



The Relationship between Teacher Leadership and School Effectiveness

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Abstract

Teacher leadership has emerged as an important component of contemporary school improvement efforts, particularly in contexts that emphasize collaboration, shared responsibility, and instructional quality. The relationship between teacher leadership and school effectiveness is explored by examining how leadership practices enacted by teachers contribute to key dimensions of effective schooling. School effectiveness is viewed as a multidimensional construct that includes student academic outcomes, school climate, quality of teaching practices, and educational equity. Drawing on theoretical perspectives such as distributed leadership, social capital, and transformative leadership, the discussion highlights the ways in which teacher leadership complements formal administrative leadership and supports sustainable improvement processes. Empirical evidence indicates that schools encouraging teacher leadership demonstrate stronger professional collaboration, higher levels of trust among staff, improved instructional practices, and enhanced student engagement and achievement. The influence of teacher leadership, however, is not uniform and is shaped by contextual conditions such as school demographics, policy environments, organizational structures, and resource availability. Recognizing these contextual factors is essential for understanding how teacher leadership can be effectively developed and utilized. Overall, strengthening teacher leadership is presented as a meaningful strategy for promoting school effectiveness and fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Keywords: Teacher leadership; School effectiveness; Distributed leadership; School climate; Professional collaboration; Educational equity; School improvement.

1. Introduction

This study investigates the relationship between teacher leadership and school effectiveness. Teacher leadership is defined and specified, and the connection between teacher leadership and school effectiveness is articulated and examined. School effectiveness is characterized by academic outcomes, school climate, quality of teaching practice, and educational equity. Leadership is discussed mainly in terms of its influence on instruction, professional practice, and related factors. Core theoretical frameworks are summarized, including distributed leadership, social capital, and transformative leadership. The methodological foundation of the study is reviewed (Vikas, 2019).

Research findings addressing the connections between teacher leadership and student attainment, broader educational outcomes, school climate, school culture, and professional development within schools are compiled and analyzed. The relationships are examined through the lenses of formal school organization and governmental regulation, professional development and collaboration, trust among school staff, and school climate. The practice of teacher leadership and its

recognition as a channel of school reform are growing, although endorsing such a stance creates tension with capacity and collective flows of educational capital (Sharma, 2022).

2. Conceptual Framework

Schools are complex organizations and their effectiveness depends on a multitude of interrelated factors. A significant body of literature summarises these factors and classifies them into different dimensions and indicators of school effectiveness. In the existing literature, student academic achievement, school climate, quality of educational practices, and equity are commonly identified as the four main dimensions that comprise school effectiveness (Ellen Smith, 2007). Academic achievement—and learning outcomes more broadly—at both the individual and collective levels is often regarded as the most direct and important indicator of school effectiveness (Sue Hartwell Barfield, 2011). School climate emphasises the affective and relational dimensions of school life and captures aspects such as educators' commitment, morale, interpersonal trust, participation in decision-making, and collaborative involvement in professional practices. Quality of educational practices refers primarily to the appropriateness of teaching and learning approaches adopted to elaborate the curriculum and promote student engagement. Equity regarding access to and quality of educational opportunities has gained increasing attention in recent years. It stresses the importance of creating conditions such as teaching practices, resources, and support services to address educational inequity among different groups of students. Investigating the relationship between teacher leadership and these specific dimensions of school effectiveness can inform and further enhance the existing knowledge on the topic in a systematic way (Yadav, 2024).

Scholarly literature offers a number of theoretical models and paradigms that help to connect teacher leadership and school effectiveness. The notion of distributed leadership emerged in the mid-1980s as an alternative to the traditional view of leadership as a top-down and agenda-driven process and as a right or privilege held by an individual leader. In a distributed view, leadership is understood as a collective rather than a positional activity that can be exercised by anyone across the organizational structure. It underlines the importance of the interactions between the person in a formal leadership role and the individuals who undertake leadership roles without formal authority. By focusing on the nature of practice instead of the position or status of the practitioner, distributed leadership recognises that different actors can engage in leadership activities even simultaneously, and that an individual may play different leadership roles at different times or contexts. School principals who adopt a distributed leadership practice approach rapidly became aware of the opportunities to draw on teacher leadership. Teacher leadership, when viewed from a distributed perspective, enables school leaders to realise the idea of effective teaching, which underpins the overall mission of school improvement, thus allowing the two forms of instructional leadership to complement and support each other.

