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## **School Organizational Democracy and School Development: A Chain-Mediated Model of Organizational Commitment and Work Engagement**

**Zongqing Cao\***

*PhD in Education, Associate Professor, College of Teacher Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0785-9955>*

**Linman He**

*Master's Candidate in Pedagogy, College of Teacher Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4111-640X>*

**Yanan Dai**

*Master's Candidate in Pedagogy, College of Teacher Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China, <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1881-0793>*

**Lanya Xiang**

*Master's Candidate in Pedagogy, College of Teacher Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China, <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7552-412X>*

**\*Corresponding author:** [caozongqing1989@swu.edu.cn](mailto:caozongqing1989@swu.edu.cn).

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**Abstract:** School organizational democracy is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone for modern educational governance. However, empirical studies examining its impact on school

development within the Chinese context remain limited. This study explores the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development, emphasizing the mediating roles of organizational commitment and work engagement. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 3,599 teachers across 74 schools in China. Using SPSS 26.0 and the PROCESS macro, descriptive statistics, multiple regression, and mediation analyses were performed. The results indicate that school organizational democracy and its key dimensions—freedom of expression, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, and equality and fairness—positively predict school development ( $B = 0.208\text{--}0.341$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, organizational commitment significantly mediates this relationship (effect sizes:  $0.271\text{--}0.338$ ). Additionally, work engagement and the sequential path “organizational commitment → work engagement” further mediate the impact of specific dimensions of organizational democracy on school development. These findings provide a theoretical and practical foundation for enhancing school participatory governance, particularly in emerging educational systems.

**Keywords:** school organizational democracy, school development, organizational commitment, work engagement, teacher participation

## Introduction

School organizational democracy is an important issue in global education management and an inherent requirement for promoting the modernization of school governance (Chu, 2021; Huong et al., 2024). The relevance of studying this issue is underscored by the evolving challenges in educational systems, particularly in bureaucratic inefficiencies and the growing emphasis on participatory decision-making. At the turn of the last century, industrialized nations began to recognize the limitations of traditional bureaucratic and scientific management approaches (Nath, 2025). Influenced by Hawthorne Studies and Human Relations Theory (Watts, 2024), employees’ democratic rights within organizations quickly gained widespread discussion and attention across various management fields. After the 1930s and 1940s, organizational democracy began to permeate from factory organizations to school organizations, and has emerged as a key concern in educational management. After the 1970s, under the influence of the effective school improvement movement in the United States, school-based management and collective decision-making have become the core themes of the movement (Conley, 1991). The changes brought by teachers’ involvement to the school administration, school curriculum, and instruction have been verified (Rice & Schneider, 1994). Moreover, as some developed countries under the guidance of Keynesianism have plunged into a new round of economic crisis, and neo-liberalism flourished, the ideas of reducing state intervention and exercising personal agency were widely accepted. The concept of participatory decision-making has gained widespread currency. Therefore, the organizational democracy in school settings has received heightened academic attention. Since the post-millennium epoch, the school organization democracy implemented by educationally advanced nations has provided a better a priori demonstration for releasing the vitality of school operation, and school organizational democracy has further attracted global attention, especially by developing countries. Some educationally disadvantaged nations expect to improve educational quality by giving more autonomy to teachers.

Despite its theoretical significance, the empirical effects of democracy within governance processes on institutional development remain inconclusive, and this extends to school organizational democracy as well. On the one hand, democracy is an organizational structure based on the concept of redistribution of power within the organization, which is the key to institutional effectiveness (Jarley et al., 1997). It enables higher levels of innovation and performance (Zhao et al., 2024) and creates

sustainable value for the organization (Battilana et al., 2022). On the other hand, democratic organizations exhibit greater wage compression than traditional structures, exacerbating income inequality. Higher-skilled employees fail to secure commensurate remuneration, triggering talent attrition (Burdin, 2016; Wang, 2018). Organizational democracy may also induce latent power asymmetries, undermining decision efficacy (Viggiani, 1997). Paradoxically, the more democratic the workplace, the more difficult it is to achieve agreement between employees and leaders, fostering accountability diffusion, thereby exerting corrosive effects on organizational culture (Cunningham, 2002). Studies have also revealed that the relationship between democratic participation and teacher performance is not simply linear, but rather that a moderate level of democratic participation most effectively enhances teachers' work performance (Conway, 1984).

Whether organizational democracy can promote organizational development is closely related to the specific context of the organization (Watkins, 2008). In the Western cultural context, there has been extensive discussion about democracy and its role, but in the current research, the role of school organizational democracy in promoting school development within the Chinese cultural context has not been sufficiently explored. This research gap presents an important opportunity to deepen our understanding of the applicability and influence mechanisms of organizational democracy in different cultural contexts. Therefore, studying the practical effects and mechanisms of school organizational democracy in the Chinese cultural context not only fills the gaps in existing research but also provides valuable references for other countries implementing organizational democracy in diverse cultural settings.

