

Teacher Leadership and School/System Change: Exploring Contemporary Evidence

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Abstract

This article presents the findings from a review of contemporary scholarly work on teacher leadership, with a focus on the international evidence concerning the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change. The PRISMA approach (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) was applied to review contemporary scholarly evidence over ten years, resulting in the identification of 26 journal articles that fully met the inclusion and exclusion criteria set for the review. The findings from this review suggest that, under the right conditions, teacher leadership can contribute to the process of school and system change. This review also highlights the need for more consolidated empirical work on the impact and outcomes of teacher leadership.

Résumé

Cet article présente les conclusions d'une analyse de recherches universitaires contemporaines effectuées sur le leadership enseignant, en mettant l'accent sur des données internationales concernant la relation entre leadership enseignant et changement scolaire et systémique. L'approche PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) a été appliquée pour examiner des données universitaires

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contemporaines sur une période de dix ans, ce qui a permis d'identifier 26 articles de revues qui répondaient pleinement aux critères d'inclusion et d'exclusion fixés pour l'analyse. Les résultats de cet examen suggèrent que, dans des conditions favorables, le leadership enseignant peut contribuer à un processus de changement scolaire et systémique. Cet examen souligne également la nécessité de mener plus de travaux empiriques consolidés sur l'impact et les résultats du leadership tel que pratiqué par les enseignants.

Keywords / Mots clés : teacher leadership, school improvement, system improvement, teacher collaboration / leadership enseignant, amélioration scolaire, amélioration du système, collaboration entre enseignants

Introduction

The extensive international evidence on teacher leadership suggests a positive relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change or improvement (Liu & Thien, 2025; Nguyen, Harris, & Ng, 2020). This position makes great sense, as teachers can be the instigators, implementers, and co-constructors of educational change and reform (Harris & Jones, 2019). It has been argued that where teachers are genuinely at the forefront of educational reform, the net result can be both transformative and empowering (Donohoo, 2018). The vast literature on educational change emphasizes the importance of teacher agency, collaboration, and leadership as key components of system success (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Harris, Jones, & Huffman, 2017; Datnow & Park, 2018). The idea of teachers leading school or system-based change collaboratively remains a primary theme in the discourse of contemporary educational reform. It is a core feature of the most recent literature on educational networking, improvement, and change (Azorín & Fullan, 2022).

Similarly, the latest work on educational change repeatedly reinforces the centrality of teacher agency, collaboration, and leadership as core influences and prerequisites of system change (McLure & Aldridge, 2022). Within many education systems, although certainly not all, teachers are viewed as pivotally important in the process of co-constructing and implementing impactful change. Recent evidence also positions teachers as system leaders, as they collaborate with others within, across, and between schools in ways that build professional capacity and capital, allowing for change and improvement to follow (Gorman, King, Madrid Miranda, Jones, & Harris, 2025).

Where teachers authentically engage in developing and implementing change, primarily through working in professional learning communities, the evidence suggests that school and system change can result (Grimm, 2024). In its work, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasizes the crucial role of teacher leadership in improving school quality and student outcomes. They note that teacher leadership, encompassing both formal and informal roles, fosters a culture of continuous improvement, collaboration, and shared responsibility for student learning. By empowering teachers to take on leadership roles, it is argued that schools can create more effective and supportive learning environ-

ments (Bowers, 2020). Conversely, the evidence suggests that where teachers are merely the recipients of top-down change or the passive recipients of policy delivery, there is less potential for lasting school and system change (Harris & Jones, 2019). While the centrality of teachers within any reform process is generally acknowledged and accepted, as various international reviews of the literature have suggested, establishing a direct link between teacher leadership and school or system change has proven to be inherently more challenging (Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

In their recent review of the evidence, Nguyen et al. (2020) propose that the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change revolves around three essential dimensions, based on evidence, which are crucial for securing educational change and improvement. First, teacher leadership is important as a form of *influence* rather than a separate role or a designated responsibility. Second, the idea of teacher leadership *as action* extends beyond their formally assigned roles to share best practices *and initiate changes*. Third, teacher leaders *develop pedagogical excellence* within their classroom and *through collaborative practice*, influencing the practice of others. The combination of these three dimensions is assumed to be a powerful resource for and driver of school and system change.

Reviews of the scholarly literature also underline that teacher leaders can contribute to improvement at the school and system level, but only if the enabling conditions are conducive and favourable (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Numerous scholars have also emphasized the importance of teachers as designers of learning where organizational features and aspects are conducive and supportive (Friesen & Brown, 2022a; Brown, Friesen, Beck, & Roberts, 2020). They have highlighted how teacher leaders play a crucial role in fostering collective responsibility, which in turn impacts their professional learning and the learning of others (Friesen & Brown, 2022b).

In their seminal review of the evidence, York-Barr & Duke (2004) highlight how research at this time tended not to chart the outcomes and impact of teacher leadership. They note that while numerous pieces of evidence underscore the positive impact of teacher leadership on the teachers themselves and their colleagues, there is limited empirical evidence to support a direct link between teacher leadership and school or system improvement. Subsequent literature reviews, including those cited in this article, have similarly highlighted an imbalance in the evidence base regarding the outcomes and impact of teacher leadership. In summary, numerous studies advocate for or assume a relationship between teacher leadership and school or system improvement without providing empirical substantiation for this claim.