2.1. Definitions of Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership encourages teachers to take on various school improvement roles and responsibilities that help shape the direction of schools and the quality of instruction. The rationale for teacher leadership stems from empirical evidence that the quality of instruction is a key factor influencing school effectiveness, and that improved instructional practices hinge on collective engagement of the teaching staff. Particular importance has been assigned to the role of teachers in the improvement of teaching practice and learning through inputs in the professional development of colleagues, participation in collaborative and cooperative working teams, planning and modeling instruction, and directly assisting peers in their instruction (Sue Hartwell Barfield, 2011).

2.2. Dimensions of School Effectiveness

Key definitions clarify the scope and situate teacher leadership within overarching school improvement paradigms and dimensions of effectiveness. Teacher leadership can be understood as: (1) a role held by some but not all teachers characterized by leadership practices such as mentoring and collaboration; (2) a collective process involving formal and informal teacher leaders; (3) a process of empowerment rooted in teachers' ownership and responsibility for decisions.

Four dimensions of school effectiveness provide a clear and practical lens for conceptualizing the relationship between teacher leadership and student success. Academic outcomes include objectives such as achievement, engagement, participation, growth, and preparedness for subsequent learning. School climate encompasses perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to students, educators, and the overall environment. Instructional and assessment practices refer to the quality, coherence, and relevance of pedagogical choices and evaluative feedback (Mythili, 2017).

Theoretical models describing the links between leadership and effectiveness further elucidate pathways through which teacher leadership influences school performance. Distributed leadership recognizes leadership dispersed among multiple actors and the resulting interactions that collectively shape outcomes. A social-capital framework posits that leadership encourages collaboration and other connections among educators, resulting in shared knowledge, norms, and continuous learning. Transformative-leadership theory embraces pedagogy, empowerment, and social justice as fundamental goals and supports the continuous development of leadership, teaching, and learning. Evidence is needed to clarify how teacher leadership influences broader patterns of school effectiveness and to strengthen the case for prioritizing attention to this construct in educational settings (Suman, 2025).

2.3. Theoretical Models Linking Leadership to Effectiveness

Establishing effective leadership is a priority for almost every educational reform and improvement agenda at the national and regional levels. For example, the Education Policy Reform Guidelines by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasize that creating high-performing school systems fundamentally depends on effective school leadership. Similarly, the 2005 Ontario Leadership Framework indicates that enhancing leadership remains an important leverage for improving student learning. At the same time, recent research has also acknowledged the critical influence of teacher leadership on school effectiveness, the social conditions of learning, and pupils' learning outcomes. Such renewed attention to teacher leadership may partly be due to the prominence of accountability and managerialism in school reform, which has, in turn, shifted focus from leadership from above to leadership at all levels, including from teachers.

Understanding how teacher leadership connects with school effectiveness requires a conceptual framework. The section first defines teacher leadership, delineates it from several related constructs, and highlights the distinctive roles teacher leaders fulfil in schools. The section then identifies the dimensions of school effectiveness and operationalizes these dimensions in a manner suitable for reviewing the empirical literature. Finally, the section presents the core theoretical models that explicate how distributed leadership can promote school effectiveness while integrating findings on social capital and transformative leadership (Rezaei Abgoli & Sabeti, 2013). These models are used in the subsequent sections to justify the focus on teacher leadership within school improvement and to link it to school effectiveness.

3. Empirical Evidence on Teacher Leadership and School Effectiveness

Teacher leadership has been posited as a potentially important avenue for enhancing school effectiveness, and a sizeable body of research has begun to examine this relationship. Frameworks of school effectiveness highlight the importance of leadership and direct heavy emphasis on the contributions of teachers functioning in leadership roles; consequently, exploring the association between teacher leadership and indicators of school effectiveness is of both conceptual and practical significance for ongoing efforts to promote teacher leadership as a policy and practice (M Williams, 2015).

