciprocal actions and joint participation in PD activities. Such learning practice of benefiting from the experiences of others is considered to have a positive impact on the initiation and continuation of collaborative learning and work of MLs (Tan, 2012; Zhang and Sun, 2018). Notably, different from research conclusions based on other societies, which believe that MLs occupying

formal leadership positions would deviate from strategic school-wide development (Bennett et al., 2007), this study provides adequate evidence that as members of a bureaucratic hierarchy, MLs in Chinese educational institutions need to be accountable to both the department and the institution as a holistic entity. They often integrate individual development needs on the basis of considering collective interests and strategic goals, which conform to the institutional characteristics that emphasise the priority of management and political work (Walker and Qian, 2015; Zhang and Pang, 2018).

In addition, this study suggests that an open and collaborative organisational culture is paramount for forming bottom-up PLCs in educational institutions and cultivating MLs' commitment to collective learning and social interactions. Chinese educational institutions are generally administrative-oriented and subject to strict control (Bush and Qian, 2000; Qian and Walker, 2021). Based on this premise, traditional PLCs and corresponding PD activities are carefully designed and arranged through a top-down form within the administrative system and accountability (Chen, 2022). The empirical evidence from this study points out that a collaborative learning culture can cultivate informal dialogue in top-down PD activities. In this case, despite formal PD activities being mandatory, traditional PLCs' members - including MLs - believe in the value of collaboration, which ensures their willingness to participate actively in interactions and collectively construct knowledge (Wong, 2010). More importantly, this study identifies a type of bottom-up PLCs, conceptualised as MLCs in this study, that exist outside of bureaucratic frameworks. Due to the lack of institutionalised support for the development of MLCs, the formation and development of MLCs rely on a collaborative learning culture and directly reflect collectivist values. As part of the leadership collective, MLs often undertake an indispensable part of the process of realising the institution's macro development vision. As discussed earlier, under the influence of collectivist values, MLs are more likely to combine organisational development visions with individual development goals, thereby reflecting a high recognition of collectivism and collaboration in practice. Thus, MLCs have a shared vision regarding

organisational governance and change, which plays a guiding and motivating role in the MLs' capability-building process. That is, the deep-rooted inclinations to collectivism can promote the construction and development of bottom-up PLCs, thereby creating more structural opportunities for collaborative learning and dialogue among MLs (Zhang and Pang, 2016).

This study also reinforces the point that authoritative culture and its characteristics of respect for authority have an impact on PD but further suggests that the subjects occupying authoritative positions are evolving from single administrative officials to include other leaders especially with expert or professor identities. As an offshoot of the Chinese bureaucratic system, experts and scholars must bow to administrators at the provincial bureau or the national Ministry of Education, as they occupy positions of authority and enjoy a series of privileges (Li, 2016). This study states that through intentionally adjusting and redesigning development concepts, institutions, and the physical environment, professional knowledge is gradually being valued in institutional governance. Correspondingly, MLs who are experts in professional fields have significantly increased their discourse power in academic affairs and no longer mindlessly and compulsorily follow the administrative leadership of non-professionals. However, it does not mean the disappearance of the authority that accompanies the role of ILs, which is manifested in MLs' work as a relationship with ILs characterised by respect, fear, and obedience (Liu and Hallinger, 2021). The research findings indicate that even in the absence of administration instructions, MLs still feel the invisible authority of ILs when participating in PD activities, leading to the implicit compulsion of PD activities. In this case, inherent position authority combined with effective capability brings more autonomy and voice to MLs, which can resist top-down pressure. The construction of such autonomy comes from the ability of MLs to exert agency. That is, when MLs' capacities are sufficient to negotiate the space for their interests, they are relatively susceptible to executing or leading the process of personal capability-building for themselves or their subordinates. This finding is consistent with Philpott and Oates (2017) accentuating building the competence of individuals.

This study shows that although the cultural tradition of maintaining harmonious relationships is conducive to building mutual trust and good interpersonal relationships, blind pursuit of maintaining harmony could easily lead to a herd mentality and superficial cooperation. Pursuing harmony and avoiding conflicts is one of the organisational goals in the Chinese context. Previous studies have confirmed that educational institutions invest significant organisational resources in building harmonious relationships and teamwork (Walker and Qian, 2021). The findings state that MLs take the initiative to adjust or even change their behaviour during work and learning due to the pursuit of harmonious relationships. Supervisory behaviour within the scope of MLs' work is transformed into more acceptable mutual learning and sharing, echoing the avoidance of controlling and monitoring others to build trust in previous research (Qian, Walker and Yang, 2017). This transformation, in turn, promotes the construction of trust-based cooperative relationships among MLs and with others in the institution, which is a manifestation of organisational harmony and promotes the formation of a positive learning culture. However, this study foregrounds that if maintaining a harmonious relationship becomes a behavioural goal, it would directly hinder or even destroy the learning effects and collective endeavours of MLs. This situation can easily lead to the collective learning of MLs becoming superficial or not leading to genuine collaboration. At the same time, its negative impact significantly reduces the authenticity of peer evaluation and assessment. In this case, MLs are prone to develop a herd mentality, which leads individuals to compromise when participating in decision-making procedures and learning activities (Liu and Hallinger, 2018a). MLs often constitute an obstacle to authentic and effective reflective dialogue and evaluation for the sake of conflict avoidance.

Overall, the findings are consistent with previous studies showing that institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture have an impact on PD for organisational members involving MLs (Huang, Zhang and Huang, 2020; Nguyen, Pietsch and Gümüş, 2021). This study highlights that aligning the influencing factors

of these three dimensions can effectively construct enabling conditions to support PD for MLs in hierarchical educational institutions, which will be discussed in Chapter 8.

7.4.4 The Role of Agency between Institutional Conditions and PD for MLs

Based on the previous discussion, it is emphasised how institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture work together to influence PD for MLs and achieve MLs' capability-building. Notably, in addition to directly affecting the capability-building of MLs, this study also found that these institutional conditions in educational institutions enhance or hinder the quality of MLs' learning and capability-building by influencing their initiative, learning motivation, and attitude towards seeking and participating in PD activities. The research findings reveal that MLs who actively or consciously invest time and energy in PD activities with strong interactivity, contextualisation, and collaboration are more susceptible to achieving development goals. Existing research interprets such practice of actively participating in PD activities and enthusiastically implementing new developments as the agency, which is stimulated by institutional conditions and affects individual capability-building and development as an important psychological condition (Hallinger, Piyaman and Viseshsiri, 2017; Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016; Li and Hallinger, 2016).

In most literature, agency is theorised as the interaction between individual personality or capabilities and the affordances or resources for agency within a sociocultural context (Philpott and Oates, 2017). By its very nature, agency is a sociological and psychological concept that Emirbayer and Mische (1998) provided three dimensions for the agency - the iterational dimension (influences from the past), the projective dimension (orientations towards the future), and the practical-evaluative dimension (engagement with the present). In other words, individuals with different backgrounds and experiences have different thinking and behavioural patterns that may affect their fears, hopes, and desires for the future, as well as their ways of dealing with current needs, dilemmas, and ambiguity (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Biesta, Priestley and

Robinson, 2015). In education, the agency is closely related to personal power in the workplace and the power to participate in PD (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). It is often described as something that people can do (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson, 2015). Regarding PD, Frost (2006) and Shen (2015) pointed out that agency involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions, reflected in attitudes of self-efficacy, optimism, and constructive engagement. Liu, Hallinger and Feng (2016) divided agency into four dimensions based on the Chinese context: learning effectiveness, teaching effectiveness, optimism, and constructive engagement. In this study, the agency of MLs is conceptualised as MLs' initiative and motivation that involves a willingness to participate in PD activities and strive for necessary resources based on individual development needs, thereby promoting the realisation of institutional development vision.

The research findings show that institutional conditions actively interact with the agency of MLs, promoting their participation in PD activities. Firstly, this study demonstrates that support and investment from ILs can effectively awaken MLs' developmental awareness and actively seek learning opportunities. The research findings illustrate that leadership behaviours from ILs consciously guide MLs to establish expectations for the future, such as explaining development policies to MLs, assigning more leadership workload to MLs, investing resources and energy in PD activities, and expanding cultural promotion, which is conducive for MLs to identify with institutional development aspirations and realise the importance of personal capability-building. Secondly, ILs adjust structural and cultural conditions to encourage MLs to actively express their personal needs rather than only catering to different policy initiatives, which is beneficial for MLs to actively seek and develop learning resources. In practice, valuing the expert identity of MLs and trusting MLs' professional judgment can help them gain and strengthen confidence in obtaining resources to enhance further personal capabilities rather than passively waiting for allocation. The research findings also identify that ILs inviting MLs to participate in the PD planning process and effectively combining practical needs with institutional development vision stimulate

MLs to exert initiative. However, the achievement of the agency is mainly concentrated in informal PD activities, including MLCs that exist outside the bureaucratic framework.

This study emphasises that informal PD activities are regarded as a valuable affordance for the agency of MLs, as the agency is not used to achieve goals or standards set by others and has no additional accountability (Philpott and Oates, 2017). The gap between traditional PLCs and emerging MLCs is evident in this regard. Essentially, MLs do not need to bear additional accountability when exercising agency in informal PD activities (Van der Heijden et al., 2015). In China, high-stakes accountability in organisational structure is more of a constraint on the agency of MLs. The research findings illustrate that MLs undertake escalating routine work involving supervising and being supervised as well as accountability and being accountable, especially government-led external accountability regarding the role of civil servants, which hampers MLs from diverting their attention from institutional imperatives. In this case, top-down formal PD activities define their learning goals and content based on national policies or set by local authorities and educational institutions, which are imposed on them with little ownership. In contrast, MLs have autonomy over bottom-up informal PD activities, especially in informal dialogue and interaction. They are able to determine the format and theme of PD based on practical needs without high-stakes accountability and complex administrative procedures. In this sense, the agency of MLs can be effectively achieved.

In addition, the agency of MLs is affected by policy changes. This finding indicates that the more initiatives in policies that propose or support PD for MLs, the stronger the enthusiasm of MLs in participating in designing PD activities, developing learning resources, and collaborating with others for learning. Specifically, these policies empower MLs in the planning and implementing of PD activities in the form of connection systems and behavioural norms in practice and, to some extent, simplify administrative burdens. That is, the choice and decision-making power of MLs in personal capability-building has been effectively expanded (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007;

Philpott and Oates, 2017), which means that the agency related to authority and autonomy of MLs has increased. Although this discourse and decision-making power is limited, it can effectively motivate and leverage the agency of MLs in a policy-driven development country. Collectivism and hierarchical structures shape the leadership practices of ILs (Bush and Qian, 2000). Institutional leaders in China are viewed as having a more authoritative status on campus and tend to enjoy a range of political privileges (Tan and Dimmock, 2014). In this context, top-down policies and actions that demonstrate a focus on MLs through empowerment and humanistic care may have more significant effects, echoing the role of principals in Chinese schools in previous studies (Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016).