### ***Research Problem***

The importance and necessity of school organizational democracy are self-evident. However, within the context of the Chinese educational environment, there is still a lack of empirical research examining the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development through large-scale samples, as well as investigating the mediating mechanisms of teachers' organizational commitment and work engagement in this relationship. This study employs various methodologies, including descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis and mediation effect testing, to thoroughly explore the status of school organizational democracy in China, and the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development from a data-driven perspective, offering empirical support for advancing school organizational democracy. This research contributes to filling the gaps in existing studies and enriching the theoretical framework in the education management field.

### ***Research Aim and Research Questions***

School organizational democracy, as a form of school governance, has not yet been deeply explored in terms of its influence on school development. Therefore, it is necessary to, based on theoretical assumptions, investigate both the direct and indirect relationships between school organizational democracy and school development, and further examine whether school organizational democracy can promote school development, and what mediating factors are at play in this mechanism. Specifically, the core research question for this study is: What is the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development in China?

## Literature Review

### *The Structure of School Organizational Democracy*

School organizational democracy originates from organizational democracy, also known as workplace democracy, which focuses on the relationship between employees and the organization (Bilge et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2020). Organizational democracy initially referred to democracy within factories. With the development of society, people's workplaces are no longer limited to frontline factories, and any collective workplace involves organizational democracy (Lu, 2014). Heller et al. (1998) propose that organizational democracy includes direct employee negotiation or employee representative participation, joint decision-making, and self-determination. Ducasse (2016) defines it more simply, including worker self-management and collective decision-making. Both of the above definitions point to the operational practice level. Other studies describe organizational democracy mainly at the level of systemic configurations. Ahmed et al. (2022) argue that organizational democracy includes ten dimensions such as freedom, fairness, integrity, tolerance, shared responsibility, autonomy, transparency, knowledge sharing, accountability, and learning environment. Viggian (2011) suggests that organizational democracy should include shared responsibility, shared benefits, employee engagement, self-management, decentralization of power, mutual trust, and so on. Hamel (2013) argues that organizational democracy includes managerial responsibility, employee engagement and cooperation, decentralization of power, organizational values and meaning, mutual communication, openness and transparency, colleague evaluation, flexible management, self-determination, and benefit sharing.

School organizational democracy refers to democracy in the sense of using schools as workplaces, which is different from organizational democracy in factories or other groups. School is a workplace for educating people, with educational and public qualities. The staff of the school are teachers with more knowledge, with specific work value pursuits and organizational cultural demands, so it is not possible to directly graft the democratic elements of other organizations into the school organization. Cao (2023), a Chinese scholar, adopts a bottom-up approach to construct a five-dimensional school organizational democracy structure, namely, freedom of expression, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, equality and fairness, and believes that school organizational democracy is defined as a kind of democratic governance in the modern school workplace. Namely, in the process of school governance, an organizational operating environment with equal interpersonal relationships and fair transaction handling is established, teachers' rights to expression, information, and supervision are fully respected, and teachers' subjectivity in school decision-making is maintained.

### *The Characteristics of School Development*

From the management perspective, school development is often seen as school performance or effectiveness, and different scholars' definitions of school development often depend on the research context. Zhang (2005) divides school development into external development and internal development. External development refers to expanding the scale and quantity of schools. In contrast, internal development refers to schools exploring their internal potential through various means within their existing conditions and unleashing vitality within the school. Yang (2020) divides school development into three levels: spiritual or conceptual, institutional or formal, and material or technological. Other scholars believe that school development includes not only instrumental indicators such as student exam scores, but also performance indicators such as management functions, teacher cooperation or morale, teacher effectiveness, trust level, teacher commitment, teacher loyalty, and teacher satisfaction (Rosenholtz et al., 1986; Uline et al., 1998).

In previous quantitative studies, school development was characterized mainly by the teacher-student ratio, academic performance, or per capita expenditure, which are more one-sided (Zhang et al., 2021). This study's definition of school development mainly comes from China's policy documents. In 2021, six national departments in China including the Ministry of Education issued the *Guidelines for Quality Evaluation of Compulsory Education* and the *Guidelines for Quality Evaluation of Ordinary High Schools*, proposing that the evaluation of school quality includes five aspects: school orientation, curriculum teaching, teacher development, school management, and student development, which are also the operational indicator of school development in this study.

### ***The Role of School Organizational Democracy in School Development***

Although scholars have pointed out that democracy has unstable factors such as the logic of ballots and street protests, its intrinsic egalitarianism conflicts with elitism based on school capabilities, and popular authority contradicts teacher professionalism (Cheng & Zhou, 2018). Schools should avoid the abuse of democratic procedures. Most studies hold a positive attitude towards the role of school organizational democracy in school development.