Empirical research has documented a range of positive contributions made by individuals acting in informal and formal teacher leadership roles. Teacher leadership appears to be positively associated with student achievement, and the available evidence suggests that the effects on student outcomes are greater among low-performing students. Teacher leadership initiatives also have been linked to changes in school climate, including improvements in trust, collaboration, and professional norms, and these aspects of school culture are themselves associated with school effectiveness. The

positive influence of teacher leadership on collaborative learning opportunities, professional development, and knowledge construction has further been highlighted.

3.1. Impact on Student Outcomes

Teacher leadership positively influences student achievement, engagement, and motivation. Schools that promote teacher leadership see improved student outcomes. Moreover, teacher leadership often counteracts achievement disparities linked to socio-economic status (M Williams, 2015).

Empirical investigations demonstrate that teacher leadership contributes to increased student academic achievement. Teacher leadership also enhances students' academic engagement and aims within high school education, fostering greater motivation and lower dropout rates. Teacher leaders influence outcomes concentration on instructional practices by serving as staff developers and building professional learning communities.

3.2. Effects on School Climate and Culture

Teacher leadership can affect both school climate and culture. Climate refers to a school's social and emotional atmosphere and reflects staff and student perceptions of respect, support, and trust among members of the school community. Culture denotes the behaviours, values, and assumptions that inform how a staff operates; for instance, whether it values collaboration, risk taking, and ongoing learning. Studies link teacher leadership to both climate (Lacks & B. Watson, 2018) and culture (Msila, 2014), but few analyze the relationship's operation, direction, or contribution to school effectiveness.

Effective teacher-leadership practices such as encouraging peer observations, offering constructive feedback, and sharing resources and instructional strategies wider context—translate into meaningful changes to school climate and culture in ways that contribute to improved student outcomes. Teacher-leadership roles that emphasize collective responsibility for student learning, in particular, are associated with meaningful increases in staff trust, collaboration, and mission focus. When schools cultivate a culture of collaborative interdependence, a key characteristic of high-functioning professional learning communities, they increase teacher commitment to student learning, heighten the likelihood of collective-engagement practices, and shift the focus from the individual's own students to the success of all.

3.3. Influence on Professional Learning and Collaboration

Professional learning communities, collaborative practice, and teacher-led professional development are positively affected by teacher leadership (Burton, 2015). Teacher leaders are critical in establishing sustained professional learning communities and cultivating an environment that encourages teachers to work together for students' benefit, which enhances collaborative practice. Furthermore, teacher leaders promote the sharing of knowledge, pedagogical strategies, and experiences among educators, influencing professional growth and fostering inquiry into teaching and learning (H. Roukema, 2008).

Distributed leadership embodies the collective exercise of influence across roles within educational organizations. When principals encourage the participation of a greater number of individuals in leadership processes and the distribution of authority throughout the school, teachers and other staff members are empowered to shape their professional development.

4. Contextual Moderators and Boundary Conditions

The relationships between teacher leadership and school effectiveness appear to depend on contextual factors that moderate their effects, determine their boundary conditions, and shape the nature of the leadership involved. At the school level, the overall capacity to develop and enact teacher leadership hinges upon the context within which schools operate. These circumstances evolve along spatial, organizational, and temporal continua, reflecting differences in (a) the stage of leadership

development, (b) the level of official endorsement and acceptance, (c) the extent to which teachers acquire or share relevant competencies, (d) the specific circumstances surrounding the leadership itself, and (e) the existing history of, degree of autonomy in, and degree of connectivity with wider policy initiatives. Such aspects include variations in demographic composition (urban/rural, socio-economic status, student mix, etc.), the significance and quality of resource investment, and the nature of administrative arrangements that enable or constrain leadership practice. Distinct patterns of leadership and development unfold in primary versus secondary education. Reforms introduced at a given point are selectively enacted across different domains, and some reforms are not pursued at all if they do not resonate with local aspirations. School-level interdependencies among initiatives influence the relationship between leadership and school effectiveness by creating opportunities for collective ownership and surplus capacity, enabling and enhancing the quality of leadership practice, and allowing for targeted leadership that is responsive and tightly integrated with development needs. Central-level structures, connections, and relations among schools also enable or constrain the forms of leadership that dominate. Emerging practices and networks at these broader levels provide opportunities to access external expertise and respond to demands originating outside the immediate school community. When additional needs remain unaddressed, leadership tends to concentrate on lower-order aspects such as community engagement (Sharma, 2024).

