

Leadership of School-Family Partnerships with Low-SES Families: Case Studies from Two Primary Schools in Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT: Grounded in Auerbach's framework on leadership for school-family partnerships, this study examines how leadership for partnerships is enacted with low socio-economic status (SES) families in Vietnam. It employs a qualitative case study design involving longitudinal fieldwork over two academic years at two primary schools in Ho Chi Minh City. Data collected from semi-structured interviews with 17 administrators and homeroom teachers, along with school and community observations, were analysed using deductive thematic analysis guided by Auerbach's five dimensions of leadership. The findings reveal contrasting leadership practices. At Primary School X, informal leadership was exercised by veteran teachers, including grade-level leaders, whose professional authority and community ties positioned them as pivotal in guiding parent engagement. At Primary School Y, the formal school administration-principal and vice-principals-actively mentored novice teachers in working with parents. Despite these differences, both schools reflected deficit views of low-SES parents' capacities and selective structures of parent representation, which constrained opportunities for shared decision-making. This study enriches Auerbach's framework by demonstrating how formal and informal leadership roles are shaped by specific socio-institutional conditions, while foregrounding the persistent tension between support and control in engaging low-SES families.

KEYWORDS: School-family partnerships, low socio-economic status families, family engagement, primary schools, educational equity.

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1. Introduction

School-family partnerships have long been recognised as a cornerstone of successful primary education, contributing to students' academic achievement, attendance, and overall development (Castro *et al.*, 2015; Wong *et al.*, 2018). However, such partnerships do not unfold uniformly across socio-economic contexts. In schools serving families with low socio-economic status (SES), migrant backgrounds, or unstable working conditions, collaboration is often shaped by structural constraints such as irregular work schedules, limited educational resources, and restricted access to school spaces. Researches have shown that under these conditions, conventional forms of parental involvement may be difficult to sustain, and expectations of engagement frequently remain misaligned between schools and families

(Rangel & Peck, 2022; Yang & Qu, 2021). As a result, partnerships in disadvantaged settings require more than general encouragement; they demand deliberate efforts to create inclusive and responsive forms of collaboration that acknowledge families' lived realities.

In such contexts, school leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping whether partnerships remain symbolic or become meaningful avenues for educational equity (Auerbach, 2007, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Rather than emerging automatically, effective school-family collaboration in disadvantaged communities often depends on how leaders interpret families' capacities, redistribute responsibilities among staff, and create conditions that enable trust and reciprocal communication (Auerbach, 2010; Baxter & Toe, 2023; Durand & Secakusuma, 2019). A growing body of scholarship highlights

leadership as a key mechanism through which schools can move from compliance-based interactions with parents toward more authentic, equity-oriented partnerships. These perspectives emphasise that leadership is not limited to formal administrative authority but also includes the everyday practices of teachers and middle leaders who mediate relationships with families (Auerbach, 2009; Gordon *et al.*, 2020). Understanding how such leadership is enacted in specific institutional and socio-economic contexts is therefore essential for bridging the gap between normative frameworks of partnership and the realities experienced by low-SES families.

In Vietnam, equity in education is a central policy commitment, and school–family collaboration is consistently promoted as a key mechanism for supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. National policy documents and local directives have encouraged schools to strengthen communication with families, particularly in urban areas with large populations of migrant and working-class households. However, a significant gap persists between policy vision and practical implementation. This is most evident in the stark disparity in school attendance: while enrolment is high at the primary level (97.6%), attendance for inter-provincial migrant children plunges to 55.7% at the secondary level, compared to 83.9% for their non-migrant peers (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2020).

Existing research in Vietnam has examined various aspects of school–family collaboration and its management in primary education, such as collaboration in life-skills education (Huynh, 2015), implementation of the VNEN school model (Le & Nguyen, 2017), environmental education (Tran, 2018), and values education (Doan & Vo, 2022). While these studies demonstrate sustained policy and scholarly interest in school–family coordination, they tend to focus on specific programmes or managerial arrangements rather than on how leadership practices shape everyday partnerships with low-SES families. Research addressing disadvantaged students has also largely centred on issues of

access, retention, or academic support, with less attention to the relational and leadership dimensions of collaboration. Consequently, a gap remains between the normative expectations of partnership embedded in policy and the ways such partnerships are enacted in schools serving socio-economically vulnerable communities.

This gap is especially visible in rapidly urbanising districts of Ho Chi Minh City, where primary schools located near industrial and export processing zones enrol large numbers of children from migrant worker families, who are widely recognised as a socio-economically vulnerable group facing barriers in accessing social and educational resources (Vu, 2021a, 2021b). These schools operate under conditions marked by time poverty, unstable income, and limited parental familiarity with formal schooling, all of which complicate conventional forms of engagement. While school leaders are expected to foster inclusive partnerships, there is little empirical research examining how leadership roles are mobilised to navigate these constraints and support collaboration with low-SES families. Addressing this gap requires context-sensitive analysis of leadership practices that connect theoretical frameworks of equitable partnership with the lived realities of disadvantaged communities.

