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Organizational Democracy in Chinese Schools: Conceptualization and Measurement

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Abstract

The practice of democracy within educational institutions is critical for fostering effective school governance. This study adopts a mixed-methods design to examine both the structural dimensions and measurement of organizational democracy in schools. During the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 teachers from primary and secondary schools in China. The qualitative data were systematically analyzed using NVivo 11.0 software through processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The analysis revealed that teachers' perceptions of organizational democracy are characterized by core components including expression of freedom, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, and equality and fairness. Building upon the qualitative findings, the quantitative phase involved the initial development of a 40-item instrument designed to reflect the identified dimensions of organizational democracy. In three separate phases, a total of 407, 421, and 346 valid responses were collected from different regions. These data were subjected to item analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and convergent validity testing. The quantitative results corroborated the structural framework established in the qualitative phase. The final 20-item scale developed through this process demonstrated robust psychometric properties, including high levels of reliability and validity, thereby providing a theoretically grounded and empirically validated tool for assessing organizational democracy in school contexts.

Keywords: Democracy, Organizational democracy, School democracy, Scale development

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1. Introduction

Democracy is widely recognized as a key indicator of modernization in organizational contexts and has consequently received increasing scholarly attention. A growing body of evidence indicates that organizational democracy significantly influences various human resource outcomes, including employees' job satisfaction, self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships at work, organizational commitment, and community-oriented behavioral tendencies (Holtzhausen, 2002;

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Moriarty, 2010; Verdorfer *et al.*, 2013; Safari *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, it contributes to broader organizational development by enhancing workflow efficiency, productivity, socio-moral climate, organizational learning, and agility (Alves *et al.*, 2016; Safari *et al.*, 2018; Deetz, 1992; Harrison and Freeman, 2004; Adobor, 2020). In contemporary society, democracy has evolved beyond a governance model and is now regarded as a desirable way of life. Consequently, increasing advocacy has emerged from various stakeholders for the integration of democratic principles into organizational settings (King and Land, 2018; Fenton, 2012).

Extensive literature has examined the concept and multiple dimensions of organizational democracy. At its core, organizational democracy refers to the inclusion of employees in decision-making processes through mechanisms such as direct negotiation, representation, shared governance, and self-determination (Heller *et al.*, 1998). Democratic organizations typically emphasize values such as freedom, fairness, integrity, tolerance, shared responsibility, autonomy, transparency, knowledge sharing, accountability, and the promotion of a learning-oriented environment (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022). Ducasse (2016) offered a relatively simplified structure of organizational democracy, comprising worker self-management and collective decision-making. Similarly, Viggian (2011) identified components such as shared responsibility, mutual interests, employee engagement, decentralized power, and trust. Hamel (2013) proposed a more elaborate model that includes managerial responsibility, employee cooperation, decentralized authority, organizational values, transparent communication, peer assessment, flexible management, self-determination, and profit-sharing. Peterson and Spängs (2022) also developed a comprehensive framework incorporating elements like employee ownership, collaboration, autonomy, job value, community-oriented relationships, innovation, and elite management. Han and Garg (2018), through a coding analysis of literature from 1998 to 2013, identified key components of organizational democracy including openness, voice, democratic leadership, supervision, and accountability.

Drawing from this literature, it is evident that the essence of organizational democracy lies in empowering individuals to engage meaningfully in institutional decision-making processes (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022). Specifically, it denotes a sustained and institutionalized form of employee participation rather than sporadic or informal involvement (Weber *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, while participation is fundamental, it does not fully encapsulate the multidimensionality of organizational democracy. Despite general scholarly consensus on its importance, the components and boundaries of the concept remain contested, complicating efforts to achieve conceptual clarity and develop robust measurement tools (Coppedge *et al.*, 2011). Battilana *et al.* (2018) further emphasize that one of the primary challenges in implementing democratic practices lies in constructing effective and context-sensitive metrics for evaluating organizational democracy.

Previous research on organizational democracy has largely adopted a top-down approach, often relying on theoretical synthesis or literature reviews to construct conceptual frameworks. For instance, Zipp *et al.* (1984), Geçkil and Tikici (2015), and Peterson and Spängs (2022) developed models of organizational democracy based on extant literature. Luhman (2006) drew on Mannheim and Weber's typologies of legitimate authority to theorize the normative foundations of collective rights. Fenton (2012) formulated ten principles for democratic organizational environments based on cross-national empirical observations. However, there is a dearth of research employing a bottom-up, grounded theory approach to construct frameworks that are contextually embedded in specific cultural or organizational settings. Moreover, few studies have developed valid measurement instruments based on such empirically derived structures.

This gap is particularly salient in non-economic sectors, such as education, where the application and interpretation of organizational democracy may differ significantly. Most existing studies have focused on democratic practices within business or industrial organizations (Tutar *et al.*, 2009), with limited attention given to educational institutions. Research on democracy within school organizations—especially in the context of Chinese culture—remains scarce. Unlike businesses, schools differ in terms of mission, governance structure, and personnel composition, all of which may influence how democracy is conceptualized and operationalized. In addition, Chinese schools operate within a distinctive socio-political and cultural framework, necessitating a localized understanding of organizational democracy. For example, Geçkil and Tikici (2015) measurement of organizational democracy includes dimensions related to religious equality, which may not be applicable in the relatively secular context of Chinese schools. This underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to conceptualizing and measuring organizational democracy.

