INFLUENCING FACTORS AND IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES FOR JUNIOR MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN REGIONAL SCHOOLS—TAKE CHAOZHOU CITY GUANGDONG CHINA AS AN EXAMPLE

Chunmiao Xie
Panyapiwat Institute of Management, Nonthaburi, Thailand

In the 21st century, educational development and changes have become increasingly globalized, and teachers have been given an increasingly important role in the educational reform and development of countries around the world. The concept of teacher leadership and actions to develop teacher leadership have been recognized by more and more countries. Based on the urgent need for educational modernization, the new situation of integrated development and reform of urban and rural education, and the changes in the social environment brought about by new urbanization, the comprehensive two-child policy, and the reform of high school and college entrance examinations, China has put forward different and higher requirements for the construction of teachers. In 2018, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council jointly issued "Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teacher Team Construction in the New Era" with Zhongfa No. 4. There have been new changes in the development of main policy concepts, emphasizing the transformation of teachers from passive policy implementation roles to the main body responsible for education quality. This article chooses junior high school teacher leadership as the research topic. Through interviews with junior high school teachers in Chaozhou City, Guangdong Province, China, it explores the development issues of school improvement in junior high school teacher leadership since China’s new round of basic education reform started in 2021.

Keywords: junior high school teachers; teacher leadership; region; school development

Introduction

In the 21st century, the concept of teacher leadership and actions to develop teacher leadership has been recognized by more and more countries. This article focuses on junior high school teacher leadership in regional schools in China.
Uses interviews with junior high school teachers in Chaozhou City, Guangdong Province, China, to find the factors that hinder the improvement of junior high school teachers' leadership and propose corresponding countermeasures.

At present, China is vigorously promoting a new round of basic education reform. The "double reduction" policy introduced in July 2021 has unprecedentedly stimulated the reform of the entire basic education field. Schools need to build a leadership model that can effectively integrate various forces.

Based on collective creation through cooperation, jointly innovate the development model of the school and build a good educational ecology. All teachers and principals must assume common leadership, use collective wisdom, actively promote school improvement, and build a learning-oriented culture characterized by collaboration and a common mission. In 2022, eight departments, including the Ministry of Education of China, issued the "Plan for Strengthening Basic Education Teachers in the New Era," oriented to the "2035 Vision Goals," and indicated that strengthening the construction of basic education teachers will be an important factor in promoting high-quality and balanced basic education for a long time to come.

The implementation suggestions put forward by China's "Teacher Education Revitalization Action Plan (2018-2022)" point out that to cultivate a high-quality professional team of primary and secondary school teachers, it is necessary to strengthen teacher training in weak schools in remote areas. Relevant education policies in Guangdong Province, China, such as the "Guangdong Province ‘New Strong Teachers Project’ Implementation Plan" (2021) and the "Guangdong Province Action Plan to Promote the High-Quality Development of Basic Education" (2021), all focus on how to comprehensively improve teacher education and teaching ability. One of the key goals is to focus on less-developed areas of basic education—the cultivation of teachers in eastern Guangdong, western Guangdong, and northern Guangdong.

**Literature review**

**Teacher leadership**

In the 1980s, the United States took the lead in proposing the theory of “teacher leadership." The literature on theoretical research shows that the development of teacher leadership in primary and secondary schools in the United States is the trend of the times. The subject of teacher leadership and the ways of developing leadership have been explored in multiple ways. Highlight the dynamic and organic coexistence of formal and informal leadership, value teachers’ cooperation, and strive to promote the development of teacher leadership in the teacher professional community (Childs-Bowen et al., 2000; Crowther et al., 2002).

Practical (empirical) research literature shows that Western countries mainly ensure the development and implementation of teacher leadership through various policies, laws, and regulations. From the first stage of advocating the establishment of a career ladder for teachers to the second stage for the development of the “whole school reform movement” (Little, 2003).

This article adopts the perspective of Gao & Zhang (2022) to define teacher leadership from the perspective of influence. The definition of teacher leadership in this article is: teacher leadership is the comprehensive influence of teachers who exert their professional
advantages in the practice of educational and teaching activities of the school's professional community, collaborate and share mutual benefits with other teachers, and promote school development. In this article, junior middle school teacher leadership is not a power in the administrative sense but is distributed throughout the school based on professionalism and is generated from the authoritative influence among all teachers.

Research theoretical model

The research of Gao & Zhang (2022) combined Chinese cultural scenarios and summarized the constituent dimensions of teacher leadership in school education and teaching practice. Middle school teacher leadership takes the form of group, shared, and organizational responsibility, requiring the establishment of a cooperative team culture, the development of collective responsibility, and the emphasis on team collaborative learning.