From the perspective of psychological capital, organizational democracy, as an objective organizational behavior or subjective cultural perception (Deitcher & Alon, 2025), is regarded as an advanced manifestation of civilization in modern organizational development and a critical management factor for enhancing organizational effectiveness. School organizational democracy fosters a harmonious and equitable cultural atmosphere, igniting teachers' work passion, ultimately achieving the dual objectives of organizational and individual growth (Liu & Du, 2024). From the organizational behavior perspective, teacher participation in school decision-making facilitates management coordination and cultivates teachers' organizational commitment (Park et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2025). Involving teachers in school administration effectively harnesses their ownership spirit, initiative, and creativity, infusing the institution with innovative vitality (Peng & Nair, 2022), and developing the school into a process of collective thinking and participation, thereby improving interpersonal cooperation within the school and promoting scientific decision-making and management (Zhou, 2019). However, no empirical research has recognized whether school organizational democracy can promote school development in Chinese contexts.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Social exchange theory provides a viable theoretical framework for examining relational processes within individuals and organizations (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). Social exchange is the most fundamental form of relational dynamics in human interactions. Social exchange theory not only encompasses the exchange of tangible goods but also involves the exchange of intangible goods such as assistance, praise, and emotions (Cooper-Thomas & Morrison, 2018 ). Democracy is a resource that employees obtain from the organization. When employees recognize and value organizational democracy, they strengthen their emotional bonds with the organization as a form of reciprocity, leading to organizational commitment (Klein, 2012; Vickers et al., 2025).

Moreover, according to the theory of motivational models, when individuals perceive that the characteristics of their work and the work environment align with their needs, they will actively engage in their tasks; otherwise, they may experience work alienation (Zagenczyk et al., 2021). Specifically, individuals with organizational commitment develop a psychological sense of belonging to the organization, and this mental state motivates teachers to adopt positive behaviors and enhances their work engagement (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Work engagement refers to a positive state of immersion in one's work, connecting individual traits, work-related factors, and work performance, and serves as a critical pathway for creating organizational competitive advantages (Aldabbas et al., 2025; Ji & Cui,

2021). Drawing on structuralist perspectives, individuals are embedded within organizational structures, and changes in their psychology and behavior inevitably influence the organization. Therefore, school organizational democracy may foster teachers' commitment and work engagement, promoting school development. Based on the insights from the above theoretical framework, this study proposes the following four hypotheses.

H<sub>1</sub>: School organizational democracy has a positive impact on school development.

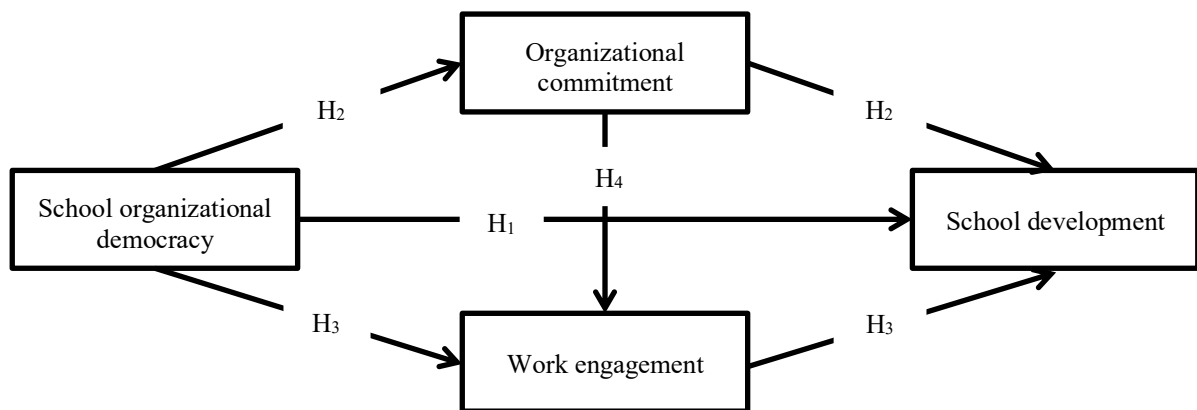
H<sub>2</sub>: Organizational commitment plays a mediating role in the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development.

H<sub>3</sub>: Work engagement plays a mediating role in the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development.

H<sub>4</sub>: Organizational commitment and work engagement have a chain mediating effect in the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development.

**Figure 1**

*Hypothesized Conceptual Framework of Influence Mechanisms*



## Materials and Methods

To investigate the manifestation of school organizational democracy in China's contexts and its relationship with school development, this study collected data through questionnaires. The SPSS 26.0 and PROCESS macro were used for standard method variance analysis, linear regression analysis, and a mediating effect test. Specific research materials and methods are as follows.