Overall, while organizational democracy has been widely recognized as a catalyst for enhancing institutional effectiveness and employee engagement, the conceptualization and measurement of this construct remain inconsistent, particularly within non-economic sectors such as education. Existing literature predominantly adopts a top-down theoretical orientation, with limited empirical grounding in specific organizational or cultural contexts. Most measurement models have been developed for industrial or corporate settings, often overlooking the unique features and needs of educational institutions.

In the Chinese educational context, where schools operate within a distinctive socio-political and cultural framework, the applicability of existing conceptual models and measurement tools—often developed in Western or corporate environments—is questionable. Current instruments may inadequately capture the nuanced ways in which democracy is understood and practiced by educators in Chinese schools. Moreover, there is a scarcity of empirical studies employing bottom-up, context-sensitive approaches to investigate how organizational democracy is perceived by school personnel and how it can be reliably and validly measured.

Given these gaps, there is a pressing need to develop a culturally grounded conceptual framework and a psychometrically sound measurement instrument that reflect the lived experiences and perceptions of organizational democracy among Chinese primary and secondary school teachers. Addressing this gap is essential not only for advancing theoretical clarity but also for informing school governance practices aimed at fostering democratic values within educational settings.

This study contributes to the literature by addressing the following research questions. (1) How do teachers in Chinese schools perceive organizational democracy? (2) How can these perceptions be effectively measured within the school context?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Organizational Democracy

Organizational democracy refers to the extent to which employees have the right and opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their work and the organization as a whole. Rooted in the broader ideals of political democracy, organizational democracy extends democratic principles—such as equality, participation, transparency, accountability, and fairness—into the workplace (Heller *et al.*, 1998; Weber *et al.*, 2020). This concept challenges traditional hierarchical models by advocating for more decentralized and participatory structures.

Despite its growing importance in management and organizational studies, organizational democracy remains a complex and somewhat contested concept, with scholars debating its precise meaning and boundaries. Early work by Heller *et al.* (1998) framed organizational democracy as employees' capacity to influence organizational decisions, focusing on structures such as codetermination, works councils, and participative management. However, this structural approach has been supplemented by a more process-oriented view emphasizing ongoing participation, deliberation, and empowerment (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022).

The multidimensionality of organizational democracy is evident in the various frameworks proposed. Zipp *et al.* (1984) identified dimensions such as participation in governance, freedom of expression, and equitable influence distribution. Hamel (2013) underscored the importance of managerial responsibility, transparency, peer assessment, and profit-sharing, reflecting both formal mechanisms and cultural values. Ducasse (2016) highlighted worker self-management and collective decision-making as essential democratic practices, stressing autonomy and shared control.

Moreover, the concept encompasses both formal institutions and informal practices. Formal democracy refers to codified procedures such as elections, voting rights, and representation, while informal democracy involves day-to-day interactions, trust, and communication fostering a democratic climate (Han and Garg, 2018). This duality implies that organizational democracy must be evaluated not only through structural features but also through cultural and relational dimensions.

The theoretical roots of organizational democracy draw heavily on political philosophy. Classic democratic theory emphasizes political equality, inclusiveness, and deliberation (Dahl, 2000). When applied to organizations, these principles suggest that employees should have equitable access to influence decisions that affect their work environment and job satisfaction (Luhman, 2006). This alignment fosters intrinsic motivation, ethical behavior, and legitimacy within organizations.

Critical management scholars argue that organizational democracy is a counterforce to managerial domination and capitalist exploitation, seeking to democratize economic power and promote social justice within firms (Deetz, 1992; Harrison and Freeman, 2004). From this perspective, democracy in organizations is not only instrumental for performance but also a normative imperative.

Conversely, some theorists caution against the idealization of organizational democracy, highlighting challenges such as decision-making inefficiencies, interpersonal conflict, and managerial resistance (Battilana *et al.*, 2018). The tension between efficiency and participation raises questions about the optimal degree and form of democracy suitable for different organizational contexts.

Contemporary research increasingly recognizes organizational democracy as a cultural and contextual construct. It is embedded in shared values, beliefs, and norms about authority, voice, and participation (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022). For example, Han and Garg (2018) identified openness, democratic leadership, supervision, and accountability as cultural markers that enable democratic functioning beyond formal mechanisms.

Cultural differences further complicate the conceptualization. In collectivist societies or hierarchical cultures, democratic practices may take different forms than in individualistic or low power-distance contexts (Geçkil and Tikici, 2015). This situational sensitivity implies that organizational democracy cannot be universalized but must be adapted to local values and institutional arrangements.

Recent scholarship has expanded the concept to include new forms such as employee ownership, cooperative governance, and digital democracy platforms. Peterson and Spängs (2022) proposed employee ownership as a means to deepen democratic engagement by aligning economic and decision-making power. Advances in digital communication tools offer opportunities to increase transparency, widen participation, and foster collaborative decision-making across organizational levels (King and Land, 2018).

These developments suggest that organizational democracy is evolving, blending traditional participatory structures with innovative practices that respond to changing workforce expectations and technological possibilities.

