

Enhancing Teacher Leadership in Shandong Province's Universities: Perceptions, Challenges, and Pathways to Empowerment

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex and multidimensional nature of teacher leadership within the higher education context of Shandong Province, China. Through qualitative analysis, it explores university teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership, the challenges they face in practice, and the necessary skills and support for effective leadership development. Findings reveal a significant gap in teachers' metacognitive understanding of teacher leadership concepts and systemic challenges in course management and teamwork. To address these issues, the study suggests adopting Project-Based Learning (PBL) and flipped classroom methods to foster active learning and improve teachers' course design and management skills. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of professional training in enhancing teachers' interdisciplinary thinking, critical thinking, collaboration abilities, and metacognition. The study also highlights the need for establishing platforms and mechanisms that support teacher leadership development, including the implementation of team collaboration optimization and the provision of comprehensive training programs. By presenting these insights, the research contributes to the discourse on teacher leadership in China, offering practical recommendations for educational institutions aiming to enhance teacher leadership capabilities.

Keywords: Teacher Leadership, Higher Education, Shandong Province, Project-Based Learning, Professional Training, Educational Management

Introduction

In the current Chinese university educational environment, the development of teacher leadership faces multiple challenges. Initially, many teachers lack a fundamental understanding of the concept of teacher leadership. This is not limited to comprehension of its definition but also includes knowledge of its application in practice. This lack of awareness hinders teachers' ability to exert leadership in daily educational activities, affecting their capability to proactively drive educational innovation and improvement. Furthermore, the challenges teachers face also involve an insufficient understanding of the factors influencing

teacher leadership. These factors include but are not limited to school culture, organizational structure, relationships among colleagues, and educational policies (Liu et al., 2021). Without awareness of these factors, teachers find it difficult to effectively exercise leadership, thereby impacting their enthusiasm and effectiveness in curriculum design, innovation in teaching methods, and enhancement of educational quality.

Additionally, the challenge of teacher leadership is also manifested in the difficulty of its application in educational practice. Although teacher leadership is considered key to enhancing teaching quality and school management efficiency, in practical operations, teachers often find it challenging to translate theory into practice due to a lack of necessary support and training, constraints of organizational structures, and misunderstandings about the application of leadership (Harris & Jones, 2019c). These issues not only hinder the development of teacher leadership but also limit the progress of educational reform and innovation.

Consequently, this study aims to delve into the challenges facing teacher leadership in Chinese universities, particularly by analyzing three aspects: teachers' understanding of the concept of teacher leadership, factors affecting teacher leadership, and teachers' ability to exert leadership in actual educational activities. The study explores the current state, challenges, and strategies for enhancing teacher leadership in Chinese universities:

Understanding of Teacher Leadership: What is the perception and understanding of the concept of teacher leadership among university teachers in Shandong Province? How do they view the role of teacher leadership in promoting teaching and school management?

Challenges Faced: What are the main challenges affecting teachers' ability to exercise leadership in the current educational environment? How do these challenges impact the development and application of teacher leadership?

Necessary Skills and Support: What key skills and support are needed for teachers to effectively enhance their leadership? How can schools and educational administration bodies provide this support?

Through an in-depth investigation into the leadership of university teachers in China, this research will enrich the theoretical foundation of teacher leadership, especially in the context of Chinese education application and practice. This will help establish a more comprehensive and detailed theoretical framework for teacher leadership, offering a reference for subsequent research. Furthermore, the findings of this study will provide an empirical basis for educational administrators and policymakers to formulate more effective strategies and measures to promote the development of teacher leadership. This will not only enhance teachers' sense of professional achievement and teaching quality but also promote efficiency and innovation in school management. More importantly, by identifying and addressing the challenges to the development of teacher leadership, this study will contribute to the reform and progress of university education in China, especially in terms of improving teaching quality and school management levels. Overall, this study aims to reveal the current limitations of teacher leadership and propose targeted suggestions to promote the development of teacher leadership, thereby enhancing the quality and efficiency of education.

