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Sustainable Leadership in International Schools: A Stakeholder Alignment Perspective

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates how international schools in Shanghai address sustainability challenges through stakeholder-driven strategies. Drawing on stakeholder theory, the research examines how parents, teachers, and school leaders perceive and prioritize strategic responses to complex institutional pressures. A qualitative multiple-case design was employed, involving semistructured and unstructured interviews with 16 participants (3 parents, 5 teachers, and 8 school leaders), and data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings identify four interrelated strategy domains: student-, teacher-, parent-, and system-focused approaches. While student-focused strategies are most visible due to their direct impact, the study reveals that effectiveness is not inherent in individual strategies but emerges from their alignment across stakeholders. Teacher strategies build capacity, system strategies provide structural support, and parent strategies enhance relational*

trust, collectively forming an integrated model of value creation. The study develops a stakeholder-based sustainability framework, positioning sustainability as a dynamic process of aligning stakeholder expectations, capacities, and relationships under context-specific conditions. By highlighting the interplay between local regulatory demands and global educational expectations, the research contributes a nuanced, context-sensitive perspective on sustainable leadership in international education.

Keywords: Educational improvement, International schools, Multiple case study, Qualitative content analysis, Sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of international schools has gained increasing attention in global education discourse, especially as these institutions face mounting pressure to adapt to rapid social, political, and technological changes. The ability of an educational system to sustain long-term growth while balancing social, cultural, environmental, and economic factors is referred to as educational sustainability. Sustainability in schools frequently entails the development of long-term educational quality, responsible resource management, stakeholder collaboration, and stable governance structures (Sterling, 2001). In particular, the sustainability of international schools in Shanghai, China, has emerged as a critical concern, as these schools operate in a highly competitive, policy-sensitive, and culturally complex environment. Shanghai is a strategically important location for investigating sustainability measures within hybrid educational governance systems since it is one of China's largest and most controlled centers for international education.

As education is a core component of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), achieving quality and inclusive education requires systemic transformation across institutions. Ferrer-Estévez and Chalmeta (2021) highlight the challenge of integrating SDG principles into educational management, calling for a reorientation of curricula, programs, and governance. However, as Leal Filho et al. (2020) point out, practical application of such sustainable educational models remains limited, leaving educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers uncertain about how best to translate global goals into institutional practices. In this context, studying the sustainability of international schools is vital not only to enhance educational quality and ensure

long-term viability but also to inform policy, foster global citizenship, and address emerging global challenges.

This study views sustainability as a multifaceted concept that encompasses organizational resilience, stakeholder alignment, adaptive governance, and the production of long-term educational value, in addition to financial continuity. The contemporary literature acknowledges the urgent need for more comprehensive and context-sensitive research on educational sustainability (Penuel et al., 2020; Hamilton & Waters, 2022; Sahlberg, 2021). Current approaches often fall short in addressing the systemic and interconnected nature of school development challenges (Fullan, 2023). Moreover, international schools in China face a unique set of challenges that remain underexplored, ranging from regulatory constraints and identity tensions to resource limitations and inconsistencies in administrative practices (Ren & Chen, 2023; Bunnell et al., 2016). Understanding these challenges is essential for developing targeted, context-driven strategies that improve institutional resilience and responsiveness.

Existing research underscores the importance of stakeholder engagement, values-led leadership, and adaptive strategies in promoting school success (Epstein, 2018; Day et al., 2020). Successful international schools often demonstrate context-sensitive, collaborative approaches that respond to local and global needs. However, the literature remains limited in its attention to sustainable leadership practices and strategic frameworks that help navigate complexity and promote innovation. Gardner-McTaggart (2018) and Sleiman (2021) note that international schools often operate along competing paradigms, which involve balancing market-driven imperatives with equitable and ethical educational goals, thus making strategic leadership and sustainable governance more crucial than ever.

Additionally, national curriculum regulations, family expectations for worldwide mobility, and Confucian-influenced educational principles emphasizing academic accomplishment and social mobility form the unique regulatory and cultural context in which Chinese international schools operate. These contextual elements have a large impact on the development and application of strategies.

However, two important gaps remain. First, existing research tends to examine international schools either from a policy or organizational perspective, with limited attention to how sustainability is coconstructed through stakeholder interactions. Second, while sustainability is frequently discussed conceptually, there is a lack of empirically grounded, strategy-oriented frameworks that explain how schools respond to real-world challenges in specific contexts, such as Shanghai.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by exploring how key stakeholders (school leaders, teachers, and parents) perceive and enact strategies to sustain international schools in a complex regulatory and cultural environment. By focusing on stakeholder-driven strategies rather than abstract institutional models, this research aims to develop a context-sensitive, exploratory framework that links sustainability challenges to practical strategic responses.

The goal is to generate actionable insights and construct a context-sensitive framework that not only informs leadership practice but also contributes to theoretical development in educational sustainability. In doing so, this research aims to support schools in fostering resilience, adaptability, and collaborative engagement in a complex global educational environment. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1) What are the strategies to overcome challenges used by international schools in Shanghai, China?