2.2. Organizational Democracy and Its Outcomes

Organizational democracy has been widely studied for its positive impact on various individual and organizational outcomes. One of the core benefits highlighted in the literature is its contribution to employee job satisfaction and psychological well-being. When employees perceive that their voice in decision-making is valued, their sense of autonomy and empowerment increases, leading to enhanced job satisfaction and reduced work-related stress (Holtzhausen, 2002; Safari et al., 2018). This improved satisfaction is closely linked to enhanced self-efficacy—the belief in one’s ability to influence organizational outcomes—which further motivates employees to engage proactively in their roles (Moriarty, 2010).

In addition to individual benefits, organizational democracy fosters higher levels of organizational commitment. Employees who participate meaningfully in governance and decision processes develop stronger identification with the organization’s mission and values, which translates into increased loyalty and reduced turnover intentions (Verdorfer et al., 2013). Such commitment is a critical factor in sustaining organizational stability and promoting long-term success.

From a relational perspective, democratic organizations tend to cultivate improved interpersonal relationships and collaboration among employees. The inclusion of diverse voices in decision-making encourages open communication, mutual respect, and trust, which are essential for effective teamwork and conflict resolution (Safari et al., 2018; Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022). This collaborative climate can also spur innovation by allowing creative ideas to surface from multiple organizational levels rather than being restricted to hierarchical channels (Peterson and Spängs, 2012).

At the organizational level, democracy enhances workflow efficiency and productivity by aligning employees’ roles with organizational goals through shared understanding and collective ownership (Alves et al., 2016). Democratic practices, such as participatory budgeting and shared governance, often lead to better resource allocation and more adaptive organizational structures that can respond swiftly to changing environments (Deetz, 1992; Harrison and Freeman, 2004).

Another important outcome of organizational democracy is the improvement of the socio-moral climate within organizations. Deetz (1992) argues that democratic workplaces foster ethical standards, transparency, and accountability, reducing the potential for abuses of power and fostering fairness. This moral dimension supports the development of trust between employees and management, which is fundamental for sustainable organizational success (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022).

Furthermore, in the face of increasing organizational complexity and uncertainty, democracy can enhance organizational agility. By decentralizing decision-making authority and encouraging bottom-up feedback, democratic organizations become more flexible and better equipped to innovate and adapt to external pressures (Adobor, 2020). This adaptability is crucial in dynamic sectors such as education, where stakeholder needs and policy environments are continually evolving.

Conversely, some theorists caution against the idealization of organizational democracy, highlighting challenges such as decision-making inefficiencies, interpersonal conflict, and managerial resistance (Battilana et al., 2018). The implementation of democratic practices requires careful management to avoid potential downsides such as decision-making gridlock or superficial participation that does not translate into real influence (Fenton, 2012).

Overall, the literature robustly supports the view that organizational democracy, when authentically practiced, leads to enhanced individual motivation, organizational performance, and ethical workplace environments. These outcomes collectively contribute to sustainable development and competitiveness in various organizational settings.

2.3. Measurement Challenges and the Need for Contextualization

Measuring organizational democracy presents significant conceptual and practical challenges, largely due to the complexity and multidimensional nature of the construct (Battilana et al., 2018; Geçkil and Tikici, 2015). Although various measurement scales have been developed, these instruments often originate from Western organizational contexts or broad political science frameworks that may not translate well across diverse cultural and institutional settings (Coppedge et al., 2011; Fenton, 2012).

One core challenge lies in operationalizing abstract democratic principles—such as fairness, transparency, and participation—into tangible, observable, and measurable organizational behaviors and structures (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022). Many extant scales attempt to capture facets like employee voice, participatory decision-making, leadership style, and accountability. However, these dimensions may manifest differently depending on organizational type, sector, and national culture (Han and Garg, 2018; Safari et al., 2018).

For example, Geçkil and Tikici (2015) organizational democracy scale includes a dimension of religious equality, which may be relevant in some cultural contexts but is less applicable in secular educational institutions or in societies with different religious compositions. Similarly, models emphasizing employee ownership and profit-sharing (Peterson, 2012) are not directly transferable to public-sector organizations such as schools, which operate under distinct governance and funding mechanisms.

Furthermore, the majority of measurement tools emphasize formal mechanisms of democracy—like voting rights or committee participation—potentially overlooking informal and cultural practices that significantly shape democratic engagement (Fenton, 2012; Weber et al., 2020). For instance, in some collectivist cultures, open dissent may be discouraged despite underlying participatory values, complicating measurement based solely on overt democratic behaviors.

In educational settings, especially within Chinese schools, contextual factors such as centralized educational policies, hierarchical management traditions, and Confucian cultural norms significantly influence organizational democracy's expression and perception (Han and Garg, 2018; Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022). The top-down political structure and emphasis on harmony and respect for authority may limit overt democratic participation while still allowing nuanced forms of consultation and teacher involvement.

Consequently, the development of measurement tools must be grounded in empirical, context-sensitive research that captures the lived experiences and perceptions of organizational members (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A bottom-up approach, such as qualitative interviews and participatory action research, can reveal culturally embedded meanings and practices of democracy, leading to more valid and reliable instruments tailored for specific sectors like education (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022).

Moreover, an overly rigid or universalistic approach risks ignoring local power dynamics, social norms, and institutional constraints, which are critical for understanding how democracy is enacted in practice (King and Land, 2018). Researchers thus advocate for hybrid models that combine universal democratic principles with context-specific indicators, enhancing both comparability and relevance (Battilana et al., 2018).

