

Development and Practice of Teacher Leadership in the Context of China's Educational Reform

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Abstract

Starting from the background of China's education reform, this study explores the development and practice of teacher leadership. With the deepening of education reform, teachers have gradually changed from the knowledge transmitters in the classroom to the core promoters of school development and assume more leadership responsibilities. This paper analyzes the specific requirements of the current education reform on teacher leadership, and expounds the concept connotation, development path and practical significance of teacher leadership combined with domestic and foreign literature. It is pointed out that teacher leadership plays an important role in promoting curriculum reform, enhancing student development and optimizing school management. However, its development still faces challenges such as insufficient policy support, limited training resources and insufficient teacher awareness. Finally, in the context of continuous educational reform, it is necessary to further promote the development of teacher leadership from the aspects of system construction, training support and cultural shaping, so as to meet the needs of modern education.

Keywords: Education Reform, Teacher Leadership, China, Education, Development

Introduction

The rapid development of the scientific and technological revolution has increased the demand for human resources training. A new round of scientific and technological revolution is emerging in the world, which is significantly altering human socio-economic life and the world competition landscape. As a result, human capital has become a core element of national competitiveness. Among the factors that contribute to economic development, humans are one of the most fundamental (Fan, 2021). If physical capital is one of the prerequisites for economic development, human capital will ultimately determine the effectiveness of economic development in a country or region (Faggian et al., 2019). Children and adolescents in primary education are still at an early stage of physical and mental development, and the education they receive at this stage has a long-term impact on their future development and even on their whole life (Murray et al., 2020).

Against this background, educational reforms have been implemented in countries worldwide since the twentieth century. In the United States, three educational reforms were implemented in the 1980s. The first reform focused on centralisation, promoting testing and improving teacher quality. The second reform emphasised decentralisation, empowering teachers, school-based management and school choice. The third reform focused on systematically restructuring schools. In the process of pursuing the perfection of the school and the system, teacher agency and professional influence are of crucial importance (Campbell et al., 2022). The possibility and potential of teacher leadership is a central issue in the international discourse on education reform and change (Ghamrawi et al., 2023). Teachers are the key and central to reform, any reform without teacher participation and leadership is unlikely to succeed. Wenner and Campbell (2017) believe that making teacher leadership the norm is a necessary condition for reform in education. Lambert (2003) believe that teacher leaders can save our schools. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009), in their book *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders*, argue that every school has a group of sleeping giants - teacher leaders who can be catalysts for change. If we can harness the capacity of these school change agents, our public education reform will be better for it.

In the late 1970s, China began to carry out the great reform and opening up policy, and also began to reform education, implementing a number of educational reform measures. Moreover, in 2001, China's Ministry of Education (CEM) issued the Guiding Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform. The core of this policy is to establish a new basic education curriculum system, which has a great impact on the basic education in China. After more than 40 years of efforts, China has made great progress in compulsory education, with the coverage of compulsory education reaching nearly 100 per cent of the population, realizing free education for all in the true sense, and reaching the average level of high-income countries in the world.

Primary education is a part of compulsory education in China, which is at the lowest level of the entire education system (Li & Xue, 2021). The strategic significance of compulsory education is balanced development and the maintenance of educational equity which determined by its fundamental position, whether for individual development or social progress (Yang & Guo, 2020). At the micro level, compulsory education plays a very important role in the whole stage of education (Li et al., 2021). Compulsory education is the foundation of subsequent high school education and university education, which plays a fundamental role in individual survival and development. The quality of a person's compulsory education significantly impacts their subsequent education and their ability to compete in society (Blossfeld & Von Maurice, 2019).

To better prepare primary school students for the rapidly changing world, teachers must adapt their teaching models. They should not only transmit knowledge in the classroom, but also be leaders in and out of the classroom. Effective leadership is critical to organizational development because it enables organizations to adapt to internal and external changes in a timely manner and respond effectively to achieve their goals. Without good leadership, organizations may struggle to succeed. It is important to note that this statement is objective and does not contain any subjective evaluations (Ngadiman & Ratmawati, 2013).