### *Sample and Participants*

Before the following sample selection procedures, ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Beijing Normal University Ethics Review Board. All participants provided informed consent, and their confidentiality and rights were protected throughout the research. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring that the benefits and burdens of participation were balanced for all participants. This study draws research samples through three stages.

In the first stage, purposive sampling is used to select the sample regions, which can make overall inferences based on statistical principles from the data. The sample provinces selected by the researchers include those with per capita GDP in the first 30%, middle 30%, and last 30%, specifically Beijing, Shandong, Anhui, Jiangxi, Chongqing, and Guizhou, six provinces.

In the second stage, purposive sampling is still used to select sample schools, fully considering the geographical location and educational level of schools in the Chinese context. Finally, 74 schools from the aforementioned six provinces/municipalities were selected as research sample schools. Among them, 53 (71.62%) were urban schools, and 21 schools (28.38%) were rural. The sample comprised 20 primary schools (27.03%), 12 junior high schools (16.22%), 11 senior high schools (14.86%), six nine-year consistent schools (8.11%), 23 complete high schools (31.08%), and two twelve-year consistent schools (2.70%), which can better cover representatives of primary and secondary schools of different regions and types in China.

In the third stage, cluster sampling and random selection methods were integrated to select teachers from the sample schools. Cluster sampling is an approach where all subjects within the selected units are investigated comprehensively. Random sampling involves selecting a portion of units from the population based on the principle of randomness for investigation. Specifically, this study implements the following procedures. If the total number of teachers in a sample school is less than 30, cluster sampling is adopted. If the total number of teachers is between 30 and 60, at least two-thirds of the school's total teachers (and more than 30) are randomly selected; if the total number of teachers exceeds 60, at least two-thirds (40 or more) of the school's teachers are selected to participate in the survey.

A total of 3,743 teachers completed the questionnaires. After deleting 144 invalid questionnaires, 3,599 valid questionnaires were included in the statistics, with an effective response rate of 96.15%. Specifically, there were 1,234 male teachers (34.29%) and 2,365 female teachers (65.71%); 233 unranked teachers (6.47%), 967 second-level teachers (26.87%), 1,571 first-level teachers (43.65%), and 828 senior-level teachers (23.01%); 913 teachers (25.37%) in primary schools, 1,415 (39.31%) in junior high schools, and 1,271 (35.32%) in senior high schools; 85 school-level leaders (2.36%), 281 middle-level leaders (7.81%), 108 grade leaders (3.00%), 1,184 class teachers (32.90%), and 1,604 ordinary teachers without management positions (44.57%). Each group's sampling ratios were consistent with the proportions, indicating that the sampled teachers had good representativeness.

### ***Instruments***

The measurement tools include two parts to comprehensively obtain school-level and teacher-level information. First, the School Basic Information Questionnaire reported by school contacts includes school location, number of teachers, average age, number of students, and school educational stage. Second, the Teacher-Report Questionnaire covered school organizational democracy, organizational commitment, work engagement, and school development. Since the data was collected in a Chinese context, all questionnaires were conducted in Chinese.

### ***School Organizational Democracy***

The measurement of school organizational democracy adopted the School Organizational Democracy Scale by Cao (2023). This scale requires teachers to evaluate five dimensions in school organizational democracy: freedom of expression (e.g. Teachers are encouraged to speak up and share their disagreements or concerns about the leaders' actions.), collective decision-making (e.g. School leaders want teachers to get involved in making decisions.), supervision and accountability (e.g. If needed, the teachers' congress can step in to supervise and question the leaders to ensure they are accountable.), openness and transparency (e.g., the school regularly updates how the finances are being

used.), equality and fairness (e.g., no gender discrimination against teachers in our school.). Each dimension contains four items, and each item is scored on a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 to 6 represent “strongly disagree”, “somewhat disagree”, “slightly disagree”, “slightly agree”, “somewhat agree”, and “strongly agree”, respectively. School organizational democracy is operationalized as the average score across the five dimensions. The internal consistency coefficients for each dimension were 0.944, 0.932, 0.893, 0.963, and 0.951, all above 0.8. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) yielded the following model fit indices: CFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.961, NFI = 0.966, RMSEA = 0.073. To address potential issues of large sample size and non-normally distributed data, the Bollen-Stine method was used to estimate the chi-square value, resulting in  $\chi^2/df = 2.325$ . These results indicate that the scale is reliable and has construct validity.