In sum, the measurement of organizational democracy requires a nuanced and culturally responsive framework that appreciates sectoral differences, such as those between business and education, and the socio-political realities influencing organizational life. Without such contextualization, assessments may produce skewed or incomplete pictures, limiting the utility of research findings for practice and policy development in diverse organizational environments (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022; Han and Garg, 2018).

2.4. Organizational Democracy in Educational Institutions

Organizational democracy in educational institutions encompasses the participation of teachers, staff, and sometimes students and parents in decision-making processes that affect the school's governance, instructional approaches, and overall climate. Unlike corporate settings, where organizational democracy often focuses on employee ownership and workplace autonomy, schools operate within complex socio-political and cultural frameworks that shape democratic practices uniquely (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2022; Weber et al., 2020).

Research has shown that democratic participation in schools enhances teacher morale, promotes professional collaboration, and improves the responsiveness of school leadership to the needs of the school community. Participatory

governance in schools often involves structures such as teacher committees, school councils, and stakeholder forums that provide avenues for shared decision-making (Harris, 2013; Sergiovanni, 1994).

However, the extent and nature of organizational democracy in schools vary significantly across cultural contexts. In Western education systems, democratic ideals are often integrated into school governance policies, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness (Mitra, 2004; Sachs, 2001). In contrast, educational institutions in many developing countries, including China and Zambia, operate under centralized control and hierarchical management, which may limit participatory practices despite growing advocacy for school-based management reforms (Ganimian, 2016).

The role of teachers as key stakeholders in organizational democracy is critical. Teachers' perceptions of involvement in school decision-making processes influence their professional commitment and willingness to innovate (Day et al., 2006). Studies suggest that when teachers feel empowered through democratic participation, they exhibit higher job satisfaction, stronger collaboration, and enhanced instructional effectiveness (Ingersoll, 2003; Muijs and Harris, 2003). Conversely, lack of meaningful participation may contribute to alienation and reduced organizational commitment (Conley and Bacharach, 1990).

In China, organizational democracy in schools faces unique challenges and opportunities. While the education system is characterized by centralized policymaking and strong government control, recent reforms encourage school autonomy and teacher participation to improve quality and equity (Zhang and Kanbur, 2020). Yet, empirical studies highlight tensions between top-down mandates and bottom-up participation, with teachers often caught between administrative directives and their professional judgment (Seker and Topsakal, 2011). Understanding teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of organizational democracy is thus essential for developing context-sensitive models that can bridge policy and practice.

Moreover, democratic school governance is increasingly linked to fostering equity and inclusivity, especially for vulnerable student populations (Sarid, 2024). Principals who embrace democratic leadership styles tend to create more supportive environments that encourage teacher collaboration and responsiveness to diverse learner needs (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2008). These practices contribute to improved student engagement and academic outcomes, aligning organizational democracy with broader educational goals.

In summary, organizational democracy in educational institutions plays a pivotal role in shaping the culture, leadership, and effectiveness of schools. However, the realization of democratic principles in schools depends heavily on cultural, structural, and policy contexts. Research gaps remain in operationalizing and measuring organizational democracy specifically within school settings, especially outside Western contexts. This highlights the need for localized, empirical studies that explore how teachers and other stakeholders perceive and enact democracy in schools, providing insights for improving governance and fostering inclusive, effective learning environments.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a sequential mixed-methods research design to explore the structural dimensions of organizational democracy within school contexts and to develop a psychometrically robust instrument for its measurement. The research is conducted in two integrated phases, each complementing the other to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

3.1. Phase I: Qualitative Exploration

The first phase employs a qualitative approach to capture in-depth insights into educators' perceptions of organizational democracy. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to express their views freely and richly. 21 primary and secondary school teachers were selected after reaching theoretical saturation, consistent with Morehouse and Maykut's (2002) recommendation that saturation typically occurs between 12 and 20 interviewees. The qualitative data were analyzed using grounded theory coding techniques as described by Johnson and Christensen (2019), following the grounded theory coding procedures as articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1990), involving a systematic three-level coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

3.2. Phase II: Quantitative Instrument Development and Validation

Building upon the qualitative findings, the second phase adopts a quantitative approach aimed at constructing and validating a measurement instrument based on the emergent conceptual framework. This phase involves the design of survey items reflecting the identified dimensions, followed by rigorous statistical analyses to assess the instrument's reliability and validity.

Three rounds of data to conduct item analysis, scale refinement, scale validation, as well as tests on convergent validity. The first round of data was used for item analysis and scale refinement. 421 teachers from Beijing and Chongqing participated, with 407 valid questionnaires collected, resulting in a response rate of 96.78%. The second round of data was used for scale validation. 441 questionnaires were distributed in Beijing, with 421 valid questionnaires collected, resulting in a response rate of 95.46%. The third round of data was used for on convergent validity. 350 questionnaires were distributed in Jiangxi Province, with 346 valid questionnaires collected, resulting in a response rate of 98.89%.

4. Results

4.1. Results of Open Coding

Open Coding was the initial phase of analysis, wherein the interview transcripts were broken down into discrete units of meaning. During this process, the data were carefully examined to identify significant statements closely related to the research focus. Each sentence or meaningful segment was decomposed and summarized into independent events or concepts. The aim was to condense the original data into concise labels representing key ideas or actions. The volume of text assigned to each label was determined by the meaning it conveyed rather than its length. Additionally, a single passage could be assigned multiple codes if it contained distinct concepts. For example, one teacher's description of the evaluation process was coded both as "asking for feedback during evaluation" and "taking into account the interests and needs of different teachers during evaluation." A total of 444 initial labels were generated.