Teacher leadership has emerged as a new aspect of teachers' professionalism, in line with the ongoing basic education reform. As education reform progresses, it is increasingly evident that teachers are assuming a crucial role in driving the reform, not merely as followers, but as leaders (Pont, 2020). Education reforms cannot bring about school improvement and changes in teaching practice without genuine teacher participation, leadership, cooperation, and action (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Angelle, 2017). Teacher leadership is not about controlling teachers over actual administrative power, but rather the combination of their professional power and non-powerful elements that form their influence in the school community's activities (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2011; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Angelle, 2017). Recognising and developing teacher leadership is essential for deepening China's basic education curriculum reform and satisfying the public's demand for quality education.

With the deepening of China's basic education curriculum reform, how to optimise the quality of education through the improvement of teacher leadership has become a key issue that needs to be addressed urgently. Teachers are not only the implementers of educational reform, but also an important leadership force to promote change and innovation in schools. However, most of the current research on teacher leadership mainly originates from Western contexts, and there is a relative dearth of research on the understanding, practice, and challenges of teacher leadership in China's local educational context. The motivation of this study is to fill this academic gap, to explore the applicability of Western teacher leadership theories in Chinese primary education, and to provide theoretical support for addressing the complex challenges of real-life educational reform. This study aims to reveal how primary school teachers promote collaboration and change through professional influence in schools, as well as to analyse the constraints affecting teacher leadership development. This not only provides a new perspective for deepening curriculum reform, but is also important for meeting the growing demand for quality education in society.

The contributions of this study are: to provide empirical support for the localized theoretical construction of teacher leadership and enrich the relevant theoretical system; to provide targeted strategies for the reform of primary education in China to promote the professional development of teachers and the overall progress of schools; and to enhance the practical efficacy of the reform for policy makers, educational researchers and practitioners. By focusing on the leadership role of teachers in education reform, this paper hopes to contribute to the further promotion of education innovation and quality enhancement, which is of great academic value and practical significance.

Literature Review

The concept of teacher leadership has evolved over time, but a unified definition remains elusive (Muijs & Harris, 2003). York-Barr and Duke (2004) noted that while scholars recognize the importance and various forms of teacher leadership, they struggle to define it clearly. This difficulty may stem from the broad scope of the term itself. However, Wenner and Campbell (2017) cautioned that the lack of a clear definition could create a disconnect between research and practice. York-Barr and Duke (2004) described teacher leadership as a process through which teachers influence colleagues, principals, and the school community to improve teaching practices and student outcomes. Wenner and Campbell (2017) defined teacher leadership as the assumption of leadership responsibilities beyond the classroom.

However, many scholars prefer a broader perspective. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) characterized it as teachers leading both inside and outside the classroom, contributing to the teaching community, and inspiring others to enhance their practices. Harris and Jones (2017) framed it as a teacher's influence that initiates school reform, extending beyond the classroom. Angelle and DeHart (2016) emphasizes that teacher leadership includes both formal and informal roles, reflecting teachers' involvement in educational leadership. It is characterized by interaction and shared responsibility, emerging as a dynamic process grounded in collaboration and trust. Despite varying definitions, a common theme is the movement beyond traditional classroom boundaries and the positive contributions teachers make to their professional communities (Baker-Doyle, 2021).

The concept of teacher leadership has attracted significant attention in Western countries, leading to reforms in teacher education, educational leadership, and teacher professional development. These reforms have encouraged teachers to take a more active role in education leadership and development (Leithwood et al., 2010; Snoek et al. 2017; Cooper, 2023). There is an increasing recognition that teacher leadership can be a potent strategy for schools to cultivate effective, collaborative teaching practices that enhance student achievement and foster school development (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). However, what knowledge and skills do teachers need to learn and develop in order to effectively assume the role of teacher leader? What support should schools and outside organizations provide to enable teachers to take on leadership roles? Reflecting on these issues highlights the significance of providing teacher leadership education.

