

How Teacher Leadership Emerges: A Systematic Review of Empirical Studies

Research Overview

This study examines teacher leadership from a leadership emergence perspective. Rather than treating teacher leadership as a static role or individual attribute, this systematic review synthesizes empirical studies to explain how teacher leadership emerges through behavioral, relational, and contextual processes, and proposes a conceptual framework of teacher leadership emergence.

Purpose of Study

Since the 1980s, extensive research has identified the contributions of teacher leadership to school improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2003; Muijs et al., 2013), student achievement (Sebastian et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2020; Uysal & Sarier, 2019), and teachers' professional development (Gümüş et al., 2022; Li & Liu, 2020).

Despite its growing importance, existing research still provides limited understanding of how teacher leadership emerges as recognized and legitimate influence within school contexts. This limitation is closely related to the conceptual complexity of teacher leadership itself. Due to its contextual (Gronn, 2000) and fluid nature, there is still no consensus on the definition of teacher leadership (Hairon et al., 2015; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Such ambiguity reflects the social and relational nature of leadership (Badura et al., 2022), suggesting that teacher leadership should be examined not merely as an individual trait, formal role, or predefined set of practices, but as a socially constructed process through which influence is enacted, recognized, and legitimized through professional interactions.

In addition, although many studies have identified factors associated with teacher leadership, including school culture, organizational structure, principal leadership, interpersonal relationships, contextual conditions, and individual characteristics (e.g., Chew & Andrews, 2010; Harris & Muijs, 2005), they tended to examine discrete

predictors of teacher leadership. Less attention has been paid to how these antecedents are transformed into recognized leadership through dynamic behavioral and relational processes of enactment, attribution, and legitimation. As a result, the mechanism through which teacher leadership emerges remains insufficiently theorized.

In response to these research gaps, this study conducts a systematic review of empirical studies to explore the mechanisms through which teacher leadership emerges. Drawing on the Integrative Framework of Leadership Emergence Research (Badura et al., 2022), this study aims to synthesize existing empirical evidence and develop a conceptual framework of teacher leadership emergence.

Specifically, this study seeks to achieve the following research purposes:

- (1) to identify the distal and semi-distal antecedents of teacher leadership emergence reported in empirical studies;
- (2) to examine the proximal behavioral and relational processes through which teacher leadership emerges;
- (3) to analyze the contextual and boundary conditions that enable or constrain teacher leadership emergence.

Research Methods

This study adopts a systematic review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and checklist (Page et al., 2021). Considering the comprehensiveness and relevance, this systematic review chose four databases as the information sources, which include Web of Science (WOS), Scopus, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Education Research Complete (ERC). In addition, the reference lists of five prior literature reviews (Nguyen et al., 2020; Schott et al., 2020; Wang & Ho, 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) were examined through a snowballing strategy to identify additional relevant empirical studies. Based on the previous literature about teacher leadership and teacher leaders (Nguyen et al., 2020; Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017), the search strings of this study were as follows:

(“teacher leadership” OR “teacher leader*”).

The literature screening processes, including duplicated records screening, title and abstracts screening, full-texts screening and quality appraisal screening, were carried out independently by two researchers with extensive experience in teacher leadership and teacher education. Disagreements were discussed and resolved through consensus. The included studies were analyzed through thematic coding and comparative analysis based on the framework of research purposes, including distal and semi-distal antecedents, proximal behavioral and relational processes, as well as contextual and boundary conditions.

Results and Discussion

Firstly, research on teacher leadership has incorporated several teacher-level distal and semi-distal antecedents with regularity, such as personality (Liu et al., 2021b; Ying & Ho, 2015), teaching experience (Angelle & DeHart, 2011), self-efficacy (Zhang & Ye, 2024). Notably, these attributes have often been examined as predictors or enabling conditions rather than direct determinants of teacher leadership, suggesting that they provide potential personal resources for later leadership emergence. However, these studies have paid relatively limited attention to how these antecedents are translated into leadership emergence through interaction and relational processes.

Secondly, the teacher-level distal and semi-distal antecedents are activated through proximal behavioral and relational processes. Teachers enact influence through behaviors such as mentoring and supporting colleagues, initiating instructional improvement, facilitating professional learning, promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing, participating in decision-making, and spanning boundaries across professional networks (eg., Cheng & Szeto, 2016; Harris & Muijs, 2004; Zhang et al., 2022). These behaviors create opportunities for interaction and influence within everyday school contexts, allowing teachers to gain recognition and acceptance from

others. These influence attempts become teacher leadership when they are interpreted and attributed as legitimate leadership by colleagues and school leaders. From the perspective of Claiming and Granting theory, teacher leadership emergence occurs when such influence is acknowledged and legitimized, resulting in the emergence of both formal and informal teacher leadership.

Thirdly, contextual and boundary conditions, including social and school contexts, shape the broader opportunity structure for teacher leadership emergence. For example, when schools adopt more egalitarian and collaborative structures, they create conditions that encourage communication, professional interaction, and shared practice, thereby promoting the enactment of teacher leadership behaviors (Harris, 2005; Muijs & Harris, 2006). By contrast, top-down hierarchical structures are often identified as barriers to teacher leadership (Nguyen et al., 2020; Stone et al., 1997). These suggest that teacher leadership emergence depends not only on teachers with relevant traits and leadership behaviors, but also on supportive contexts that create opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and recognition.

Overall, the synthesis suggests that teacher leadership emergence should be understood not as a static role or individual attribute, but as a dynamic and socially constructed process. The proposed framework explains this process as a mechanism in which teacher-level antecedents are activated through leadership enactment, interpreted and legitimized through relational recognition, and transformed into formal or informal teacher leadership, while contextual boundary conditions enable or constrain this transformation. This perspective shifts the focus of teacher leadership research from identifying the static attributes of teacher leaders to explaining how leadership emerges within everyday professional interactions.

Keywords

Teacher Leadership; Leadership Emergence; Systematic Review;