Hence, this article examines the contemporary scholarly literature to illuminate the current evidential position on the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change or improvement. Drawing on international evidence, this review aims to assess how far contemporary research has advanced in substantiating and verifying this relationship. It selects evidence very deliberately to answer this question and outlines some key findings, themes, and issues from the review process.

Inevitably, the scope of this review does not encompass all relevant evidence on teacher leadership and school/system change, as the literature is vast and varied. Consequently, a decision was made to narrow the scope and scale of this review and to focus exclusively on scholarly work published in reputable academic journals

over the past decade. As with any review process, there are practical decisions to be made when analyzing any knowledge base, and limitations arise from these decisions. The authors fully acknowledge the limitations of omitting other published evidence beyond scholarly journal articles and accept that, as all the articles considered were written in English, there are missing parts of the evidence base that may have been published in journals in other languages.

This review offers one lens on the contemporary teacher leadership evidence base at a particular moment; clearly, of course, there are others. It aims to identify articles that focus primarily on teacher leadership and school/system change or improvement to assess the strength and validity of the most recent body of empirical work that has focused explicitly on this relationship. As noted earlier, the evidence based on teacher leadership is wide-ranging; therefore, the selection process was undertaken to deliberately narrow the focus and exclude articles that encompassed multiple themes or perspectives. The following section outlines the review methodology and provides details of the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Methodology

The primary intention of this review was to examine the contemporary literature that specifically highlights evidence concerning teacher leadership and school or system change and improvement. To achieve this outcome, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)¹ method was used. PRISMA is a well-established and reliable method of reviewing scholarly evidence (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & The PRISMA Group, 2009). It provides a comprehensive framework for reviewing evidence, including identification, screening, and eligibility checks (Kitchenham, 2004). PRISMA is a well-established method for defining research questions, developing search keywords, establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, and systematically synthesising evidence.

This review aimed to gain insight into the contemporary evidence base by scrutinizing relevant, selected work. The following questions guided the review:

1. What does contemporary evidence highlight about the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change/improvement?
2. What themes and issues emerge from the contemporary literature concerning teacher leadership and school/system change improvement?
3. What research methodologies are reflected in the selected studies, and what are the implications for the teacher leadership research field?

These questions also informed the subsequent narrative and discussion of the findings from the review process.

In line with PRISMA, the review commenced with the selection of search keywords, ensuring alignment with the review's objectives and questions. Syntax based on the specific combination of keywords using Boolean operators such as "AND," "OR," and "NOT" was developed from the selected keywords. The next step involved selecting databases relevant to the subject of the review, guided by the prime relevance of the databases to the study context, specifically education and leadership (Chandler, Cumpston, Li, Page, & Welch, 2019).

Databases

The search included three primary databases: EBSCOhost databases (ERIC, British Education Index, Education Abstracts, Education Administration Abstracts, eBook collection), Web of Science, and SCOPUS. When selecting databases for a systematic review, two key considerations have typically been applied. Qualitatively, the focus is on the specialization of each selected database in the relevant study area(s). Quantitatively, emphasis is placed on the breadth and currency of the repository, ensuring access to a comprehensive and up-to-date collection of resources. Both of these considerations are reflected in the choice of databases (EBSCOhost, Scopus, and Web of Science) used in this review, as each offers unique strengths:

EBSCOhost is beneficial for capturing studies grounded in pedagogy, teacher education, and school leadership. EBSCOhost provides access to a range of education-specific databases, including ERIC, Education Source, Academic Search Complete, Education Abstracts, and Educational Administration Abstracts. This ensures strong coverage of peer-reviewed articles, practitioner journals, and educational policy reports directly relevant to educational leadership. Quantitatively, according to EBSCO, the Education Source database provides access to more than 2.1 million records, including full-text for over 2,000 journals, and indexing for thousands of education-related titles (<https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/education-source>).

Scopus, in the context of educational leadership, is valuable for identifying cross-disciplinary research, impact trends, and citation networks, especially studies intersecting with management, leadership, and organizational theory.

Web of Science (WoS) enabled the inclusion of globally recognized studies in education and the social sciences, and facilitated citation tracking for mapping scholarly influence within the educational leadership domain.

The selection of the three databases, each offering unique strengths relevant to the research context, was strategically designed to ensure cross-referencing and reduce the risk of missing key literature. In combination, these databases supported a balanced, comprehensive, and rigorous search strategy, minimizing publication bias and maximizing the retrieval of relevant peer-reviewed literature across the education and leadership spectrum.

The articles were scrutinized at all search stages to ensure consistency with the review objectives and questions. The PRISMA model was followed to evaluate and filter articles at each step systematically.

Keywords

To ensure the search strategy was comprehensive and appropriate for qualitative and mixed-methods research, we employed the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) tool (Cooke, Smith, & Booth, 2012) to

guide the development of search terms. This helped define key elements of the review (SPIDER) and informed the selection of relevant keywords and descriptors across databases.