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter brings together the general findings drawn from the policy text and semi-structured interview data, discusses these findings within a conceptual framework, and attempts to provide answers to the core questions of this study.

The research findings reveal that the content of MLs' capabilities involves two dimensions and two directions, which can be achieved through PD activities - especially informal and comprehensive formats - as intermediary tools for capability-building. The most potent supporting evidence for this view is that pre-designed and well-structured PD activities are rooted in bureaucratic structures and accompanied by numerous informal learning opportunities. Systematic construction and administrative promotion provide enabling institutional conditions for PD to carry out social interactions and personal reflection, thereby enhancing the process of internalisation. It then focuses on analysing the difficulties and challenges encountered in PD for MLs in practice. This study provides sufficient empirical evidence to show that utilising PD as an administrative mandate increases the workload of MLs, which is susceptible to intensifying the contradiction between administrative control and professional

autonomy. In this regard, PD rooted in Chinese hierarchical educational institutions is influenced by institutional factors.

Based on the research findings about the basic status of PD for MLs, this study further analyses the mechanism of different factors at the institutional level on PD for MLs. Findings suggest that agency may be vital to mitigate the tensions faced by PD for MLs in Chinese hierarchical educational institutions. This chapter offers possible explanations for such mitigation from collective endeavours at institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture dimension that ensure MLs' professional autonomy and agency. By its very nature, this study believes that it is necessary to construct a conducive institutional setting in the Chinese context that can support PD for MLs in the above three dimensions.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This study responds to the call for literature review and the need for practice by exploring middle leaders' (MLs') capability-building and leadership construction from professional development (PD) participation and how institutional factors influence on the process in the Chinese hierarchical context. This chapter explains the construction of an enabling institutional setting with the intention of clarifying the logic of the findings. Reflection is made to gauge whether the research outcomes have answered research questions. It then discusses this study's potential contributions and highlights its importance in providing a Chinese perspective on PD for MLs. Following this, further research directions and opportunities are identified.

8.2 Key Findings

PD and learning do not occur spontaneously (Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016). This study elucidates the specific connotation of middle leadership, as a shifting configuration of role-sets, and confirms the specific pathways of MLs' capability-building and their characteristics and challenges in practice. From the social constructivist lens, MLs and PD activities are deeply rooted within institutional conditions of educational institutions, and thus their relationships with MLs' capability-building are affected by institutional forces in the specific context (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). On the basis of clarifying the typical formats, learning content, and operational mechanisms of PD for MLs, this study is to enhance understanding of how institutional conditions in hierarchical contexts work coherently as holistic models to intentionally build middle leadership capacity that supports institutions improvement and development agendas. The following sections will recapitulate the key findings of the study by revisiting the research questions.

RQ1: What is the status of current provision for professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?

RQ1.1 What are the policy aspirations for the PD for MLs in CHVCs?

This study shows that consistent with Chinese hierarchical culture, the process of MLs' capability-building is embedded in bureaucratic systems to top-down design and promote PD activities, aimed at achieving institutional development visions. Administrative authorities and educational institutions have introduced a series of policies regarding PD, such as goals, scale, structure, and rules, to promote and regulate MLs' participation in PD activities. Among them, educational institutions are given more autonomy to manage their affairs, including identifying learning resources and developing institution-based learning activities for PD for MLs. This study argues that the practice of organising and investing significant resources by governments and educational institutions to support MLs' capability-building is conducive to maintaining learning coherence and stimulating individual development awareness. As professionals and civil servants, MLs are empowered in policies and regulations to allocate more administrative and leadership workload, which is seen as an effective measure to overcome solo leadership's shortcomings. By its very nature, this is strong evidence of distributed leadership in the Chinese hierarchical context. Given the critical formal position of MLs, their capacity-building is expected to fulfil the roles of industry experts and department leaders simultaneously. Correspondingly, the development and learning of MLs are professional and political. That is, MLs are required to draw on specialised expertise and positional authority to play an important role in the bureaucratic framework and thereby initiate changes that align with the institutional vision. The findings of this study sit comfortably alongside the existing literature on PD and its emphasis on the potential of MLs in institutional governance, which moderates the tension between collegiality and hierarchical authority by aligning departmental goals with organisational mission. Notably, the authentic implementation and practice of MLs participation in PD activities is an issue.

RQ1.2 What is the experience of MLs engaging with PD in CHVCs?

This study found that in practice, the capacity building of MLs uses institutionally-driven PD as the main model in the context of the Chinese hierarchical system. This model aims to build the professional capabilities of MLs to fulfil complex roles, characterised using multi-dimensional professional standards and diverse pedagogy strategies with highly demonstrative. Institutionally-driven PD is consistent with the collectivistic cultural characteristics in educational institutions, which causes MLs to recognise the value of collaboration and be susceptible to becoming accustomed to collective learning activities. More importantly, they are, in most cases, willing to determine individual and departmental development goals based on organisational development stages and priorities. Such policy-oriented, problem-based PD helps educational institutions leverage the leadership collective's shared vision and capabilities to serve organisational development needs.

However, this study identifies apparent conflicts and contradictions during the practice process of PD for MLs in hierarchical educational institutions. On the one hand, there is tension between the political and professional aspects of PD for MLs. This outcome could be chiefly attributed to the fact that MLs occupy complex roles in bureaucracies and need to respond to the needs of different stakeholders. The outside not only requires MLs to supervise the work of peers and subordinates, but also expects MLs to establish harmonious relationships with others to assume responsibility for institutional improvement. Paradoxically, the former can easily lead to the breakdown of trust relationships and thus bring difficulties initiating the latter. Put at its simplest, the role of MLs is clearly conflicting. On the other hand, learning programmes aimed at capacity building of MLs disconnect from routine work. It is an unreasonable approach common in practice to directly summarise PD for MLs as the professional learning of backbone teachers, as it ignores the particularity of middle leadership positions, the complexity of context, and the embeddedness of knowledge. Existing development programmes focus on pedagogy and theoretical knowledge, which is less helpful for the real-life

problems of MLs in their leadership work. By comparison, learning formats that MLs consider able to build the capacity to deal and cope with other people in various contexts should receive sufficient attention and practice in hierarchical contexts.

RQ1.3 What are the implications for the extent to which policy aspirations and MLs' experience of PD match in CHVCs?

This study confirms that policy aspirations in the Chinese hierarchical context play a strong guiding role in practice, especially when it comes to capacity-building of MLs. Educational institutions and related organisations are required to organise and carry out appropriate learning activities for MLs occupying formal leadership positions in accordance with national policies and professional standards. Although policies encourage innovation and emphasise the importance of professional autonomy, most PD for MLs still rely on the top-down administrative system of educational institutions for careful design and arrangement. That is, PD for MLs in hierarchical contexts is bound by bureaucratic management knots, which invisibly squeeze out the professional autonomy and space of MLs. This does not mean that these activities are entirely ineffective. This study believes that MLs can still carry out real learning and collaboration within a formal framework. Notably, professional learning and other leadership behaviours are transformative when MLs are given more autonomy and transformed into professional agencies.

As mentioned above, although this study recognises that most PD for MLs practices are effective, there are still obvious practical challenges in constructing MLs capabilities. Drawing from the perspectives of current MLs in CHVCs, five main areas of difficulty are identified: unbalanced allocation of learning resource; conflict of structural arrangements; internal tension between autonomy and control; ignorance of Professional Learning Communities practice; ambiguous assessment of learning outcomes. This study reveals that these challenges constitute obstacles to promoting PD for MLs. It is worth noting that capacity building and PD for MLs occur and are

embedded in educational institutions. As such, there is a close connection between the practical challenges faced by PD for MLs and the institutional context. This study confirms that the adjustment and improvement of institutional conditions, including institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture, can effectively support the practice of PD for MLs in hierarchical educational institutions, facilitating the productive involvement of MLs in institutional improvement.

RQ2: In what ways and to what extent do institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture influence professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?

RQ2.1 How does institutional leadership influence PD for MLs?

This study further confirms that institutional leaders (ILs) play a vital role in PD and capacity-building of organisational members, including MLs. In the context of Chinese hierarchy, most initiatives come from the top rather than the bottom. ILs are empowered to lead any domain of institution affairs. Regarding PD for MLs, empirical evidence from both policy aspirations and practical experience suggests that as leadership team members occupying formal positions, PD for MLs should be a priority for ILs rather than additional ad hoc or peripheral work. This study identified ILs play an important role in supporting PD for MLs and constructing a suitable organisational environment, which involves five specific ways: constructing learning vision; building learning communities; optimising learning environment; regulating learning activities; setting learning role-models. MLs noted that ILs played a supportive role in their professional learning process beyond giving administrative instructions. This study confirms that ILs' development awareness can initiate, support, and sustain PD for MLs directly and indirectly.

Different from the stereotypical description of Chinese ILs in Western literature, this study found that ILs' leadership practices regarding PD for MLs in China combine

distributed and bureaucratic approaches. It is necessary to draw on the administrative power of ILs to arrange and promote PD programmes in the top-down practice of institutionally-driven PD, as this is conducive to coordinating all stakeholders to exert a synergistic role in the capacity-building of MLs. Notably, the administrative power of ILs needs to be constrained by a clear operational framework and mechanism, with each adapting to the boundaries of acceptability within existing systemic administration and influence relationships. Once MLs cannot recognise the boundaries, such administrative instructions from the top would be seen as excessive administrative intervention and thus engender difficulties in PD for MLs, such as superficial collaboration, and resistance to participation in PD. In addition, considering that MLs are an important part of the bureaucratic structure and are industry experts, empowering MLs and allocating more leadership opportunities are also confirmed in this study to be one of the effective ways to avoid unreasonable interference. This study shows that the sense of professional autonomy is related to the authority distributed to MLs. ILs re-clarify the allocation of responsibilities and the procedures for fulfilling responsibilities based on empowerment principles and policies that help promote MLs to take the initiative to invest time and energy in participating in PD activities.

RQ2.2 How does organisational structure influence PD for MLs?

As aforementioned, the attention and top-down promotion from ILs are of great significance to PD for MLs in hierarchical educational institutions. However, the situation in which ILs take the initiative to provide effective support to MLs' capability-building seems to presuppose that ILs have this awareness and cognition. In essence, such reliance on individual subjective consciousness to obtain resources has once again proven unstable. This study shows that embedding learning opportunities in the organisational structure (OS) and institutionalising on-the-job learning practices can help protect MLs' rights to participate in PD. The three critical areas of OS identified include formal management structure, organisational operating mechanisms, and multiple connection systems. This study emphasises that adapting OS to achieve

resource integration, delineation of authority, and coherent operations in educational institutions can help to re-establish an understanding of MLs' capacity-building and its role within the organisational improvement agenda.

