The Connotation, Issues, and Construction of Teacher Leadership in China at the Present Time

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Abstract: *In recent years, with the continuous advancement and development of the construction of the teacher team and school reform, teacher leadership has gradually become an important part of teacher culture and has attracted increasing attention from scholars. Teacher leadership is considered to be an important force in school reform. Under the background of the new era, teacher leadership is mainly restricted by two factors: organizational structure and professional barriers. This article discusses the optimization path of teacher teaching quality under the background of the new curriculum reform from three aspects: the implicit power, solid foundation, and external performance of teacher teaching quality.*

Keywords: *Leadership, Teacher, Construction*

1. Introduction

The development of education in the new era is inseparable from the transformation of schools. Teacher leadership is considered an important force in school transformation, and effective leadership is widely regarded as a key element in achieving school improvement.[1] Research has found that in the process of school development, teachers' leadership and management style are an important part of school culture, and school reform and development cannot be separated from the participation and implementation of teachers. The construction of school culture also depends on the improvement of each teacher's own cultural level. Without the participation and action of teachers, school transformation will be limited to form and slogans, and cannot truly bring substantial changes to the school. At the same time, the professional development of teachers also puts forward requirements for teacher leadership: teacher leadership can enable teachers to actively participate in discussions on teacher professionalism and put forward timely and effective suggestions and opinions to solve professional problems. It can be seen that teacher leadership has important practical significance for promoting teacher professional development. [2]

2. The Connotation and Composition of Teacher Leadership

2.1. Definition of Teacher Leadership

Regarding teacher leadership, there is no precise academic consensus yet. Scholars from both domestic and international contexts have provided definitions of the concept of "teacher leadership" from different perspectives and understandings: From the perspective of teacher professionalism, Ruth believes that teacher leadership is the ability of teachers to systematically accumulate and transmit knowledge, thereby enhancing their professional qualities in this process ; from the perspective of the roles teachers play, Katchmer and Moeller consider teacher leadership to be a relationship between individuals and groups, where individual teachers take on the role of leaders within the teacher community, contributing to the development of the group [3].

Chen Pan believes that teacher leadership refers to the decentralization of administrative power, allowing teachers to have the opportunity to participate in school management; on the teaching front, it grants teachers more power to develop their professional skills autonomously, and through their own efforts, influence and drive the development of other teachers [4]; Lu Nai Gui believes that the fundamental purpose of teacher leadership, achieved through enhancing interaction with other teachers and students, is to enhance the professionalism of teachers.

In summary, the current definition of teacher leadership mainly has two characteristics: first, from

the perspective of the teacher's role, teachers are not only simple course leaders and classroom managers, but also participants and leaders in school reform. Teachers can fully participate in activities, become participants and decision-makers in different events, and only when teachers' leadership roles are truly realized can their leadership be fully realized; second, from the perspective of the teacher group, teachers cannot only focus on their own personal development, but should also establish mutual trust and cooperation with their peers. Cooperation and sharing is the core of teacher leadership, and only when teachers establish a cooperative relationship of mutual trust and support with their peers can teacher leadership be effectively exerted.

2.2. The Composition of Teacher Leadership

What does teacher leadership include? Analysis from the concept of teacher leadership reveals that within the scope of teacher leadership activities in schools, the primary role of followers is students, followed by peers and leaders. Additionally, followers should also include the teacher themselves as a leader, because "self-dialogue" is the highest level of interpersonal interaction and an effective force for self-transformation. Therefore, the core elements of teacher leadership corresponding to followers should include four aspects that progress step by step: "developing oneself, teaching students, leading peers, and advising leaders." [5]

2.2.1. Developing Oneself: The Foundation of Teacher Leadership

The development of oneself in teacher leadership refers to the individual teacher shaping themselves according to the relevant requirements in the teacher standards, becoming a qualified and even excellent teacher. Since the condition of a teacher's professional quality is the foundation for the comprehensive development of students, the development of oneself should be at the center and foundation level of the core elements of teacher leadership. The development of oneself under teacher leadership should emphasize that teachers should understand and recognize the public's requirements and strive to achieve corresponding professional development through their own efforts.

2.2.2. Teaching Students: The Main Task of Teacher Leadership

The teacher is responsible for imparting knowledge, teaching skills, and resolving doubts. Teaching students is the teacher's duty. Even today, with the emphasis on developing teacher leadership, the professional level and teaching ability of teachers are still the most important qualities a teacher needs to cultivate. Teaching students to develop towards the goals of the curriculum, especially under the framework of "the Core Competencies of Chinese Students' Development," and to enable students to become "comprehensively developed individuals" from aspects such as cultural foundation, independent development, and social participation, is the main task of a teacher's work.