- Sample (S): teachers, schools, school leaders
- Phenomenon of Interest (PI): teacher leadership
- Design (D): empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed)
- Evaluation (E): school or system improvement, change, development, or reform
- Research type (R): peer-reviewed studies of any design

The terms listed (e.g., reform, improvement, development) were not intended as direct synonyms for “school” or “system,” but rather as descriptive indicators of the focus or outcome of the studies within school or system-level contexts. Their inclusion aimed to capture diverse formulations of how teacher leadership is linked to institutional change across varied educational systems. Table 1 lists the keywords and their synonyms.

Table 1. Keywords and their synonyms

Term	Synonym
Teacher-leader	teacher leader, teacher leadership, teacher leading teacher-leader, teacher-leadership, teacher-leading
Teacher	teacher, educator, instructor, school staff, tutor, teaching staff
Leadership	lead, manage, leading, leadership, management
School	school OR schools
School/system	Improve, reform, develop, change, enhance, transform, empower

The syntax used in the search included TI (“teacher,” “educator,” “instructor,” “school staff,” “tutor,” or “teaching staff”) OR TI (“teacher leader,” “teacher leadership,” or “teacher leading”) OR TI (“teacher-leader,” “teacher-leadership,” or “teacher-leading”) AND TI (“lead,” “manage,” “leading,” “leadership,” or “management”) AND TI (“improve,” “reform,” “develop,” “change,” “enhance,” or “transform”).

Inclusion criteria

Prior to initiating the search, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined to ensure alignment with the review’s research questions and to support methodological transparency, in line with PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). These criteria were developed using an adapted SPIDER framework (Cooke et al., 2012), which is appropriate for qualitative and mixed-methods evidence synthesis in education. Table 2 outlines the inclusion criteria and their corresponding justifications.

The decision to begin the search using “titles” in the “identification” step and proceed to “abstracts” during the “screening” step stems from an ongoing debate in systematic review methodology. Mateen, Oh, Tergas, Bhayani, and Kamdar (2013) highlight that there is no clear consensus on whether screening by title alone or using both titles and abstracts is preferable for article inclusion. Starting with title (TI) searches was a purposeful methodological choice, closely aligned with the aims and scope of this review. The rationale was twofold:

Table 2. Table of inclusion criteria and justification

Criterion	Justification
Date range	December 2014–May 2025
	This range captures the most recent decade of research, reflecting contemporary policy shifts and leadership models in education.
Databases	EBSCOhost (Education Source, ERIC, etc.), Web of Science, Scopus
	These are authoritative, multidisciplinary academic databases with high indexing quality and coverage of education and leadership literature.
Source type	Peer-reviewed journal articles only
	Ensures a minimum quality threshold and relevance to academic discourse; excludes grey literature, books, and media due to inconsistencies in review.
Search parameters	“Titles” in the “identification” step and proceed to “abstracts” during the “screening” step.
	Keywords were piloted and refined to strike a balance between comprehensiveness and relevance.
Context	Schools and systems (including districts/municipalities)
	Aligned with the study’s focus on formal schooling contexts, where teacher leadership is situated as an institutional and policy-relevant phenomenon.
Language	English
	Due to the review team’s language capacity, a recognized limitation.
Geographic scope	Global (all countries included)
	Aims to capture international variation in the conceptualization and implementation of teacher leadership and system/school improvement.

1. Improved specificity and relevance: Before finalizing the search strategy, we piloted keyword combinations across both title and abstract fields. This piloting revealed that articles containing our key terms in the title were more likely to be directly focused on the topic of interest—teacher leadership and its role in school or system change. In contrast, using a broader search across abstracts yielded a large volume of irrelevant studies, often referencing the key terms only peripherally. Limiting the search to titles helped ensure that the studies returned had an explicit and primary focus on our research questions, rather than incidental mentions that did not align with our analytical aims.

2. Balancing scope with methodological rigour: Starting with titles allowed for a focused and manageable scope while maintaining systematic rigour. This strategy prioritized depth over breadth by focusing on studies that addressed teacher leadership and system improvement as core subjects. It reduced the inclusion of tangential literature—such as conceptual or reflective discussions—common in abstract-inclusive searches. In turn, this approach enabled a more efficient screening process during the abstract stage, ensuring that studies moving forward in the review pipeline were both relevant and analytically rich.

Exclusion criteria

Studies that have elements that disqualify them from inclusion have been excluded. The following types of studies were excluded: theoretical commentaries, reflective or personal accounts, descriptive narratives lacking empirical data, and studies with-

out a direct focus on the relationship between teacher leadership and school or system improvement. This decision ensured that the review focused on research that offered clear insights into teacher leadership practices and their demonstrated or inferred outcomes. Table 3 lists the exclusion criteria and their justification.