This study argues that centralised systems provide the necessary structures and procedures for MLs' ongoing cross-spanning collaboration. In addition to well-structured formal learning activities, MLs build capacity by developing social networks with different stakeholders, such as government, other educational institutions, and industry. Evidence from CHVCs suggests that educational institutions have a mature institutional structure that promotes collaboration and flexible working relationships across hierarchical and traditional boundaries, which differs from the stereotyped description of Chinese overly hierarchical and stratified systems in Western literature. This study confirms that in the clear and systematic distribution of responsibilities, weakening departmental boundaries and simplifying administrative procedures accompanying PD is beneficial to reducing the bureaucratic burden of MLs carrying out and participating in learning activities, thereby generating genuine collaboration in the collective learning process. In addition to the formal design of power and structure, cultivating and leveraging professional learning communities (PLCs) that target MLs' competency development is a crucial way to expand structured learning opportunities. The learning opportunities in PLCs are often spontaneous and informal, which can make up for the inability of formal learning to deal with practical problems. This study further reveals that besides the rationally designed controls of OS for this type of PLCs, the cultivation of MLs' learning awareness and professional initiative requires the blessing of organisational culture, assuming major significance in both centralised and devolved systems.

RQ2.3 How does organisational culture influence PD for MLs?

This study confirms that MLs working in hierarchical educational institutions with a positive organisational culture (OC) have higher learning initiative and developmental

awareness levels. Empirical evidence from CHVCs shows that while developing and adapting a supportive set of structural conditions for effectiveness is important for PD for MLs, learning initiatives are a prerequisite for generating genuine collaboration and learning in hierarchical educational institutions. Accordingly, cultural conditions can exert a key role in emphasising MLs as agentic actors and achieving bottom-up change. This study confirms that PD for MLs is affected by OC from three levels, namely spiritual and ideological, institutional, and material level. Once the three dimensions of cultural conditions are aligned to achieve leading by shared values, professional standard orientation, and platform support, strong OC would cultivate effective middle leadership behaviours to achieve the desired capability building.

The widely accepted characteristics of Chinese culture are high power distance and respect for authority. This study believes that MLs have a small social distance from ILs and front-line teachers by virtue of their dual identities as members of the leadership group and industry experts. In formulating and communicating the organisational shared vision, MLs have the opportunity to express their personal opinions and needs, making it more susceptible for them to identify with administrative policies and professional standards. Meanwhile, supportive workplace conditions create more enabling settings to cultivate collaborative learning behaviours, such as spontaneous sharing of experiences and mutual learning, and building trusting relationships. It facilitates the formation of collective beliefs and an open mindset about collaborative learning among MLs. In addition, this study shows that academic authority in the Chinese hierarchical educational institutions is gradually returning to academic experts and scholars. This shift advocates protecting PD from excessive outside interference. As industry experts, MLs' development needs and plans are respected. This study reveals that this bottom-up learning initiative is a powerful driving force for MLs to pursue continuous PD and capacity-building.

8.3 Implication

Drawing on the key findings from the study, some implications can be made for theories on distributed leadership and professional development, and for educational practice.

8.3.1 Implications for Theory

As reviewed in Chapter 2, MLs have great potential in educational institutions in their pursuit of continuous organisational development (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). The importance of middle leadership construction in improving institutional governance is of great significance in both centralised and devolved systems. It is worth considering the extent to which most theories and concepts originating from Western societies are applicable to Asian societies, especially the Chinese hierarchical environment with its special institutional structures and cultural norms. This study adds to this body of knowledge that explores MLs' capability-building from PD participation while applying distributed leadership theory in centralised settings. Based on distributed leadership, instructional leadership and transformational leadership were combined in this study to comprehensively analyse the policy aspiration and practical experience for PD for MLs, and thus reveal the manifestations and challenges of MLs' capability-building process from PD participation in the Chinese context. It is conducive to deepen the understanding of the pathways and opportunities for MLs to participate in PD activities in hierarchical contexts. This study does not pursue an approach to capacity building for MLs that is applicable to all cultures and backgrounds. However, it is undeniable that this study provides experiences and revelations from China, which enrich theories developed and honed in Western contexts with practical evidence in hierarchical contexts.

Notably, personal professional development and learning do not happen spontaneously (Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016). The bulk of previous research has established that organisational conditions influence continuing PD in educational institutions and that

personal factors play a moderating role (Hallinger, Piyaman and Viseshsiri, 2017; Liu, Hallinger and Feng, 2016; Li and Hallinger, 2016). To this end, it is vital to explore and understand how Chinese educational institutions can be built to respond effectively to the need to improve the capabilities of MLs. This study focuses on the organisational conditions of CHVCs, involving institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture, and discusses the manner in which organisational conditions influence PD for MLs. By applying the conceptual framework, this study adds to knowledge about the impact of various organisational conditions on PD and leadership building in a hierarchical context. Supporting evidence found in the study again shows that distributed leadership theory can coexist with centralisation and hierarchy (Lu and Smith, 2021). Institutional leaders (ILs) facilitate PD for MLs by empowering MLs and providing a supportive structural and cultural environment. This study confirms that professional autonomy can serve as the stimuli for agency and transformative behaviour to foster bottom-up change from MLs. At the same time, coupled with properly designed top-down control and supervision, this study provides a promising method to alleviate the tension between collegiality and administrative hierarchy faced by MLs in the leadership construction process in the Chinese context. Evidence from this study further demonstrates that when conditions along the three dimensions in educational institutions are aligned, organisational environments can work synergistically to overcome adverse conditions and generate genuine learning and collaboration.

8.3.2 Implications for Practice

As aforementioned, a growing body of work discusses the practice of leadership constructs in diverse contexts around the world. This study has no intention to pursue one-size-fits-all or impose a globally homogenized format on other contexts. However, this study has potential implications for the practice of developing middle leadership and the design and construction of enabling institutional conditions in a general sense.

First, this study focuses on the challenges and difficulties MLs face in participating in learning activities and establishing relationships in a hierarchical context. Although distributed leadership theory and term professional development come from Western contexts, a large number of previous studies confirm that the importance of collective efforts and continuous development has been embedded in Chinese educational institutions under Chinese traditional institutional and cultural context (Bush and Qian, 2000; Tang, Lu and Hallinger, 2014; Liu and Hallinger, 2021; Qian and Walker, 2021). This study supports the position that middle leadership practices in the Chinese context combine distributed and bureaucratic approaches through top-down delegation and distribution. MLs take on more leadership workload, thus their ability building and improvement are given priority. This study analyses the challenges and difficulties in the process of PD for MLs, which makes for perceived differences among MLs in practice. These identified challenges have implications for the practice of leadership building in international contexts.

Second, educational institutions should commit to designing and deploying a supportive structure and procedures for the successful work of MLs. This study considers that when authority is decentralised to the level of educational institutions, the responsibility for optimising organisational conditions rests with ILs. More importantly, the allocation of leadership mandates and opportunities to MLs in the Chinese hierarchical context is also controlled by ILs. Empirical evidence from CHVCs clarifies the specific pathways through which institutional leadership, organisational structure, and organisational culture influence PD for MLs. On the one hand, ILs' personal abilities and leadership behaviours are considered in this study as part of the learning resources directly involved in PD for MLs. On the other hand, this study further confirms that using organisational structure to fix top-down learning opportunities and organisational culture to cultivate bottom-up learning initiatives is the basic strategy for ILs to play a supporting role in PD for MLs. This practice of clarifying power boundaries and constructing a learning culture is seen as a promising approach to moderate the tension between collegiality and administrative hierarchy in

the Chinese context. These experiences help PD address the dilemma of organisational bureaucracy and individual professional autonomy in practice (Kennedy, 2014).

8.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Notably, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, this study cannot distinguish the impact of educational institutions at different levels of development on PD for MLs. The sample colleges in this study come from the latest selected high-level vocational colleges in China. The CHVCs identified for this plan represent the top level of higher vocational education in the Chinese mainland. In other words, the environment in which this study is conducted has a developed external environment, such as sufficient funding, advanced awareness, and a positive atmosphere. Therefore, this study cannot reveal through clear comparison the attitudes and behaviours of MLs in CHVCs at different developmental levels when it comes to PD and capacity-building. In order to more comprehensively understand the knowledge of PD for MLs in the Chinese context, future research can explore practical experiences of MLs in CHVCs at different developmental levels regarding PD.

Secondly, this study cannot explain the role that personal characteristics play in the process when organisational factors influence PD for MLs. From the literature review to the interview outline design, this study only focuses on the impact of factors from the organisational level on PD for MLs. However, during the interviews, I became aware of changes in personal characteristics and factors and their possible positive or negative impact on PD and learning. Nonetheless, this study only analysed the interviewees' responses without an in-depth explanation of their personal characteristics, as it is not the focus of this study. In fact, research findings and perspectives from teachers professional learning can inspire research around MLs, such as the mediating or moderating role of personal factors in the PD process. To explain the impact of different factors on PD for MLs in more detail, future research should also add personal characteristics to explore how organisational factors affect individuals.

Thirdly, this study has certain methodological limitations. This study relies on documentary data in the first phase. Although this study collects policies and regulations from different levels and specific programmes of CHVCs, the content presented in the text has a certain administrative and political nature. In order to offset the negative impact of this characteristic and enhance the feasibility of the study, this study utilised the snowballing method to collect interview data from MLs. In this process, interviewees with similar experiences and opinions may appear in this study simultaneously, as they have a close relationship. Meanwhile, since the data collection stage is during the pandemic, the length of empirical evidence collection is limited, and the interview data is not very rich. To increase the quantity and validity of the data, future research should involve more MLs, institutional leaders, frontline teachers, and other stakeholders.

Finally, this study is a small-scale study, thus limiting the richness of the findings. The documentary data and interview data of this study all come from Shandong Province. As the birthplace of Confucian culture, institutions located in Shandong Province may be more influenced by traditional Chinese culture. During the interviews, some interviewees mentioned effective experiences and practices from other provinces. However, limited by the scale of the study, this study cannot describe the regional differences between different regions and cannot reveal the full story of the regions in the Chinese mainland. Certainly, this study does not seek to achieve statistical generalisability. It is undeniable that to gain a more comprehensive understanding, future research is necessary to be conducted in different regions.

8.5 Autobiographical Reflection

This is the last part of the entire thesis writing, which means that my doctoral career is coming to an end. This study is what I have been doing for the past three years. I once lamented that a person who can only do one thing a year without being disturbed by the outside world is lucky. In this sense, my study has given me this blessing. Although this

thesis has certain limitations, it has irreplaceable significance for me to gradually grow into an independent researcher.

Looking back on my initial confusion, three years of exploration and analysis finally gave me the answer. I understood why the leaders I met in my previous job still maintained their enthusiasm and belief in their own ongoing development. Although she encountered different challenges and obstacles in the process of pursuing progress, she still did not choose to give up learning and development opportunities as a responsibility. I also truly understood what she often said - when there are no favourable conditions, you must create conditions to persist in working hard again. Looking back on the past three years, I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to explore topics that interest me. I believe that my interest and enthusiasm can lead me to continue further research and study.