RQ2) To what extent can a new international school sustainability framework be developed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability and International Schools

Globalization, marketization, and increasing transnational mobility have contributed to the rapid expansion of international schools and a corresponding growth in related research. However, these institutions also face persistent sustainability challenges, including regulatory ambiguity, financial dependence on enrollment, and tensions between international standards and local policy expectations. In the Chinese context, these challenges are further intensified by a highly regulated and rapidly evolving policy environment, in which schools must continuously respond to state requirements while also meeting strong parental expectations for academic achievement and international progression. Despite growing scholarly attention, existing research remains fragmented and largely descriptive, with limited integration of multiple stakeholder perspectives to explain how sustainability is strategically constructed in practice.

International schools are typically characterized by diverse curricula (e.g., IB, AP, A-Level), transnational student populations, and hybrid governance structures (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). While these characteristics enhance flexibility and global relevance, they also generate structural tensions that complicate long-term sustainability (Peng et al., 2026). These include regulatory uncertainty, financial dependence on enrollment-driven income, and ongoing tensions between globally standardized educational models and locally situated expectations. As a result, sustainability in international schools cannot be understood solely as institutional stability but must be examined as an evolving process shaped by competing demands and contextual constraints.

In China, international schools operate within a particularly complex governance landscape where policy changes, curriculum regulations, and licensing requirements significantly shape institutional development. Existing studies suggest that schools must continuously adjust their strategies to remain compliant with national regulations while maintaining international competitiveness (Ren & Chen, 2023). At the same time, parental expectations, especially those related to academic performance and overseas university admission pathways, exert a strong influence on institutional priorities and strategic decision-making. These multiple pressures highlight the extent to which

sustainability is shaped by ongoing negotiation among key stakeholders rather than by internal institutional planning alone.

Overall, despite increasing interest in international education, research on sustainability in international schools remains limited in explanatory depth. Much of the literature focuses on descriptive accounts of institutional challenges or macro-level policy analysis, with insufficient attention to how schools respond strategically to competing pressures in practice. There is a lack of integrated studies that bring together multiple stakeholder perspectives to explain how sustainability is constructed, maintained, and adjusted within complex and dynamic educational environments.

Educational Sustainability

Educational sustainability in international schools is commonly associated with governance effectiveness, teacher professional development, student achievement, and curriculum continuity. Existing studies highlight leadership capacity and instructional quality as key determinants of long-term institutional performance (Ajani, 2024; Kilag & Sasan, 2023). However, these elements are often treated as technical or performance-based indicators rather than as socially constructed outcomes shaped through ongoing stakeholder interaction. From a stakeholder theory perspective, educational sustainability is not solely a managerial function but a negotiated process in which school leaders, teachers, parents, and regulatory bodies continuously influence priorities, expectations, and definitions of “educational quality.”

For instance, governance and leadership are frequently framed as strategic mechanisms for school improvement, yet they are deeply embedded in competing stakeholder expectations, particularly between regulatory accountability and parental demand for academic excellence. Similarly, teacher professional development is widely recognized as essential for educational quality, but its implementation is shaped by institutional constraints such as workload pressures, policy requirements, and resource allocation decisions influenced by multiple stakeholders. Student outcomes and curriculum continuity, often measured through academic performance and international frameworks (e.g., IB programmes), are therefore not neutral indicators but outcomes shaped by stakeholder-driven prioritization and negotiation processes (Naite, 2021; Lee & Wright, 2016).

Above all, although educational sustainability is widely acknowledged in the literature, it is still predominantly conceptualized as an institutional performance domain rather than a relational system. Consistent with stakeholder theory, this study argues that educational sustainability should instead be understood as an interactional process of alignment and negotiation among stakeholders, where outcomes emerge from the continuous balancing of expectations, resources, and institutional constraints.

Stakeholder Theory

To address these limitations, this study draws on stakeholder theory as its primary analytical lens. Originating from Freeman (1984), stakeholder theory argues that organizational success depends on managing relationships among diverse stakeholders rather than maximizing internal efficiency alone. In educational settings, stakeholders include school leaders, teachers, students, parents, governing bodies, regulatory agencies, and wider communities. Therefore, understanding sustainability requires mapping influence, expectations, and power relations across the entire educational ecosystem.

Building on this foundation, Donaldson and Preston (1995) emphasize the ethical and performance dimensions of stakeholder management, while Jones and Wicks (2007) conceptualize stakeholder theory as a relational framework for understanding dynamic organizational interactions. Tools such as stakeholder mapping, the stakeholder salience model (Mitchell et al., 1997), and the power–interest matrix (Mendelow, 1981) provide structured approaches to identifying and prioritizing stakeholders. However, these frameworks are often criticized for limited contextual sensitivity and weak explanatory power in complex environments where stakeholder interests’ conflict.