Table 3. Table of exclusion and justification

Excluded study type	Study focus	Justification for exclusion
Perceptions of teacher leadership	Explore individual attitudes, beliefs, or perspectives of teachers or leaders	Subjective focus lacks outcome-based evidence on impact at the school/system level
Teacher leadership and professional development models	Focus on training programs, model design, or implementation strategy	Often theoretical or program-driven, without evaluating impact on school/system improvement
Teacher leadership approaches in specific countries	Describe national models or cultural interpretations of teacher leadership	Excluded when focused solely on context or policy without empirical outcome data
Theoretical models only	Develop or critique frameworks, conceptual models	Lack of empirical data or evaluative findings required to assess real-world impact
Descriptive accounts of practice	Narrative or observational reports of leadership practice	Absence of systematic data collection or evaluation undermines evidence quality
Personal accounts of teacher leadership	First-person narratives, reflections, or case illustrations	Anecdotal in nature and not generalizable; do not meet empirical standards
Teacher leadership in specific subjects or school types	Studies confined to single subject areas (e.g., STEM) or unique school types	Limited transferability and often lack broader implications for system-level change
Contextual accounts with no empirical evidence	Focus on the school setting, policy environment, or leadership context without data	Valuable context, but excluded due to the absence of systematically collected or analyzed data
Not aligned with the inclusion criteria	Studies outside the specified date range, non-school settings (e.g., higher education)	Excluded to maintain focus on current, school-based empirical literature in line with the defined scope and objectives

The field of teacher leadership is extensive, variable, and far-ranging; hence, many potential articles were inevitably returned in the search. The exclusion criteria ensured that only relevant and appropriate articles related to the overall objective of this review and the questions it posed remained in the final list.

Search flow

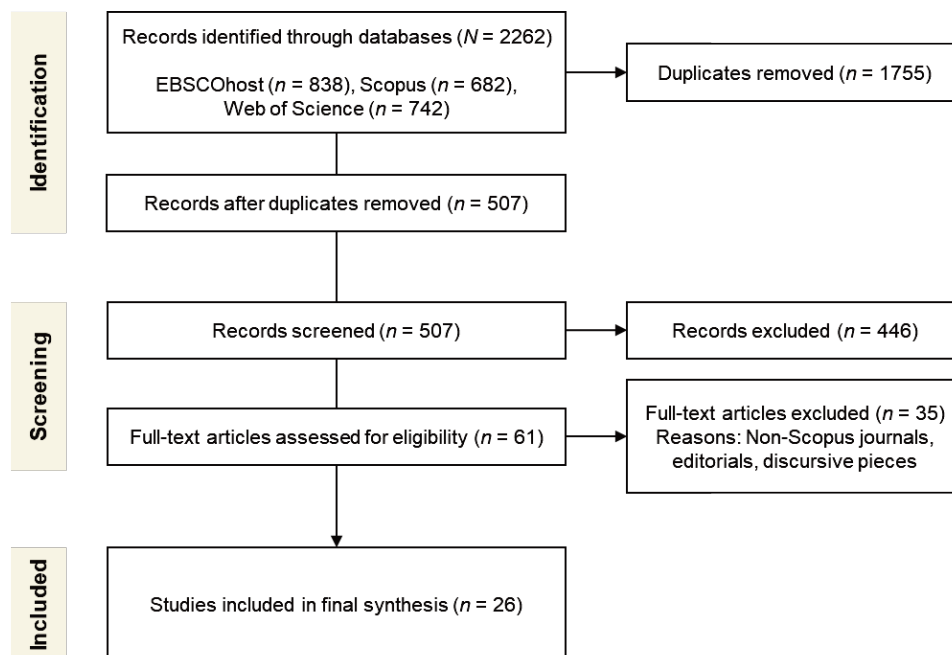
The flow of search in this review covered two steps: In step 1, the review captured a wide range of literature explicitly addressing “teacher,” “leadership,” and “school.” This step provided a solid foundation of core studies and evidence. Step 2 refined the focus to teacher leaders in schools or systems, ensuring that the selected literature focused, in some direct way, on the impact or outcomes of teacher leadership on school and system change/improvement. Dividing the search into two steps ensured that no critical literature was overlooked. It also minimised selection bias and ensured that the data collected represented diverse perspectives. Both steps utilized the same databases and applied the same inclusion and exclusion criteria.

This approach required both technological and manual processes, ensuring the inclusion of high-quality, relevant studies for analysis by applying three steps: identification, screening, and inclusion.

1. Identification: This step involved locating and gathering all potential studies relevant to the research questions from the selected databases. Initially, 2,262 records were identified through all the database searches. The removal of duplicates occurred in two stages. During the identification phase, the primary selection criterion was the presence of predefined keywords in the article titles. At this point, no reading of abstracts or full texts was conducted. The first step involved the database algorithm, which identified duplicates by capturing identical article names. A manual duplicate check was also conducted within the same database and across all databases. After removing duplicates, 1,755 abstracts were excluded, and 507 records remained relevant for further screening.

2. Screening: Screening focused on reviewing the abstracts of the identified studies to exclude those that did not meet the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. During the screening phase, 507 abstracts were assessed to determine their relevance and eligibility. Of these, 446 articles were excluded for various reasons, such as failing to meet the predefined inclusion criteria or not focusing directly on some aspect of teacher leadership and school or system change/improvement. As a result, 61 studies were initially identified as eligible for inclusion. However, upon further review, it was found that not all these articles were indexed in SCOPUS journals, a requirement for final inclusion, so they were removed.