Throughout the process of clearing my confusion, I truly felt a change in myself. Initially, I needed my supervisory team to give me intensive feedback and opinions on my draft. On this basis, I was able to further improve my analysis and writing work, which brought me a massive sense of accomplishment. At that time, I was touched by the patience and trust my supervisors had in me. I thought that I would never be able to leave this kind of guidance. By mid-2023, I realised I could gradually and independently review my previous drafts and identify areas needing further revision. This change made me excited and ashamed because I found that I was making progress, and at the same time, I was ashamed of my immature writing in the past.

I understand there are many reasons for the change, such as the professional guidance of my supervisory team and my own efforts. It makes me extremely grateful every time I think about it. I am clear that I walk alone at the end of a period of growth. However, I always believe that the trust and encouragement from my supervisors during the doctoral stage will always be the ray of light that illuminates my path forward. I will always strive to become a qualified independent researcher.

Appendices

Appendix 1 The Ethical Application Form submitted to University of Glasgow

Staff & PGR: November 2021 V6



College of Social Sciences College Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research involving Human Participants/Data

Staff and Postgraduate Research Students: Application Form for ethical approval

Before completing this form, refer to the guidance notes available at [College ethics information](#) and [Ethics Information for Applicants](#).

Completed, typed forms (with supporting documents) should be submitted electronically via the [Research Ethics System](#).

Submit applications **at least 6 weeks in advance** of the intended data collection start date, allowing time for applications to be reviewed, and any recommended amendments to be made.

Applications requiring PVG Clearance/permissions to access participants will not be approved until evidence of this is received by Ethics Administrator. Guidance is available at [PVG Guidance](#).

Applicant Details

Staff Research Project Postgraduate Research Project

Name of Applicant Ni Zhang

Student ID/Staff Number

School & Subject (Cluster/RKT group) School of Education

PGR Programme Title (Where applicable) PhD in Education (Research)

Application Details

Project Title Policies and Practices of and Conditions for Professional Development for Middle leaders in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

Data Collection Start Date At least 6 weeks after application submission 13/06/2022

Proposed Project End Date e.g. date of PhD award, article submission, end of funding 01/10/2023

Is this application being submitted to another ethics committee, or has it been previously submitted to another ethics committee? Yes No

If YES provide details Enter text here

Is the research subject to external funding? (i.e. a sponsor or funding body) Yes No

If YES provide details Enter text here

Does the research involve using networked or electronic data such as internet platforms, apps, social media, secondary data, Big Data? Yes No

If YES you must complete and submit the 'Protocol for research dealing with non-standard human data'
This can be downloaded from the [College ethics website](#).

1 Description of project Give a brief description of the project.

This research is positioned in the Chinese higher vocational education colleges (CHVCs). Based on the analysis of the current situation and differences in the professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs, the purpose of this study is to explore the factors that affect the professional development for middle leadership in the organizational dimension. By analysing the current situation and exploring the influencing factors, the researcher will give specific professional opinions on the formulation of CHVCs policies on the professional development for middle leaders. This study will fill the gap about professional development for middle leaders in Chinese educational environment under the new reform, and it will facilitate the overall progress of middle leadership in CHVCs.

Research questions:

1. What is the status of current provision for professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?
2. In what ways and to what extent do organizational structure, institutional leadership and institutional culture influence professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?

! Application will be returned if Ethical Risks section is incomplete !

PGR Applications – Supervisors must complete and sign this section, approving submission for ethical review.

Staff Applications – Applicant must complete and sign this section, confirming submission for ethical review.

2 Ethical Risks Comment on any potential research ethics risks involved in the project, and any steps taken to mitigate these risks. Risk Guidance Document is available at [Ethics Forms](#)

I consider the research ethics risk to be low with this application. The researcher in question is not a colleague of the participants and has no working relationship or involvement with the research sites in question. The plain language statement makes it clear that involvement in the project is entirely voluntary and no participant will be disadvantaged by taking part. The focus of the research is on vocational colleges and the factors impacting middle leadership which reflects an onging issue in these colleges, and therefore of direct relevance and interest to the participants – the content of the interviews should pose little risk to their working practices.

X)

X 31/03/2022

3 Names of Researchers/Supervisors

3.1 All Researchers including research assistants and transcribers where appropriate

| Title | First and Surname | Telephone | Email (usually UofG) |
|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| PhD Student | Ni Zhang | | n.zhang.3@research.gla.ac.uk |
| Enter text here | Enter text here | Enter text here | Enter text here |
| Enter text here | Enter text here | Enter text here | Enter text here |

3.2 All Supervisors Principal Supervisor first where applicable

| Title | First and Surname | Telephone | Email (usually UofG) |
|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| Dr | Mark Murphy | 01413303023 | Mark.Murphy.2@glasgow.ac.uk |
| Dr | Dong Nguyen | Enter text here | Dong.Nguyen@glasgow.ac.uk |
| Enter text here | Enter text here | Enter text here | Enter text here |

4 Justification for the research

Why is this research **significant** to the wider community? What might be the **impact** on your practice or on the practice of others? How will the possible **benefits** to researchers, participants, and others, realised from the project justify any risks or discomfort involved?

The research on professional development and its occurrence conditions and methods have made significant progress in the past thirty years. In the educational environment, faculty professional development takes priority (Mampone, 2017). Some scholars review it in conjunction with leadership performance and school reform (McCauley and Brutus, 2011; Bredeson, Kelley, and Klat, 2012; Edwards and Ellis, 2012). The formation of a standardized professional development system in educational institutions is helpful to maintain high-level development.

Middle leadership is the "active wheel" for Chinese higher vocational education colleges (CHVCs) to improve their school-running capabilities and comprehensive competitiveness. Middle leaders, as executors, coordinators, and participants of development strategies, play a linking role in the leadership team of colleges. As a developing country in education, China has begun to pay more attention to middle leadership in recent years, but there has been little research. In general, most of the existing research in China is a useful exploration in the general higher education environment, and there is no comprehensive and standardized

empirical research on middle leadership in CHVCs. Comprehensively comparing the research status at home and abroad, learning from the experience and achievements of foreign middle leadership research, and actively carrying out localized research, have an irreplaceable role in Chinese higher vocational education reform and the quality and training of CHVCs.

Although research on middle leadership in CHVCs has made some progress, the limitations are evident when compared with other countries. This research is positioned in the CHVCs. Based on the analysis of the current situation and differences in the professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs, the purpose of this study is to explore the factors that affect the professional development for middle leadership in the organizational dimension. By analyzing the current situation and exploring the influencing factors, the researcher will give specific recommendations on the formulation of CHVCs policies on the professional development for middle leaders. This study will fill the gap about professional development for middle leaders in the Chinese educational environment under the new reform, and it will facilitate the overall progress of middle leadership in CHVCs.

5 Research Methodology and Data Collection

5.1 Method of data collection You are **required to provide** indicative themes/questions in separate documents, in sufficient detail to present a clear view of the project and its ethical implications.

Select all that apply

| Method | Selected |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 5.1a Face to face or telephone interview | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.1b Online interview, for example using Teams or Zoom | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.1c Focus group | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.1d Questionnaire | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.1e Online questionnaire Provide indicative electronic copy with application pending online version | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.1f Participant observation Provide an observation proforma | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.1g Audio or video-recording interviewees, focus groups or events Provide evidence of permission on the consent form. Details should be provided, either in theme/question information or separately. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 5.1h Other methodology | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| If Other selected above, provide details here: Document Analysis (Policy documents at national, provincial, and institutional levels) | |

5.2 Research Methods

Explain the reasons for the chosen method/s, the estimated time commitment required of participants and how the data will be analysed. Include reference to methods of providing confidentiality as indicated below.

This research aims to explore the basic blueprint of professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs and explain its influencing factors, and the researcher choose the qualitative research. A literature review found a lack of research on professional development for middle leadership, especially in CHVCs. Therefore, this study has a solid exploratory nature. Depending on the purpose of this research and the specific research question, the researcher needs to develop the theory further to strengthen interpretation. New empirical data is used to explain phenomena. Therefore, this study uses the phenomenology, which allows in-depth exploration of how phenomena appear to us in our consciousness and the nature and meaning of such phenomena. The researcher attempts to analyse the theories or explanations about professional development for middle leaders emerging from the data collected through exhaustive research.

The data collection in this research consists of three phases. During the first phase of the research, official policies and institutional documents on the professional development of incumbents from Ministry of Education (MOE), Shandong Provincial Department of Education (SDPDOE) and the college's Personnel Division are collected upon approval. In the second phase of the research, the researcher will combine purposive sampling and snowball sampling as sampling methods, and recruit middle leaders as interviewees in college A. The researcher will check the email addresses of middle leaders on the college official website and ask them if they would like to participate in this interview. The relevant information and documents of this study are attached to the email. After obtaining the approval of middle leaders, the researcher will conduct the necessary pilot study and then begin to schedule and conduct face-to-face interviews. If there are not enough responses, the researcher will seek help from middle leaders who volunteered to be interviewed to recommend other middle leaders who are willing to participate. Finally, in the third phase, the researchers will design the second round of interviews based on the analyse results of Phase 1 and Phase 2. The followed-up interviews will mainly focus on emerging themes through in-depth discussion with the interviewees.

Through the analysis of relevant documents, the background and status of the professional development for middle leaders will gradually become clear. Through the document analysis, national-level guidelines and instructions were sorted out. At the same time, the attention support means and financial investment for the professional development of incumbents formulated at the organizational level according to the relevant national requirements are gradually clarified. Through comparative analysis, the researcher determined the extent to which the former influences the latter and see a standard view across the country. This resulted in a more in-depth analysis of the documents of the various agencies. During this phase, document collection and analysis work is expected to begin on June 13th, 2022 and continue until June 30th, 2022. The first phase will take about one month. In addition, the necessary pilot study of semi-structured interviews and interview data analysis will be conducted by the end of June. The pilot study will involve 3 middle leaders and the findings will inform the preparation for data collection of Phase 2.

To better understand the perspectives of middle leaders about participating in professional development, the researcher needs to analyse further the factors that influence it and needs to conduct in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 15 participants to develop a detailed description of the specific situation given by each participant. This study will use semi-structured interviews to collect data on opportunities (activities) supported from CHVCs to professional development for middle leaders and factors influencing the

professional development for middle leaders, that is, given topics and open-ended questions to be answered by interviewees. The interview consists of three parts, which are the basic information of the interviewees, professional development actual opportunities (activities) and influencing factors. The questions both in the second and third part revolve around three themes that are significantly relevant to the literature review. It will be finally determined that the three parts contained 24 questions. Each semi-structured face-to-face interview will take 50 to 60 minutes. Overall, the required interview time for the second phase is 750-900 minutes and for the third phase is about 300 minutes. Considering safety reasons, all interviews will take place in the public place, such as the participant's workplace or institutional meeting room. The researcher will analyse data following specific steps for grounded theory analysis. This data, in conjunction with the document analysis, provided the researcher with the basic interpretation prior to the second-round semi-interviews and gave a way to guide the follow-up interview questions. This phase will last for two months. Specifically, the researcher will conduct face-to-face interviews with 7 middle leaders at College A on July 1st to July 3rd. Transcription and analysis of the interview data will begin immediately and is expected to be completed by early August. The researcher will then conduct interviews with 8 other middle leaders. Interviews will be completed from August 4th to 7th, and data transcription and analysis will be completed by the end of August. In September, the researcher will conduct an in-depth analysis of all interview data and memos, and develop new interview outlines and questions for the second-round of interviews.