Building on these gaps, this study investigates how leadership for school–family partnerships with low-SES families is enacted in Vietnamese primary schools and how such leadership shapes the possibilities for more equitable forms of collaboration. Drawing on Auerbach’s framework of leadership for authentic school–family partnerships, the study examines not only formal administrative roles but also informal and distributed leadership practices that mediate relationships between schools and families in disadvantaged contexts. By focusing on two primary schools serving large populations of migrant and working-class families in Ho Chi Minh City, the study aims to illuminate how leadership practices are embedded in specific socio-economic conditions and how they mediate the tension between policy expectations of inclusive partnership and the everyday realities

of collaboration. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute contextually grounded insights into how leadership can enable, constrain, or reshape opportunities for meaningful participation among socio-economically disadvantaged families in public primary education.

Guided by this purpose, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How are school–family partnerships with low-SES families enacted in everyday educational practices at the two studied primary schools? (2) How do leadership practices shape the nature of school–family partnerships with low-SES families in these contexts?

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship highlights key insights into school–family partnerships, especially in relation to equity and the engagement of low-SES families. Prior studies converge on three themes: (1) partnerships as a means to promote learning and reduce inequalities, (2) barriers and deficit views that constrain low-SES family engagement, and (3) leadership practices that determine whether partnerships remain symbolic or evolve into authentic collaboration.

2.1. School-family Partnerships in Primary Education

Research has consistently highlighted the vital role of school–family partnerships in supporting children’s learning and development, especially in the primary years when academic and social foundations are laid. Epstein’s framework on parent involvement has provided a foundational lens for examining such collaboration, and meta-analytic evidence confirms that effective partnerships improve both academic and socio-emotional outcomes (Castro *et al.*, 2015).

For students from low-SES backgrounds, partnerships with families are especially crucial, as targeted collaboration can help counteract disadvantages linked to limited resources and cultural capital. Evidence from broader research also indicates that consistent parental engagement in home learning fosters children’s motivation, school engagement, and resilience (Wong *et al.*, 2018).

At the same time, scholars caution that one-size-fits-all approaches to family engagement may fall short. Bower and Griffin (2011) illustrated that simply applying generic involvement models without adapting to families’ contexts led to limited outcomes in a high-poverty school. This underscores the need for schools not only to encourage parental participation but to redefine partnership as a process responsive to families’ cultural and socio-economic realities.

Collectively, these studies highlight that school–family partnerships are not merely as supportive activities but as a mechanism for advancing educational equity. For students from low-SES backgrounds, meaningful collaboration between schools and families can help narrow opportunity gaps and strengthen learning engagement. Importantly, such partnerships are not realised through policy declarations alone but through everyday practices of communication, coordination, and shared responsibility between schools and families.

2.2. Barriers and Deficit Views in School-family Partnerships with Low-SES Communities

Research consistently shows that barriers to school–family partnerships with low-SES communities arise not only in material hardship but also from deficit views. Families from disadvantaged backgrounds often face structural barriers such as irregular working hours, migration, limited cultural and social capital, and language constraints, which reduce their ability to participate in school life (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Pong, 2015; Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2020), socio-economic barriers have contributed to lower school attendance, higher dropout rates, and more limited educational trajectories among students from low-income households.

At the same time, deficit-based assumptions held by educators further constrain collaboration. When teachers or school leaders interpret parents’ limited visibility in school activities as a lack of interest, opportunities for meaningful dialogue can be reduced and hierarchical, school-centred relationships are reproduced (Durand

& Secakusuma, 2019). As Christianakis (2011) observes, such framings often position parents primarily as providers of “help labour,” rather than as partners whose perspectives can shape educational processes.

However, several studies contradict these stereotypes, documenting the strong commitment of low-SES and immigrant families to their children’s education. Parents express aspirations for meaningful dialogue and shared decision-making, and they value recognition of their children’s unique strengths and needs (Paccaud *et al.*, 2021; Duval & Dumoulin, 2022). Yet without institutional practices that support reciprocal engagement, these aspirations rarely translate into sustained participation. This tension between families’ willingness to engage and schools’ deficit-oriented framing represents a central obstacle to equitable school–family partnerships, particularly in contexts where structural constraints already limit opportunities for interaction.

2.3. Leadership for Authentic School-family Partnerships

Building authentic school–family partnerships with low-SES communities requires leadership practices that extends beyond administrative compliance to embrace relational, cultural, and equity-oriented dimensions. Auerbach (2010) argues that school leaders play a decisive role in shaping whether partnerships remain at the traditional level—where schools define directions and parents provide support—or move toward authentic partnership, where parents are recognised as equal stakeholders and co-constructors of school life. Leadership is thus central to challenging deficit views and creating spaces where low-SES families’ voices are genuinely heard.

Yet, research also points to the risks of weak or narrow leadership in disadvantaged contexts. In Irish communities experiencing socio-economic hardship, Martin *et al.* (2018) found that school leaders often prioritised families’ assimilation into existing school rules rather than engaging with their socio-economic realities, thereby reinforcing hierarchical relationships between

schools and parents. Likewise, Lehmann (2018) reported that teachers expressed a need for stronger preparation for parent engagement, but school leaders offered little training and rarely considered family–school collaboration skills in recruitment processes. These findings suggest that when leadership fails to recognise family diversity or socio-economic constraints, efforts to promote partnership may remain largely symbolic.