Recent developments extend stakeholder theory toward sustainability, social responsibility, and shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Elkington & Rowlands, 1999). These extensions emphasize that long-term organizational success depends on balancing competing stakeholder expectations rather than privileging a single group. In international schools, this implies that sustainability emerges through continuous negotiation among academic performance demands, parental expectations, regulatory compliance, and institutional capacity.

Complementing stakeholder theory, recent studies on international education highlight strategic responses adopted by schools, particularly stakeholder-focused and system-focused strategies. Stakeholder-focused strategies such as communication, collaboration, and cultural integration are widely regarded as essential for aligning expectations (Bailey & Gibson, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). However, these strategies are often presented as linear and universally effective, overlooking issues such as miscommunication, unequal participation, and power asymmetries among stakeholder groups. Similarly, system-focused strategies such as continuous improvement, empowerment, and feedback mechanisms are frequently promoted as best practices (Cravens, 2018; Spencer, 2018), yet their implementation is rarely examined in relation to institutional constraints, regulatory pressures, or cultural norms.

Consequently, both stakeholder theory and strategic management literature tend to adopt normative assumptions, focusing on what “should” work rather than how strategies function in context. This limitation is particularly evident in international school settings, where competing stakeholder expectations and regulatory complexity shape strategic outcomes in nonlinear ways.

Research Gap

Several significant gaps in the literature are still apparent despite the growing scholarly focus on international schools and sustainability. First, there is still a lack of empirical research on how sustainability is experienced and implemented by various stakeholder groups, such as parents, teachers, and school administrators. The majority of these studies emphasize institutional or policy-level perspectives while ignoring the relational and lived aspects of sustainability. Second, there is a strategic gap because the research currently available does not adequately explain how schools translate sustainability challenges into cogent strategic responses. Instead of looking at how leadership, curriculum, and governance interact within an integrated system of practice, it frequently treats them as distinct components. Third, there is still a contextual gap because a large portion of the material now in publication is based on Western educational environments and so does not fully capture the regulatory complexity, cultural variety, and market-driven forces influencing international schools in China, especially in Shanghai.

METHOD

To investigate how stakeholders perceive and implement strategies for maintaining international schools in Shanghai, this study employs a qualitative multiple-case study design. A qualitative approach was thought to be suitable for capturing complex stakeholder experiences and interpretations, given the exploratory nature of the study and its emphasis on specific practices. The study is positioned as exploratory, with the goal of creating an analytically grounded framework rather than a generalizable theory.

Research Context and Sampling

Five globally recognized schools in Shanghai that have been in operation for at least five years and provide IB, A-Level, or AP curriculum participated in the study (including a pilot case). Shanghai was chosen because of its high concentration of international schools, complicated regulatory framework, and significance as a center for China's globalized educational system.

Sixteen participants (8 school administrators, 5 teachers, and 3 parents) were recruited using purposeful sampling that combined maximum variety and snowball techniques. To guarantee informed viewpoints, participants had to (a) have a formal position inside the school and (b) have worked there for at least two years. Although a variety of stakeholder groups were included to obtain a range of perspectives, the study recognizes that group representation varies.

Data Collection

Semistructured and unstructured interviews were used to gather data during a six-month period. It was deliberate to use both forms. Key subjects such as leadership, sustainability challenges, and stakeholder responsibilities were

methodically examined among participants thanks to semistructured interviews, which offered a consistent thematic framework. Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, gave participants more latitude to express emergent, situation-specific concerns that would not have been covered by preplanned questions. Both comparability and depth were made possible by this combination, which is crucial for exploratory qualitative research.

Depending on the participant option, interviews were performed in either Chinese or English for approximately 60 minutes. To ensure linguistic correctness, all interviews were audio recorded with permission, verbatim transcribed, and then translated using a forward-backward translation technique.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data, integrating deductive and inductive coding techniques. Stakeholder theory and the stakeholder management viewpoint served as the foundation for the initial coding categories, which offered a framework for raising awareness. To capture context-specific insights, new codes were simultaneously created inductively from the data.

There were multiple phases to the analytical process. To find significant data units across transcripts, open coding was first used. Second, conceptual similarity and recurrent patterns were used to organize comparable codes into subcategories. Third, higher-order categories that reflected important strategic themes were created by further abstracting these subcategories. The development of an exploratory, stakeholder-informed framework that connects problems, strategies, and sustainable outcomes resulted from the examination of relationships between these categories across examples.

The organization of data and coding were supported using NVivo 14. Peer debriefing and iterative codebook refinement improved coding consistency. Instead of being linear, the process of developing categories and building the framework was iterative and recursive, with constant comparison between examples and stakeholder groups. When no significantly new categories appeared, thematic saturation was deemed to have been reached.