Leadership practice varies according to the prevailing policies, the internal organization of different school systems, and the emphases of system-level actors (Lorene Voshell, 2013). Diverse authorizing environments impose differential expectations and simplify existing arrangements, while varied legislative solutions permit multiple routes of compliance in response to similar pressures. The degree of specification concerning either expected outputs or permissible input routes also shapes the organization of practice, determining whether a drive for improvement unfolds primarily through outcome-oriented target setting or input-driven methodology formulation. Resources, particularly time, exert a significant influence on leadership. Within schools, time limitations govern the extent to which in-practice agendas can be expanded; without sufficient opportunity to engage in selected leadership roles that meet genuine needs, teacher leaders struggle to augment their authority. At the inter-school level, time is a crucial boundary condition for the establishment of a leadership agenda supportive of surrounding priorities. Externally imposed time constraints that compress the opportunity for necessary developmental activities serve to lift leadership priorities; when such conditions diminish, patterns of leadership can revert or shift in accordance with alternative pressures. Consequently, effective leadership supplements rather than supplants these multiple external demands. Circular arrangements, in which leadership across specified fields is simultaneously introduced at the school level and the broader system, may still endure; under these circumstances, leadership is both retained and transformed, facilitating the response to capacity deficits at the level of formal authority and enabling the accomplishment of transitional priorities.

Variable resource availability influences the nature of agency exercised and the content of professional development within a school system. When substantial support is provided, investment usually extends to the enhancement of leadership capacity within schools, building and developing explicit pathways and concurrently pursuing leadership development across a range of themes (Yong Tan et al., 2020).

4.1. School Level and Demographics

With regard to school demographics, teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership attributes were investigated in elementary schools located in low-poverty, average-poverty, and high-poverty areas in the United States of America to identify possible links with school effectiveness. The findings suggested that leadership attributes such as organization of school activities, planning professional development, and creating a positive learning environment were influential in schools where at least 70% of learners were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

The teachers' perceptions of relationships between their principals' leadership attributes and school effectiveness in schools with various demographic profiles were analysed through factor analysis. The leadership attributes identified in the mean analyses were common across all three school demographics at the United States level, but the relationships between leadership attributes

and effectiveness considerably varied among these different levels of the United States. These results suggested that certain leadership attributes might be more effective in certain school demographic situations than in others. (Ontai-Machado Ontai-Machado, 2016)

4.2. Policy and Organizational Structures

Lack of clarity and different points of view influence how teacher leadership is perceived and defined (M Williams, 2015). Commonly, it is defined as any occurrence where an educator influences education stakeholders to achieve a better performance. Works with teacher leaders underlined their capacity to influence policies, contribute to improvements, and create trustful environments. For some, teacher leadership involves fostering leadership skills within different members of the teaching staff. Teacher leaders contribute significantly to school effectiveness, shaping individual and collective capacities through professional development and learning systems. Different activities support engagement in teacher leadership. These activities enlighten the significance of time allocation to nurture teacher-leadership practices.

Establishing a shared understanding of what it means to be a teacher leader, how teacher-leadership practices may contribute to school development, and which barriers withhold or reduce that participation is strategic for enhancing programs. Designing a policy framework through which the school board and school administrators, including principals, can influence and support the implementation of teacher-leadership practices is equally relevant. By critically examining existing teacher-leadership practices, the schools formulated a more nuanced understanding, which resulted in assessing the situation and initiating discussions focused on the barriers and enablers for those practices. The discussions provided insights to the schools of different ways in reaching the target and potentially contributed to indicating the direction of future research.

The manner an organization operates is frequently determined by external environmental frameworks. Over the next few years, efforts toward educational openings will increase along with mechanisms for transforming the associated policies and structures into local realities within many jurisdictions. An educational-open framework seeks to foster capacity building at different levels and the adoption of an equity-based approach that is broad in scope. Work-based programs have been progressive within the teacher-education sector. Teacher-leadership structures prove complex to implement satisfactorily and have remained on the table since, yet seldom through official requirements, which, in the international context, ameliorate operational capabilities to open further new spaces of collective governance.