By contrast, a growing body of research illustrates how leadership practices can foster more inclusive and reciprocal forms of collaboration. School leaders help shape partnership cultures by articulating shared goals, building trust, and institutionalising structures for dialogue with families (Stringer & Blaik Houran, 2013). In disadvantaged contexts, culturally responsive leadership that acknowledges families’ lived experiences has been shown to strengthen school–family relationships (Auerbach, 2009). Auerbach’s portraits of leadership in urban schools, for instance, describe principals who acted as facilitators, resource mobilisers, or visionaries, thereby transforming hierarchical dynamics between schools and families.

Evidence from diverse contexts further demonstrates how leadership practices can actively expand opportunities for participation. Ratliffe and Pont (2018) documented how principals built a “culture of participation” by being approachable, visible, and creating informal opportunities for parents to connect with school life. Smith *et al.* (2021) showed that collegial leadership significantly enhanced parental involvement in schools serving low-SES students, especially when expectations were clearly communicated and consistently supported. In Indonesia, Suharta *et al.* (2020) reported that principals enabled parents to contribute to curriculum design, extracurricular activities, and problem-solving processes, decentralising authority and valuing families as contributors to educational decision-making. Likewise, Diez-Palomar *et al.* (2011) and Durand & Secakusuma (2019) highlighted how

dialogic spaces and informal meetings reduced exclusion and encouraged parents' intellectual contributions.

Together, these studies position leadership not simply as an administrative function but as a relational practice that shapes how school–family partnerships are enacted in everyday contexts. Through decisions about communication, participation, and responsibility-sharing, leaders influence whether collaboration remains superficial or develops into deeper and more reciprocal forms of engagement with families. However, much of this evidence derives from Western or comparative international settings, leaving limited empirical understanding of how leadership for equitable partnership unfolds in rapidly urbanising education systems. Examining these dynamics within the Vietnamese context is therefore essential for understanding how leadership interacts with socio-economic constraints and institutional conditions to shape partnerships with low-SES families.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Auerbach's framework of leadership for school–family partnerships, developed through qualitative research in U.S. schools serving low-income and immigrant communities (Auerbach, 2007, 2009, 2010). Although the original work referred to “urban schools,” the core concern was how leaders engage families who face structural barriers such as poverty, language, and cultural exclusion. For the Vietnamese context, this article refers simply to *Auerbach's framework of leadership for school–family partnerships*.

Auerbach conceptualises leadership not as the routine implementation of policy, but as the active shaping of relationships between schools and families. Central to this framework is the distinction between *traditional partnerships*, in which schools define directions and parents are invited to support, and *authentic partnerships*, in which families are respected as equal partners, their lived experiences are valued, and decision-making is shared (Auerbach, 2010). Leaders play a pivotal role in building trust, countering

deficit views, and creating opportunities for genuine dialogue with families who are often marginalised in school life (Auerbach, 2009).

The model is organised around five interrelated dimensions: (1) goals, which extend beyond compliance and student achievement to include equity and social justice; (2) partnership orientation, which ranges from one-way involvement to co-construction; (3) view of families and parent roles, shifting from deficit assumptions to recognition of families' cultural and social capital; (4) leadership style, emphasising reflective, facilitative, and culturally responsive practices; and (5) school climate, which provides the cultural and organisational conditions for sustained collaboration. These dimensions underpin the continuum of leadership that spans from preventing and nominal partnerships to traditional and authentic partnerships (see Auerbach, 2010).

In addition, Auerbach (2007) identified a range of leadership roles—such as visionary, resource mobiliser, facilitator, and responsive manager—that may emerge in practice. While these roles are often associated with principals and administrators, subsequent work has also pointed to the significance of distributed and informal leadership, including the ways in which teachers and other staff can become central actors in guiding family engagement (Auerbach, 2009). This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where formal leadership structures are limited or constrained.

Guided by this framework, the present study examines how leadership practices unfold in Vietnamese primary schools serving low-SES families. Specifically, the analysis draws on the five interrelated dimensions identified by Auerbach (2010)—goals, partnership orientation, view of families and parent roles, leadership style, and school climate—to illuminate how leaders shape the nature of school–family partnerships in disadvantaged contexts. At the same time, attention is given to both formal leadership by principals and administrators and informal or distributed leadership by teachers and staff, in order to capture the full range of roles and practices that emerge in engaging families.

4. Methodology

This study employed qualitative case studies (Yin, 2014) at two primary schools in District 7, Ho Chi Minh City, to explore how leadership for school–family partnerships with low-SES families is enacted. While case studies do not claim generalisability, their strength lies in capturing the depth and complexity of social processes in natural contexts. The extended fieldwork across two academic years enabled the researcher to trace leadership practices over time and to compare variations across different school settings.