In the mid-1990s, some scholars began to advocate for the promotion of teacher leadership education. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada have launched the "Developing Teacher Leaders" initiative. Teacher leadership education, as an exploratory system and practice, has entered people's research vision. It has become an important field of teacher leadership research. Prior to formal teacher leadership education, teacher leadership ability was primarily acquired through practical experience. Darling-Hammond (2019) identified three key aspects of acquiring teacher leadership: learning through the process of teaching, learning through participation in organizational restructuring, and learning through collaboration with others. It is obvious that the way in which teachers spontaneously learn by doing is not the training of teacher leaders in the true sense of teacher leadership. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) criticised the lack of attention paid to teacher leadership education in educational research. They argue that teachers are often asked to assume leadership roles without being given any education on how to work with their colleagues. Some scholars have called for teacher leadership education in the true sense. As Gordon et al. (2021) pointed out, a large number of literature studies have demonstrated that we need to provide formal preparation and support for teacher leaders.

Teacher training and professional development have been identified as crucial factors in education reform (Richter et al., 2022). The leadership role of teachers has also been acknowledged by the American government, making it one of the national education goals (Garland & Tadeja, 2013). For the first time since 1993, the U.S. Department of Education has held a National Teacher Forum, in which states select outstanding teachers of the year and teachers from the Goal 2000 Planning Group to participate in the forum to discuss relevant education issues. In 1993, the U.S. Department of Education sponsored the Goal 2000:

Educate America Act, which became law in 1994 to promote national education reform. The Act emphasizes providing teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities to enhance their knowledge, skills, and leadership capacities, enabling them to effectively guide students and play a leading role in educational improvement (Schwartz, 2000).

To enhance the discussion, the U.S. Department of Education opened the Teacher Leadership Forum website to allow more teachers to express their opinions on teacher leadership. The No Child Left Behind Act was introduced in the United States in 2001 and enacted into law in 2002. It aimed to promote nationwide education reform by enhancing accountability, improving student performance through standardized testing, and building a team of highly qualified teachers. The act also emphasized teacher leadership by encouraging professional development, empowering teachers to take active roles in instructional improvement, and driving school-wide reforms. In 2009, the United States passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which included significant investments in education reform. Through programs like Race to the Top, the act emphasized improving teacher quality and professional development. It also encouraged teachers to demonstrate leadership qualities by contributing to school improvement efforts and enhancing educational outcomes (Superfine, 2011).

According Phillips (2018), the state of Iowa adopted the Iowa Teacher leadership and Compensation System in 2013, requiring all districts to develop a local teacher leadership program within which educators can engage in a variety of key roles necessary for continuing professional learning. For example, model teachers, mentors, teaching tutors, etc. play a positive role in increasing teacher retention, promoting cooperation among teachers, teacher professional development, and student achievement. In recent years, North Carolina launched the Opportunity Culture Initiative, a statewide program designed to enhance educational outcomes by expanding teacher leadership roles. Through strategies such as the Multi-Classroom Leader (MCL) model, the initiative emphasizes improving teacher quality and providing professional development. It also encourages teachers to demonstrate leadership qualities by mentoring peers, supporting instructional improvement, and contributing to school-wide reforms, thereby addressing educational inequities and promoting student success (Pittman & Lewis, 2023). It can be seen that the theme of teacher leadership has been running through the education reform policies in the United States.

The UK has increasingly recognized the importance of teacher leadership in promoting school development and improvement. In 2001, the UK government launched the Continuing Professional Development initiative to provide more support and funding for teachers' professional development (Collin et al., 2012). The National College for School Leadership (NCSL), established in 2000 in the UK, aimed to enhance educational leadership through training and development programs. It promoted teacher leadership by supporting professional growth, collaboration, and mentoring, empowering teachers to drive school improvement and reform (Newton, 2003). In 2002, the initiative funded the establishment of the National College for Teaching Leadership, which is dedicated to improving the professional competence of teachers and supporting the development of more teacher leaders. In 2009, the UK Department for Education launched the National Professional Qualification for Leadership programme to provide systematic leadership training, it was

reformed and updated in 2012 and 2017 to ensure that course content and methods are in line with the latest educational research and practice (Lambert, 2018).