Literature Review

In discussing theories related to teacher leadership, traditional transactional leadership or management theories view leadership as a system based on a reward and punishment system, emphasizing result orientation and hierarchical structures. However, this model does not encourage innovation, which resonates with the challenges faced by teacher leadership in China (Yeh, 2020). On the other hand, transformational leadership theories or relational theories believe that effective leadership stems from positive relationships between leaders and team members, highlighting the importance of interpersonal relationships and the leaders' involvement in information gathering, meeting convening, and advisor selection (Artiles et al., 2023). Distributed leadership theory advocates for driving strategy by endowing leaders with autonomy, capabilities, and responsibilities, emphasizing the expansion of roles and responsibilities to enhance the leadership of teachers and students (Cooke, 2015). Furthermore, Chinese Confucian and Legalist leadership theories respectively emphasize the influence of moral roles and the importance of order unity, reflecting the distinctiveness of Chinese teacher leadership models from those in other societies (Luan, 2016; Liu, 2017). A comparative analysis of these theories with the modern educational concept of "teacher leadership" can provide a clearer observation of Chinese teachers' understanding of teacher leadership, the reasons for the challenges they face, and how to theoretically develop the leadership skills of Chinese teachers.

Compared to Chinese Confucian and Legalist theories, modern theories of teacher leadership exhibit significant differences and connections. Teacher leadership is described as a process where teachers, through collaboration with colleagues, school management, professionals, students, and their families, improve educational practices, thereby driving school change to benefit all students. Specifically, teacher leadership is not only concerned with the organization of curriculum and management but also involves developing the curriculum through teachers' influence, helping students form learning motivation, and establishing an atmosphere of respect and trust in student management (Chang & Fan, 2023). However, when comparing these modern educational theories with traditional Chinese Confucian and Legalist theories, it is found that although there are many similarities, modern theories provide more comprehensive theoretical data and specific logic for guiding teaching, significantly enhancing teachers' metacognitive abilities (Sanocki, 2013; Wen, 2020). The Chinese teacher leadership model is influenced by traditional Confucian and Legalist theories while also integrating some personal experiences of teachers (Ma, 2009; Tjosvold & Fang, 2004b).

However, the formation of this leadership model has solidified Chinese teachers' metacognition of the teacher leadership model, leading to deficiencies in curricular autonomy and innovation, thereby affecting the effective implementation of teacher leadership (Xi et al., 2020). In contrast, distributed leadership, as an innovative practice, not only enhances educators' autonomy but also increases students' engagement and higher-order thinking skills (O'Shea, 2021). This indicates a gap in Chinese teachers' understanding of teacher leadership, highlighting the need for acquiring new skills to enhance teacher leadership.

Through an in-depth analysis of modern theories of teacher leadership and their comparison with traditional Chinese Confucian and Legalist theories, this study reveals the unique challenges and opportunities facing teacher leadership in the Chinese university

environment. Although modern theories of teacher leadership offer a comprehensive perspective on the role of teachers in promoting educational change, emphasizing the importance of improving educational practices through curriculum development, student management, and collaboration with colleagues and families, applying these theories in the Chinese educational context necessitates consideration of China's unique cultural background and values.

This analysis suggests that for teacher leadership to be effectively implemented and developed in China, there must be a blending of modern leadership theories with traditional Chinese cultural values. This approach could lead to the creation of a hybrid model of teacher leadership that is both innovative and culturally sensitive, facilitating the effective implementation of teacher leadership in the Chinese educational landscape. Such a model would address the current limitations by fostering curricular autonomy, encouraging innovation, and enhancing the teacher-student relationship, thereby contributing to the overall improvement of educational quality and efficiency in China.

This study indicates that the practice of teacher leadership in China is profoundly influenced by Confucian and Legalist traditional theories. These traditional theories resonate with modern educational theories to some extent but also exhibit significant differences. Particularly, in enhancing teacher leadership, the Chinese educational system needs to introduce more modern educational concepts and methods that promote teacher autonomy, innovation, and metacognitive abilities, while respecting traditional values.

Building on the foundation of existing literature, this research will further explore how to develop a teacher leadership model that aligns with China's educational practices and cultural background. This approach not only aims to provide new perspectives and directions for the research and practice of teacher leadership but also to contribute important theoretical and empirical foundations to educational reform and development in China and globally.