4.1. School Selection

District 7 is a rapidly urbanising area of Ho Chi Minh City, home to the Tan Thuan Export Processing Zone, one of the largest industrial zones in southern Vietnam. The district has attracted large numbers of internal migrants who work in factories, small-scale trade, or informal labour, creating communities marked by economic precarity, long working hours, shift work and limited educational attainment among parents. These socio-economic conditions pose considerable challenges for schools in fostering meaningful collaboration with families.

Within this context, two public primary schools—referred to here as School X and School Y (pseudonyms)—were purposefully selected as research sites. School X, located near the export processing zone, was established in 2021 through the merger of two of the district’s oldest primary schools, each with more than 20 years of history, and now operates across two campuses about two kilometres apart. In the 2023–2024 academic year, it enrolled 1,617 students, most from low-income households with parents employed as factory workers, small vendors, or informal labourers (e.g., motorbike drivers, delivery workers).

School Y was established in 2019 in a newly developed area of District 7, Ho Chi Minh City. By the 2023–2024 academic year, the school had entered its fifth year of operation and enrolled 1,405 students. Located in a neighbourhood with a high concentration of young migrant workers and informal labourers, the school initially served

predominantly low-income families, many of them recent inter-provincial migrants. Over time, as enrolment expanded and the catchment area stabilised, the student body became more socio-economically diverse, with increasing numbers of children from middle-income and professional families living in nearby apartment complexes and residential areas. Notably, three key staff members—two administrators and one grade-level leader—had previously accumulated over a decade of experience at School X before transferring to School Y. This continuity of professional experience created a subtle but important linkage between the two schools, enriching the comparative lens of this study.

Together, these two schools embody the everyday realities of public education in urban-industrial districts of Vietnam, where schools serve families facing overlapping challenges of economic instability, time constraints, and constrained cultural capital—conditions that directly shape the nature of school–family partnerships.

4.2. Data Collection

Data collection took place between November 2023 and April 2025, spanning two academic years (2023–2024 and 2024–2025). Adopting an interpretivist case study design, the study employed multiple qualitative methods to capture the complexity of leadership practices in school–family partnerships with low-SES families. These methods were designed to complement one another through data triangulation (Yin, 2014), linking leaders’ accounts of practice with observed interactions and material evidence of partnership enactment.

The primary data source consisted of semi-structured interviews with 17 participants across the two schools, including principals, vice-principals, homeroom teachers (some of whom also served as grade-level leaders). Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved in leading or enacting school–family partnerships with high concentrations of low-SES families. The sample was designed to represent both formal leadership

roles and informal leadership exercised by experienced teachers, consistent with Auerbach's emphasis on distributed leadership (Auerbach, 2007). The final number of participants was determined by theoretical saturation, as recurring themes emerged across leadership roles and school contexts. Notably, three participants at School Y had previously accumulated long-term professional experience at School X, providing an embedded comparative perspective that strengthened cross-case interpretation of leadership practices. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, with several conducted over multiple sessions.

Observations were conducted to triangulate interview data and to examine how leadership practices were enacted in everyday settings. These observations followed two structured frameworks: direct observation within school spaces and participant observation in the surrounding community. At school, observations focused on interactional contact points such as teacher–parent communication during drop-off and pick-up times, the organisation of parent-facing spaces, staff meetings, and informal exchanges among teachers and administrators. In the residential neighbourhood and playgrounds, participant observation concentrated on naturally occurring behaviours, including families' living conditions, community routines, and spontaneous conversations about schooling and parental support under irregular work schedules. These observations provided contextual insight into how leadership practices intersected with families' lived constraints.

Supplementary data included school documents (e.g., parent meeting minutes, internal policies, and communication records), physical artifacts (such as homework books and informal communication notes), and digital interactions between schools and families via platforms such as Zalo or eNetViet. These materials were treated as analytic data rather than background information and were examined alongside interview and observational data to trace leadership practices across formal, informal, and digital spaces, thereby enhancing the credibility of the analysis.

4.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis drew on interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials. Interview transcripts served as the primary data source, with findings triangulated against observations and documentation to enhance validity and analytic rigor (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2014). A deductive thematic analysis was employed (Naeem *et al.*, 2023), guided by Auerbach's framework of leadership for school–family partnerships.

To ensure alignment between the research design and the theoretical framework, the analysis was structured as a theory-driven process in which Auerbach's five dimensions—goals, partnership orientation, view of families and parent roles, leadership style, and school climate—served as the primary coding categories. All interview transcripts and field notes were repeatedly reviewed and coded against these dimensions, allowing leadership practices in each school to be systematically examined in relation to the partnership continuum proposed by Auerbach. At the same time, analytic openness was maintained to capture patterns that extended beyond the framework while still relating them back to its core constructs.

Codes were iteratively grouped into themes capturing patterns in leadership practices across formal administrative roles and informal teacher leadership. Thematic maps were developed and refined through repeated comparison across data sources, enabling the researcher to examine how leadership goals, orientations, and view of families were enacted in everyday interactions. Triangulation across interviews, observations, school documents, and digital communications allowed the analysis to verify how reported leadership practices corresponded with observable routines and artefacts of school–family interaction.