Figure 1. PRISMA model steps



3. Inclusion: In this final step, the full texts of the remaining articles were assessed again for relevance and eligibility. The studies that met all criteria were included. The final number of studies included in the qualitative synthesis was narrowed to 61. On final re-examination of the articles in full, however, it was clear that some editorials had been wrongly identified as articles in the databases, and were removed. Additionally, this final review revealed that some articles were overly discursive and

lacked any empirical basis. At this point, it became clear that some articles, despite their titles and abstracts, failed to concentrate primarily on the relationship between teacher leadership and school or system improvement. Hence, these articles were removed, resulting in 26 articles in the final review. Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA model, which outlines the results at each step from each database.

The final articles in the review were analyzed individually and thematically to identify key patterns and trends in the selected scholarly work. Braun and Clarke (2012) advocate for thematic analysis due to its flexibility and usefulness in presenting rich and complex data. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2012) outline that clarity around the process and practice of the method is vital when undertaking thematic analysis. The review team worked independently and interdependently, following the same protocols for eliciting key themes, and tested these themes regarding representativeness and content validity.

It is fully acknowledged that the selected articles that comprise this review were far fewer than anticipated. At the outset of this review, given the extensive nature of the field and the popularity of the topic, the review team anticipated including many more studies than it ultimately did. This was both disappointing and surprising, given the volume of writing and research on teacher leadership. Inevitably, this also meant that the limited number of articles restricted the possibility of identifying strong themes or generalizing from a considerable body of work that a larger set of articles might present. However, the application of a rigorous review process had yielded this body of work for further investigation and scrutiny, which the review team duly undertook.

The number of articles that emerged from the review meant that the team sought to provide a commentary to organize and represent the findings. This commentary provides insights into the selected literature, assesses the quality of the knowledge base represented, and offers implications for future research in the field of teacher leadership. It was not possible, given the nature of the selected studies, to group the review by robust themes that ran consistently throughout most of the evidence; the empirical work did not afford, nor did it support, this form of detailed thematic representation. Four general, overarching themes are therefore offered as an organizational structure for grouping similarities in the selected evidence base and for highlighting areas of commonality.

Commentary

As noted, this commentary presents the findings from the review in broad, overarching headings that organize the articles and their main content into categories. The intention is to group the articles in a way that supports key themes arising from an overview of the selected work. The insights, issues, and implications arising from this review, in its entirety, will be considered in the concluding section.

Reviews of the evidence

An obvious starting point for any commentary must be the reviews of evidence that were part of the selected evidence. Interestingly, nine literature reviews were included, focusing on various aspects of teacher leadership and school/system change. Each

of the literature reviews will be briefly summarized with commentary on the evidence, as this offers the optimum means of authentically representing the findings.

The earliest literature review included in this contemporary examination of the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change is by Wenner & Campbell (2017). The authors comprehensively examine the teacher leadership research completed since the seminal work of York-Barr & Duke (2004). Wenner and Campbell (2017) report that, although definitions of teacher leadership vary, broadly they tend to focus on roles beyond the classroom and how teacher leaders support peer professional learning, ultimately targeting student learning as a primary goal. The review notes that the research it reviewed was not always theoretically grounded and that very little of the evidence that comprised this review addressed social justice and equity issues.

Wenner and Campbell (2017) conclude that “no research was found in the body of literature reviewed that examined the impact of teacher leaders on student learning” (p. 18). While they acknowledge the existence of research linking overall school leadership and student learning, they conclude that no studies in the literature included in their review explicitly link teacher leadership to student learning. Furthermore, this review suggests that the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change requires further research to explore the link between teacher leadership and student learning before broader associations can be investigated or established.

In their more recent review, Pan, Wiens, and Moyal (2023) undertook a bibliometric analysis of the scholarly literature on teacher leadership. This involved reviewing 704 documents (1964–2021) in SCOPUS and quantifying the development of the teacher leadership literature by the volume distribution of teacher leadership by year and region. The review identifies the most influential authors and documents in the field, revealing the intellectual structure of the teacher leadership research base. However, this review does not analyze or assess the quality or direction of the research on teacher leadership included for consideration.

Among their findings, Pan et al. (2023) highlight that teacher leadership research still primarily focuses on roles beyond the classroom, including supporting the professional learning of peers, influencing policy and decision-making, and ultimately targeting student learning. They note that much of the research they reviewed lacked theoretical grounding or was not informed by theory. Most importantly, they conclude that none of the literature in their review explored the impact or outcomes of teacher leadership. Instead, they note that the effects of teacher leadership were limited to the impact on teacher leaders themselves and their colleagues.

Another relatively recent review of the teacher leadership evidence by Conan Simpson (2021) highlights the importance of evaluating the promotion of teacher leadership in ways that positively impacts student achievement. The review considers mostly small-scale studies of teacher leadership, arguing that these are most prevalent in the field. Conan Simpson concludes that teacher leadership can support school improvement and directly benefit students’ learning and achievement: “Teacher leadership has been shown to improve student performance and achievement, likely due to the indirect benefits of school culture and teacher satisfaction as well as the im-

provement in instruction that results from teacher peer support, mentoring, and coaching” (2021, p. 5). The review concludes that teacher leaders can help sustain school improvement efforts, provided they have clearly defined roles, administrator support, and opportunities to design and implement those efforts. It is notable, however, that they discuss the indirect benefits of teacher leadership rather than its direct impact on school or system change.