Following the open coding, the next step involved categorization, where similar codes were grouped into broader categories that captured the essence of related concepts. This process answered questions such as what aspects the events pertained to and what the underlying themes were. For instance, the example from the teacher's evaluation procedure was categorized under broader themes such as "collecting everyone's opinions" and "respecting teacher demands," which were identified as primary methods of democratic management in the school context. After removing irrelevant or weakly supported categories—such as those focused on student feedback or unclear democratic concepts—a refined set of 36 meaningful categories was established to represent teachers' perceptions and experiences of organizational democracy (Table 1).

Table 1 presents the 36 finalized categories, ranked by their frequency and number of sources. The top categories—considering teachers' feelings (34 references from 15 sources), seeking teachers' opinions (30 references from 12 sources), and adopting teachers' suggestions (22 references from 11 sources)—underscore the prominence of inclusion and respect in democratic school environments.

Category	Material Source	Rank	Reference
Considering teachers' feelings	15	1	34
Seeking teachers' opinions	12	2	30
Adopting teachers' suggestions.	11	3	22
Ensuring smooth communication channels	11	4	22
Fair and equitable management	10	5	20
Teacher involvement in decision-making	10	6	13
Equal relationship between leaders and teachers	9	7	15
Discussion between leaders and teachers	9	8	12
Transparent management	9	9	11
Moderated delegation of power	9	10	13
Collective decision-making for public affairs	8	11	12

Table 1 (Cont.)			
Category	Material Source	Rank	Reference
Caring about teacher’s interests	8	12	10
Transparent information within the school.	8	13	14
Autonomous teaching arrangement	8	14	10
Responding to teachers’ opinions	7	15	10
Autonomous classroom management	7	16	14
Teacher involvement in management	6	17	9
Teachers dare to question	6	18	9
Teacher supervision and management	6	19	8
A scientific and humanistic institutional system	6	20	10
Expression of opinions by teachers	5	21	11
Teachers dare to speak out	5	22	6
Harmonious relations between leader and teachers	4	23	5
Collective discussion and consultation	4	24	4
Openness of the school system	4	25	5
Respecting collective rules	4	26	9
Respecting the collective contract	4	27	8
Valuing teachers’ views	3	28	4
Accommodating sharp opinions	3	29	7
Representing the views of teachers	3	30	4
Co-management by leaders and teachers	3	31	7
Rule-based management	3	32	4
Accommodating dissenting views	2	33	4
Teachers evaluating leaders	2	34	2
Offering multiple choices	2	35	3
Procedural justice in policymaking	1	36	3

4.2. Results of Axial Coding

At axial coding step, the researcher was looking at how the categories linked together. To reduce the number of categories to become more abstract or general categories (the main categories), categories were merged or removed whenever needed, so as to discover and establish various potential logical relationships between the categories and form new categories. In this process, the researcher, after repeated searching, comparing and revising, aggregates the categories with similar concepts, which can be used to form new concepts using open coded categories or based on analytical generalization. For example, such categories discussion between leaders and teachers, collective decision-making for public affairs, collective discussion and consultation, and offering multiple choices all emphasize communication

and negotiation between leaders and teachers, so the four categories above can be grouped under the category of “discussion and negotiation.” In the end, 12 core attributes were refined, including discussion and consultation, advice on decision-making, work autonomy, accommodation of opinions, free expression, equality between leaders and teachers, fairness in management, person-centeredness, checks and balances on power, evaluation and monitoring, transparency of information, and participation in the process.

4.3. Results of Selective Coding

Selective coding aimed to identify deeper relationships among the 12 axial-coded categories. Through constant comparison and referencing theoretical frameworks—including political democracy, governance, and workplace democracy—the researcher synthesized the categories into a five-dimensional framework. This framework captures teachers’ perceptions of organizational democracy in schools and includes: freedom of expression, democratic decision making, accountability, transparency, and fairness. Organizational democracy in schools, therefore, is a governance model that integrates democratic ideals into the educational environment. It fosters equity in interpersonal relationships and institutional management, promotes teachers’ rights to freely express opinions, access information, engage in oversight, and participate in decision-making, while respecting their professional autonomy and influence.

4.4. Results of Item Analysis

Item analysis is a crucial process that evaluates the suitability and reliability of test items, forming the basis for questionnaire development. As seen in Table 2: (1) The mean scores of the 30 items range from 3.76 to 5.13, with the 95% confidence interval of the mean mostly falling between 4 and 5. The standard deviation ranges from 1.08 to 1.65, indicating a relatively uniform distribution without any distinct outliers. (2) In terms of the correlation with dimensions, Pearson correlation coefficients range from 0.549 to 0.973, all reaching statistical significance at $p < 0.01$, suggesting good internal consistency among the dimensions of the preliminary measurement scale. (3) According to the critical ratio test, participants were ranked based on their total scores from highest to lowest, with the top 27% classified as the high-score group and the bottom 27% as the low-score group. Independent sample t-tests were conducted between the two groups for each item, revealing significant differences at the $p < 0.001$ level for all test item scores. This provides additional evidence that the discriminatory power of all items in the preliminary scale meets the requirements of measurement theory. In conclusion, the quality of the test items is acceptable, and therefore, the aforementioned 30 items will be retained for further analysis.