4.3. Resource Availability and Support Systems

Access to resources and support mechanisms for teachers is essential for effective teacher leadership. Teacher leaders require time, professional learning opportunities, formal authority, compensation, collaborative structures, and trust to fulfil their roles. Principals influence the provision of these supports through practices that establish shared vision and goals, foster professional learning and collaboration, and empower other leaders (M Williams, 2015).

Constraints on resources, time, and administrative support limit teacher leadership in various contexts. Schools must allocate adequate resources to support leadership practices if they expect to enhance capacity. Available resources shape the type and focus of leadership (Yong Tan et al., 2020).

5. Discussion

Research on the relationship between teacher leadership and school effectiveness has increased, yet gaps in understanding remain. Synthesizing the empirical evidence reveals that formal recommendations for the development of teacher leadership often neglect consideration of school-level constructs (Wills, 2015). Under the broad umbrellas of school improvement or reform, teacher leadership is viewed as instrumental for enhancing either school effectiveness or student achievement. However, definitions differ across the education community regarding what constitutes improvement or effectiveness: academic success, community involvement, overall quality of teaching practices,

failure rates, equity of opportunities and outcomes, value-added growth, student engagement and motivation, and coherence of teaching practices. Clarifying the alignment of teacher leadership with these various dimensions would sharpen discussions about its relative importance.

Research into the relationship between teacher leadership and school effectiveness is still emerging compared to studies of the relationship between teacher leadership and other important outcomes such as professional learning or pedagogical practice. Further work is needed to clarify how leadership and effectiveness are understood, to propose a rationale for exploring this specific relationship and to identify dimensions of effectiveness that can be operationalized in practice.

5.1. Gaps in the Literature

Despite rapid advances in research on teacher leadership and increasing advocacy for efforts to develop leaders among the teaching corps, significant gaps remain in the literature. Research to date examines teacher leadership mainly through the lens of its potential effects on student achievement, with little attention given to other possible benefits such as improved school climate, stronger professional collaboration, or enhanced instructional practice. Within the small but growing research base on these wider outcomes, few studies employ theoretical or conceptual frameworks that explicitly link teacher leadership to school effectiveness. It is challenging to build on earlier studies to strengthen insights and address overlooked dimensions, given the specific demographic context addressed in many existing works. Furthermore, the literature on teacher leadership and broader school improvement policies remains only partially connected with extensive scholarship on similar topics—such as professional learning communities and networks—that does not explicitly frame initiatives in terms of leadership or authority (Wills, 2015).

5.2. Implications for Future Research

Teacher leadership and school effectiveness constitute a critical area of inquiry in educational leadership research. Although the institutional sources of school improvement may be well recognised, attention has shifted towards the role of teachers as leaders of change, both individually and collectively (Sue Hartwell Barfield, 2011). Teacher leadership can therefore be considered a significant channel for school improvement and a related area of inquiry in leadership research (Chen, 2009). The first priority is to identify the nature of the relationship between teacher leadership and school effectiveness. Teacher leadership is often posited as an essential ingredient of school improvement, but the precise dimensions of school effectiveness that it influences are rarely specified. Is it, for example, mainly the academic achievement of students, their socio-emotional development, or perhaps school climate? Similarly, the pathway linking teacher leadership to school effectiveness requires clarification. The teacher-as-leader metaphor may be meaningful in some contexts, but there remain fundamental questions regarding the nature and limits of such leadership. Do teachers have power and authority to lead? Are they supported and encouraged to do so? Apart from conventional positional leadership roles, in what other figurative ways can frontline teachers lead? Furthermore, under what circumstances and in response to what antecedent conditions are short-term engagement or shared decision-making, faculty participation in policy-making, and other specified teacher-leadership practices assumed to be necessary?

A second set of questions concerns the establishment of an adequate measurement framework to shape the research agenda. The existing literature on teacher leadership embodies a wide variety of dimensions, ranging from loose engagement in student instruction to concerted efforts to advance teaching practices. Few researchers, however, have attempted to identify the minimal set of distinctive dimensions to communicate the meaning of teacher leadership consistently. Similar diversity also appears regarding school-effectiveness outcomes, yet efforts to clarify the dimensions that matter most for both teacher leadership and school effectiveness remain scarce.