Research Methodology

This study aims to explore the current state, challenges, and enhancement strategies of teacher leadership among university teachers in Shandong Province. It employs a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews and case studies to collect firsthand data for a comprehensive understanding and analysis of these issues. Through empirical research, this study seeks to provide theoretical and practical suggestions for enhancing teacher leadership in Chinese universities, thereby facilitating improvements in educational quality and teaching innovation. Adopting a qualitative research design and drawing on empiricism, the study explores various aspects of teacher leadership and their interrelations. Interaction with participants aims to gain deep insights into their perceptions, experiences, and the challenges faced within the context of universities in Shandong Province (Lin, 1998).

In terms of sample selection, the study employs purposive sampling, prioritizing teachers with at least ten years of work experience who have participated in specific course teaching, after-class student management, and university-organized teacher leadership training activities. In the second phase, teachers meeting the first criterion from different departments are randomly selected to ensure the representativeness and comprehensiveness of the sample.

Finally, 3 teachers with experience in course operation and student management are chosen as research subjects (Vaughn et al., 2018).

Data will be collected using semi-structured interviews, focusing on teachers' views on teacher leadership and the challenges encountered in their personal experiences with teacher leadership. To ensure the effectiveness of the interviews and research, interviews will be recorded, with notes taken as backup in case of electronic recording device failure. After interviews, contents will be transcribed, data coded, categorized, and the logical relationships between internal elements further organized (Montabon et al., 2018). The data collection process is expected to last at least 2 weeks, with teacher interviews conducted using remote online technology through platforms like Tencent Meeting, WeChat, and Classin, where participants can choose to turn on their cameras. Each participant will undergo a 30-minute recorded interview, with interview times notified in advance along with provision of relevant research information (Brandon et al., 2018). Subsequently, data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, with contents categorized and content analysis performed to reveal the factors influencing the themes, the connections between factors, and respondents' metacognition of related concepts (Mitchell, 2012).

Data analysis steps include: (1) transcribing interview content and organizing data; (2) reading all data to understand the overall meaning; (3) conducting a more detailed analysis, categorizing data, and proposing related theoretical information; (4) implementing member checks to ensure data validity and credibility, presenting analysis results and processes to respondents for verification; (5) writing the paper, presenting descriptive information under themes in narrative or tabular form; (6) capturing or seeking more details to elucidate essence and explaining these contents or behaviors' meanings by reconfirming certain information with respondents (Deterding & Waters, 2021).

Research Result

Cognition and value of teacher leadership

The study on the understanding of teacher leadership among university teachers in Shandong Province reveals several key characteristics and objectives. Initially, the participating teachers lacked a basic metacognition and systematic understanding of "teacher leadership." Their comprehension mainly stems from personal experience, often exercising teacher leadership unintentionally. For instance, in curriculum design and student management, they would refer to the guidance of teaching and research offices or seek advice from experienced teachers, demonstrating the influence of traditional Confucian and Legalist thoughts, especially the tendency to quote Confucian sayings when leading and managing classes.

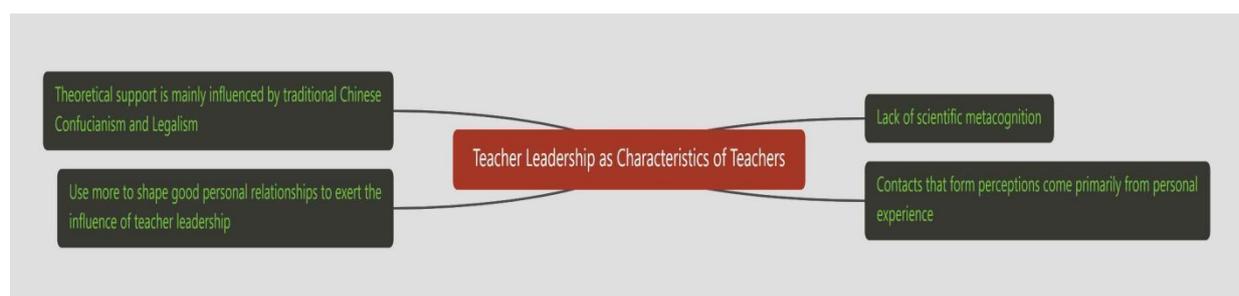


Figure 4.1.1 : Characteristics of teacher leadership in university shandong as leader

The findings also indicate that teachers particularly emphasize cultivating teacher leadership through interpersonal relationships in student management, such as assigning students temporary responsibilities for certain activities to handle interpersonal relations with students. However, when discussing the effectiveness of courses or evaluation mechanisms, teachers often could not provide clear responses, reflecting their challenges in this area.