The two scholars constructed a progressive hierarchical structure model of the teacher leadership evaluation index system, distinguishing teacher leadership into five dimensions: professional leadership, cultural cultivation, organizational development, home-school cooperation, and social charisma (Day & Gu, 2007; Feng, 2022).

These five dimensions make up junior high school teacher leadership, highlighting the professional attitudes teachers hold to collaborate and take ownership both inside and outside the classroom (Little, 2003; Shi, 2023). The first layer of the structural model is the target layer, which is the evaluation index of primary and secondary school teacher leadership; the second layer is the dimensional layer, which mainly includes "professional leadership", "cultural cultivation ability", "organizational development ability" and "home-school cooperation ability".

There are five dimensions of "social charisma"; the third layer is the indicator layer, including indicators such as "cooperative exploration", "atmosphere creation", "change leadership", "community interaction," and "quality display".

Research results

This article adopts a purposive sampling method and collects data mainly through interviews. It takes junior middle school teachers in the eastern Guangdong region of Guangdong Province, China, as the specific research object. It focuses on the high-quality development of education against the background of China's new basic education reform and policy. An overall and panoramic description of the development of junior high school teacher leadership in the development of schools in shortcomings areas, as well as the development, practice, and effect of teacher leadership under natural circumstances.

This article is based on the progressive hierarchical structure model of the primary and secondary school teacher leadership evaluation index system by Gao & Zhang (2021).

It provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from a relatively specific microlevel and conducts dynamic description and analysis to ensure that the research is authentic and comprehensive.

The interview questions are as follows:

Please introduce your work experience.

What do you think leadership is? Have you heard about teacher leadership? In what aspects do you think teachers’ influence is reflected?

In what aspects do teachers lead or exert greater influence on each other at work?
In addition to leading students in the classroom, what other aspects of school do teachers exert influence on?

What are the factors in schools that support and hinder teachers from exerting influence on school-level affairs? What measures do you think can be taken to help teachers increase their influence in school affairs?

A total of 11 junior high school teachers were interviewed in this article. The researcher identified teachers recommended by principals, middle-level cadres, or teachers who are more influential in school affairs as interviewees and conducted interviews to obtain data. This article uses codes to identify the interview subjects, named TOO1, T002,... T011, respectively.

T stands for the English word "teacher. Basic information is shown in Tab.1.

Table 1 - Basic information about interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Teaching years</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOO1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Ordinary Administrative Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Subject Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Teaching And Research Team Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Head Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Subject Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Subject Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Head Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO8</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Head Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Teaching And Research Team Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO10</td>
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<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Grade Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Head Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the 11 teachers interviewed are the young and middle-aged backbone of the school. They have witnessed the development of the school and have accumulated relatively rich teaching and education experience. They have good professional authority among colleagues; that is, they have higher qualifications. Among them, there is T004, who has only 2 years of teaching experience and is a representative of young teachers.

(1) Junior high school teachers have a vague understanding of teacher leadership: When asking about junior high school teachers’ cognition and understanding of teacher leadership, most teachers are skeptical at first, thinking that leadership is management and leadership is school managers’ capabilities, and some also express the ability of their colleagues to obtain job promotions through their efforts.

T004: I have never heard the word leadership before, but leadership may also refer to the teacher’s interaction with students through their professional qualities, abilities, emotions, etc. in certain group activities. Some kind of influence. It is reflected in teachers’ professional requirements, professional qualities, humanistic qualities, organizational abilities, and personality charm.

T010: During teacher professional training, I heard and learned about teacher leadership but still thought about what kind of leadership teachers can have.
Teachers' self-confidence and sense of self-worth are also closely related to the accumulation, development, and display of teacher leadership. Teachers’ perception of teacher leadership is more about the first dimension: professional leadership. Teachers' cognition of professional abilities determines teachers' subjective initiative to exercise leadership.

T003: Teacher leadership is an independent development concept that fully affirms the professional strength of teachers and emphasizes that teachers can learn from each other, promote each other, and develop together by giving full play to their professional advantages. It is a kind of respect for the professional authority of teachers. Teachers, regardless of their age or professional title, are encouraged to take the lead in their specialized research.

T008: “Leadership” sounds quite interesting. I think teacher leadership is reflected in the following aspects: 1. The teacher's professional skills. 2. Teachers’ organizational skills. 3. Teachers can play the role of leadership and guidance in action.