### ***Organizational Commitment***

The teachers’ organizational commitment measurement was adapted from the PISA 2015 (Programme for International Student Assessment 2015) Teacher Questionnaire. This questionnaire demonstrates high international adaptability and item stability, and it is specifically designed for teacher populations, making it well-suited for this study’s context. The PISA 2015 organizational commitment scale includes three items: “I enjoy working at this school.” “My school is a good place to work,” and “I am satisfied with my performance at school.” Teachers reported their agreement on a 6-point Likert scale, 1 = “strongly disagree”, 2 = “somewhat disagree”, 3 = “slightly disagree”, 4 = “slightly agree”, 5 = “somewhat agree”, 6 = “strongly agree”. Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.906, indicating high internal consistency. Confirmatory factor analysis revealed perfect model fit indices (NFI = IFI = CFI = 1.00), suggesting a saturated model.

### ***Work Engagement***

The measurement of work engagement employed the short version of the UWES-9 scale optimized by Schaufeli et al. (2006). This scale consists of 9 items, including statements such as “Work inspires me.” “I feel energetic when working,” and “I become completely absorbed in my work.” Responses are rated on a 6-point scale, where teachers report the degree to which each statement aligns with their experience (1 = “strongly inconsistent”, 6 = “strongly consistent”). Reliability analysis showed a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.906, indicating high internal consistency. Confirmatory factor analysis yielded the following model fit indices:  $\chi^2/df = 2.779$ , CFI = 0.896, TLI = 0.861, NFI = 0.895, RMSEA = 0.176, suggesting acceptable reliability and construct validity for the scale.

### ***School Development***

The measurement of school development was based on relevant policies and focused on five key dimensions: school orientation, curriculum and instruction, teacher development, school management, and student development. Teachers were asked to evaluate each indicator of school development according to their genuine perceptions, using a 6-point Likert scale where 1 = “very poor”, 2 = “somewhat poor”, 3 = “fair”, 4 = “good”, 5 = “excellent”, and 6 = “very excellent”. Reliability statistics indicated a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.975, demonstrating high internal consistency. The model fit indices were obtained following confirmatory factor analysis (CFA):  $\chi^2/df = 3.824$ , CFI = 0.979, TLI = 0.965, NFI = 0.979, RMSEA = 0.143. These results indicate that the scale possesses good reliability and structural validity.

## Results

### *Common Method Bias Testing and Variable Descriptive Statistics*

Common method bias (CMB) is fundamentally a form of artificial covariation. Data originating from a single source, with identical raters assessing different variables under uniform measurement contexts, may induce artificial covariation between explanatory and explained variables. The following two procedures were implemented to control for common variance bias. First, procedural controls were applied during data collection, emphasizing confidentiality and academic-use-only restrictions (Baumgartner et al., 2021). Second, common method bias testing was conducted using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)—a standard diagnostic for CMB (Salmerón-Gómez et al., 2025). A preliminary linear regression model was constructed with freedom of expression, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, equality and fairness as independent variables, and school development as the dependent variable. Results indicated that all primary independent variables had VIF values below 10, signifying acceptable levels of artificial covariation. Thus, common method bias falls within tolerable limits, warranting further analysis.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for Key Variables*

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
1 FE	4.13	1.51	1								
2 CD	4.32	1.47	.900***	1							
3 SA	4.46	1.43	.872***	.842***	1						
4 OT	4.52	1.37	.861***	.842***	.885***	1					
5 EF	4.79	1.16	.808***	.791***	.878***	.879***	1				
6 SOD	4.61	1.24	.949***	.935***	.952***	.948***	.919***	1			
7 OC	4.61	1.16	.673***	.668***	.722***	.706***	.718***	.739***	1		
8 WE	4.76	1.13	.657***	.645***	.684***	.665***	.678***	.707***	.815***	1	
9 SD	4.76	1.13	.687***	.688***	.748***	.731***	.732***	.761***	.780***	.681***	1

**Note:** \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001; FE: freedom of expression; CD: collective decision-making; SA: supervision and accountability; OT: openness and transparency; EF: equality and fairness; SOD: school organizational democracy; OC: organizational commitment; WE: working engagement; SD: school development. The same applies to the following.

Based on descriptive statistics (Table 1), the overall mean score of school organizational democracy was 4.44 on a 6-point scale, equivalent to 68.8/100, reaching a conventional passing threshold but remaining below the 80-point benchmark for good performance. Among the dimensions of school organizational democracy, equality and fairness ranked highest (M=4.79), followed by openness and transparency (M=4.52), supervision and accountability (M=4.46), and collective decision-making (M=4.32); freedom of expression scored lowest (M=4.13).