In terms of the objectives of teacher leadership, all interviewed teachers agreed that the primary responsibility of a leader is to ensure the successful implementation of the course plan, meet the needs of each student, and enhance the overall abilities of students. Yet, the main purpose of teacher leadership in the modern educational environment is to create a conducive environment, direct students' attention, and ensure the efficiency of educational management.

In summary, teacher leadership among Chinese university teachers exhibits characteristics and challenges distinct from those in modern educational concepts of teacher leadership. These findings underscore the importance of integrating traditional thoughts with modern educational practices in the Chinese educational context and the necessity of further researching and developing a teacher leadership model suitable for the Chinese situation.

Challenges and Impacts in Educational Settings

The challenges faced by university teachers in Shandong Province in terms of teacher leadership are primarily manifested in the ambiguity of roles in course management and leadership collaboration platforms. Teachers acknowledge that adapting to the current educational developments, especially the new demands posed by technological advancements such as artificial intelligence on traditional teaching models, presents a challenge for them. They lack the professional knowledge and skills necessary for autonomously transforming courses. Additionally, while curriculum research groups are run by equally qualified teachers, the teaching and research office, a permanent administrative department responsible for overseeing online courses, does not support the exercise of teacher leadership.

One of the reasons for these challenges is the unclear rights and obligations on leadership collaboration platforms. Teachers often lack specific research topics, and most of the time, they discuss issues faced in the classroom as discussion topics. However, such discussions and exchanges do not result in concrete information or jointly developed strategies for course improvement. Moreover, reports submitted to the teaching and research office, although based on the teachers' understanding and the national teaching syllabus, usually do not receive feedback.

These challenges indicate that to transform teacher leadership, teachers need to undergo training in thinking skills to have the proper metacognition when engaging in course projects, including the use of diagrams, symbols, organizing content, and exploration. Logical thinking is crucial when genuinely contemplating problems, as it affects the interpersonal barriers faced by teachers. Teachers might not understand the causal and logical relationships between new student thinking models, changes in the educational environment, and the challenges to teacher leadership. It's more a unilateral perception that the deep penetration of the internet causes students to be non-compliant with teachers' leadership.

This situation suggests a need for a shift in the approach to teacher leadership development, emphasizing the importance of clarity in roles and responsibilities, as well as enhancing the skills and capabilities of teachers to adapt to and integrate technology into teaching and learning processes. Addressing these challenges requires not only institutional support but also a reevaluation of the professional development programs to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to lead effectively in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

Critical support for improving teacher leadership

To enhance the capabilities of university teachers in Shandong Province as teacher leaders, the study identifies a need for a course organization model with clear positioning and corresponding feedback. The issues identified include the absence of appropriate discussion and teaching platforms, insufficient effectiveness of team collaboration, and the lack of a platform that supports the development of teacher leadership. To address these issues, it's recommended to adopt Project-Based Learning (PBL) models and flipped classroom methods to promote active learning and enhance student feedback (Lento, 2016).

In response to the inadequate teacher teamwork capabilities and the absence of a platform for teacher leadership collaboration, it's suggested to introduce the Robert's Rules of Order system to improve the efficiency and productivity of meetings while protecting each member's right to speak and express opinions.

Furthermore, teachers reported a systemic lack of professional knowledge on teacher leadership, including the need for professional curriculum knowledge, psychological knowledge, and modern management thinking. Therefore, it's recommended to formalize teacher leadership training or courses, especially for professional leadership development, adopting the following three strategies: (1) encouraging teachers to adopt interdisciplinary and multi-perspective attitudes, enhancing metacognition about teacher leadership; (2) strengthening teachers' thinking and reasoning training; (3) involving teachers more in the analysis of real-life cases of teacher leadership in teaching.