Items	Mean	95%CI	SD	<i>r</i>	<i>t</i>
T 1	4.33	[4.18, 4.88]	1.58	0.932**	25.103***
T 2	4.36	[4.21, 4.51]	1.53	0.952**	26.870***
T 3	3.94	[3.78, 4.10]	1.65	0.936**	26.705***
T 4	4.13	[3.97, 4.28]	1.54	0.949**	30.200***
T 5	3.76	[3.61, 3.92]	1.60	0.945**	27.398***
T 6	4.17	[4.02, 4.32]	1.52	0.907**	32.388***
T 7	4.20	[4.06, 4.35]	1.52	0.889**	34.953***
T 8	3.97	[3.81, 4.12]	1.57	0.909**	30.504***
T 9	4.08	[3.92, 4.23]	1.58	0.944**	30.960***
T 10	4.26	[4.10, 4.41]	1.56	0.951**	33.786***
T 11	4.65	[4.51, 4.78]	1.38	0.799**	20.803***

Table 2 (Cont.)					
Items	Mean	95%CI	SD	$\hat{\alpha}$	t
T12	4.32	[4.17, 4.46]	1.52	0.897**	31.725***
T13	4.61	[4.47, 4.74]	1.39	0.813**	22.215***
T14	4.10	[3.95, 4.26]	1.61	0.953**	28.545***
T15	4.34	[4.19, 4.49]	1.51	0.855**	27.578***
T16	4.33	[4.19, 4.48]	1.47	0.821**	24.701***
T17	4.50	[4.36, 4.64]	1.42	0.796**	21.212***
T18	4.27	[4.13, 4.42]	1.51	0.872**	30.059***
T19	4.21	[4.06, 4.37]	1.60	0.779**	23.938***
T20	4.96	[4.84, 5.08]	1.24	0.622**	13.901***
T21	4.47	[4.33, 4.62]	1.45	0.823**	26.003***
T22	5.13	[5.02, 5.23]	1.08	0.549**	12.248***
T23	4.48	[4.34, 4.62]	1.44	0.846**	28.329***
T24	4.43	[4.28, 4.57]	1.51	0.848**	28.581***
T25	4.36	[4.21, 4.51]	1.51	0.971**	31.498***
T26	4.34	[4.19, 4.49]	1.53	0.949**	30.651***
T27	4.46	[4.31, 4.60]	1.47	0.854**	23.837***
T28	4.31	[4.15, 4.46]	1.57	0.935**	33.705***
T29	4.34	[4.19, 4.49]	1.57	0.929**	31.555***
T30	4.34	[4.19, 4.49]	1.55	0.973**	29.155***

Note: + $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

4.5. Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis

To further refine the measurement scale, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted with the primary aim of identifying the underlying factor structure among the 30 items. This procedure sought to determine the number of latent dimensions represented within the data and assess their congruence with the five theoretically anticipated dimensions: freedom of expression, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, and equality and fairness. Accordingly, EFA served a dual role—both exploring the structure and validating the emergent factors against the conceptual framework.

To assess the suitability of the dataset for factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were employed. The KMO statistic was 0.923, indicating excellent sampling adequacy. Moreover, Bartlett's test yielded a statistically significant result ($\chi^2 = 5001.598, p < 0.001$), confirming that the correlations among items were sufficient to warrant factor analysis.

Following these diagnostics, a varimax rotation was applied using the maximum variance rotation method to enhance interpretability. During this iterative process, factor loading patterns were continually examined and adjusted to optimize alignment with theoretical expectations while maintaining an approximately equal number of items per dimension. Ultimately, five distinct factors were extracted.

The rotated eigenvalues for these five factors were 4.57, 2.52, 3.57, 2.89, and 4.26, respectively. The variance explained by each factor was 22.84%, 21.30%, 17.85%, 14.43%, and 12.58%, respectively. Together, the five factors accounted for a cumulative 89% of the total variance. These results provide strong empirical support for the five-dimensional construct, with the extracted factors aligning precisely with the theoretical categories of freedom of expression, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, equality and fairness. The detailed factor loadings for each item under their respective dimensions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Factor Loading Coefficients of Exploratory Factor Analysis		
	Items	Standardized Factor Loading
Freedom of expression		
1	Teachers can openly and without any hesitation point out the flaws in school decision-making.	0.708
2	The leaders really care about what teachers have to say and take their criticisms and suggestions seriously.	0.594
3	Teachers are encouraged to speak up and share their disagreements or concerns about the leaders' actions.	0.692
4	During meetings, every teacher gets a chance to speak up and share their thoughts and ideas.	0.438
Collective Decision-making		
5	School leaders really want teachers to get involved in making decisions.	0.818
6	When making decisions, school leaders consider what most teachers think and feel.	0.801
7	Every teacher who is impacted by a decision has the right to have a say in it.	0.793
8	No matter how the leaders may feel about it, they will always respect the decisions that most teachers agree on.	0.783
Supervision and Accountability		
9	Teachers have the freedom to ask questions or raise concerns about how the school is managed.	0.681
10	Our school has a system in place to hold all accountable for their actions.	0.789
11	Teachers have easy access to channels through which they can monitor and oversee the school's work.	0.708
12	If needed, the teachers' congress can step in to supervise and question the leaders to ensure they are accountable.	0.733
Openness and Transparency		
13	Our school follows an open and transparent approach when it comes to making policies.	0.555
14	Our school follows an open and transparent approach when it comes to making policies.	0.746
15	We keep the process of promoting and evaluating teachers' professional titles transparent.	0.723
16	The school regularly updates how the finances are being used.	0.642
Equality and Fairness		
17	Talent teachers are more likely to be promoted.	0.457
18	There is no gender discrimination against teachers in our school.	0.883
19	We focus on the merits of ideas rather than personal biases and will listen to whoever has the more reasonable opinion.	0.447
20	Colleagues respect each other.	0.826