The third phase aims to excavate emerging themes further and explore the key degree of each influencing factor on the research phenomenon. The researcher sought participants from the first-round interviewees to participate in the followed-up interviews voluntarily. This phase will occur when the researcher returns the results of the first round of interview data analysis to the interviewees for verification. The format of semi-structured interviews will continue to be selected as the data collection tool in this phase, and the principle will remain to respect the interviewees' wishes. The topic guide will be determined by the second stage data analysis results. This will also help interviewees have the opportunity to express any further thoughts they may have after the interview. It could be "mulling over", "reliving", "prioritizing," or "clarifying". Furthermore, the second-round of interviews is expected in October 2022 and the data collection process in the third phase is similar to the second phase, which is deemed not to fall outside of their comfort zones, and it facilitates the opportunity for deeper reflection and obtaining insights into internal conversations.

6 Confidentiality and Data Handling

6.1 Will the research involve: (Click to right of **Select method** at top of column to indicate method and select all that apply)

| | INTERVIEW | SELECT METHOD | Select method | Select method | Select method |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Degree of Anonymity | | | | | |
| 6.1a De-identified samples or data (i.e. a reversible process whereby identifiers are replaced by a code, to which the researcher retains the key, in a secure location?) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 6.1b Anonymised samples or data (i.e. an irreversible process whereby identifiers are removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers. It is then impossible to identify the individual to whom the sample of information relates)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6.1c Complete anonymity of participants (i.e. researchers will not meet, or know the identity of participants, as participants are part of a random sample and are required to return responses with no form of personal identification)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Use of Names | | | | | |
| 6.1d Subject being referred to by pseudonym in any publication arising from the research? | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6.1e Participants consent to being named? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6.1g Participants being made aware that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee; for example, in the event of disclosure of harm or danger to participants or others | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6.1h Participants being made aware that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee; for example, due to size of sample, particular locations etc.? | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6.1i Participants being made aware that data may be shared/archived or re-used in accordance with Data Sharing Guidance provided on Participant Information Sheet? | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6.1f Any other methods of protecting the privacy of participants? (e.g. use of direct quotes with specific, written permission only; use of real name with specific, written permission only): | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If you have selected Other above provide details here Enter text here | | | | | |

6.2 The following methods of assuring confidentiality of data will be implemented:

Select all that apply

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>6.2a Data will be stored at University of Glasgow</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Paper (kept secure in locked facility/cabinet) * Electronic (files to be available by password only and data encrypted; see UofG/IT/InformationSecurity/ConfidentialData for guidance) | <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> |
| <p>6.2b Data will be stored at another site provide details/address below</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Paper (kept secure in locked facility/cabinet) * Electronic (files to be available by password only and data encrypted; see UofG/IT/InformationSecurity/ConfidentialData for guidance) <p>(Provide details/address below)</p> <p>Enter text here</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p> |
| <p>6.2c Other (other methods of securing confidentiality of data in transmission, access and storage) (e.g. data to be encrypted for transmission/security measures if data sent outside UK; cloud storage and access) See UofG Data management support and link given above.</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/></p> |
| <p>If you have selected Other above provide details here:</p> <p>Enter text here</p> | |

7 Access to data

7.1 Will anyone other than those named above (researchers, supervisors, examiners, research assistants, Heads of Department, transcribers) **access the research data?** Yes No

If YES please provide details below. If e.g. transcribers or research assistants are not known at this time, please forward details to Ethics Administrator when available.

Enter text here

7.2 Retention and disposal of PERSONAL data

Explain/justify your proposals for retention and disposal of any PERSONAL data to be collected. The definition of personal data is available at [UofG GDPR Changes](#). Further information on GDPR is available at [UofG GDPR Guidance](#)

There is a clear plan for the retention and disposal of the collected personal data in this research. According to the relevant regulations of UofG GDPR Changes, any information relating to a data subject which can be identified, directly or indirectly by that information, including name, pseudonymised data, staff number, location data and others, will be uniformly destroyed at the end of this research. This research includes three phases. Since the researcher needs to perform a comprehensive analysis of different types of data when the research enters the data analysis and discussion, personal data has irreplaceable value in the later stages of the research. Therefore, the researcher will dispose of the personal data together at the complete conclusion of the research. A shredder will destroy the paper version of personal data, and the electronic version will be deleted using secure deletion software.

7.3 Retention and disposal of RESEARCH data

Explain/justify your proposals for retention and disposal of RESEARCH data to be collected. PGR/Staff research data is expected to be retained for 10 years. Further guidance is available in [Code of Good Practice in Research](#). For Data Management Support, visit [Data Management](#)

Throughout the research work, the researcher will be required to keep clear and accurate records of the procedures followed and the results obtained, including interim results. Research data other than personal data will remain securely held by the researcher for ten years after completing the research. Research data will be held by the researcher and will be securely stored at the University of Glasgow, in electronic files and on Microsoft OneDrive to be available by password only and data encrypted. If any problem with either of the ways that the researcher still have a data reset. These research data have long-term value. It may underpin a publication or thesis or form the basis of a future funding application in the future.

8 Dissemination of results:

(select all that apply)

| Method | To Participants | To Peers/Colleagues |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 8.1a Dissertation | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 8.1b Thesis (e.g. PhD) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 8.1c Journal Articles | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 8.1d Conference Papers | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 8.1e Written summary of results to all if requested | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 8.1f Other or none of the above | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If you have selected Other above provide details here: Enter text here | | |

9 Datasets suitable for future re-use will be:

| | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 9.1a Openly available via data repository (UKDA, Enlighten, Research Data) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9.1b Available via a data repository but with restricted access | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9.1c Available from researchers by personal request | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 9.1d None of the data will be suitable for future access/reuse | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9.1e Other or none of the above | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If you have selected Other above provide details here: Enter text here | |

10 Participants

10.1 How do you intend to recruit participants? Provide as much detail as you can, including what age/type of group will be used for each research activity involved, e.g. interviews

Regarding recruiting participants, this research will be conducted at two-time points separately. The recruitment method adopts electronic recruiting. The researcher will approach potential participants individually. First, for the first semi-structured interview phase, the researcher will recruit 15 middle leaders as participants in four comprehensive CHVCs in Shandong Province, China. After receiving ethical approval, the pilot study will be conducted in the middle leadership of college A and will involve 3 middle leaders. The researcher will combine purposive sampling and snowball sampling as sampling methods, and recruit middle leaders as interviewees in college A. The researcher will check the email addresses of middle leaders on the college official website and ask them if they would like to participate in this interview. The content of the email will briefly describe the nature of the research and the criteria for participation. At the same time, a clear indication that this is a request for help from a researcher should be given at the beginning of an email and that the reader, if not interested, should 'hit the delete button'. The email will include the researcher's contact information at the end. If the reader of the email is interested in participating, then he or she should be asked to contact the researcher directly (not a group reply). After completing the first-round qualitative data analysis, the followed-up interview will be developed based on its results. The second electronic recruiting will start when the researcher returns the results of the first round of interview data analysis to the interviewees for verification. The principle will remain to respect the wishes of the interviewees.

10.2 Target Participant Group Guidance on the age of legal capacity available on [Age of Legal Capacity \(Scotland\)](#) and also [Principles of Consent \(England, Wales and Northern Ireland\)](#)

Select all that apply

| | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 10.2a Students * or Staff of the University of Glasgow (* See Working with Glasgow University Students) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10.2b Adults (over 18 years old and competent to give consent) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 10.2c Adults (over 18 years old who may not be competent to give consent) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10.2d Young people ages 16-17 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10.2e Children under 16 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> |

10.3 Will financial inducements/incentives, other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time, be offered to participants? Yes No

If YES provide details

Enter text here

10.4 Number of participants Give details of different age groups/activities involved for each method of data collection

In this research, the selected research samples involve 15 middle leaders and all of them are from China. Primary data will be collected through two rounds of semi-structured interviews with 15 participants. Considering the representativeness, feasibility and accessibility of the sampling, the researcher will select four comprehensive CHVCs in Shandong Province.

It is necessary to note that the sample size is not specified and determined in qualitative research, and suitability for research purposes is the primary condition. The researcher need sufficient data until the theory is saturated (i.e., new data no longer generate elements that need to be added to the theory) to achieve the effect of theoretical explanation of the phenomenon under research. For this research, considering the feasibility and rationality, the researcher chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with 15 middle leaders in four CHVCs. Then, candidates for the second-round of interviews will be selected from these interviewees.

10.5 Are any of the participants in a dependent relationship with any of the investigators, particularly those involved in recruiting for or conducting the project? i.e. student/teacher, employee/employer, patient/doctor, student/supervisor etc.

Yes No

If YES provide details

Enter text here

11 Location of research participants

| | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 11a University of Glasgow | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11b Outside location/s provide details/address below Considering safety reasons, all interviews will take place in public place, such as the participant's workplace or institutional meeting room. All colleges are in Shandong Province, China. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

12 Permissions to access participants

12.1 Do you require permission to gain access to research participants within an organisation? e.g.

Academic institution, **including University of Glasgow**, Private Company; school; Local Authority; Voluntary Organisation; Overseas institution.

Yes No

12.2 If YES

is evidence of this permission provided with this application? Yes No

NB: Separate permission to survey students must be obtained, usually from the appropriate authority, prior to any such survey being undertaken once ethical approval has been granted. Once obtained, proof of permission must be forwarded to the Ethics Administrator. More details available on [Information for Applicants](#). See [Working with Glasgow University Students](#)

12.3 If applicable, list the University of Glasgow students that you intend to contact e.g. 30 students from X course. [Information for Applicants](#) has guidance.

Enter text here

12.4 If NO

to either of the above questions, explain why permission is NOT required, or why evidence is not provided with this application:

This research belongs to a student research project and takes place in mainland China. The researcher will contact participants individually. All questions and information will not damage any individual or institution.