The Development and Practice of Teacher Leadership

There are many issues and challenges associated with teacher leadership, such as lack of research on primary school teacher leadership practices. The concept of teacher leadership is gaining traction in countries around the world in the context of decentralization and teacher empowerment, including China. In 2005, Li and Xu, scholars from Hong Kong, China, introduced the concept of teacher leadership from the United States in their book *Teacher Leadership and Teacher Professional Development*. Since then, the research on teacher leadership has become a popular trend in China, but it mainly focuses on the concept research and comparative research of teacher leadership (Wang & Zhu, 2020).

Primary education is the core stage of basic education, which has an important impact on students' cognitive ability, personality development and the formation of social skills (Chen & Li, 2024). Teacher leadership is particularly evident at the primary school level, and its role is not limited to the improvement of teaching in the classroom, but also to promote the change of school culture, enhance teacher collaboration and promote the sharing of educational resources (Conan Simpson, 2021). These informal leadership behaviors play a key role in the overall efficiency of school operation and the improvement of education quality.

In contrast, Western education research focuses more on the whole K-12 stage, and less on the uniqueness of primary education (Brundrett, 2013). Primary schools in China play a particularly prominent role in the basic education system (Lo, 2017). Research on teacher leadership at this stage not only helps to understand the uniqueness of primary education, but also provides academic support for school reform and education policy optimization (Abdallah, 2023).

Teacher Leadership is a dynamic and complex concept that encompasses multiple roles and forms of practice. It is not limited to formal authority or hierarchical positions in schools, but also includes influencing school culture, student achievement, and teacher collaboration through informal practices (Harris & Jones, 2019). Moreover, this type of leadership can be characterized by mentoring colleagues, leading professional development, and fostering innovative and collaborative practices. It is generally regarded as a distributed or informal form of leadership (Daniëls et al., 2019).

In the relationship with the principal, teacher leadership plays a collaborative and complementary role, with trust and support at its core (Berg, 2018). Teacher leaders foster collaboration and serve as a bridge between principals and teachers by sharing goals with them, such as improving student achievement or driving school improvement. Effective principals support teacher leadership by creating a school culture that values collaboration and shared leadership, empowering teachers to take on more leadership roles (Liu et al., 2021). However, this relationship may vary in different school environments. In some cases, the principal acts as a facilitator for teacher leadership development, while in others, the principal may retain more control. Research shows that teacher leadership is most effective when principals and teachers share a common vision for school development and work together (Berg, 2018).

After more than 40 years of development, teacher leadership research in Western countries has changed from theoretical advocacy to practical exploration, and the focus of research has changed from "teachers become leaders" to "how to help teachers become leaders" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Western countries have formed relatively diversified systems and effective training methods in the education and training of teacher leaders, however, in China, there is a lack of strategies in teacher leadership and the research on teacher leadership strategies started late and developed slowly. The research contents tend to introduce the mature systems of European and American countries, and lack the right to speak and practicability of their own research. Compared with the previous theoretical construction, empirical research has become the theme of teacher leadership research in Western scholars. However, in China, empirical research and strategic research are still in the initial stage. Therefore, it is difficult to exert the substantive influence value of leadership in practice and limited effective practices so far.

There are significant differences between Western countries and China in terms of teacher leadership policies (Liu, 2024). Western countries typically emphasize the autonomy and multi-role of teachers, and promote the development of teacher leadership through the combination of specific policies and practices. For example, the United States has formed a systematic and practice-oriented teacher leadership training model through degree courses in colleges and universities, training programs in educational institutions, platforms provided by social organizations, and special teacher leadership programs in various states (Visone, 2024). In 2019, the United States published a research report on Teacher Leadership development -- Teacher Leadership Toolkit 2.0: Strategies for Establishing, Supporting, and Sustaining Teacher Leadership Opportunities. The report primarily elaborates on practical experiences in developing teacher leadership across different states in the United States (American Institutes for Research, 2019). This approach emphasizes the combination of theory and practice, and ensures that teacher leadership can be integrated into daily management and decision-making during policy implementation.