4.6. Results of Scale Validation

Following the successful refinement of the measurement scale through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), the subsequent step involved scale validation to assess the robustness and construct validity of the instrument. This phase aimed to confirm the factor structure identified during EFA and provide empirical evidence supporting the validity and reliability of the *School Organizational Democracy Scale*.

To achieve this, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using the second-round dataset. The CFA results are summarized in Table 4, which presents several key model fit indices used to evaluate the adequacy of the hypothesized five-factor model.

1. Incremental Fit Indices such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Incremental Fit Index (IFI) all fall within the optimal range of 0 to 1. In this study, all these indices exceeded 0.90, indicating a strong model fit relative to the null model.
2. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), which ranges from 0 to 1 and is ideally close to 0, was found to be 0.087. This value, being below the threshold of 0.10, reflects an acceptable level of model fit for the current sample.
3. Lastly, the Chi-square divided by degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) yielded a value of 4.205, which is less than the recommended maximum of 5. This further supports the conclusion that the model exhibits an acceptable to good level of fit.

Based on these multiple indicators, it can be concluded that the *School Organizational Democracy Scale* demonstrates sound construct validity and is well-suited for measuring teachers' perceptions of organizational democracy in schools.

Indices	Indices	Acceptance	Fit-indices Calculated
1	χ^2/df	$\chi^2/df < 5$	4.205
2	GFI	$0.90 \leq GFI \leq 1$	0.903
3	IFI	$0.90 \leq IFI \leq 1$	0.957
4	CFI	$0.90 \leq CFI \leq 1$	0.952
5	NFI	$0.90 \leq NFI \leq 1$	0.945
6	RMSEA	$0 \leq RMSEA \leq 0.08$	0.087

To further validate the measurement model, convergent validity was assessed (See Table 5). Convergent validity refers to the extent to which multiple items measuring the same construct are in agreement. For the refined questionnaire comprising 5 factors and 20 items, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) were calculated. As reported in Table 5, the AVE values for all five dimensions exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, while the CR values were all above 0.70. These results confirm that each factor demonstrates strong convergent validity, indicating that the indicators are adequately representing their respective constructs.

Dimensions	Average Variance Extracted	Composite Reliability
Freedom of expression	0.749	0.922
Collective decision-making	0.690	0.898
Supervision and accountability	0.873	0.965
Openness and transparency	0.790	0.937
Equality and fairness	0.650	0.880

5. Discussion

This study, situated within the Chinese school context, advances our understanding of organizational democracy by elucidating its structural dimensions and developing a culturally responsive measurement instrument. The findings reveal a multifaceted conception of organizational democracy as perceived by Chinese teachers, reflecting both universal democratic principles and distinctive cultural nuances. This discussion examines these findings through comparative lenses: first between Chinese and Western democratic ideals, and second between organizational democracy in educational versus business contexts.

5.1. Organizational Democracy in Western and Chinese Cultures: Convergences and Divergences

The research confirms that Chinese teachers' perceptions of organizational democracy include core democratic attributes widely recognized internationally, such as expression of freedom, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, and equality and fairness. This convergence underscores the global relevance of these values across diverse cultural and institutional settings. However, the study also reveals meaningful divergences rooted in Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions, particularly Confucianism, which emphasize harmony, collective well-being, and benevolent leadership.

A salient insight from the qualitative phase was the primacy of "considering teachers' feelings" as a democratic marker. Unlike Western models that emphasize self-governance and active participation in decision-making as the essence of democracy, the Chinese teachers interviewed appear to conceptualize democracy more as an expression of careful leadership that takes teachers' interests and psychological needs into account. This reflects the Confucian ideal of *Ren* (仁), or humaneness, where the moral responsibility of leaders to their subordinates is central. Such a perspective reframes democracy as relational and moral, rather than merely procedural or legalistic.

This distinction challenges the universal applicability of Western democratic frameworks in non-Western contexts, suggesting that in China, democracy is not solely about who makes decisions but how decisions reflect respect and concern for the collective. The traditional notion of *Mingui* (putting people's interests first) encapsulates this ethos, which tolerates a degree of centralized authority, provided that it is exercised with benevolence and responsiveness to the community. This nuanced understanding enriches the discourse on organizational democracy by incorporating cultural values often marginalized in dominant Western theories.

5.2. Organizational Democracy in Educational Versus Business Contexts

Comparing organizational democracy in schools with that in economic organizations reveals both parallels and distinctive challenges. Both sectors share foundational democratic practices such as inclusive dialogue, supervision mechanisms, transparency, and freedom of expression, supporting the notion that democracy involves shared participation and accountability regardless of context. The literature from business studies, which highlights voting, appeals systems, and adversarial procedures (Pettersson and Spängs, 2006), aligns closely with school democracy elements like discussion, negotiation, and teacher involvement in decision-making processes.