13 Informed Consent Consult the guidance on [Ethics Forms](#) page to understand what you are required to provide in the Participant Information Sheet (a written 'plain language' statement that explains your project and invites participation)

| Participant Information | YES | NO |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 13a Have you attached your Participant Information Sheet? | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13b Will a copy of the Participant Information Sheet be offered to participants to keep? | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| If NO to 13a or 13b above, please give details here: Enter text here | | |

| | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 13c Are any participants likely to require special consideration in the preparation of the Participant Information Sheet, to ensure informed consent? e.g. use of child friendly language or English as a second language | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <p>If YES to 13c above, please give details here:</p> <p>Enter text here</p> | | |

14 How will informed consent by individual participants or guardians be evidenced? Written evidence of informed consent is normally obtained and retained using a formal consent form, with copies provided for review select all that apply

| Participant Consent | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 14a Signed consent form | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 14b Recorded verbal consent | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14c Confirmed by return of survey (evidence of clear agreement of consent to use participant data must be provided at start of survey e.g. by use of tick box) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14d Other | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <p>If you have selected Other above provide details here:</p> <p>Enter text here</p> | |

15 Justification, if **written** evidence of informed consent will **NOT** be obtained and retained:

Enter text here

16 Monitoring

16 How will the project be monitored to ensure that the research is being carried out as approved e.g. give details of regular meetings/skype/email contact.

The researcher will meet with supervisors regularly to report the progress of the research. If research difficulties are encountered, the researcher will contact supervisors for professional guidance as soon as possible.

17 Health and Safety/Risk

17 Will the project have any personal safety implications for you, and/or all other researchers and participants involved in the research? (This should include risks associated with COVID-19 but **other** than lone fieldwork – refer to Section 18 for this)

Yes No

If YES, please explain the potential issues and how you intend to manage them:

The world is currently amid a pandemic. The researcher will collect data in mainland China. Chinese control of the epidemic is relatively strict and effective. The researcher will conduct data collection by local requirements. In order to protect the researcher's own safety, the researcher will do PCR tests regularly to minimize the risk.

18 Risk

18.1 Does the activity involve lone field work, lone working or travel to unfamiliar places? See

[Information for Applicants, Lone Working](#) Yes No

If YES, please explain

The researcher will collect data in Chinese different cities. The researcher will hand over plans with time and place to supervisors before travelling to different cities. At the same time, the researcher will also maintain close contact with parents. The researcher will use the mobile phone with agreed contact times with parents who know where the researcher is, and the length of time expected to be there. The meeting will be in a public location rather than participants' homes is also recommended.

18.2 Does this research include any sensitive topics or vulnerable groups? Risk guidance is available at [Ethics Forms](#)

Yes No

If YES, please explain the reason for including these and how the sensitivity will be managed

18.3 How will you ensure that you minimise any possible distress caused to any participants by the research process? Consider potential disruption or negative consequences that could cause emotional, social or economic distress.

During the research, the researcher will immediately stop asking questions if there are various discomfort or accidents caused by the participants' problems (including emotional, psychological, physical, social, or economic). At the same time, timely contact relevant staff to conduct a comprehensive inspection of the participants. In addition, the informed consent form will be provided to participants before interviews.

18.4 What procedures are in place for the appropriate referral of a study participant who discloses an emotional, psychological, health, education, or other issue during the course of the research or is identified by the researcher to have such a need?

Before starting the study, researchers will prepare the contact information of professionals in the field of emotion or health in case of need. Once participants disclose emotional, psychological, health, educational or other problems during the research, the researcher will provide effective information and solve the problems in time.

18.5 Does this project require Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) clearance? Guidance available at [UofG Protection of Vulnerable Groups](#) and additionally at: [MyGov Types of Disclosure](#)

Yes No

If YES please provide confirmation of certification held or being sought

Enter text here

19 Please provide additional details if the proposed research involves:

- Work involving the use of research participants outside GB, NI, the Channel Islands, or the Isle of Man
- The use of hazardous materials
- Non CE marked medical devices
- Molecules or compounds developed and manufactured at the UofG
- Number of participants in excess of 5000
- Work involving research participants known to be pregnant at the time of the project

Activity involving any of the above may require additional insurance cover to be put in place

See [Insurance Guidance](#)

Please contact debra.stuart@glasgow.ac.uk for further information regarding additional insurance requirements

If applicable, please provide details

Enter text here

20 Government Legislation further information available at [Information for Applicants](#)

| 20.1 Have you made yourself familiar with the requirements of the following legislation? | YES | NO |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (May 2018) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

20.2 If NO to either of the above questions, explain why the legislation is not relevant.

Enter text here

21 Declaration by Researchers And Supervisors

! Application will be returned if declaration is not signed and dated !

- The information contained herein is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, accurate.
- I have read the University's current human [ethics guidelines](#), and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures set out in the attached application in accordance with the guidelines, the University's Code of Conduct for Research and any other condition laid down by the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee and the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

- I and my co-researcher/s or supporting staff have the appropriate qualifications, experience, and facilities to conduct the research set out in the attached application and to deal effectively with any emergencies and contingencies related to the research that may arise.
- I understand that **no** research work involving human participants or data collection can commence until I have been granted full ethical approval by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Applicant/Researcher/s

X)

X 03/03/2022)

Supervisor/s

(Where Applicant Is Student)

X)

X 31/03/2022)

For Supervisors – Please note that by submitting this application the supervisor confirms that:

- The student is aware of the College ethics requirements.
- The topic merits further research.
- The student has the relevant skills to begin research.
- If interviewing, the student has produced an appropriate information sheet for participants.
- The procedures for recruitment and obtaining informed consent are appropriate.

End Of Application Form.

Applications should be submitted electronically as follows:

Upload the completed form, along with any other required documents by logging in to the Research Ethics System at: <https://frontdoor.spa.gla.ac.uk/login/>

NB: PGR students are required to upload their application which is then forwarded to their named supervisor for approval and submission to the College Research Ethics Committee.

Appendix 2 Consent Form



College of Social
Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: Policies and Practices of and Conditions for Professional Development for Middle leaders in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

Name of Researcher: Ms Ni Zhang

Supervisors: Dr Mark Murphy, Dr Dong Nguyen

Please tick as appropriate

- Yes No I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- Yes No I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- Yes No I consent to interviews being audio-recorded
- Yes No I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.
- Yes No I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

I agree that:

- Yes No All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- Yes No Confidentiality may not be guaranteed; due to the limited size of the participant sample; in the event of disclosure of harm or danger to participants or others.
- Yes No The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- Yes No The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- Yes No The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research.
- Yes No The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Yes No I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

Yes No Other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Yes No Other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

Yes No I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I agree to take part in this research study

I do not agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of ResearcherSignature

Date

_____ End of Consent Form _____

Appendix 3 Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project

Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project:

Title of Project: Policies and Practices of and Conditions for Professional Development for Middle leaders in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

Name of Researcher: Ms Ni Zhang

Supervisors: Dr Mark Murphy, Dr Dong Nguyen

Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project on Policies and Practices of and Conditions for Professional Development for Middle leaders in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

Why we need it

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and contact details in order to conduct our research. We need your name and contact details to arrange face-to-face semi-interviews at first and then potentially online interviews.

We only collect data that we need for the research project and your participation will be kept anonymous and confidential via different strategies, such as a reversible process whereby identifiers are replaced by a code, to which the researcher retains the key, in a secure location, the use of pseudonym, and secure data storage.

Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; due to the limited size of the participant sample; in the event of disclosure of harm or danger to participants or others. Please see accompanying **Participant Information Sheet**.

Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study. Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit is processed by: PhD student Ms Ni Zhang and her supervisors at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom. In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe: pseudonymisation, secure storage, and encryption of files and devices. Please consult the **Consent form** and **Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

Due to the nature of this research, it is likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way.

We will provide you with a written summary of results if requested.

What are your rights?*

GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see [UofG Research with personal and special categories of data](#).

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact dp@gla.ac.uk

Complaints

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee or relevant School Ethics Forum in the College.

How long do we keep it for?

Your **personal** data will be retained by the University only for as long as is necessary for processing and no longer than the period of ethical approval (01/10/2023). After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your **research** data will be retained for a period of ten years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.

End of Privacy Notice _____

Appendix 4 Participant Information Sheet



College of Social
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: Policies and Practices of and Conditions for Professional Development for Middle leaders in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

Name of Researcher: Ms Ni Zhang

Supervisors: Dr Mark Murphy, Dr Dong Nguyen

You are being invited to take part in a PhD student research project. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research is focused on Chinese higher vocational education colleges (CHVCs). Based on an analysis of the current situation of professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs, the purpose of this study is to explore the factors that affect the professional development for middle leadership at the organizational level. It is hoped that this inform the future progress of middle leadership in CHVCs.

Why have I been invited?

You are invited because you are a middle leader in Chinese higher vocational colleges. This research aims at recruiting 15 participants in the first phase.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw without giving a reason and without prejudice. You don't have to answer questions you don't want to without giving reasons; semi-interviews will be ended in the event of any distress. In the event that you withdraw, all data contributed by you up to that date will be destroyed.

What will the participation involve?

You will be invited to join a semi-structured interview. In this interview, you will be invited to answer some questions about professional development for middle leaders. This is to gain an understanding of your attitudes towards middle leadership professional development and the factors that influence it through interviews. Interview time will be within an hour.

What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?

There is no intended risk from taking part in this research and the researcher will minimize any possibility before the research process. In the event of risk during the research, the researcher will adhere to the University's ethics guidelines, and consult the College Research Ethics Committee to mitigate the risk. Regarding possible benefits, you will have the chance to reflect on your understanding of professional development for middle leaders over time.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, your participation will be kept confidential via different strategies, such as a de-identified process whereby identifiers are removed from data and replaced by a code, with the code securely retained by the researcher only, the use of a pseudonym, and secure data storage. Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; due to the limited size of the participant sample; in the event of disclosure of harm or danger to participants or others.

What will happen to my data?

Your data will be securely stored at the University of Glasgow, in electronic files and on Microsoft OneDrive to be available by password only and data encrypted. No one other than the researcher and her supervisors will have access to your data. During the research, the collected data will be encrypted and analysed by the researcher. The findings will mainly be disseminated in a Ph.D. thesis and potentially journal articles, conference papers and online via webinar and workshop. According to the relevant regulations of UofG GDPR Changes, all personal data will be destroyed by the end of this project. No personal data will be stored by the end of the study. Research data will be retained for 10 years on the University-approved Microsoft OneDrive system before it is disposed.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

How do I file a complaint?

If you wish to complain about the conduct of the research: contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Susan Batchelor, email: socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk

How do I contact you about the study?

Regarding any aspect of the study, you can contact the researcher, Ms Ni Zhang, email: n.zhang.3@research.gla.ac.uk. The supervisors contact emails are Mark.Murphy.2@glasgow.ac.uk and Dong.Nguyen@glasgow.ac.uk.

End of Participant Information Sheet

Appendix 5 Data Protection Impact Assessment



Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)

Data Protection Impact Assessment: List of Requirements

Before submitting your DPIA template to the DP Office, please ensure that you have completed and addressed all relevant points below. **The DP Office will not review your DPIA unless you can demonstrate engagement with or reference to the checklist and its attending documents and requirements.**

Are your data [anonymous](#)?