Trustworthiness

By following standard qualitative trustworthiness criteria, such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, this study guaranteed methodological rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Long-term interaction with the research context, triangulation among stakeholder groups (parents, teachers, and leaders), and member verification to confirm interpretations all improved credibility. While confirmability was enhanced by ongoing reflexive memo writing to document assumptions, analytical reflections, and decision-making processes, thereby reducing interpretive bias, dependability was guaranteed by a thorough audit trail that documented coding decisions, category development, and iterative analytical refinements. Thick, contextual explanations of the research site

and participants were used to address transferability, enabling readers to evaluate applicability to comparable scenarios. To further improve transparency, analytical meeting documents were methodically added to the audit trail and recorded changing interpretations and category refinement during the analysis process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Approval Ref: JEP-2025-754). All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants were anonymised using coded identifiers (e.g., A1 for Administrator 1, T2 for Teacher 2, P3 for Parent 3). All data were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

FINDINGS

This study examines how stakeholders in international schools strategically respond to sustainability challenges. Guided by stakeholder theory and the stakeholder management model, the analysis moves beyond description to interpret how stakeholder relationships, power dynamics, and alignment mechanisms shape sustainability practices.

Rather than treating challenges and strategies as isolated themes, the findings reveal that sustainability is produced through ongoing negotiation among stakeholders with differing expectations, resources, and influence.

Stakeholder-Structured Challenges

To understand the barriers to sustainability, this study analyzed stakeholder perceptions across administrators, teachers, and parents, identifying 116 coded references to challenges. These were organized into four interrelated categories: internal organizational challenges, external systemic pressures, stakeholder-related challenges, and structural constraints (Table 1).

Table 1: Categories and Subcategories of Challenges

Categories	Sub themes and categories
1.Internal organisational challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Leadership● Teacher● School Culture and Climate● Curriculum and Content
2.External systemic pressures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Innovation & Competition● External Environment● Educational sustainability

	● International Education
3. Stakeholder-related challenges	● Student ● Parent
4. Structural and resource constraints	● Support Systems and Resources

Rather than representing discrete problem areas, these categories reflect points of misalignment between stakeholder expectations, institutional capacity, and contextual constraints. A conceptual depiction of the multifaceted challenges faced by the international schools under investigation is shown in Figure 1.

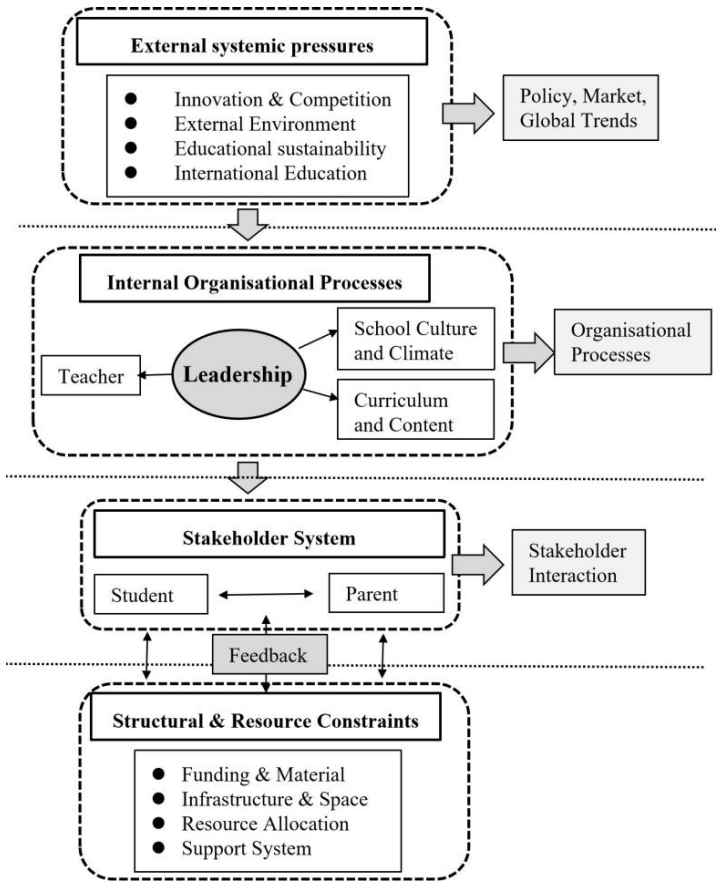


Figure 1: Multilevel Challenges Faced by International Schools

Internal stakeholder misalignment is the main cause of internal organizational challenges, which include problems with leadership, teachers, culture, and curriculum. Similar findings were presented in Peng et al.'s study (2026). The implementation of the goal is weakened by leadership instability and ambiguous decision-making, which results in problems including uneven instruction, teacher turnover, and a disjointed school culture. Additionally, schools must constantly modify their goals and strike a balance between compliance and competitiveness due to external pressures from market rivalry, regulatory rules, and global-local tensions. Relations between stakeholders are especially noticeable at the school-community interface, where parental expectations for academic achievement and international mobility may surpass institutional capacity or clash with pedagogical approaches, impacting student well-being and feeding back into parental perceptions. Structural and resource limitations, which restrict institutional response and perpetuate power disparities among stakeholders, further influence these dynamics. In general, these difficulties should be viewed as interdependent relational tensions rather than discrete problems, where modifications in one stakeholder domain have a domino effect on others. This supports stakeholder theory's claim that sustainability depends on the continuous alignment of conflicting interests within a limited system.