The analysis does not aim for statistical generalisation but seeks to provide a theoretically grounded, context-rich account of how leadership for school–family partnerships with low-SES families was enacted in School X and School Y. By systematically mapping empirical data onto Auerbach's dimensions

while attending to context-specific variations, the study demonstrates how leadership practices both align with and adapt the framework within a disadvantaged urban setting.

5. Results

The findings from this case study of two primary schools—School X and School Y—illuminate how leadership practices shaped the dynamics of partnerships with low-SES families. While both schools expressed commitment to collaboration, the orientations, practices, and underlying assumptions varied significantly. To capture these patterns, the analysis is organised around three themes derived from Auerbach’s (2010) five dimensions: (1) goals and partnership orientation, (2) view of families and parent roles and deficit perspectives, and (3) leadership roles and practices in shaping school–family partnerships.

As summarised in Table 1, both schools operated within the framework of *traditional partnerships*, where schools define directions

and families mainly provide support. Yet their leadership practices diverged: School X relied heavily on the informal authority of veteran teachers embedded in the local community, while School Y reflected a more centralised model of formal leadership. The following sections elaborate on each theme in detail, drawing on interview and observational data.

Theme 1: Goals and partnership orientation

Analysis revealed that although both schools expressed strong commitments to collaboration with families, their partnerships with low-SES households were largely framed through a compensatory orientation, in which teachers assumed responsibility for filling perceived gaps in students’ home environments. In this model, parents were expected primarily to support school-defined goals rather than participate in shaping educational practices.

At School X, the leadership team articulated the guiding principle of ensuring that “no child is left behind,” particularly for students from disadvantaged families. However, this

Table 1. Overview of Leadership Practices in School–family Partnerships at School X and School Y

Theme	School X (informal leadership prominent)	School Y (formal leadership prominent)
Goals & partnership orientation	Goals centred on “no child left behind” and preventing grade repetition for disadvantaged students; responsibilities delegated to veteran teachers and grade leaders; parents positioned mainly as supporters through initiatives such as “open lessons.”	Goals tied to the principal’s vision of a “modern and open educational community”; partnerships centralised within formal administration; young teachers guided to follow school leaders’ instructions in parent engagement.
View of families and parent role	Families often described as “voiceless” or unable to contribute; teachers assumed they must compensate for parents’ limitations; parent representative committees selected based on stable finances/time, side-lining low-income families.	Families framed as “shy” or passive, giving minimal feedback; online responses limited to “ok” or “likes”; criteria for selecting representatives privileged resourceful parents; some teachers sought to allow minimal participation for disadvantaged parents.
Leadership roles & practices	Informal leadership delegated to veteran teachers who mentored colleagues and directed parents; solidarity strong, but limited innovation from young teachers; parents encouraged but remained passive.	Formal leadership more centralised, with administrators directly managing parent meetings and mentoring young teachers; internal tensions between veterans and young teachers; parents mobilised through representatives, but within school-defined parameters.

commitment was operationalised through practices that positioned teachers as substitutes for parental support. Several teachers described themselves as “being like a parent to study with the child,” explaining that when families struggled with long working hours or limited educational backgrounds, teachers felt responsible for closely monitoring students’ learning. In many cases, teachers provided detailed written guidance in students’ exercise books to indicate exactly which tasks parents should help with at home. During classroom observations, one teacher carefully annotated a student’s notebook to show the section that needed to be reviewed that evening, illustrating how teachers attempted to simplify expectations for parents who might have limited familiarity with school curricula. Such practices functioned as practical bridges between school instructions and home support, but they also reinforced a model in which the school retained authority over the learning process.

Leadership practices at School X also included initiatives designed to guide parents’ involvement while maintaining the school’s pedagogical direction. One example was the “open lesson” (tiết học mở), where parents were invited to observe or participate in simple classroom activities alongside their children. Teachers described these events as opportunities to help parents “understand modern teaching methods” and learn how to assist their children at home. Yet the structure of these activities largely positioned parents as observers or supporters rather than partners in designing learning experiences.

At School Y, similar goals were articulated but implemented through a more centralised leadership structure. The principal framed partnerships as part of building a “modern and open educational community,” yet administrators maintained a strong role in directing how teachers should interact with parents. Young teachers frequently reported that they communicated with families “exactly according to the school leaders’ instructions,” indicating that parental engagement was organised within clear institutional guidelines. While such guidance helped novice teachers navigate complex relationships with parents, it also limited opportunities for more

flexible or collaborative forms of engagement.

These patterns were closely connected to the socio-economic realities of the surrounding communities. Many parents in both schools worked in nearby industrial zones and often returned home late in the evening after long shifts. Teachers frequently mentioned that some parents finished work around 9 or 10 p.m., which constrained their ability to attend school meetings or supervise homework. In response, school leaders emphasised academic monitoring and behavioural discipline as central goals of partnerships, reinforcing a model in which teachers compensated for what they perceived as limited parental availability.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the goals of school–family partnerships in both schools were shaped by a combination of educational aspirations and socio-economic constraints. While leadership practices sought to support disadvantaged students, they simultaneously reinforced a traditional partnership structure in which the school defined priorities and families primarily contributed through compliance and logistical support.