Correlation analysis revealed a strong association between organizational democracy and school development (r=0.761). All five dimensions showed substantial correlations with school development,

ranging around 0.7: freedom of expression ( $r=0.678$ ), collective decision-making ( $r=0.688$ ), supervision and accountability ( $r=0.748$ ), openness and transparency ( $r=0.731$ ), equality and fairness ( $r=0.732$ ); organizational commitment and work engagement demonstrated moderate correlations (approximately 0.7) with both the dimensions of school organizational democracy and school development, indicating that organizational commitment and work engagement are suitable mediators for constructing a mediation model linking school organizational democracy to school development.

### ***Chain Mediation Analysis***

The data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). After controlling for variables such as teachers' gender, age, education level, professional title, principal's gender, age, school location (urban/rural), and school size, school organizational democracy and its dimensions were treated as independent variables. Using the entire sample as the bootstrap population, 5,000 bootstrap samples were generated to test the mediating effects.

As shown in Table 2, Models from  $M_1$  to  $M_6$  indicate that school organizational democracy and its dimensions significantly and positively predict organizational commitment ( $0.522 < B < 0.728$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The effect sizes for these predictors are notable, with coefficients ranging from moderate to strong, suggesting that school organizational democracy plays a substantial role in fostering employees' commitment to their organization. After introducing organizational commitment, Models from  $M_7$  to  $M_{12}$  reveal that school organizational democracy and its dimensions significantly and positively predict work engagement ( $0.152 < B < 0.219$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Though smaller than those for organizational commitment, these effect sizes still reflect practical significance.

When simultaneously including organizational commitment and work engagement, Models from  $M_7$  to  $M_{12}$  further show that school organizational democracy and its dimensions positively predict school development ( $0.208 < B < 0.341$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The effect sizes for these predictors are moderate, indicating that school organizational democracy has a tangible impact on the broader goal of school development, confirming  $H_1$ .

Additionally, in Models from  $M_{13}$  and  $M_{16}$ , the predictive coefficients of work engagement are nonsignificant. Specifically, when school organizational democracy and work engagement, or supervision, accountability, and work engagement are simultaneously included in the models, work engagement does not significantly predict school development ( $M_{13}$ ,  $M_{16}$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). This finding suggests that work engagement may not independently contribute to school development in the context of these models, or that its effects are mediated or moderated by other variables. In contrast, across other models, both organizational commitment and work engagement positively predict school development ( $0.457 < B_{OC} < 0.523$ ,  $0.045 < B_{WE} < 0.054$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). These results underscore the practical significance of fostering organizational commitment and work engagement within school settings, as they are critical drivers of school development.

**Table 2***Multiple Linear Regression Analysis*

DV	OC			WE									SD					
IV	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18
Constant	1.572*	.487***	2.328**	2.328**	1.943**	1.943**	.355***	.487***	.451***	.445***	.435***	.239*	.999***	1.223**	1.147**	1.104***	1.068***	.789***
SOD	.668**						.219***						.341***					
FE		.522***						.161***						.208**				
CD			.530***						.152***						.218***			
SA				.596***						.175***						.293**		
OT					.605***						.163***						.282***	
EF						.728***						.206***						.327***
OC							.631***				.676***	.665***	.457***	.529***	.523***	.466***	.480***	.481***
WE													0.16	.049**	.054**	0.032	.046**	.045**
R <sup>2</sup>	.55***	.456***	.449***	.526***	.501***	.518***	.692***	.689***	.686***	.687***	.684***	.686***	.686***	.662***	.665***	.683***	.678***	.674***
F	731.369***	502.395***	487.531***	665.328***	601.749***	643.024***	1154.280***	1137.542***	1119.568***	1126.948***	1108.788***	1118.498***	982.066***	879.453***	889.170***	968.019**	943.689***	926.345***

**Note:** IV: Independent Variables; DV: Dependent Variables.

**Table 3***Bootstrap Analysis of Mediating Effects*

Variables	Mediating path I			Mediating path II			Mediating path III		
	OC			WE			OC→WE		
	Effect size	BootSE	95% CI	Effect size	BootSE	95%CI	Effect size	BootSE	95%CI
SOD	0.298	0.018	[.230, .287]	0.005	0.005	[-.005, .015]	0.011	0.011	[-.009, .032]
FE	0.271	0.014	[.243, .298]	0.009	0.004	[.002, .016]	0.021	0.009	[.004, .0380]
CD	0.272	0.014	[.243, .301]	0.009	0.004	[.002, .016]	0.024	0.009	[.006, .0420]
SA	0.271	0.016	[.240, .140]	0.007	0.004	[-.001, .016]	0.016	0.01	[-.003, .036]
OT	0.283	0.017	[.250, .316]	0.008	0.004	[.001, .016]	0.022	0.01	[.003, .0430]
EF	0.338	0.02	[.297, .376]	0.01	0.005	[.001, .019]	0.026	0.012	[.001, .050]

As shown in Table 3. The mediating effects of organizational commitment between school organizational democracy (and its dimensions) and school development ranged from 0.271 to 0.338, with all Bootstrap confidence intervals excluding zero. According to Kenny (2008), the critical values for small, medium, and large indirect effects in mediation models are 0.01, 0.09, and 0.25, respectively, indicating that the mediating effects fall into the medium to large range, suggesting that organizational commitment is a meaningful mechanism through which school organizational democracy influences school development.