In their work, Tintoré, Gratacós, and Ladrón de Guevara (2024) present a scoping review that investigates research on teacher leadership in a broad sense. This review highlights that teacher leadership is crucial for school improvement and student learning. It is posited that teacher leadership cannot progress without teacher professional development and requires a context of collaboration and learning. The results of this study underscore the importance of considering different perspectives (person, school, and supra-school) in developing teacher leadership. Once again, in this review, the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change is implied rather than proven. No empirical evidence is cited that supports this relationship.

Another review of evidence (Nguyen et al., 2020) concludes that teacher leadership has a positive impact on school-level factors, including fostering a positive culture, promoting professional learning, and supporting curriculum reforms. On balance, the empirical evidence from this review suggests that teacher leadership can have a positive impact on teachers, their colleagues, and, to some extent, certain organizational aspects, such as the learning climate, democracy, and organizational commitment. This review suggests the potential for school or system change through the promotion of specific conditions within the organization, facilitated by teacher leadership. However, it does not provide any accounts that substantiate this relationship.

Wang and Ho (2020) present a research synthesis of findings drawn from studies of teacher leadership published in English language journals from 2000 to 2018. The research synthesis aimed to develop new insights into teacher leadership through a theoretical discussion and identify emerging themes for future research. The methodology employed in the study was a systematic review. The synthesis yielded four themes: the notion of teacher leadership, the theoretical perspectives used for understanding teacher leadership, the factors influencing the development of teacher leadership, and the approach to building and developing leadership capacity. The review concludes that teachers have the potential to be leaders in various aspects of school improvement and development, although it does not cite studies that empirically consolidate this proposition.

Shen, Wu, Reeves, Zheng, Ryan, and Anderson (2020) note that while teacher leadership is commonly discussed in educational research and practice, the relationship between teacher leadership and student achievement has not been sufficiently explored. Hence, their meta-analysis examines the relationship between teacher leadership and students’ academic achievement. The results reveal that teacher leadership was positively related to student achievement ($r = .19$). Of the seven dimensions of teacher leadership identified in this work, it is suggested that all are positively associated with student achievement, with facilitating improvements in curriculum, instruction, and assessment showing the most substantial relationship. The finding of this

meta-analysis is that teacher leadership is positively related to student achievement. This is a rather bold claim that requires further confirmation and scholarly validation.

A recent review by Aliu, Kaçaniku, and Saqipi (2024) similarly points toward a positive relationship between teacher leadership and student outcomes. After reviewing 33 articles (2018–2023) that focused on teacher leadership in the K-12 setting, they found that many authors relied on established definitions of teacher leadership, with few offering their own interpretations. Overall, they suggest that the selected articles depict teacher leadership as an informal and individual form of influence. Their analysis revealed that the outcomes of teacher leadership at the school level were broadly categorized into two main areas: teacher-level benefits, including professional growth, and student-level impacts, such as increased achievement. Again, these are claims that require further investigation and scholarly attention.

In contrast, Schott, van Roekel, and Tummers (2020) highlight the current methodological limitations of studies on teacher leadership and point to areas for further development. They call for more conceptual research, reiterating Wenner and Campbell (2017), who explicitly called for further research investigating whether teacher leadership can be linked to improved teachers' practice and increased student learning. While Wenner and Campbell (2017) found no studies demonstrating a direct relationship between teacher leadership and student learning, York-Barr and Duke (2004) identify a group of correlational studies that document an indirect relationship between teacher leadership and student learning. However, the authors note that the nature of these correlational studies does not permit firm conclusions on causality.

In summary, the contemporary reviews of evidence all point to the importance of teacher leadership as a positive force on colleagues and organizational structures. There is a broad consensus in these various reviews that teacher leadership, once clearly defined, has the potential to be a catalyst for impactful change on other individuals within and across organizations. However, despite widespread support for teacher leaders and teacher leadership in all these reviews, albeit based on different types of evidence, the fact remains that the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change/improvement is implied rather than proven within this selected body of work.

The analysis of selected articles in this current review now turns from reviews of the literature to the available evidence. This evidence, within the remaining articles, is categorized as being at the individual and/or school/system levels. A commentary on the review evidence specifically and the teacher leadership knowledge base more generally is then offered.

1. Individual level: Some of the selected articles in this review focus on the work of individual teacher leaders and highlight their collaborative actions in securing school-level change. For example, Brondyk and Stanulis (2014) provide evidence of a teacher leader who helped lead change in an urban elementary school by creating a new culture of support for beginning teachers. They report that the teacher actively developed focused, collaborative inquiry around discussion-based teaching to improve teaching effectiveness, which led to some changes in professional practice. They conclude that the teacher leader creates a school-wide coalition of support for beginning teachers to maintain ambitious, discussion-based instruction.

In their work, Ghamrawi, Shal, and Ghamrawi (2024) examine the transformative impact of a professional development model (PDM) designed to foster teacher leadership. At the heart of this model, teachers assume the role of trainers, guiding their colleagues during dedicated professional development days. The study concludes that empowering teacher leaders to help mould the professional development journey of others actively created a more collaborative and intentional personal approach to teacher leadership. This work is in keeping with the evidence that underscores how teacher leaders can influence the practice of others through working collaboratively on professional learning goals.