T011: I think teacher leadership in school education is mainly reflected in the classroom. Teacher leadership is reflected in how to effectively guide students to understand, master, and apply subject knowledge to achieve classroom learning goals.

The junior high school teachers interviewed had a vague perception of teacher leadership. Most teachers equate teacher leadership with teachers’ professional authority, accumulation of teaching experience or teaching experience and age, and the formation of teaching style. Most teachers limit teacher leadership to the teacher's leadership of students in the classroom or the teacher's ability to manage the curriculum, or associate teacher leadership with administrative positions, professional titles, age, teaching experience, etc. It is the ability or influence held by some people with leadership qualities.

(2) Junior high school teachers have an insufficient perception of teacher leadership: The opinions of the interviewed teachers reflect that junior high school teachers have an insufficient perception of teacher leadership, the role of teacher leadership is unclear, there is no active and conscious leadership behavior, or there is a lack of active and conscious leadership behavior between new and old teachers. There are issues such as generational barriers and marginal participation.

T011: In teacher training, I learned about teacher leadership. But I still can’t understand why teachers still have leadership skills.

T009: As teachers who are responsible for “preaching, imparting knowledge, and solving doubts,” it seems that it has nothing to do with leadership.

T007: It seems that teacher leadership should refer to the transformation of teachers from a relatively passive coach to a more active leader. But it feels like it can’t be done. The leader teacher should be the one who can perform well in work and home-school contact, fully express their views and opinions, play a leading role, or be adopted.

T004: I am the type of person who has my thoughts and is relatively young. But there is no leadership role. The other teachers are older than me and have more experience than me. If they would teach me, I would appreciate it. But it seems that everyone is doing their own thing, and there is less communication.

In this interview, 10 teachers have been teaching for more than 10 years. They have been working on the front lines of junior high schools for a long time, have rich teaching and social experience, and know the education and teaching situation of junior high schools well. However, the sense of "ownership" in a teacher's leadership needs to be awakened and stimulated.
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Many teachers have been immersed in their own "teaching kingdom" and believe that teachers who teach well have the qualifications to be leaders, will naturally have authority, can be leaders, and can lead other teachers. "Professional level. The deep teaching skills and professional level of old teachers can lead young teachers in the right direction." (T002)

T003: He said, I think the mutual influence between teachers in teaching and research is more important.

During the interviews, the researcher found that there is a sense of distance between some junior high school teachers and school leaders. Teachers' sense of distance, burnout, or frustration further illustrates teachers' weak leadership awareness. For example, Teacher T005: I think people should try not to be leaders in school. Leadership is not just for whoever wants to be the leader. Some teachers have a "dispensable" attitude toward opportunities for teachers to participate in school leadership and are not very enthusiastic. For example, teacher T010 is the grade director. She said, Actually, I think teachers should do a good job teaching first. To be honest, I am now the director of this grade, and my job is very trivial. It would be much easier for me if other colleagues were willing to take over. I am not a leader, but I have many things to do.

T004: I have only worked for two years. Students like me just because I am a young teacher. Our group leader said that I was good at teaching, maybe because I know better about computer operations and multimedia. But I can’t say where I want to make an impact or how high it can go. I think the biggest influence is professionalism and charisma.

The lack of teacher leadership awareness among junior high school teachers is caused by many reasons, including both internal personal reasons and external school or social environment reasons. Various reasons make them unwilling to take the initiative to lead others. The indifference to leadership awareness will largely limit the performance of their overall teacher leadership and hinder the progress and development of the teacher professional community.

(3) The junior high school teachers’ professional community has limited space for teacher leadership; junior high school teachers do not have a strong willingness to develop their leadership. Junior high school teachers have weak leadership awareness, resulting in their weak willingness to develop leadership. Among them are regulatory restrictions, too long working hours, too much work intensity, and physical reasons. Another reason is that they cannot perceive what leadership is and what the methods and behaviors of implementing leadership are. Relevant research shows that high-intensity work conflicts after the implementation of the “double reduction” policy have also become one of the main sources of emotional stress for junior high school teachers under the background of the “double reduction” policy (Feng K.R., 2022; Shi J.F., 2023).