The 95% confidence intervals for the mediating effects of work engagement between school organizational democracy and school development and between supervision and accountability and school development included zero. This indicates that work engagement does not serve as a significant mediator in these relationships, at least in the context of this study. However, the 95% confidence intervals for work engagement between freedom of expression, collective decision-making, openness and transparency, equality and fairness, and school development all excluded zero, indicating that work engagement mediates these relationships. These findings suggest that work engagement is practical in mediating the effects of certain dimensions of school organizational democracy on school development. For instance, fostering freedom of expression and collective decision-making may enhance employees' work engagement, contributing to school development.

Furthermore, the 95% confidence intervals for the chain pathway “organizational commitment → work engagement” between school organizational democracy or supervision and accountability and school development included zero, suggesting that organizational commitment does not meaningfully influence school development through work engagement. In contrast, for the dimensions of freedom of expression, collective decision-making, openness and transparency, and equality and fairness, the confidence intervals for this chain pathway excluded zero, indicating significant mediating effects.

In summary, H<sub>2</sub> was fully supported, while H<sub>3</sub> and H<sub>4</sub> were partially validated. The results demonstrate that organizational commitment is a robust and practically significant mediator of the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development. Additionally, work engagement mediates the effects of certain dimensions of organizational democracy, but not all of them.

## Discussion

The overall average score for school organizational democracy is 4.44 on a 6-point scale. Among the five dimensions of school organizational democracy, openness and transparency ( $M=4.52$ ), and equality and fairness ( $M=4.79$ ) score relatively higher. The two lowest-scoring dimensions are freedom of expression ( $M=4.13$ ) and collective decision-making ( $M=4.32$ ), both of which barely exceed the conventional 60-point passing line.

Insufficient freedom of expression reflects, to some extent, a lack of openness and inclusiveness in China's school climate for discourse. As a means for citizens to express opinions, thoughts, and information, freedom of expression holds a paramount position among various political freedoms (Gunatilleke, 2021). Furthermore, freedom of expression serves as a prerequisite for collective decision-making, supervision and accountability. If relevant factors constrain teachers' opportunities to speak freely, the extent of their participation in collective decision-making, supervision and accountability will also be significantly compromised (Briones, 2024). Previous research has predominantly interpreted insufficient employee freedom of expression through cultural and institutional perspectives. Guerci et al. (2023) suggest the organization is characterized by relatively rigid hierarchical distinctions and a high power distance orientation within organizations (Islam et al., 2024). To maintain managerial authority and secure a relatively safe workplace environment, employees often adhere to the Doctrine of the Mean (Duan & Ling, 2011). Although some inclusive leaders may treat employees with openness, approachability, tolerance, and support (Li et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2020; Wang & Shi, 2021), hierarchical cultural influences lead Chinese teachers to act cautiously or remain silent on public affairs matters to avoid unnecessary trouble.

The level of collective decision-making scores directly indicates the implementation of substantive democracy in schools. Further examination reveals that despite the existence of democratic decision-making mechanisms such as faculty congresses and trade unions, the influence of teachers' decision-making remains restricted (Duan & Huang, 2013). In practice, suggestions proposed by lower-ranking employees may not always be practically feasible, potentially causing leaders to hesitate when adopting teachers' proposals (Volante, 2020). Additionally, this phenomenon may relate to leadership styles. Authoritarian leadership generally exerts a significantly negative impact on subordinates' decision-making behaviors (Or & Berkovich, 2023). To enable broader teacher participation in school decision-making, attention must also be paid to practical issues beyond institutional frameworks, such as representatives failing to fulfill their representative roles (Yin & Tian, 2016).

School organizational democracy demonstrates a significant positive predictive effect on school development, with empirical data robustly supporting its beneficial impact. Based on large-scale data from 3,599 teachers and controlling for relevant variables, this study reveals through multiple regression models (using school organizational democracy and its respective dimensions as independent variables) that both overall school organizational democracy and its individual dimensions significantly and positively predict school development, which is consistent with the findings of Torun (2021). This confirms the positive impact of democracy within educational institutions, providing a theoretical foundation for proactively advancing organizational democracy in schools moving forward.