2. School level: Within this review, several articles focused on the school level as a way of illuminating teacher leadership practices and, in some cases, to examine the impact of these practices. In addition, other articles offered accounts of teacher leadership within certain types of schools to highlight the positive impact of teacher leadership. On this latter point, Visone (2024) explored a group of National Blue Ribbon Schools (NBRSs) in the United States and undertook a study that replicated the methodology used in an earlier review where these high-achieving schools were examined for their collaborative practices and the way this practice influenced social and decisional capital. This 2018 study involved a qualitative analysis of responses from the applications of schools that were awarded to the NBRS Program. Overall, the study found that teacher leadership was highlighted positively by all schools in the study, which, it is claimed, indicates the importance of teacher leadership in the success of the schools in the sample.

In sharp contrast, Musselman, Crittenden, and Lyons (2014) focused their empirical work on rural Kentucky high schools to determine whether differences existed between high- and low-performing rural schools across specific items in a survey. They found that rural high schools identified as high performing demonstrated significantly different results on survey items related to a culture of collaboration and teacher leadership. According to the article, based on survey results, high-performing schools are characterized by principals and teachers who support each other in their development as instructional leaders and establish effective communication and collaboration skills with families and community stakeholders. It is also posited that the reverse was confirmed in the lower-performing rural schools, suggesting some correlation between teacher leadership practices, as defined in the survey, and positive school change.

Focusing on the school level, Weiner and Woulfin (2018) draw on sensemaking theory to analyze teacher leadership practices and the transfer of ideas. This article's findings are based on qualitative interview data from teachers and administrators in two urban schools. The elements of teacher leadership that teacher leaders reported transferring into practice are presented, along with the structures, norms, and factors that enable and constrain teacher leadership. The article focuses exclusively on the processes adopted in enacting teacher leadership and hence does not provide any evidence of outcomes and impact.

Cooper, Stanulis, Brondyk, Hamilton, Macaluso, and Meier (2016) present an embedded case study examining the leadership practices of 11 teacher leaders in three urban schools. The work aims to identify how these teacher leaders attempt

to change their colleagues' teaching practices while working as professional learning community leaders and mentors for new teachers. The article offers some implications for schools seeking to develop teacher leadership as a reform strategy for authentic instructional improvement; however, there is no evidence of the outcomes or impact at the school or system level.

Focusing more specifically on collaboration, Grimm (2024) considers teacher leadership within professional learning communities (PLCs). They describe a study of three Swedish PLCs, based on six video observations and 24 interviews with teachers and teacher leaders. The study examined how professional learning and teaching improvement were promoted in teacher-led PLC conversations, what tended to be missing, and how these conversations influenced the teaching practices of participating teachers (as reported by them). The results indicate that the teaching practices did not undergo significant changes in any depth. The article highlights the need for teacher leaders who consciously and systematically analyze and support teachers' learning processes and foster a habit of inquiry among their peers.

3. System level: Not all studies in the review focused on the school level; several pieces of research aimed to track the impact of teacher leadership at the district level. In their work, Eckert and Daughtrey (2019) tracked the progress of a Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) model over a three-year period, which was designed in response to a statewide TLC system initiative. A survey administered at baseline and after each of the three pilot years measured teacher leadership development, identified specific areas for improvement, and guided the district's teacher leadership support efforts. Scores from the items demonstrated evidence of reliability. District leaders reported that the resulting data proved beneficial within an implementation plan that yielded increased planned retention and improved practice—two goals of the TLC model. The study suggests that the collective leadership of teachers and their positive influence on peers is an essential feature of any district-wide program.

An account of district-wide improvement through a large-scale approach to teacher leadership is reflected in an article by Henry, VanGronigen, Wronowski, and Olive (2023). This article highlights how a large urban school district in the United States created, resourced, and implemented a program to develop teacher leaders who used what they were learning to analyze and critique local school improvement plans. Based on research conducted in the district from 2019 to 2021 in 65 schools, the central premise of this article is that this approach to teacher leadership was designed to improve schools and districts. The study suggests that carefully designed teacher leadership programs can build the capacity for lasting improvement at the school and district level, but only under the right conditions.

In their work, Brown and Friesen (2023) report the results of a multi-phase, design-based research study conducted with teacher leaders, assistant principals, and principals who participated in a two-year design-based professional learning initiative aimed at building capacity for instructional leadership and system improvement. The question guiding the research was: how do teacher leaders contribute to system improvement? Three dimensions of focus associated with high-performing systems emerged from the study in connection to the investment in professional capital that

contributed to system improvement: 1) enhancing the quality of teaching and learning for school and district improvement, 2) preserving continuous design-based professional learning opportunities, and 3) ensuring opportunities for collaborative learning alongside colleagues and the development of a network of teacher leaders with a shared purpose. The article concludes that teacher leaders are informal leaders and important members of an instructional leadership team contributing to school and district improvement.

Comparison

Several articles within the review employ a comparative approach to researching teacher leadership. Webber (2021) and Webber and Okoko (2021) highlight the need for further cross-cultural studies of teacher leadership. Both articles present a rationale for researching teacher leadership comparatively based on the need to clarify the definition and explore how to facilitate teacher leadership development. A set of attributes and indicators of teacher leadership is provided based on a literature review focusing on teacher leadership. Webber (2021) then describes four additional concepts related to teacher leadership—formal and informal influence, school culture, school improvement, and professional development—followed by a summary of essential considerations for cross-cultural work. Both articles strongly support cross-cultural empirical work, which could unquestionably shed further light on the outcomes and impact of teacher leadership.