T008 has been teaching at a municipal experimental middle school since 2008. She confessed many practical difficulties: In fact, we work long hours, you know, working in shifts. Then our students are junior high school students, who are difficult to teach. There is also the pressure of high school entrance exams. Students and parents are not the only ones who are stressed; we are also stressed. The pressure will be even greater after a double reduction. We often teach these substitute teachers step by step. A year later, a new substitute teacher is replaced, and we must be the teaching instructor all over again, which is exhausting mentally and physically. The current professional title evaluation and recruitment system has few places and fierce competition, which affects the enthusiasm of teachers and makes teachers feel tired, which will hinder the display of leadership.
T007: I can’t think of any place other than the classroom where our teachers can be influential. Especially our female teachers. I have two children at home, and my energy is very limited. I work with a large group of older children. As a class teacher, I must deal with students' trivial matters every day. Back home, I have two kids to look after.

T009: Awarded "Excellent Grassroots Cadre" and "Excellent Teacher" in the district many times. He observed that teachers themselves have little awareness of participation in leadership and weak professional leadership skills.

T002: Excellent work performance has received many awards, such as the honorary title of "Excellent Teacher in Teaching and Educating," the third prize of the junior high school group in the middle school young teacher teaching competition, the third prize of the middle school ideological and moral, ideological, and political outstanding paper selection, etc. But he hesitated when invited to be one of the management team, with the idea that a teacher can only be the ideological mentors of students.

(4) Insufficient shared leadership among junior middle school teachers: The generation of teacher leaders is inseparable from the support of the teacher professional community. Chaozhou City is in a poor geographical location, and its educational information resources are relatively backward. Junior high school teachers should actively and consciously share what they have learned to improve their professionalism and teacher leadership. During the interview, we learned that there is disharmonious communication between school leaders and teachers, as well as between teachers. Both principals and teachers ignore the importance of teamwork in their work.

T003: As the teaching and research team leader, he thinks: I am now responsible for the mathematics teaching and research work for the first grade of junior high school, so I am the teaching and research team leader. I feel that educational, teaching, and research exchanges between teachers in the same subject group are very important. We can learn from each other's strengths and overcome each other's weaknesses.

T009 is also the leader of the teaching and research team. He also agrees that in their daily work, teachers influence and promote each other. Although they are in the same working environment, teachers have different performances at work due to their different professional qualities, different personalities, and different styles of dealing with people.

T004 expressed: The quality of teachers is still relatively high. Everyone requires themselves to have high moral standards of conduct, be a good role model for students, learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses, and improve the overall teaching level.

The teaching profession has distinct individual characteristics. In the face of the reality of diversified development, every teacher has a distinct personality and different levels of needs. Different personalities and concepts greatly affect the interpersonal relationships between teachers. The shared leadership of junior middle school teachers is insufficient, and they lack awareness of sharing rights and responsibilities.

T006 is an old teacher who has been working for 16 years. She pointed out that cooperation among colleagues at work still needs to be strengthened. She said: I have been working for so many years, and I think we prepare lessons collectively, but it seems that everyone can often reach a consensus, and they may not necessarily have the same views.

T007: There is some competition among us. If you want your students to have better grades than other classes, you must keep some experience and good things, and don't talk about them with others. If you do, others may surpass you.
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T008 has been teaching English subjects in junior middle schools since 2008. She believes that if teacher leadership is to be developed, it must include peer leadership. She said that teacher leadership has the effect of peer guidance. “For example, a certain teacher can drive other teachers to learn professional knowledge, improve teaching capabilities, and improve teaching effects. Another example is that a certain teacher has outstanding teaching ability and significant teaching results, and the student’s achievements play a role in other teachers.” Competition is the result of leadership." And she said that now she needs this kind of peer guidance and help more and more. Since the implementation of the new curriculum reform and double reduction policy, she feels that the direction of education and teaching has changed. In the past, some of her teaching methods were not suitable for the new situation, and she urgently needed colleagues to lend a hand. She said: "If a teacher can be proactive in teaching research or learning, keep learning, and share with other teachers, and selflessly share the information with other teachers and students, it can produce positive results."

(5) Insufficient support for junior high school teacher leadership at the school level: As an organizational institution, the school’s cultural atmosphere and management norms have a subtle impact on every member. Most teachers said that changes can be made at the school level to create conditions to promote the development of teacher leadership and encourage teacher leadership. "I think we can create a platform to promote the development of teacher leadership through multiple channels. From the perspective of school leaders and managers, developing teacher leadership cannot just stay in words or ideas. We must constantly create platforms to actively participate in teachers' management, discover problems, take responsibility, and improve ourselves during participation" (Teacher T004).

"Schools can start by using legal power to improve teacher leadership. For example, in the school management system, the position responsibility system can be used to stipulate the responsibilities of each built-in position based on consultation with teachers" (Teacher T005).

"The cultural atmosphere and working atmosphere of the school are also one of the influences” (Teacher T007).