2.2.3. Leading Peers: A Higher Level of Teacher Leadership

Whether it is about developing oneself or teaching students, it revolves around the scope of the basic functions of teachers. The development of teacher leadership not only requires the professional abilities of teachers but also the recognition and affirmation of other members of the teacher group. The attention and focus of others in the teacher group cannot be separated from the positive impact generated by individual teachers in the process of developing themselves and teaching students. Therefore, leading peers based on excellent achievements in developing oneself and teaching students is a leadership quality that outstanding teachers should possess, which is at a higher level of the core elements of teacher leadership.

2.2.4. Staff Leadership: The Ultimate Purpose of Teacher Leadership

Generally, teachers only have a "leadership" role in the sense of teaching students and managing classes. In the process of school management and reform, there are specialized "leaders," and teachers mainly play the role of "informal leadership." Therefore, in terms of staff leadership, the role of teacher leadership is mainly to lead to the effective improvement of leadership decisions, which is an important force for promoting school development or educational reform, and it is also an ability that general teachers do not possess. Staff leadership belongs to the highest level of core elements of teacher leadership, and it is a level that teachers can reach only after gradually improving themselves, teaching students, and leading peers.

3. Key Issues in Cultivating Teacher Leadership

Developing teacher leadership is beneficial to both individual teacher development and school development. However, in order to truly play the role of teacher leadership in schools, some obstacles need to be overcome.

3.1. Organizational Barriers

Organizational barriers refer to the structural leadership model and the bureaucratic organizational form of schools that constrain or hinder the development of teacher leadership. Influenced by the Asian cultural environment that emphasizes hierarchy and seniority, factors that impede the development of teacher leadership include bureaucratism and hierarchical structures within schools. The primary leadership model currently adopted by schools is structural and top-down, which leads teachers to perceive a lack of status and formal authority in the school, hindering their leadership capabilities. At the same time, the bureaucratic organizational form of schools also impedes the development of teacher leadership. Traditional school organizations in our country are bureaucratic systems influenced by long-term bureaucratism, with a distinct hierarchical structure and clear division of job responsibilities. This hierarchical structure relies on authoritative leaders commanding followers, who have little say in executing curriculum tasks. This means an unequal distribution of power, limiting the development of teachers as leaders, as there is an asymmetric power relationship between high-level administrators and teachers in this bureaucratic hierarchical structure. Therefore, in such organizations, teachers cannot assume the role of leaders but are merely participants or executors, receiving "commands" and carrying out corresponding tasks, although they may have some involvement at the curriculum implementation level, they do not participate in decision-making.

3.2. Professional Barriers

Professional barriers as obstacles to the development of teacher leadership mainly refer to unfriendly relationships among peers or the lack of common values among teachers, leading to barriers in teacher leadership in team collaboration. The formation of such professional barriers often leads teachers to pursue individual goals and neglect peer collaboration when implementing leadership projects. Unless there are common values to support it, teacher leadership will not occur. This illustrates that common values among teachers are crucial for teacher peer collaboration, and these common values are first formed through common discussions, observations, and team teaching. Therefore, the work of teacher leadership in cooperative teams is crucial, so that they can make decisions together for school change. Teacher leadership not only needs to be fully utilized in a cooperative environment, but one of the tasks of teacher leadership should be to encourage the establishment of a cooperative culture in schools and the development of school common learning.

4. Pathways for Cultivating Teacher Leadership

Based on the above discussion on the connotation and dilemmas of teacher leadership, we can know that teacher leadership is not only manifested in some traits and abilities of teachers themselves, but also influenced or restricted by the school environment and the teacher group, and has characteristics such as contextuality and interactivity. Therefore, the path to improving teacher leadership needs to be decomposed from the perspective of the composition and dilemmas of teacher leadership.

4.1. Multi-party collaboration and strengthening top-level design

As mentioned earlier, one of the key obstacles to the cultivation of teacher leadership in our country is organizational obstacles. These obstacles have been long-standing and deeply rooted. Solving this difficult problem requires not only the efforts of schools and teachers but also assistance at the national level. Therefore, the cultivation of teacher leadership requires the joint collaboration of educational administration departments, schools, and teachers. Educational administration departments should carry out top-level design, take charge of the overall situation, formulate special plans for the cultivation of teacher leadership, and utilize the advantages of big data to build training and evaluation platforms. Currently, Western countries have all issued relevant policies on the cultivation of teacher leadership, while our country has not yet issued specific standards for teacher leadership. Therefore, it can be combined with the content of our country's teacher professional standards on teacher professional

development, while also learning from foreign experience, specifying the various leadership abilities that teachers need to possess, and refining the relevant indicators of teacher leadership according to the professional characteristics of teachers, improving the training program. In this process, the educational authorities should widely solicit opinions from experts, teachers, and other parties. Given the diversity of the teacher group, the training program should take into account the diverse development needs of teachers.

