

Introduction Teacher Leadership

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Teacher leadership is an increasingly significant area of inquiry in education, yet it remains conceptualized in diverse and sometimes inconsistent ways across contexts. In this special issue, eight articles examine how teacher leaders influence school and system improvement through their leadership, often without formal titles or designated roles. The variation in terminology used across the articles reflects broader challenges in the field: while the phenomenon of teacher leadership is widely observed, it is described in multiple ways that may hinder coherence and accessibility of the research literature.

A recurring theme across the contributions is the role of teacher leaders as influencers and professionals who lead change through expertise, relational work, and collaborative practices, rather than through positional authority. While some articles explore the work of teachers who take on responsibilities commonly associated with “middle leaders” (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Tindall-Ford, & Attard, 2025) and those who support colleagues’ professional learning within schools, notably none of the authors use this term. This signals both a gap and an opportunity: the need to clarify and converge on terminology to enhance scholarly dialogue and knowledge mobilization. This special issue aligns with recent scholarship that conceptualizes leadership as influence and relational capacity rather than formal authority or role (Hargreaves, 2023).

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This special issue makes a timely and important contribution by helping to articulate the field of teacher leadership across a range of global contexts. The issue includes a literature review by Harris and colleagues, who examined 26 empirical studies and argue that while teacher leadership holds promise for contributing to school and system change, the current research base lacks robust methodologies to evaluate impact at scale. Two articles are drawn from a broader international study, featuring a case from Australia and another from a Canadian independent school. Conway and colleagues report on a case study from Australia, and, similar to Harris et al., note that teacher leadership can be undermined when system-level support structures are unclear or misaligned, highlighting the importance of coherence between school and system expectations. In the Canadian case, Nickel and Webber explore how educational entrepreneurialism and shared governance, rooted in the founder's philanthropic vision, created enabling conditions for teacher leadership to thrive in a K-12 independent school. The issue also includes a conceptual article from Singapore that offers a new theoretical perspective wherein Chua and colleagues argue that teacher wellbeing should be viewed as a form of human capital investment. They propose that sustaining teacher leadership requires enabling conditions that prioritize wellbeing.

The special issue also includes an article that explores the enactment of teacher leadership across the state of Nevada in the United States. Wiens and colleagues use large-scale survey data to reveal how access to supports for teacher leadership varied by school context—underscoring the need for targeted investment and systemic support. Brown and Friesen investigate how non-positional or informal teacher leaders supported new teachers within a large school district in Canada, emphasizing the importance of relational mentorship, resilience, and trust-building in the early years of the profession. One study situated in China examines the perceptions of teacher leadership. In this article, Liu and colleagues contribute insight into how teacher leadership is formed and understood in the Chinese context, offering new perspectives on the role of school conditions in shaping teachers' engagement with leadership practices. And finally, using findings from a multi-country research project involving seven nations (Brazil, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Malaysia, South Korea, Switzerland, and Uruguay), Campbell and colleagues demonstrate how teacher-led professional learning initiatives, focused on formative assessment, cultivated teacher leaders through peer mentorship and confidence building, highlighting the complexity of shared dimensions of teacher leadership across diverse education systems.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue offer a compelling portrait of teacher leadership as a dynamic, relational, and contextually situated practice that extends well beyond formal roles or titles. Across vastly different education systems and institutional structures, teacher leadership is shown to be shaped by system alignment, relational trust, opportunities for professional growth, and investments in wellbeing and human capital. The articles collectively affirm that teacher leadership is not merely a function of designation, but an enactment of influence, reciprocity, and collaboration. At the same time, the studies illuminate the persistent need for conceptual clarity, policy support, and research designs capable of capturing impact at scale. By bringing together diverse voices, methodologies, and locations, this

special issue not only advances the field's understanding of teacher leadership but also offers a call to action for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to better recognize and support the powerful, often unseen leadership contributions of teachers.

References

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