Stakeholder-Driven Strategies

From the content analysis of the stakeholders' responses, 619 coded references pertaining to sustainability methods were found. Using thematic clustering and iterative coding, these references were divided into four primary strategy groups: teacher-focused strategies, student-focused strategies, parent-focused strategies, and system-focused strategies. These groupings show different but related facets of how stakeholder-driven methods are implemented in international schools. Understanding how different stakeholders promote sustainable leadership and school improvement is simplified by this classification (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Table 2 displays the categories that were found.

Table 2: Categories and Subcategories of Strategies

Categories	Sub themes and categories
1. Teacher-Focused Strategies(T)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● T-Training (T1)● T-Retention ((T2)● T-Recruitment (T3)● T-Support (T4)
2. Student-Focused Strategies(S)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● S-Engagement (S1)● S-Well-being (S2)● S-Support (S3)

- S-Resources (S4)
 - P-Engagement (P1)
 - 3.Parent-Focused Strategies (P) ● P-Communication (P2)
 - P-Support (P3)
 - 4.System-Focused Strategies (Sy) ● Sy-Operations (Sy1)
 - Sy-Policy (Sy2)
 - Sy-Partnerships (Sy3)
-

These four strategy areas represent different but connected functions in the stakeholder ecosystem of the school. Learning, engagement, and well-being are directly shaped by student-focused strategies that function at the level of observable value generation. To provide consistently high-quality education, teacher-focused strategies serve as enabling mechanisms. While parent-focused strategies promote relational alignment by enhancing trust, communication, and institutional legitimacy, system-focused strategies offer structural coordination through governance, policies, and organisational arrangements.

While student-focused strategies are the most common, this is more indicative of their exposure than of their greater significance. While teacher-, system-, and parent-focused solutions work less obviously but are just as important in maintaining long-term efficacy, their results are instantaneous and immediately identifiable. Together, these domains, student (visible), teacher (enabling), system (structural), and parent (relational), represent complementary types of value, emphasizing that sustainability results from their integration rather than their separation.

Additionally, effectiveness depends on stakeholders. Parents concentrate on the communication and well-being of their children, teachers highlight the influence of the classroom, and leaders prioritize organisational performance. Effectiveness also functions in a variety of ways, such as instant results, long-term capability, structural alignment, and interpersonal trust. These results show that effectiveness is multifaceted and socially created rather than unique.

In general, no single strategy domain is adequate by itself. The alignment and negotiation of interconnected stakeholder interests, wherein actions in one area influence results in others, is how sustainability arises. The results imply that efficacy is relational and systemic, based on the coordinated interaction of student-, teacher-, system-, and parent-focused initiatives, rather than pinpointing a "most effective" approach.

DISCUSSION

Strategies identified by stakeholders (RQ1) and the creation of a sustainability framework for international schools in Shanghai (RQ2) are linked in this discussion, which analyses the results in light of the study's research questions. By analyzing patterns, contradictions, and unexpected insights, this discussion

provides a deeper understanding of the operational and strategic dimensions influencing international school sustainability.

Summary of the Findings

The results go beyond technocratic viewpoints and rethink international school sustainability as a systemically embedded, stakeholder-mediated process. Although in line with stakeholder theory, the findings broaden its application by showing that sustainability depends on the continuous alignment of interdependent stakeholder actions within a coordinated system rather than just stakeholder identification and management.

Furthermore, the four strategy domains serve as interdependent parts of an integrated value-creation system rather than as distinct categories. Parent-focused tactics maintain trust, legitimacy, and outside support; system-focused strategies provide institutional structure and resource allocation; teacher-focused strategies improve pedagogical capacity; and student-focused methods represent immediate educational outputs. Therefore, sustainability results from the coherence and alignment of all four domains rather than from the strength of just one of them.

One important insight is that feedback dynamics and cross-stakeholder alignment are necessary for effectiveness. The execution and scalability of all initiatives are contingent upon system-level decisions, whereas improvements in teacher capacity result in better student outcomes, which in turn influence parental attitudes and participation. Depending on the level of alignment attained, these cyclical interactions create feedback loops that either stabilize or destabilize the system.

The results imply that rather than being the result of discrete actions, sustainability in international schools is better understood as an emergent feature of coordinated stakeholder engagement. As a result, the relational architecture that links various strategies becomes the analytical focus instead of the strategies themselves.

Effective Strategies: From Prioritization to Systemic Effectiveness

Strategies' visibility or frequency cannot be used to gauge their effectiveness. Although student-focused tactics seem to be the most popular because of their immediate and visible results (such as engagement and achievement), this only indicates short-term, proximal effectiveness rather than long-term durability.