Establishing a rigorous epistemic and methodological rationale, accompanied by specific research designs and analytical approaches, is a third priority. Teacher leadership resides other domains of leadership capacity, which are typically measured across a spectrum of density and proliferation. Recognising this relationship invites systematic measurement of teacher leadership and

consideration of its potential complexity. It is also necessary to distinguish teacher leadership within school from leadership exercised over schools; the latter can scrutinise both school characteristics and the impact of school level and context on teacher leadership itself.

Define the scope, rationale, and research questions connecting teacher leadership to school effectiveness using evidence-based framing. Clarify how the chapter positions teacher leadership within broader school improvement paradigms and indicators of effectiveness. Explain key terms, clarify distinctions from related constructs, and map roles of teacher leaders. Identify and operationalize dimensions of school effectiveness (academic outcomes, climate, practice quality, equity). Present core theoretical models (e.g., distributed leadership, social capital, transformative leadership) linking leadership to outcomes. Outline methodological bases for studying the relationship, including epistemological stance and validity considerations. Compare research designs (correlational, longitudinal, quasi-experimental) and measurement approaches. Describe data sources (surveys, observations, administrative records, interviews) and analytical methods (multilevel modeling, SEM, thematic analysis). Compile and evaluate empirical evidence on relationships among teacher leadership and outcomes. Report effects on student achievement, engagement, and differential outcomes. Describe changes in school climate, culture, trust, collaboration, and norms. Analyze impacts on professional learning communities, collaborative practice, and knowledge construction. Identify moderators and boundary conditions shaping effects across contexts. Examine variation by school level, demography, and context (urban/rural, SES, student mix). Assess influence of policy mandates, governance structures, and collective arrangements. Consider resource constraints, time, and administrative support enabling leadership practice. Translate findings into actionable implications for practice and policy. Propose strategies to develop teacher leadership capacity and pathways for empowerment. Elaborate on distributed leadership concepts, roles, and authority distribution. Recommend PD frameworks and evaluation systems that align with leadership development and improvement goals. Synthesize key insights, identify limitations, and propose directions for future inquiry. Highlight gaps in evidence, methodological limitations, and theoretical ambiguities. Suggest prioritized questions and design considerations for subsequent research.

6. Conclusion

An education system's effectiveness hinges on its community of teachers. Teachers working collaboratively to uplift their own practice can lead to student improvement. Teacher leadership promotes collaboration and empowerment within schools, affecting the students they serve. Evidence points to teacher leadership serving as a positive influence on student outcomes, school climate, and professional learning. The importance of teacher leadership must be weighed along a variety of boundaries. School-level differences and the composition of the student population can influence the degree to which teacher leadership affects the community. Similarly, teacher leadership provides varied support depending on the policy context in which a school operates. Resources available for leadership, such as time and administrative support, also shape the opportunities for effective engagement in teacher leadership.

Schools committed to teacher leadership can engage with the community more effectively. Orientation towards teacher leadership invites a greater diversity of conversation about leadership across the school and promotes a specific distributed leadership approach in which broader teacher input is sought. Schools implementing chronic reforms, in contrast, may find teacher leadership an attractive route to maintain change but have limited engagement to consider the requisite investment. Prioritizing teacher leadership outside acute opportunities can broaden and deepen overall engagement with the idea. First hand insights point to avenues of support that assist schools in navigating the varying options. Establishing clear priorities for the direction of the teaching profession can guide consideration of how teacher leadership contributes. Ensuring these priorities resonate with educational values can open space for organizations holding varied mandates. Encouraging a broader conversation about leadership signals a commitment to diverse engagement and steers consideration of distributed leadership models. Clarifying desired outcomes for teacher leadership allows the definition of a framework for implementation. Prioritizing evidence on a topic supports the language and approach of subsequent questions. Strong evidence exists for the link between teacher leadership and improvement in working practices; questions exploring this connection can be framed accessibly

and inclusively. Links with school-level outcomes, particularly student achievement, rely more on indirect connections; the title alignments of these questions suggest broader accessibility than tighter wording could achieve.

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