In contrast, although China emphasizes the importance of teacher leadership at the policy level, it continues to face a significant disconnect between policy and implementation in practice. Although the national policy advocates the promotion of teachers' professional ability and participation in school management, the actual school management mode is still dominated by top-down decision-making (Pant, 2020; Baris & Hasan, 2019). This model limits the leadership role of teachers in the daily management of schools, making them more executives than leaders. In addition, the lack of clear teacher leadership implementation strategies in China's primary education system makes it difficult to truly achieve policy objectives in practice.

Teacher Leadership in China

the research on teacher leadership has become a popular trend in China, but it mainly focuses on the concept research and comparative research of teacher leadership (Wang & Zhu, 2020). China has also noticed the importance of teacher leadership at the national level. In 2013, China's Ministry of Education issued the Professional Standards for Principals of Compulsory Education Schools, which requires principals to optimize internal management, implement scientific and democratic management, attach importance to teachers' opinions

during the process of school decision-making, and recognize that teachers are the most valuable human resources for school reform and development. At the same time, this standard requires respect, trust, unity and appreciation of every teacher, stimulate the internal motivation of teachers' development, respect and support the democratic right of the staff congress to participate in the management of the school, report to the staff congress regularly, and implement the system of school affairs meeting. In 2019, the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued China's Education Modernization 2035, emphasizing the promotion of independent professional development of teachers and striving to improve their political, social and professional status. This shows that the improvement of school management level is not only the matter of individual leaders, but more importantly, the formation of a positive management culture and a leadership model with extensive participation, which means that schools should pay more attention to the positive role of teachers in school management and enhance the status of teachers (Zhou et al., 2022).

In addition, under the new reform situation, the demand for teachers has also increased. China's compulsory education is undergoing an enhancement process from "basic equilibrium" to "quality equilibrium", which is inseparable from improving the teaching quality of teachers. The 14th Five-Year Plan of China highlights the need to enhance teachers' ability to educate and teach, and to cultivate a group of high-quality, professional, and innovative primary and secondary school teachers. Under the background of "Double Reduction" (reducing the burden of homework and out-of-school training for students in compulsory education), the quality of classroom teaching in primary education is increasingly demanding. This tests the comprehensive quality of teachers (Zhou et al., 2022). Due to the rapid development of the era, primary school students are becoming more and more self-confident, and traditional teaching methods cannot satisfy students' desire for a democratic, free, positive and active classroom atmosphere. Therefore, teachers should continuously enhance their leadership skills to gain the trust and respect of students.

International experience shows that the development of teacher leadership is fundamental to the success of collaborative educational reform (Ye & Zhu, 2018). However, compared with Western countries, China seems to face more issues in terms of challenges. Traditional Chinese school management has long been based on a sectional system, with the principal as the main leader of the school. Although there is a cadre of key teachers in the teaching staff, such as subject leaders, teaching and research group leaders, their influence on other teachers is largely formed naturally, carried out separately and in an informal state. Their role as teacher leaders has not been recognized and their leadership influence is not sufficiently manifested (Fan & Xiong, 2021).

In contrast, Western education research focuses more on the whole K-12 stage, and less on the uniqueness of primary education (Brundrett, 2013). Primary schools in China play a particularly prominent role in the basic education system (Lo, 2017). Research on teacher leadership at this stage not only helps to understand the uniqueness of primary education, but also provides academic support for school reform and education policy optimization (Abdallah, 2023).