By increasing instructional capacity through professional development and support, teacher-focused solutions ensure long-term quality and stability and enable effectiveness. By influencing organisational factors that promote coherence and adaptability, such as governance, resources, and policy, system-focused initiatives contribute to structural effectiveness. By encouraging trust, communication, and alignment, all of which support stakeholder engagement and institutional legitimacy, parent-focused methods provide relational effectiveness.

All things considered, effectiveness is a multiple layered, system-dependent construct that results from the alignment of parent (relational), teacher (enabling),

system (structural), and student (visible) tactics rather than from a single dominant strategy.

Rather than existing independently, these four types of efficacy are interrelated. System improvements influence teaching conditions, teacher development enhances instruction, and improved student outcomes strengthen parental trust, all of which have a cascading effect on other domains. Therefore, interaction and feedback (rather than discrete actions) are what lead to effectiveness.

Accordingly, this study reframes the notion of a “most effective strategy.” In line with stakeholder theory’s focus on coordinated value creation, systemic effectiveness results from the alignment of educational (student), enabling (teacher), structural (system), and relational (parent) techniques.

Sustainability is driven by a number of interrelated mechanisms across these domains: pedagogical practices improve learning outcomes; teacher commitment maintains instructional quality; parent engagement builds trust and alignment; and organisational coherence is ensured by structural processes (e.g., policy, resources, coordination). Rather than being isolated interventions, these processes function as a multilayered system.

These four forms of effectiveness are not independent but interdependent. Changes in one domain generate cascading effects across others: system-level reforms influence teaching conditions; teacher development enhances classroom practices; improved instruction strengthens student outcomes; and effective parent communication reinforces trust and engagement. These feedback loops demonstrate that effectiveness is produced through interaction rather than isolation.

Bridging Theory and Context

This study addresses a key gap in the literature on international school sustainability by situating stakeholder dynamics within a complex governance context. Much of the existing research tends to treat international schools in relatively abstract or decontextualized terms, paying limited attention to how regulatory systems, cultural norms, and market forces jointly shape school development.

The Shanghai case demonstrates that sustainability is not only influenced by organisational decision-making but is also deeply embedded in a distinctive stakeholder environment. In this context, the state functions as a powerful regulatory stakeholder shaping institutional boundaries and compliance expectations, while parents represent highly influential actors who actively shape school priorities through their expectations, choices, and evaluations. At the same time, schools must continuously respond to hybrid global-local demands, balancing international educational standards with local cultural and policy requirements.

Rather than operating as a uniform or universal framework, sustainability therefore emerges from specific configurations of stakeholder power, expectations, and negotiation. The findings show that schools must continuously

align these sometimes-competing stakeholder demands to maintain legitimacy, stability, and long-term development.

International School Sustainability Framework

This study proposes an exploratory framework that views international school sustainability as a continuous process of stakeholder alignment. The paradigm views sustainability as a dynamic relational process determined by the ongoing negotiation of expectations among key stakeholders, including leadership, teachers, students, parents, and external regulatory actors, rather than as a fixed conclusion or technological condition.

A stakeholder-based framework that places student-, teacher-, system-, and parent-focused strategies as interdependent domains inside a single structure is shown in Figure 2. The framework illustrates how value flows among stakeholder groups: parental engagement is shaped by student performance, teacher capacity affects student results, and system-level governance governs the application of all initiatives. Additionally, the picture depicts the alignment mechanisms and feedback loops found in the empirical investigation, showing that sustainability is preserved by ongoing modification as opposed to linear advancement. By converting abstract relational dynamics into a structured and comprehensible model, Figure 2 operationalizes the study's major thesis and clarifies how cross-stakeholder coordination serves as the primary mechanism supporting long-term sustainability.

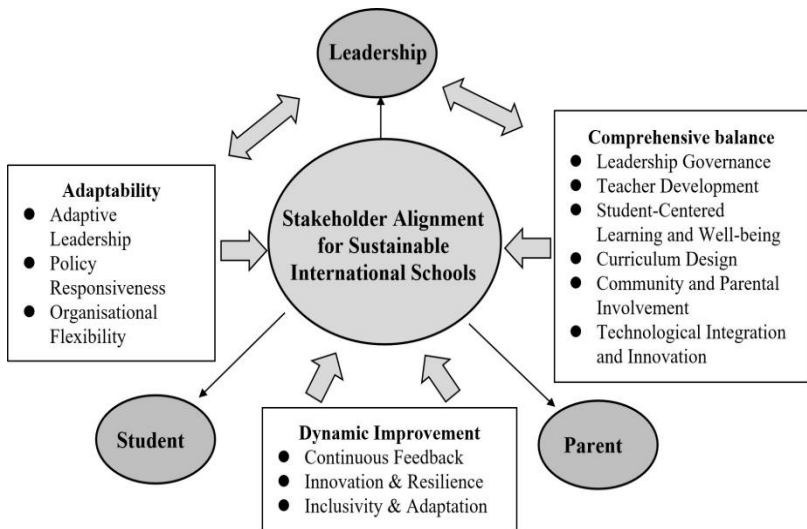


Figure 2: Framework of International School Sustainability

Adaptability as a core principle

Adaptability is identified as the foundational principle of sustainability. From a stakeholder theory perspective, it reflects the capacity of schools to respond to evolving and sometimes competing stakeholder expectations under conditions of regulatory, economic, technological, and cultural change. Adaptive leadership, policy responsiveness, and organisational flexibility enable schools to maintain legitimacy by continuously realigning stakeholder relationships. Rather than a reactive function, adaptability operates as a strategic capability for sustaining stakeholder trust and institutional coherence.