Theme 2: View of Families and Parent Role

Analysis revealed that school staff’s interpretations of parental roles were strongly shaped by assumptions about the capacities and constraints of families from low socio-economic backgrounds. While teachers frequently expressed sympathy for parents’ difficult working conditions, these understandings were often intertwined with deficit-oriented perceptions that positioned parents as passive supporters rather than active partners in students’ education.

At School X, teachers commonly described parents as hardworking but limited in their ability to support learning due to “time poverty” and restricted educational backgrounds. Several participants explained that many parents worked in nearby industrial zones and often returned home late in the evening. As one teacher noted, some parents finished work around 9 or 10 p.m., leaving little time to supervise homework or attend school meetings. In addition to long working hours, some parents also undertook multiple jobs in order to sustain their families.

For example, a few teachers mentioned cases where parents worked as construction helpers during the day and took additional evening work as delivery riders or domestic helpers, further stretching their availability.

Observations in the surrounding residential neighbourhoods and at the school gates further illustrated these lived realities. While some parents arrived hurriedly in work uniforms to collect their children, others were unable to do so, and several students were seen walking home on their own or waiting for grandparents to accompany them because their parents were still at the factories. These circumstances shaped how teachers interpreted parental involvement. Because many parents were rarely present at school and had limited opportunities to communicate directly with teachers, staff tended to view parental engagement primarily through practical forms of support, such as ensuring that children attended school regularly or signing school documents when requested.

At School Y, similar interpretations emerged in teachers' accounts of daily communication with parents through digital platforms. Class communication groups on Zalo were widely used to share announcements, homework instructions, and reminders. Teachers noted that many parents responded only briefly with messages such as "ok" or by clicking the "like/heart" icon. While some educators understood these minimal responses as signs that parents had received the information during busy work schedules, others interpreted them as evidence that parents were passive or insufficiently engaged in their children's education.

These perceptions also influenced how schools organised formal structures of parental participation. The selection of members for the Parents' Representative Committee (PRC), for instance, was often guided by practical considerations about who could communicate effectively with teachers and represent the class in school activities. Teachers frequently indicated a preference for parents who were financially stable, confident in interacting with school staff, and familiar with school regulations. As a result, parents who worked long hours or felt less

comfortable engaging with teachers were less likely to be nominated for these roles.

In summary, these practices reveal how school staff's interpretations of parental engagement were shaped not only by empathy for families' economic circumstances but also by implicit expectations about what constitutes "appropriate" parental involvement. While teachers recognised the pressures faced by low-income families, their interpretations sometimes framed parents' limited participation as a matter of attitude or confidence rather than as a consequence of structural constraints such as demanding work schedules and time poverty. In this way, deficit-oriented views of families subtly influenced which parents were able to participate more visibly in school life.

Theme 3: Leadership roles and practices in shaping school–family partnerships

The findings indicate that leadership for school–family partnerships was enacted through both formal administrative structures and informal teacher leadership. However, the two schools differed markedly in how leadership responsibilities were distributed and practiced.

At School X, leadership for partnerships was largely delegated to veteran teachers and grade-level leaders, with administrators maintaining oversight while avoiding close interference in classroom-level collaboration. As one vice-principal explained, the principal "was attentive and supportive but did not intervene too deeply in specific teaching and collaborating work". Teachers confirmed this atmosphere of trust, noting that the principal "often asked if my class was going well... it showed he really cared about each class".

Within this structure, veteran teachers assumed significant informal leadership roles. Drawing on their long-standing experience and familiarity with the local community, they often acted as intermediaries between the school and families. One experienced teacher recalled directly confronting a disengaged parent: "Let me tell you, I do my best to teach, but you neglect". Such forthright communication reflected both their professional authority and their established standing within the community.

Veteran teachers also played an important role in mentoring younger colleagues. As one novice teacher explained, “the older teachers kept reminding us again and again...”. This mentoring fostered collegial solidarity and helped maintain consistent practices across the school. At the same time, it meant that younger teachers often adopted established routines rather than experimenting with alternative ways of engaging families.

Informal teacher leadership was also evident in efforts to adapt school practices to the working conditions of families. During field observations in a nearby rented housing area where many factory workers lived, two students were seen studying together after school while their mothers alternated supervising the children. When asked about this arrangement, the homeroom teacher—who also served as a grade-level leader—explained that she had intentionally encouraged the two students to study together because both of their parents worked late shifts. By facilitating this arrangement, the teacher sought to ensure that the children received academic support despite their parents’ demanding work schedules. This example illustrates how teacher leadership extended beyond classroom instruction to accommodate the realities of families’ working lives.

In contrast, leadership for partnerships at School Y was organised through a more centralised structure. Teachers explained that communication with parents often followed clear guidance from school administrators, with several younger teachers noting that they interacted with parents “exactly according to the school leaders’ instructions”. For novice teachers, this structure was often experienced as protective, particularly when dealing with demanding parents or sensitive situations.