Yes

No

If you are claiming that your data are **anonymous**, are there any potential data linkages that would allow someone to identify your data subjects? Note that simply removing a name does not constitute anonymisation. Have you considered the impact of other potential identifiers e.g. you are studying individuals with an uncommon medical condition and also working with gender, age, and location data or other factors that narrow your population and potentially lead to identification?

Are your data [pseudonymous](#)?

Yes

No

If you hold an identifier key(s) that would allow you or another party to identify your masked data then it is pseudonymous and therefore must be treated as personal data.

Is the University a [data controller or a data processor](#) for this project?

Data controller

Data processor

Will you require third parties (outwith UofG) to assist you in gathering, storing, accessing, or translating or transcribing the data?

Yes

Explain:

No

Do you have a [data sharing agreement](#) in place?

Yes

No

If you do not have an agreement, but you require one, complete the [Questionnaire for Data Processing Involving Third Parties](#) and return to the [Contracts Team](#).

Have you completed a [privacy notice](#) to inform data subjects on the intended use of their personal data? (If you answer "yes", please attach for review.)

Yes

No

Have you completed the University's online [Data Protection](#) and/or [Information Security](#) trainings? (These trainings are mandatory for all staff; the full project team should complete both training modules)

Yes

If yes, please indicate dates of completion for all colleagues: 21 March 2022

No

Have you completed a [research data management plan](#) and reviewed the [DMP and DPIA Workflow chart](#)?

Yes

No

If no, please explain why you do not require a data management plan.

Have you applied for, or received ethical approval?

Yes

If yes, when was the application submitted? Approved? Please submit a copy with this DPIA submission.

No

Consider the following ways to reduce potential risk and demonstrate practical compliance:

- pseudonymisation
- [data minimisation](#)
- storage limitation
- access restrictions
- detailed data flow modelling
- technical solutions (e.g. encryption)
- organisational measures (e.g. policies, procedures and workflows to comply with GDPR requirements)

| Project overview | |
|--|--|
| Project Name: | Policies and Practices of and Conditions for Professional Development for Middle leaders in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges |
| Brief description of the Project: | This research is positioned in the Chinese higher vocational education colleges (CHVCs). Based on the analysis of the current situation and differences in the professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs, the purpose of this study is to explore the factors that affect the professional development for middle leadership in the organizational dimension. By analyzing the current situation and exploring the influencing factors, the researcher will give specific professional opinions on the formulation of CHVCs policies on the professional development for middle leaders. This research will fill the gap about professional development for middle leaders in Chinese higher educational environment under the new reform, and it will facilitate the overall progress of middle leadership in CHVCs. |
| Project Owner: Name, Designation and email address | Ni Zhang Ph.D student n.zhang.3@research.gla.ac.uk |
| Project Manager: Name, Designation and email address | Dr. Mark Murphy Mark.Murphy.2@glasgow.ac.uk Dr. Dong Nguyen Dong.Nguyen@glasgow.ac.uk |
| External project partners, if any: | |
| Summarise identified need for DPIA: | The data is Low Risk but involves human data subjects, use the information in the DMP to complete the DPIA. |
| Timing of the Project: Start/end dates, duration as applicable | Start date: 09/05/2022 End date: 01/10/2023 |
| Date template completed: | 01/10/2023 |
| Date submitted to the Data Protection Office: | 01/04/2022 |

Describe the processing activities

Describe the nature and purpose of the processing:

You might find it useful to refer to a flow diagram or another way of describing data flows.

- **What is the source of the data?**

For research purposes, the primary data for this research will come from 15 middle leaders of CHVCs. At the same time, secondary data will be sourced for analysis from both national-level, regional-level and college documents relating to professional development for middle leaders' policies and practice.

- **How will you collect data?**

Primary data were collected from 15 participants via semi-structured interviews. Official policies and institutional documents on the professional development of incumbents from Ministry of Education, Shandong Provincial Education Department and each college's Personnel Division are collected upon approval.

- **How will you use the data?**

The investigator will process the collected data, including coding and analyzing it. Through content analysis and thematic analysis, research questions will be answered.

- **How will you store the data?**

The official documents and semi-structured interview results obtained in this phase may include both paper and electronic versions. Paper materials (official documents and interview notes) will be kept in locked cabinets. Electronic versions (official documents, audio-recording, memo and transcript) will be uploaded to Microsoft OneDrive.

- **How will you delete the data?**

A shredder will destroy the paper version of data, and the electronic version will be deleted using secure deletion software.

- **Will you be sharing data with anyone (within the University or external to the University)?**

No

- **What measures do you take to ensure [data processors](#) comply? Do you have a [data sharing agreement](#) drafted?**

The investigator will select the third party data processors to collect, use, and manage data as permitted by the university.

No.

- **What types of processing identified as likely [high risk](#) are involved?**

No

- **What do you want to achieve?**

This research will answer the following questions:

1. What is the status of current provision for professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?
2. In what ways and to what extent do organizational structure, institutional leadership and institutional culture influence professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs?

- **What is the intended effect on participants or users?**

Through document analysis and semi-structured interviews, this research will paint a blueprint for professional development for middle leaders in CHVCs. The investigator's in-depth analysis of specific influencing factors will provide targeted recommendations for educational institutions to promote the participation of middle leaders in professional development.

- **What are the benefits of the processing for you or the University, and more broadly?**

In general, most of the existing research in China is a useful exploration in the general higher education environment, and there is no comprehensive and standardized empirical research on middle leadership in higher vocational colleges. Comprehensively comparing the research status at home and abroad, learning from the experience and achievements of foreign middle leadership research, and actively carrying out localized research, have an irreplaceable role in Chinese higher vocational education reform and the quality and training of higher vocational colleges. By analyzing the current situation and exploring the influencing factors, the researcher will give specific professional opinions on the formulation of CHVCs policies on the professional development for middle leaders. This research will fill the gap about professional development

for middle leaders in the Chinese educational environment under the new reform, and it will facilitate the overall progress of middle leadership in CHVCs.

Describe the scope and context of the processing:

- **What is the nature of the data, and does it include [special category](#) or criminal offence data?**

the nature of the data is human data.

No

- **How many individuals are affected by your planned processing?**

15 individuals are affected by the planned processing.

- **What is the nature of your relationship with the individuals whose data you will process?**

Any of the participants are not in a dependent relationship with the investigator.

- **How much control will they have over what you do with their data?**

The investigator provides that participants have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. Participants can request access to the information the investigator process about them at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information the investigator process relating to them is incorrect, participants can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. Participants may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

- **Does your processing include children or other vulnerable groups?**

No

- **What geographical area does it cover?**

Shandong Province in China

- **Are there concerns over this type of processing generally or more specifically regarding information security? If yes, have you contacted [Information Security](#) for advice?**

No

- **Does the project involve the use or development of new technology? If yes, have you contacted [IT Services](#) for advice?**

No

- **Are there any current issues of public concern that you should factor in?**

Yes. Due to the current pandemic period, the investigator will strictly abide by local epidemic prevention and control requirements.

- **Are you signed up to any approved code of conduct or certification scheme (once any have been approved)?**

No

- **Do you have stakeholders, either within the University or external, that you must consult with regarding this intended processing? If yes, who are they?**

No

- **Describe when and how you will seek these stakeholders' views – or justify why it's not appropriate to do so.**

- **Do you need to involve anyone else within your organisation?**

No

- **Do you need to ask your [data processors](#) to assist with consultation?**

No

- **Do you plan to consult information security experts, or any other experts?**

No

Ensuring basic compliance

Describe how you will uphold the [data protection principles](#):

- **What is your [lawful basis for processing](#)?**

(d) Processing is necessary to protect the vital interests of a data subject or another person

- **What information will you give to individuals about the project, e.g. *privacy notice, participant information sheet etc***

Privacy Notice

Participant Information Sheet

Consent Form

- **How will you help to support their rights?**

The investigator will provide the information of the University Data Protection Officer and the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer.

- **How will you prevent function creep?**

The investigator will regularly report the progress to the supervisors to ensure that all tasks are completed under their guidance and meet the related requirements.

- **How will you ensure data quality and [data minimisation](#)?**

The investigator will hold only the minimal amount of information required for research activities. The investigator will regularly review the processing activities. Once the investigator find that the personal data needs have changed over time, the data will be destroyed or otherwise get rid of it.

- **How will the data be kept up-to-date, if necessary?**

The investigator will keep in touch with participants during the research and, if necessary, will initiate the next round of interviews.

- **How long will you [keep the data](#)?**

There is a clear plan for the retention and disposal of the collected personal data in this research. According to the relevant regulations of UofG GDPR Changes, the investigator chose to destroy the personal data together at the complete conclusion of the research. A shredder will destroy the paper version of personal data, and the electronic version will be deleted using secure deletion software.

Research data other than personal data will remain securely held by the researcher for ten years after completing the research. These research data have long-term value. It may underpin a publication or thesis or form the basis of a future funding application in the future.

- **How will the retention be reinforced?**

Electronic versions (official documents, audio-recording, memo and transcript) will be uploaded to Microsoft OneDrive.

- **How will the data be kept securely, both during the project and after completion?**

Paper materials (official documents and interview notes) will be kept in locked cabinets. Electronic versions (official documents, audio-recording, memo and transcript) will be uploaded to Microsoft OneDrive. Additionally, the researcher realizes the importance of backups. At the first time obtaining the data, the researcher will back up the data twice on desktop computers and portable storage devices. At the same time, the backup will be encrypted. Among them, the desktop computer will have antivirus software installed and its system is configured in accordance with all system security recommendations. When the backup is in the portable storage device, the researcher chooses to use a standard storage device with macOS native encryption using the Finder.

- **Will you be sharing data internationally, e.g. *sending it to or receiving it from an organisation abroad, or using an international service/platform to process your data*?**

No

| Identify and assess risks and measures to reduce risk | | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Describe the source of risk and nature of potential impact on individuals. Include associated compliance and corporate risks as necessary. | Likelihood of harm + | Severity of harm = | Overall risk | Options to reduce or eliminate risk | Residual risk (after reduction) |
| | (Remote, possible or probable) | (Minimal, significant or severe) | (Low, medium or high) | | (Low, medium or high) |
| <i>Semi-interview transcriptions may result in data loss or misuse</i> | <i>Possible</i> | <i>Minimal</i> | <i>medium</i> | <i>The investigator will scan the data multiple times to ensure data accuracy.</i> | <i>Low</i> |

Data Protection & FOI Office recommendations

| | | |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| DP & FOI Office advice provided: | | DP & FOI Office should advise on compliance and step 6 measures |
| Summary of DP & FOI advice: | | |
| | | |

Sign off and record outcomes (To be completed by the PI/Project Lead)

| | |
|--|---|
| Mitigation measures and residual risks approved by (<i>sign & date</i>): | Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All mitigation measures must be integrated back into the project, with a documented date and responsibility for completion. The ICO must be consulted if high risks are identified and cannot be mitigated. If the DP & FOI Office advice is overruled, an explanation must be provided. |
|--|---|

| | |
|---|--|
| This DPIA will be kept under review by: | A copy of the most recent version should be sent to the DP & FOI Office and retained in the IAR* by the PI/Project Lead. |
|---|--|

* The University's Information Asset Register (IAR) is a repository for all data protection compliance documents, e.g. privacy notices, DPIAs etc. You can access the IAR (using VPN or remote staff desktop) here: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfooffice/gdpr/onlineinformationassetregister/>.