Based on the needs of the interviewed teachers and the aforementioned principles, a theoretical learning course and curriculum structure for teacher leadership are proposed. This includes psychology experiments, educational management, modern curriculum knowledge categorization, and general education courses. The aim is to ensure teachers systematically acquire knowledge and skills related to teacher leadership in modern education and improve their metacognitive level.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

Our research on the perception of teacher leadership among university teachers in Shandong Province has uncovered several pivotal characteristics and objectives. Initially, it is evident that the participating teachers lack a fundamental metacognitive and systematic understanding of "teacher leadership," often exercising it unintentionally based on personal experiences. For instance, they draw upon the guidance of teaching and research offices or seek advice from seasoned educators, reflecting the influence of traditional Confucian and Legalist ideologies.

Moreover, teachers place significant emphasis on nurturing teacher leadership through interpersonal relationships in student management, such as assigning temporary responsibilities to students for specific activities. However, when it comes to the effectiveness of courses or evaluation mechanisms, teachers often struggle to provide clear responses, indicating challenges in these areas.

In terms of the objectives of teacher leadership, all interviewed teachers concurred that a leader's primary duty is to ensure the successful execution of the course plan, cater to the needs of each student, and enhance students' overall capabilities. Yet, the principal purpose of teacher leadership in the modern educational context is to foster a conducive environment, direct students' focus, and ensure the efficiency of educational management.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes specific application suggestions to bolster teacher leadership capabilities:

Incorporate Active Learning Models: Higher education institutions should foster the use of Project-Based Learning (PBL) and flipped classroom teaching models. These approaches not only invigorate student engagement but also sharpen teachers' course design and management skills through project-oriented practices. This hands-on involvement allows teachers to integrate leadership effectively within the teaching process, fostering autonomous learning and critical thinking among students.

Enhance Professional Training: Regular workshops and seminars that develop interdisciplinary thinking, critical thinking, and metacognitive abilities should be conducted by universities. Such systematic professional training equips teachers with a comprehensive understanding of teacher leadership theories and practices, enabling more effective application in teaching and student management.

Establish Supportive Platforms: The creation and refinement of platforms and mechanisms that support teacher leadership development are essential. Implementing systems like Robert's Rules of Order can enhance team collaboration and decision-making, ensuring inclusivity in member contributions. Online resources and forums can facilitate the exchange of experiences and strategies, forming a supportive network for teacher leadership knowledge.

Integrate Interdisciplinary Knowledge and Case Studies: Teacher leadership training should be enriched with interdisciplinary insights and real teaching cases. Analyzing specific cases from multiple perspectives helps teachers understand and navigate leadership challenges, promoting the development of application abilities and innovative thinking.

Implement Continuous Evaluation: Establishing a continuous evaluation and feedback mechanism is vital for ensuring the effectiveness of teacher leadership training. Universities should adjust training content and methods based on regular assessments, ensuring ongoing improvement in teacher leadership to meet the evolving demands of modern education.

Appropriateness and Potential Benefits of Recommendations

These recommendations are tailored to the specific context and findings of the study. For instance, the recommendation for enhanced metacognitive training is based on the discovery that teachers lack proper metacognition in course projects, which will aid in a deeper understanding of teacher leadership and improve their professional capabilities. Additionally, the suggestion to adopt PBL and flipped classroom methods aims to improve teaching effectiveness by fostering student engagement and feedback.

Implementing these recommendations is expected to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of teacher leadership, strengthen teachers' professional skills, and promote the modernization of educational management.

Limitations and Future Directions

While our study provides valuable insights, it has some limitations. For example, the research primarily focuses on university teachers in Shandong Province and may not fully represent other regions. Future research should consider expanding the scope to teachers in other areas or different educational levels to further explore and validate our findings.

Summary

In conclusion, this study provides a nuanced understanding of teacher leadership in the Chinese higher education context, offering targeted recommendations for capacity building. By implementing these suggestions, we aim to enhance the leadership capabilities of university teachers in Shandong Province, improve educational quality and efficiency, and enrich the learning experience for students.

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