However, interviews also revealed tensions between different generations of teachers. Some younger teachers described attempts to respond flexibly to families’ circumstances, only to be criticised by more experienced colleagues for being “overly accommodating” toward students and parents. These accounts suggest that leadership practices at School Y simultaneously

supported professional development while generating disagreements over how strictly school rules should be applied in relationships with families.

Together, these findings illustrate how leadership for school–family partnerships operated through different organisational logics across the two schools. While School X relied more heavily on the informal authority of veteran teachers, School Y emphasized centralised administrative guidance. These contrasting arrangements shaped how teachers interacted with parents and how partnership practices were enacted in everyday school life.

6. Discussion

This study contributes to the growing literature on school–family partnerships by demonstrating how leadership practices are enacted in two Vietnamese primary schools serving predominantly low-SES families. While both schools reproduced a “traditional partnership” model—where the school sets directions and parents primarily provide support—their leadership orientations differed substantially, shaping distinct patterns of collaboration and internal dynamics. The findings underscore that leadership is not merely an administrative role but a relational practice that structures how teachers and parents participate, and whose voices become legitimised.

Leadership Orientations and Institutional History

A central finding is the divergence between School X, where informal authority was vested in veteran teachers, and School Y, where the principal and vice-principal exercised direct, formal control. These orientations generated contrasting outcomes. At School X, reliance on senior teachers fostered collegiality and stability but constrained younger teachers, who tended to conform to established routines rather than innovate. In contrast, School Y’s centralised leadership enhanced novice teachers’ professional growth, but it paid little attention to cultivating collegial consensus. This neglect of internal cohesion explains why tensions persisted among staff and why families sometimes received

inconsistent signals, undermining the school's broader partnership goals. These findings illustrate Auerbach's (2007, 2010) argument that both formal and informal leaders mediate how partnership ideals are enacted in practice. However, they also enrich this framework by showing that informal teacher leadership can be as powerful as formal administrative authority in shaping partnership practices and their internal contradictions. Both orientations, in different ways, reinforced "traditional partnerships," where parents remain in supportive rather than co-constructive roles.

The divergent trajectories can further be explained by the schools' institutional histories. School X emerged from the merger of two long-established institutions with teachers who had spent their entire careers there, producing a strong professional memory that privileged veteran authority. Such institutional legacies often reproduce barriers to authentic participation, as teachers are positioned as experts and parents as passive supporters (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; O'Toole *et al.*, 2019). By contrast, School Y, established only five years ago, lacked entrenched traditions; administrators relied on centralised leadership to quickly consolidate routines. As O'Toole *et al.* (2019) notes, socio-historical legacies shape what forms of parental involvement are considered legitimate, and "vestiges of traditional structures may still remain today" (pp. 51). These cases highlight that leadership orientations cannot be understood in isolation from institutional history, which conditions both internal staff dynamics and the scope of school–family partnerships.

Deficit Views and Parent Representative Councils

The findings also reveal those inequities in school–family partnerships are sustained through persistent deficit views of low-SES parents. In both schools, parents were described as lacking time, skills, or knowledge; even when their contributions were acknowledged, they were treated as supplementary, positioning them as helpers rather than co-constructors. Such portrayals echo what Auerbach (2010) identified as the tendency of traditional partnerships to

keep marginalised parents in reactive roles. They also reveal the risk, noted by Baxter and Kilderry (2022) and Baxter and Toe (2023), that deficit discourses become embedded in everyday practices, confining parents to tasks of *involvement* while closing off possibilities for genuine *engagement*. Similarly, Liou and Liang (2021) demonstrate that deficit perspectives erase the cultural wealth of immigrant and working-class communities, sustaining social stratification under the guise of parental support. Seen together, these insights suggest that deficit thinking is not simply descriptive but an active discourse that shapes the boundaries of collaboration.

These discourses were reinforced by how PRCs were organised. At School X, it was typically chosen from families "less disadvantaged" than the majority, producing hierarchies within poverty itself. At School Y, the initial pattern gave way to a shift: as middle-income and professional families moved into the catchment area, representation gradually migrated toward these better-off groups. As Hornby and Lafaele (2011) argue, structural and family-level constraints systematically limit which parents can participate, and these constraints are normalised in organisational rules. From a Bourdieusian perspective (1997), councils function as a field where families with greater economic and cultural capital are valorised, while the lived resources of migrant labour families are devalued.

Taken together, deficit framings and representative structures work in tandem to institutionalise exclusion. Leadership for school–family partnerships must therefore pursue both epistemic change—embracing asset-based views—and structural reform, such as rotating leadership roles, recognising non-material contributions, and creating alternative channels of voice. Without such efforts, PRC risk reproducing inequalities under the guise of democratic participation.

Informal Leadership of Veteran Teachers.

At School X, long-serving teachers not only mentored younger colleagues but also acted as intermediaries with parents, leveraging their kinship ties and longstanding community

presence. This form of “leadership from below” generated trust and continuity in school-family interactions, filling gaps left by formal administrators. As Auerbach (2007) noted, sustainable partnerships often depend on distributed forms of leadership in which informal leaders become cultural brokers between schools and families.