Pineda-Báez, Bauman, and Andrews (2020) offer a cross-cultural case study examining teachers' practices as they experienced leadership across three cultural contexts: Colombia, Canada, and Australia. The article provides exemplars of teacher leadership in action and offers images of it being enacted in context, aligned with commentary about the important factors that support their leadership actions. Notably, very few articles in this contemporary review employ a comparative or cross-cultural analysis of teacher leadership, which seems to be an important omission in the field.

Conclusion, insights, issues, and implications

To summarize the key findings from this contemporary analysis it is necessary to return to the core purpose of the review and the three key questions that framed it. The primary purpose of this review was to determine if contemporary work in the teacher leadership field had moved closer to establishing and verifying a relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change. The evidence in this review suggests that while there is important and interesting work happening within the field of teacher leadership, in terms of the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change, the research is still too small-scale, disparate, and methodologically variable to offer a solid basis for consolidating and affirming this relationship.

As noted earlier, evidence may exist in forms other than journal articles, and this is an acknowledged limitation of this review; however, it would be odd if any empirical work existed and was not reflected in scholarly journals in some form. The other issue, of course, is the challenge of the research design and the scale of the empirical work needed to expose and explain a relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change in valid and reliable ways.

Collectively, the teacher leadership research landscape provides a solid foundation for proposing that such a relationship exists and it suggests that teacher leaders play a significant role in school and system change. Those researching in this field, however, need to move to the next level of empirical enquiry and collectively work toward securing greater confirmation that this is indeed the case.

Turning next to the specific questions in this review, the first question about the nature of the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change, based on the evidence in this review, is inconclusive. The selected evidence suggests that while this relationship is generally expected, anticipated, or even posited in some cases, this collective body of work does not firmly uphold or empirically verify this relationship. As noted already, the articles in this review provide evidence of the numerous positive effects and benefits of teacher leadership on teachers, their colleagues, and organizational culture and characteristics.

The second question, which asks what themes and issues emerge from the contemporary literature concerning teacher leadership and school/system change improvement, is also challenging to address, as the selected articles reflect such diverse contexts, settings, priorities, and research foci/methods. The literature reviews also vary considerably in approach, context, scale, and methodology, making it almost impossible to establish a clear and consistent empirical line through them. There are areas of agreement and reinforcement, of course, such as the importance of teacher leadership, the influence of teacher leaders on their colleagues, the centrality of teacher-led collaboration, and the positive ways in which teacher leaders influence the professional development practices of their colleagues. These are all hugely positive messages and findings. The evidence-based perspectives that appear in the selected work partly overlap and tangentially connect, but on the question of clear themes and consistent issues, they do not consolidate.

Regarding the third question about research approaches, the selected literature, which includes articles represented in various literature reviews, encompasses small-scale qualitative studies, extensive multi-phase studies, individual case studies, large-scale surveys, and cross-cultural comparative work. All these research approaches are legitimate and worthy of use. It remains the case, however, that there is still an overrepresentation of small-scale, qualitative research enquiries within the teacher leadership field generally, reflected also in the small sample of articles within this review.

In their seminal work, York-Barr and Duke (2004) argue that the empirical evidence on teacher leadership had specific limitations, particularly the lack of quantitative and/or large-scale studies. Thirteen years later, Wenner and Campbell (2017) suggest that not much has changed in this respect. This contemporary review concurs that almost a decade after Wenner and Campbell (2017), little has changed.

This is not to criticize or devalue the research of those working in the field of teacher leadership. Detailed, indepth qualitative work is important and essential to any field of scholarly enquiry within the social sciences. Instead, it is suggested that more extensive and sophisticated methodologies on a larger scale are needed, offering greater empirical and analytical power to gain insights into how teacher leaders impact school/system change. Such studies could record, capture, and illuminate the

impact and outcomes of teacher leadership in confirmatory ways. As Berry (2019) proposes, “Next-generation reform needs to include efforts to document the contributions teacher leaders make and how their influence spreads in a system of continuous school improvement” (p. 50).

This contemporary review suggests that a more coordinated, collaborative, cross-cultural, and connected set of scholarly activities could contribute significantly to a more grounded and substantive understanding of the impact of teacher leadership, especially at the school and system level. It is posited that the knowledge base on teacher leadership would benefit from future research activities that systematically build on and extend solid empirical foundations through new forms of empirical investigation and scholarly enquiry. In essence, research in the teacher leadership field needs to go deeper rather than wider. This empirical shift would ensure that the teacher leadership knowledge base is more connected, reliable, and robust, with the potential to shed substantive, and much-needed empirical light on the relationship between teacher leadership and school/system change

Note

1. See Page, M.J., Moher, D., Bossuyt, P.M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T.C., Mulrow, C.D., et al. (2021). PRISMA 2020 explanation and elaboration: Updated guidance and exemplars for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 372, n160. doi:10.1136/bmj.n160

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