Organizational commitment functions as a mediator between school organizational democracy and school development, indicating that social exchange theory finds support in this study's data. As a key theoretical foundation of this research, social exchange theory posits that when schools or administrators respect teachers' democratic rights, empowering them to fully exercise rights to expression, decision-making, oversight, and information access within the workplace, and fostering an equitable organizational climate, teachers reciprocate by ultimately facilitating school development

upon receiving institutional support and respect (Ahmad et al., 2023). Zhi and Derakhshan (2025) argue that workers' affective states directly influence productivity, with high work morale achievable only when employees attain psychological fulfillment. Conversely, insufficient democratic support in schools diminishes teachers' positive affect toward the school and their work engagement.

The findings substantially align with existing conclusions (Aldabbas et al., 2025; Whillas, 2021), revealing that work engagement and the path "organizational commitment → work engagement" play a mediating role between most dimensions of school organizational democracy and school development. Specifically, school organizational democracy not only directly strengthens teacher-organization affective bonds but also stimulates work engagement. Furthermore, teachers translate their affective commitment toward the school into heightened work engagement, thereby fostering school development.

Additionally, the findings indicate that work engagement does not significantly predict or mediate school development in the models. Furthermore, the hypothesized moderation effect of work engagement in the relationship between organizational commitment and school development, as well as between school organizational democracy or supervision and accountability and school development, was not supported. These findings may be influenced by the specific research context, suggesting that work engagement and organizational commitment may exert their effects through different pathways or under varying conditions. These results suggest that work engagement may play a less direct or nuanced role in driving school development compared to other factors in the study. Future research could explore additional pathways or contextual factors to better understand their potential contributions.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the descriptive analysis of large-scale sample data, the overall status of school organizational democracy in China was found to require further improvement, with an average score of 4.44 points across the 74 sample schools. The dimensions of school organizational democracy were ranked from lowest to highest as follows: freedom of expression (M=4.13), collective decision-making (M=4.32), supervision and accountability (M=4.46), openness and transparency (M=4.52), and equality and fairness (M=4.79). Stepwise testing and mediation effect analysis using the PROCESS macro revealed that school organizational democracy and its dimensions positively predict school development. Furthermore, work engagement and the "organizational commitment-work engagement" pathway mediate the relationship between most dimensions of school organizational democracy and school development. This suggests that school organizational democracy not only directly strengthens teachers' emotional connection to the organization but also enhances their work engagement, which subsequently promotes school development.

The practical significance of these findings underscores the importance of school leadership and management in fostering organizational commitment and work engagement. Schools can prioritize implementing democratic practices, such as freedom of expression and collective decision-making, which demonstrate strong mediating effects. Additionally, enhancing work engagement, particularly in contexts where specific dimensions of organizational democracy are present, can further drive school development. However, the inconsistent mediating effects of work engagement across all dimensions highlight its context-dependent role, warranting further investigation to better understand its potential contributions.

## **Implications for Education**

This study finds that school organizational democracy plays a crucial role in enhancing teachers' emotional bonds, fostering work engagement, and driving school development. Based on these findings, the following three practical recommendations are proposed.

First, schools should deepen the implementation of governance by law to ensure the effective enforcement of democratic school governance policies. While China has established relatively comprehensive regulations and systems for democratic governance, the actual manifestation of such practices still needs improvement. This indicates that although there are laws to rely on, the practical behaviors of governance by law require further refinement.

Second, schools should strengthen organized teacher participation to genuinely enhance teachers' perception of organizational democracy within the school. When teachers participate as a collective group, it effectively overcomes the limitations of individual efforts, amplifying their voices through organized channels and enabling their collective strength to exert greater influence.

Third, schools should enhance principals' awareness of democracy and cultivate a modern governance team. On one hand, principals should actively practice the modern concept of school governance characterized by multi-party collaboration. They should guide, demonstrate, and supervise the democratic management practices of the administrative staff. On the other hand, principals should focus on articulating and disseminating their democratic management philosophy to the school's administrative team, fostering a culture of democratic management within the leadership.

## ***Suggesting for Future Research***

This study has the following limitations. First, the data model reveals that freedom of expression, collective decision-making, supervision and accountability, openness and transparency, and equality and fairness can all independently and positively predict the level of school development. However, school organizational democracy, as a form of school governance, is not the sole factor influencing school development. There are multiple elements involved in school governance, and in future research, more factors could be incorporated into the model to further explore the explanatory power of school organizational democracy regarding school development. Second, this study primarily examines school organizational democracy through large-sample data analysis. In practical contexts, the mechanisms through which school organizational democracy operates are more complex. Therefore, it would be beneficial to delve deeper into the field of school governance, conduct case studies to explore the phenomena. Third, this study employs cross-sectional data to investigate the relationship between school organizational democracy and school development, resulting in conclusions that primarily reflect predictive associations rather than strict causal relationships. To better understand the causal mechanisms between the two, future research could involve tracking the developmental trajectories of schools over time and collecting longitudinal data for analysis.

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