Comprehensive balance across stakeholders

Sustainability also depends on achieving a dynamic balance among competing stakeholder demands. This involves the coordinated alignment of six interrelated domains: leadership governance, teacher development, student-centered learning and well-being, curriculum design, community and parental involvement, and technological integration and innovation. These domains represent overlapping arenas of stakeholder value creation rather than isolated organisational functions. Sustainable schools are those that integrate these domains to mediate tensions among stakeholder expectations while maintaining coherence in institutional practice.

Dynamic improvement through stakeholder feedback

A further defining principle is dynamic improvement, which captures the iterative nature of stakeholder alignment over time. Sustainability is reinforced through continuous feedback, reflection, and adjustment processes that allow schools to respond to changing stakeholder perceptions and needs. Innovation, resilience, inclusivity, and resource optimization function as interconnected mechanisms that support this ongoing adaptation. Importantly, improvement is not merely performance enhancement but a process of sustained stakeholder negotiation that reinforces long-term legitimacy and trust.

Together, the framework positions international school sustainability as a stakeholder-driven and context-dependent process. Sustainability emerges not from isolated interventions but from the continuous alignment of stakeholder expectations through adaptability, balanced coordination, and dynamic improvement. This perspective extends stakeholder theory by demonstrating how sustainability is enacted through ongoing relational negotiation within complex educational environments.

Implications

According to this study, rather than being the result of discrete institutional practices, the sustainability of international schools in Shanghai is better understood as a strategically mediated process impacted by numerous stakeholders. The results, which are based on stakeholder theory, demonstrate that

sustainability results from the ongoing alignment of conflicting demands from educators, parents, students, school administrators, and regulatory agencies. In this situation, schools use strategy as a dynamic tool to understand, prioritize, and address these expectations. By presenting sustainability as a continuous, context-sensitive process rather than a static organisational state, this reframing adds to the body of literature.

In practical terms, the results emphasize the significance of strategic coordination and stakeholder alignment in tackling major issues such as teacher turnover, leadership instability, and misaligned parental expectations. School administrators are urged to implement more flexible and participatory governance strategies, such as shared decision-making procedures and organized feedback systems. Building trust and preserving institutional coherence also depend on expanding student involvement, improving communication with parents, and developing teacher support mechanisms. These tactics can support schools in maintaining instructional quality while responding to uncertainty more skilfully.

Based on the study, institutional methods and regulatory environments are intimately related to sustainability from a policy standpoint. Increased uniformity and clarity in policy can help schools concentrate on long-term growth by lowering uncertainty. However, more adaptable and flexible governance strategies, such as pilot programs or distinct regulatory frameworks, may better foster creativity and flexibility. Overall, the results indicate that strategic responsiveness at various levels of governance and balanced stakeholder engagement are essential to sustainable development in international schools.

Limitations

Using a multistakeholder qualitative method, this study offers a basic analytical framework for comprehending the sustainability of international schools in Shanghai. A number of limitations should be noted, even if the results provide insightful information on how parents, teachers, leadership, and institutional contexts interact. First, the findings' applicability is limited by the very small and context-specific sample. Despite the inclusion of several stakeholder groups, the sample size within each group remained tiny, with no direct inclusion of student views and a particularly small parent sample. Therefore, the results might not adequately reflect the variety of stakeholder viewpoints, particularly regarding families' expectations and the student experience. Additionally, how sustainability was perceived in various institutions may have been impacted by variations in curriculum systems (such as IB, AP, and A-Level).

Second, data access and interpretation are limited by the study's primary reliance on qualitative interview data, complemented by scant institutional documentation. Some conclusions are based on participants' views rather than on fully triangulated evidence due to restricted access to internal school data. Additionally, the analytical process includes the researcher's interpretation, which may influence the emergence of themes, as is the case with all qualitative research. Examining how stakeholder relationships and strategic actions change over time

in a rapidly evolving educational and policy context is further made more difficult by the cross-sectional design.

Last, rather than being definitive, the suggested framework should be viewed as exploratory and preliminary. The lack of longitudinal research restricts the evaluation of long-term stability, and it has not been empirically confirmed in larger contexts. To further evaluate and improve the framework, future studies should use more varied samples, including student perspectives, and employ mixed-methods and longitudinal approaches.