Although the formal authority of principals is by no means absent, in the Vietnamese educational context the image of a “leader” is often understood in two ways: either as a senior administrator in charge of management, or as an inspiring figure who motivates teachers in their professional and instructional work. Because principals are heavily occupied with bureaucratic duties, the latter image of inspirational leadership is more visibly embodied by veteran teachers. For parents, these experienced teachers thus become the accessible and trustworthy faces of school leadership in practice, even without holding official titles.

At the same time, relying heavily on veteran teachers carries risks. Gordon *et al.* (2020) show that informal leaders typically emerge “organically” through expertise and credibility, but without formal recognition they can become overburdened and, paradoxically, preserve traditional practices rather than drive innovation. Veteran teachers may also transmit deeply ingrained professional habitus—including deficit views of low-SES families—to novice colleagues, thereby reproducing existing asymmetries (see also Egger *et al.*, 2015). In this way, informal leadership may sustain stability while simultaneously reinforcing a teacher-led, one-directional model of school-family partnership.

These findings point to the need for more balanced leadership arrangements. Rather than romanticising informal authority, school leadership should formally acknowledge the mentoring role of veteran teachers while also creating feedback mechanisms that give space to younger teachers and parents. Such a move could preserve the relational trust generated by informal leaders while opening pathways toward more democratic and co-constructive partnerships.

Socio-economic Context Shaping Leadership Practices

In practice, leadership for school-family partnerships is inseparable from the socio-economic contexts surrounding schools. At School X, where the majority of families were low-income households, including migrant workers and informal labourers with limited time and resources, leadership practices gravitated toward a compensatory model that positioned parents as recipients of guidance. By contrast, at School Y, the gradual influx of middle-class and professional families reshaped the ecology of collaboration, creating space for new expectations of creativity but also reinforcing stratification between parent groups.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2006) bioecological model offers a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. While originally developed to explain individual human development, the Process – Person – Context – Time framework can be extended to leadership as a social practice—a set of proximal processes enacted through repeated interactions among teachers, administrators, and families. From this perspective, leadership trajectories are not simply expressions of administrative preference but emerge through and within ecological conditions. Context, in particular, exerts the strongest shaping force: labour patterns, migration status, and the evolving composition of school communities fundamentally determine the possibilities and limits of partnership. Person-level characteristics (such as the experience of veteran teachers or the cultural capital of middle-class families) and temporal shifts (such as the diversification of School Y’s catchment area over time) mediate these dynamics, but always in ways that reflect contextual structuring.

Seen in this light, what appears as a “leadership style” is better understood as the product of contextually embedded processes that evolve over time. This recognition carries significant implications. Leadership for school-family partnerships cannot be reduced to universal best practices; rather, it is locally contingent, historically situated, and socio-economically mediated. Policies and professional development that overlook these ecological dynamics risk

reproducing inequalities, while approaches attentive to context may foster more authentic and sustainable forms of collaboration.

7. Conclusions

This study illustrates that leadership for school–family partnerships with low-SES families is enacted not as a fixed style but as a set of practices shaped by context. At School X, veteran teachers assumed informal leadership, building trust with parents yet reinforcing teacher-led, compensatory models of collaboration. At School Y, centralised leadership from administrators supported novice teachers and introduced space for new initiatives, but also produced tensions among staff and reinforced stratification between more affluent and disadvantaged families. Across both schools, deficit views of low-income parents and selective rules of parent representation further constrained authentic co-construction.

Taken together, the findings show that leadership for school–family partnerships with low-SES families is enacted through interwoven formal and informal roles, bounded by deficit discourses, and embedded in specific socio-economic conditions. These dynamics generate both possibilities and constraints for engaging low-SES families in school life. Addressing them requires epistemic shifts toward asset-based framings of families and structural reforms that democratise parent representation and recognise diverse forms of leadership—steps essential for building more equitable and sustainable school–family partnerships.

Limitations

Despite the depth provided by two years of fieldwork, this study has several limitations.

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First, the qualitative case study design involving only two primary schools in a specific urban–industrial district of Ho Chi Minh City means that the findings are not statistically generalisable to all primary schools in Vietnam. The results are closely embedded in the socio-historical context of the Tan Thuan Export Processing Zone and its migrant worker population. Second, although the study triangulated data from interviews, school documents, and observations, the perspectives of low-SES families were primarily accessed through the accounts of school administrators, teachers, and observations in community spaces. This focus on the school side of leadership, while necessary to address the research questions, may not fully capture the internal motivations or hidden barriers experienced directly by families themselves.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend this work by examining a wider range of school contexts, including rural areas and ethnic minority regions, in order to further refine and test Auerbach’s framework within the broader Vietnamese educational landscape. Mixed-methods studies may also help examine how different leadership orientations influence parental engagement across diverse settings. Most importantly, further research should prioritise the direct voices of marginalised parents and students. Such work would be valuable for challenging persistent deficit discourses and for exploring how asset-based leadership approaches might reshape school governance and parent representative structures into more inclusive and genuinely co-constructive forms.

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