However, the nature of work and organizational goals in schools create unique demands for democracy that differ markedly from business environments. Teaching requires professional judgment, creativity, and autonomy, none of which are easily standardized or regulated by rigid procedures. Thus, self-determination emerges as a critical dimension in school organizational democracy, reflecting teachers' need for independence in pedagogical choices and classroom management. This contrasts with factory or business workers, whose tasks are often clearly defined and monitored, reducing the necessity for individual autonomy in decision-making.

Another profound difference lies in the power dynamics and employment conditions characteristic of educational institutions, particularly within the Chinese system. Unlike businesses, where hierarchical imbalances can be mitigated by employees' mobility—allowing them to leave unsatisfactory jobs—Chinese teachers often face limited employment mobility and a relatively fixed career trajectory within schools. This situation entrenches inequalities in resource control and decision-making power between leaders and teachers, making issues of equity and fairness more salient and sensitive. Teachers' elevated educational qualifications and professional status further amplify their expectations for an equitable, respectful, and just work environment that recognizes their expertise and contributions.

In business contexts, equality often functions through contractual relationships and market mechanisms; in contrast, school organizational democracy in China must grapple with institutional hierarchies, cultural expectations of authority, and long-term relational ties that complicate efforts toward egalitarian participation. This complexity requires that democratic reforms in schools account for both structural constraints and cultural values, fostering a balanced approach that promotes participation while respecting established norms.

6. Conclusion

This study successfully developed and validated a measurement scale for assessing organizational democracy in schools from the perspective of teachers. Drawing from a rigorous three-level coding process during the qualitative phase, five core dimensions of organizational democracy were identified: expression of freedom, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, and equality and fairness. These dimensions formed the theoretical foundation for the item pool generated for the quantitative phase.

Through expert review and iterative refinement, the initial 40-item questionnaire was reduced to 30 items for pilot testing. Using data collected from three rounds of large-scale teacher surveys, item analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted. EFA revealed a clear five-factor structure consistent with the theoretical framework, with a high cumulative variance explained rate of 89%. CFA results further confirmed the model's robustness, with fit indices (CFI, NFI, IFI > 0.90; RMSEA = 0.087; $\chi^2/df = 4.205$) indicating strong construct validity. Moreover, convergent validity analysis demonstrated that each of the five factors had acceptable average variance extracted (AVE > 0.5) and composite reliability (CR > 0.7), confirming the internal consistency and coherence of the scale.

As a result, a final 20-item measurement instrument was established, offering a valid and reliable tool for evaluating organizational democracy in school settings. This outcome contributes significantly to the field by providing an empirically grounded scale that captures teachers' perceptions of democratic practices in educational institutions. Future research could utilize the organizational democracy within educational institutions studied in this paper to conduct comparative studies on organizational democracy theories across different countries or contexts, and further employ the scale to carry out more in-depth quantitative research.

7. Implications

This study contributes to the field by integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies to construct a culturally grounded, psychometrically sound measurement tool for school organizational democracy. It highlights the importance of contextualizing democracy within specific cultural and organizational environments rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model.

For policymakers and school leaders, these findings suggest that democratic governance in Chinese schools should emphasize leader attentiveness to teachers' well-being and inclusive communication alongside participatory mechanisms. Educational reforms aimed at enhancing democracy must therefore balance top-down leadership responsibilities with bottom-up teacher engagement, promoting a collaborative rather than adversarial organizational culture.

The findings underscore several actionable strategies for improving organizational democracy tailored to the Chinese school context.

Strengthening leader responsiveness and empathy. Since Chinese teachers highly value leaders' attention to their psychological well-being and interests, school administrators should receive training in emotional intelligence, empathetic communication, and culturally sensitive leadership. This can foster trust and a perception of democratic governance even when decision-making remains somewhat centralized.

Promoting participatory communication channels. While full teacher autonomy in decision-making may not be culturally emphasized, creating structured opportunities for meaningful teacher input—such as regular forums, consultative committees, and anonymous feedback mechanisms—can enhance perceptions of transparency and inclusion without disrupting established hierarchies.

Balancing authority and equality. School leaders must consciously address inherent power imbalances by ensuring that resources, information, and recognition are distributed fairly. This includes acknowledging teachers' professional expertise and creating mechanisms to prevent abuse of authority while respecting cultural norms of leadership.

Enhancing professional autonomy in pedagogy. Recognizing the importance of self-determination for teachers, schools should encourage autonomy in instructional methods and classroom management. This empowers teachers and reinforces their professional identity, contributing to greater job satisfaction and commitment.

Building collective norms of fairness and accountability. Institutionalizing clear, transparent policies regarding responsibilities, performance evaluation, and conflict resolution can reinforce fairness and accountability, which are key pillars of organizational democracy.

8. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that should be addressed in future research.

Sample and context specificity. The data were collected from teachers within specific Chinese school contexts, which may limit generalizability to other regions or educational systems. Future studies should test the developed measurement tool across diverse provinces and school types to enhance validity.

Cross-sectional design. Future research could extend this work by exploring how organizational democracy influences teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and student outcomes in Chinese schools.

Multi-stakeholder Perspectives. Incorporating views of other school stakeholders, such as principals, students, and parents, could provide a more holistic understanding of organizational democracy in schools.

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Conflicts of Interest

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