Recommendations for Future Research

To improve knowledge of sustainability in international schools, future research should broaden the extent and variety of stakeholder representation, building on the study's shortcomings. Although this study offers perspectives from parents, teachers, and administrators, the lack of student voices and low parent representation point to the need for more inclusive sampling techniques. To effectively capture the complex nature of stakeholder interaction, future research is advised to include students, legislators, board members, and community partners. Furthermore, expanding the geographic scope beyond Shanghai would enable comparative research on how institutional structures, cultural norms, and policy settings influence sustainability initiatives, both within China (e.g., Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou) and internationally.

Future studies should also examine how sustainability processes are dynamic and ever-changing, particularly regarding leadership, parental expectations, curriculum systems, and technological advancements. For example, future studies could examine the motivations and environments of stakeholders under specific policy changes (Yuan et al., 2025). Further exploration into the roles of sustainable leadership, teacher efficacy, and stakeholder collaboration is warranted (e.g., Peng et al., 2024). Longitudinal techniques might be useful for examining how stakeholder relationships and strategic responses evolve over time, particularly under changing regulatory and market conditions, given the cross-sectional nature of this study. Additional research into how various curriculum models (such as IB, AP, and A-Level) affect sustainability practices would enhance contextual understanding and illuminate differences across institutional settings.

To improve the reliability and validation of the proposed framework, future research should employ multilevel and mixed-methods study designs. Relationships between leadership behaviors, stakeholder involvement, and institutional results could be tested using quantitative methods such as survey analysis or structural equation modeling. Analytical depth might also be improved by triangulating qualitative insights with institutional data and comparative case studies. In this sense, the paradigm put forward in this study should be viewed as exploratory and subject to further empirical refinement; future research will be crucial for determining its application and expanding its relevance across a variety of international education contexts.

CONCLUSION

Through the lenses of sustainable leadership and stakeholder views, this study examined the role of strategy in tackling sustainability concerns at Shanghai's international schools. The study's qualitative interviews with eight school administrators, five teachers, and three parents revealed a variety of tactical solutions that together help schools deal with challenging operational, pedagogical, and interpersonal challenges.

Building on these findings, the study develops a multifaceted sustainability framework that views international school sustainability as a system that is integrated and driven by stakeholders rather than as a collection of discrete practices. Three interconnected dimensions form the framework's structure. First, adaptability is a fundamental principle that allows schools to sustain legitimacy by constantly realigning stakeholder relationships in response to changing internal and external pressures. This is made possible by adaptive leadership, policy responsiveness, and organizational flexibility. The second is comprehensive balance across stakeholders, which entails the coordinated alignment of six interconnected domains: curriculum design, community and parental involvement, student-centered learning and well-being, leadership governance, teacher development, and technological innovation and integration. These domains act as an integrated structure of value creation, where changes in one area have systemic repercussions on others, rather than operating separately. Third, ongoing feedback systems that foster creativity and resilience while guaranteeing inclusivity and adaptability throughout the educational system sustain dynamic improvement through stakeholder input.

Practically speaking, the results can be used by lawmakers and school administrators as a structured reference to develop more intelligent and responsive sustainability plans. The framework makes decision-making easier by clarifying how leadership, teaching skills, student outcomes, curriculum design, community involvement, and technological innovation all contribute to long-term institutional resilience in demanding global education environments.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on sustainable education and the growth of international schools by offering both an empirically grounded framework and a stakeholder-informed conceptualization of sustainability. It demonstrates that sustainable leadership is not a set of set practices but rather a dynamic process of strategic integration across interdependent stakeholder systems.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Main Categories about Strategies through Key Stakeholders' Perspective

Main categories	Categories	F	Participant
Teacher-Focused Strategies(T)		180	
	T-Training (T1)	63	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A7, A8, T1, T2, T3, T5, P2, P3
	T-Retention ((T2)	20	A1, A2, A3, A5, A6, A7, A8, T3
	T-Recruitment (T3)	15	A1, A2, A3, A4, A7, T1
	T-Support (T4)	82	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, P2, P3
Student-Focused Strategies(S)		273	
	S-Engagement (S1)	93	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, P1, P2
	S-Well-being (S2)	69	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A8, T1, T2, T3, T5, P1, P2, P3
	S-Support (S3)	93	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, T1, T2, T5, P2, P3
	S-Resources (S4)	18	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, T1, T2
Parent-Focused Strategies (P)		56	
	P-Engagement (P1)	13	A3, P1, P2, P3
	P-Communication (P2)	19	A1, A2, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, T1, T2, T3, P1, P2, P3
	P-Support (P3)	24	A3, A4, A5, A8, T1, T5, P1, P2, P3
System-Focused Strategies (Sy)		110	
	Sy-Operations (Sy1)	60	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, T3, T4, T5, P1
	Sy-Policy (Sy2)	31	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A7, A8, T3, T5
	Sy-Partnerships (Sy3)	19	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, T3
	Total	619	

Note. F=Frequency.