Note: students don't have full access to the IAR so DPIAs for student research projects and theses should be uploaded by the supervisor instead

Appendix 6 Ethics Approval Letter from University of Glasgow.

Letter removed due to confidentiality issues.

Appendix 7 Detailed Information about Selected National and Provincial Policy Texts

| Signifier | Published Date | Full Title and Weblink |
|-----------|----------------|---|
| GPT1 | 24/01/2019 | <p>Notice from the State Council on the Issuance of <i>the National Implementation Programme for Vocational Education Reform</i></p> <p>https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2019/content_5368517.htm</p> |
| GPT2 | 12/10/2021 | <p>General Office of the State Council and General Office of the CPC Central Committee, issued <i>Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education</i></p> <p>https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5647348.htm</p> |
| GPT3 | 25/10/2022 | <p>Notice from the General Office of the Ministry of Education on <i>the accreditation of Double-Position teachers in vocational education</i></p> <p>http://www.moe.gov.cn/srbsite/A10/s7034/202210/t20221027_672715.html</p> |
| GPT4 | 16/09/2020 | <p>Ministry of Education and other nine departments on the issuance of <i>the Action Plan for Improving the Quality and Excellence of Vocational Education (2020-2023)</i></p> <p>https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-09/29/content_5548106.htm</p> |
| GPT5 | 30/08/2019 | <p>Implementation plan to deepen the reform of the construction of a Double-Position teaching force for vocational education in the new era</p> <p>https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-10/18/content_5441474.htm</p> |
| GPT6 | 05/02/2018 | <p>Notice from the Ministry of Education and Other Six Departments on the Issuance of <i>Measures for the Promotion of College-Enterprise Cooperation in Vocational Schools</i></p> <p>https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-02/20/content_5267767.htm</p> |

| | | |
|-------|------------|---|
| GPT7 | 24/12/2020 | Guiding Opinions from the Ministry of Education and Other Six Departments on <i>Strengthening the Reform of the Teacher Team Construction in Universities in the New Era</i> https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-01/27/content_5583070.htm |
| GPT8 | 29/07/2021 | Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance on the Implementation of <i>Teacher Quality in Vocational Colleges Improvement Plan (2021-2025)</i> http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s7034/202108/t20210817_551814.html |
| GPT9 | 13/05/2019 | Notice from the Ministry of Education on the Issuance of <i>the National Programme for the Construction of Teaching Innovation Teams for Teachers in Vocational Colleges</i> https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2019-10/22/content_5443312.htm |
| GPT10 | 01/04/2022 | National Vocational College Principal Training (Cultivation) Base 2022 Training Plan https://www.sdjyxww.com/tj/45305.html |
| PPT1 | 12/2022 | Shandong Province Higher Vocational Education Quality Annual Report (2022) http://edu.shandong.gov.cn/art/2022/12/23/art_12061_10308443.html |

Appendix 8 Semi-structured Interviews Questions Outline

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews (Part 1) | | |
| Section A | | |
| <p>Many thanks for agreeing to participate in my study about professional development for middle leaders.</p> <p>I have received the reply of <i>Consent Form</i> with your signature. I still need to confirm to you again that you have read the <i>Participant Information Sheet</i> and <i>Privacy Notice</i> carefully. Do you agree to take part in this study?</p> <p>I would like to add that as well as recording this interview, I will take notes as I go along, so please do not think I have stopped listening to you when I look down and take notes.</p> | | |
| Section B The Semi-Structured Interview Questions | | THEMES |
| 1 | We first need to understand your basic information. What is your position and title? | Personal Background |
| 2 | How long has it been since you were promoted to middle leader? | |
| 3 | What does your main work include? | |
| 4 | What personal competencies do you think are required to accomplish these tasks? | |
| Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews (Part 2) | | |
| Section A | | |
| <p>Thanks for your answers to the above questions.</p> <p>Next, I'll ask questions about your experience about engagement in professional development.</p> | | |
| Section B The Semi-Structured Interview Questions | | THEMES |
| 5 | In your opinion, what is professional development? | Experiences about opportunities/activities of PD |
| 6 | Is there a professional development program for middle leaders in your college at this stage? | |

| | | |
|---|--|--------------------------|
| 7 | If yes, how many levels are included? Can you elaborate on what specific initiatives/learning formats are included at each level? | |
| 8 | If not, what professional development activities or projects have you been involved in in your past work? Who are the organisers of these activities or projects? How did you know about these activities? | |
| 9 | Based on what you just mentioned, which is your favourite activity or project? Why? | |
| 10 | Overall, how would you rate the professional development for middle leaders' program or activities available at your college? | |
| Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews (Part 3) | | |
| Section A | | |
| Thanks for your answers to the above questions. | | |
| Next, I'll ask questions about the factors that influence middle leaders' engagement in professional development. | | |
| Section B The Semi-Structured Interview Questions | | THEMES |
| 11 | How would you rate the relationship between senior leaders and you? | Institutional Leadership |
| 12 | Based on your experience, do you think that different senior leaders have different attitudes towards professional development for middle leaders? What specific performance? | |
| 13 | What impact do senior leaders have on the professional development for middle leaders? In what way? Please explain with specific examples. | |
| 14 | Based on your own professional development situation, what improvements do you hope senior leaders can take to motivate middle leaders to participate in professional development activities? | |

| | | |
|----|---|--------------------------|
| 15 | How do you understand the organisational structure of your college and the positioning of middle leaders in it? | Organisational Structure |
| 16 | Depending on the positioning, how does the organisational structure affect your participation in professional development activities? Why? | |
| 17 | In your opinion, what are the specific manifestations of this influence in your daily work? Please explain with specific examples. | |
| 18 | What adjustments do you think the organisational structure in your college should make to promote better participation in professional development activities? | |
| 19 | Could you please describe the organisational culture of your college based on your personal feelings? | Organisational Culture |
| 20 | How do you think this organisational culture affects the professional development for middle leaders? why? | |
| 21 | In your opinion, in what ways does this organisational culture influence the professional development for middle leaders in your daily work? | |
| 22 | Based on your expectations, how do you think the organisational culture should be developed to better facilitate the professional development for middle leaders? | |
| 23 | Taken together, which of these would you rate the most important? | Others |
| 24 | Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to be interviewed. Do you have anything else to add? | |

Appendix 9 Initial Coding Examples from Documentary Data

| A Section from Policy Documentary Data | Conceptualisation | Categorisation |
|---|---|---|
| <p>6. <i>Cultivate principals.</i> Vocational college principals will be selected to participate in training, cultivating them through centralised training, on-the-job training, online seminars, and return-to-work practices. The content mainly includes important policies related to the inspection and exchange of vocational education and teacher work by the Party Central Committee and the State Council, advanced concepts and practices in international vocational education, modernisation of regional vocational education, governance of vocational colleges, reform of vocational college talent training models, 1+X certificate system, leading and implementing the <i>San Jiao</i> reform, deepening of college-enterprise cooperation, cultivation of educational and teaching achievements, information construction management and application, etc.</p> <p>7. <i>Cultivate a team of backbone teachers.</i> Vocational colleges should select highly influential teaching masters or skill masters (full-time or part-time) from colleges to establish a Master Teacher Studio or skill inheritance and innovation platform. Through regular team training, project research, action learning, and other methods, a 3-year phased training program will be conducted. The training content of the MTS mainly includes modular course construction, research and development of teaching resources, and improvement of teaching and research abilities. The training content of the skill inheritance and innovation platform mainly includes the inheritance of technical skills, accumulation and development of applications, inheritance of traditional skills, development of internship resources, and exchange of experience in innovation and entrepreneurship education, etc.</p> <p>8. <i>Trainer team building.</i> Vocational colleges should establish teaching and training management teams to backbone the training of teachers and the training leadership collective of vocational colleges in national and provincial training bases. Phased training will be conducted through combination of collective online training and research projects relying on such platforms. The training content mainly includes training base construction, needs analysis methods, modular training course design, performance evaluation, etc.</p> | <p>Offline learning; Online seminars; Practice in enterprise; Policy learning; School running and governance; Informatization; Master Teacher Studios for skills; Collective learning; Learning for front-line teaching; Learning for skills; For experts; Forming teams; Offline learning; Project-oriented; Training skills</p> | <p>Experience Presentation; Collegial Visits; Leadership Competency; Subject Knowledge and Skills; Pedagogical Basis; Subject Knowledge and Skills;</p> |

Appendix 10 Initial Coding Examples from Interview Transcripts

| A Section from Interview Transcripts | Conceptualisation | Categorisation |
|--|--|---|
| <p>The researcher 0:6:34</p> <p>Based on the basic work or humanistic care you mentioned, which aspects of abilities do you think middle cadres need?</p> <p>Amiee 0:6:57</p> <p>I think the first one is tolerance, which requires their organisational and coordination abilities beyond doubt. But what about tolerance? For the middle level, the upper level contacts the college leaders, and the lower level contacts the teachers. What is inclusive of? The first question is about accommodating teachers. I always discover the strengths of each teacher and utilise their maximum abilities. Secondly, to be honest, I believe it is also necessary to be tolerant of superiors. The work and methods of each leader are different. All leaders have a block of administrative work. Secondary colleges are all faced by these work. For example, Dean Li oversees teaching, while Dean Zhang is in charge of scientific research. But can teaching and research be separated? It's definitely impossible to separate. That means there are many cross-cutting issues involved here. In this situation, my job may fall into the cracks, but blaming is meaningless. I think we should be tolerant of the potential neglect and imbalance that leaders may have and then actively address the issues.</p> <p>Another very important aspect is team building ability. I place great emphasis on teamwork. One issue I often tell teachers is that they have conflicts of interest because they objectively exist. We don't need to avoid this question. Communication is very important at this time. You must establish good relationships with teachers openly and then build a team. This team must have common interests and common goals to achieve. That is to say, coordination skills are also important. Some teachers may have many guidance classes for competitions while also taking on more student management responsibilities. As the competition instructor, this teacher needs to focus energy and concentrate on doing this. So, I need to help this teacher coordinate their time and even share some of their workload, aiming to build our secondary colleges and CHVC well.</p> | <p>Aspects of abilities;</p> <p>Tolerance;</p> <p>Discover advantages;</p> <p>Forgiving mistakes of leaders;</p> <p>Understanding Imbalance;</p> <p>Being active;</p> <p>Resolving conflicts;</p> <p>Communicating;</p> <p>Good relationship;</p> <p>Coordinating resources;</p> | <p>Leadership Competency;</p> <p>Leadership Competency;</p> |

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