"Create a scientific and harmonious leadership and management atmosphere, change the ‘one word’ of administrative leadership, and enhance teachers' interest in participating in and executing school affairs” (Teacher T009).

Teachers have personal experience of the school's organizational culture and are participants in organizational system changes. As an ordinary administrator of the school, teacher T001 is involved in various administrative affairs of the school daily. He also holds senior professional titles. He confessed that “the decision-making of measures at the school level only involves the participation of a small number of teacher representatives, lacking collective operations and voting. Moreover, most policies are issued by higher-level departments, lacking the joint participation of front-line teachers and certain practices”.

During the interview, we learned that teachers' understanding of classroom instructional leadership is far greater than curriculum leadership. Teacher T011 said: “Teachers have a limited degree of autonomy in classroom teaching activities, but they must accept the guidance and arrangements of the teaching administrative department in setting up courses, formulating syllabuses, and arranging class hours”. Teachers have a certain degree of autonomy over course content. Not enough leadership has been given to the decision.

Teacher T003 suggested, “In an open and collaborative atmosphere, principals, teacher leaders, and other teachers can intimately discuss matters related to school development.”
Teacher T010 said: "The school system was established ten years ago. The teaching and research model only focuses on form and has no substantive meaning. It fails to give full play to the initiative of teachers, and teaching abilities are uneven. Teacher T009: Give full play to teacher leadership; encourage and support teachers to participate in the school's decision-making on curriculum, moral education, etc. If the school adopts a hierarchical management model with administrative power at its core, teachers can only passively accept management in their daily teaching and work, and the leadership of the teachers' professional community will not be possible.

Conclusion, discussion and strategy

Junior high school teacher leadership, as an integral part of teachers' professional identity, is a complex issue caused by multiple factors. As Day and Gu (2007) pointed out, teachers' professional identity is jointly affected by the professional expectations of teachers from individuals, working situations, and social and cultural policies.

(1) Strategies for improving professional leadership: Snell and Swanson (2000) proposed: "Professional knowledge is the basic dimension of teacher leadership because it provides a reliable basis for these teachers to become role models and thus opens their role as teaching leaders. In 2012, the Ministry of Education of China promulgated the "Professional Standards for Secondary School Teachers (Trial)," which put forward new requirements for the basic concepts, professional standards, professional knowledge, and abilities of middle school teachers. The reverse transmission effect of China's "double reduction" policy calls for junior high school teachers to make a positive response by improving their professional leadership in teaching and curriculum.

(2) Strategies for improving cultural cultivation: Teacher cooperation, as an important way to promote teachers' professional development and education and teaching practice, has received widespread attention internationally. Teacher collaboration prompts teachers to reflect on existing teaching methods, helping to improve their knowledge, skills, and teaching beliefs, which in turn has a significant impact on teachers' teaching implementation. The members of the teachers' professional community interact with each other's cultures and make full use of resources. Every teacher must have a common value orientation and action goals, cooperate to achieve common goals by meeting organizational requirements, dare to assume a certain role, and actively and diligently complete shared tasks.

(3) Strategies for improving organizational development capabilities: Schools must understand that to satisfy many reasonable demands in the education field, they must integrate internal and external resources, give full play to the motivation and wisdom of every member of the organization, and actively carry out organizational changes. Real leaders only emerge in special situations. To make school culture a sustained educational force, it needs to start with the school's organizational culture. A supportive school organizational culture is essential to building a high level of trust among staff.

(4) Strategies for improving home-school cooperation: The educational characteristics of school organizations and the situational nature of the reform background require that school organizations uphold the correct value orientation in handling home-school relationships, with humanistic orientation and service orientation as inevitable choices. Creating an equal and relaxed atmosphere for home-school negotiation is also one of the manifestations of teacher leadership. This requires teachers to not only "teach" but also
"educate", effectively fulfill the dual responsibilities of "teaching" and "management", shorten the distance of communication and understanding with students and parents, and thereby achieve the goal of comprehensive education.

(5) Strategies to enhance social charisma: The rapid development of society has enriched the professional role of teachers. The expectations of teachers from all walks of life are increasing, and the identities and roles of teachers are becoming more and more diverse. Junior high school teachers should establish the concepts of professional independence and professional identity, have the consciousness to improve their teacher leadership, and have the motivation to improve teacher leadership. Only when the school adopts an appropriate multi-interest integration system design and strives to turn multiple stakeholders into different parts of the same stakeholder can the coordination and communication costs be greatly reduced.

References