The gap between policy and practice has become a significant barrier to the development of teacher leadership in primary schools (McLure & Aldridge, 2022). Research

shows that the effectiveness of policies not only depends on the establishment of macro goals, but also needs specific support at the micro level (Nowosad, 2021). In China's primary education system, the leadership role of teachers is often overlooked in practice due to the executive-led hierarchical management, which further weakens the effectiveness of policy transformation into practice (Liu & Hallinger, 2018). Addressing this issue requires narrowing the gap between policy and practice through the optimization of policy implementation pathways and supervision mechanisms.

In addition, the practical development of teacher leadership requires contextual strategic support. Cultural background is a key factor affecting teacher leadership development (Szeto, 2022). Influenced by Confucian culture, Chinese primary school teachers are usually positioned as knowledge transmitters rather than participants in school management (Szeto & Cheng, 2017). Such role positioning limits teachers' leadership and makes it difficult for many Western-based theoretical frameworks to be directly applied to the Chinese context. Therefore, the development of strategies and training systems that meet local needs is crucial to the development of teacher leadership (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

The lack of practical support further limits the development of teacher leadership. The effective implementation of teacher leadership requires not only policy-level guidance, but also professional development opportunities, empowerment mechanisms, and a collaborative culture (Angelle, 2010). However, the current teacher training in China's primary schools mainly focuses on the improvement of teaching skills, ignoring the systematic training of leadership, and the lack of formal avenues for teachers to participate in school management (Wang & Ho, 2020). This limitation not only hinders the diversification of teachers' professional development, but also restricts the innovation ability of schools and the overall teaching quality.

The Future Directions

In the future, the development of teacher leadership should be carried out from the following key directions. First, policy support and top-level design are crucial. A more systematic policy framework is needed to integrate teacher leadership into national education planning and improve incentive mechanisms to ensure that teachers can actively assume leadership roles outside of classroom teaching (Harris, 2003). Under the background of "double reduction policy" and curriculum reform, the core responsibilities and evaluation criteria of teacher leadership are clarified, and the participation of teachers in school decision-making and educational reform is promoted.

Secondly, the optimization of training system is the key path to improve teachers' leadership. The development of teacher leadership requires practice-oriented training content, focusing on the cultivation of practical problem solving and teamwork ability (Pont, 2020). Through hierarchical and classified training mode, combined with online and offline mixed forms, teachers are supported to improve their ability in teaching innovation, resource integration and school management. Especially in grass-roots schools, we should increase the resource tilt and promote the regional balanced development of teachers' leadership.

Thirdly, culture shaping and school support can provide good soil for teacher leadership. At the school level, it is necessary to create an atmosphere that encourages teachers to

participate in decision-making, establish a collaborative mechanism, and strengthen teachers' leadership role in teaching and research activities, curriculum development and interdisciplinary cooperation (Huber, 2009). The leadership team should also play the role of supporters to help teachers accumulate leadership experience in practice and gradually realize the role transformation from inside the classroom to outside the classroom.

Finally, the introduction of an international perspective will provide valuable experience for the development of teacher leadership. Through international educational cooperation projects or experience sharing, we will learn from the successful practices of developed countries in teacher leadership development, and explore localized models combined with China's actual situation. Further strengthening of international academic exchanges will also help enhance the competitiveness and influence of Chinese teachers in the global education system.

In short, the development of teacher leadership in the future requires the coordination of policies, training, culture and international cooperation, and provides a solid guarantee for the realization of education modernization through systematic support and practical innovation

Conclusion

Based on the current background of China's education reform, teacher leadership, as an important driving force of education reform, plays an indispensable role in realizing educational equity, improving educational quality and promoting the all-round development of students. This paper analyzes the core connotation and practice path of teacher leadership, and points out its key position in classroom teaching innovation, curriculum reform and school management optimization. However, the development of teacher leadership still faces many challenges, including insufficient institutional support, fuzzy teacher role positioning and limited training resources. At the same time, the research emphasizes that the effective improvement of teacher leadership needs systematic support from three levels: education policy, training system and school culture, so as to better serve the goals of education reform and the development needs of students.

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