The school adjusts the training program based on the training methods stipulated in the special plan and the actual situation of the school. It formulates individual training programs according to the development stage, personality characteristics, and personal career planning of teachers. It also promptly opens various learning and training projects, strengthens communication among teachers within and between schools, and has relevant departments supervise the implementation of the plan. Specialized personnel are assigned to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan and provide feedback. Teachers should actively participate in the training content of the leadership development program stipulated by the leadership development plan, continuously improve their professional quality and leadership skills, and provide suggestions for improving the plan during the practical process, forming a closed loop of educational administration-school-teacher in terms of teacher leadership development.

4.2. Establish teacher leadership courses in teacher education

As a teacher educating students, I deeply realize that the pre-service training of teachers in China does not receive enough attention in both professional training and in-service development courses. Therefore, the training programs for master's and doctoral degrees in education in our country should consider offering at least one course on teacher leadership. In the "New Era Model Teacher and Model Principal Training Program" of the Ministry of Education, and in various projects such as the training of backbone teachers, it is necessary to include several topics on teacher leadership to help teachers recognize the important value of leadership, guide teachers to establish a sense of identity and leadership, and form concepts and methods of teacher leadership, thereby laying a cognitive foundation for the development of teacher leadership. In addition, in school management and research on teacher education, it is necessary to strengthen the research on teacher leadership, focus on refining the existing experiences of teacher leadership in the improvement of China's basic education schools, and strengthen theoretical summaries. It is also necessary to pay attention to the theoretical construction of Chinese-style teacher leadership under the concept of educational modernization and the modern governance concept of schools.

4.3. Principal's Focus on the Practice of Transformational School Leadership

The school principal, as the first leader of the school, deeply shapes the school culture and the space and methods of teacher participation, and their ideological concepts and management level directly affect the development of teacher leadership. Therefore, the principal needs to give teachers enough trust and support so that they have sufficient space and resources to exercise leadership. The cultivation of a collaborative culture and the principal's trust and support are key elements that influence teacher leadership practice in the school context.[6] The school should establish certain mechanisms to fully respect and protect teachers' rights to participate, express, and make decisions in their professional fields.

The principal should actively carry out transformational leadership practices around the concept of building a learning organization. Firstly, the school should have clear values and goals for establishing a learning organization. The principal, middle-level school leaders, and all teachers should have a correct understanding of the learning organization and truly believe in its value for the excellent development of the school and the exertion of teacher leadership, forming a common vision. Secondly, various opportunities for teacher communication and collaboration should be provided to give teachers the chance to exercise their leadership. This includes allowing outstanding teachers to take on the roles of research group leaders and project heads, while ensuring that all teachers have ample opportunities to demonstrate their abilities in their professional work. In professional activities, support should be given to teachers for public teaching and learning practices, critical reflection dialogues, and collaborative practices. Additionally, attention should be paid to shaping the culture of the learning organization, consolidating and praising shared values and significant improvements in the construction of the learning organization through rituals, stories, and other means.

4.4. Establishing a Learning Community to Enhance Teaching Skills and Academic Level

Establishing a teacher learning community is of great significance for the development of teacher leadership, which can maximize the improvement of teachers' teaching skills and academic level. In the past, teacher learning communities were influenced by the cultural view of artificial cooperation and the cultural view of factionalism. The former emphasizes that teacher cooperation is controlled by administrative power, aiming to meet the requirements of the bureaucratic system, while the latter divides teachers into many independent "groups," with close connections within the group but competition between groups. Both are difficult to reflect the autonomy and initiative of teachers as the main body of teacher culture. The teacher learning community should be a spontaneous and natural cooperative organization among teachers, where teachers should share goals, observe and learn from each other, help each other, and improve together.

Schools should provide teachers with opportunities for communication and free time, allowing them to establish teacher learning communities through various means (on-site or online) based on teaching challenges, personal interests, and daily activities. Teachers can make full use of the advantages of cooperative communities, actively participate in discussions, engage in self-reflection and group reflection, and help members grow in leadership in teaching and research. In addition, teachers can also cultivate some traits beneficial to the exercise of teacher leadership in the activities of learning communities, including a positive, enthusiastic, and humorous attitude towards life, a serious and stable work style, and the ability to listen and care for others. This is more likely to win the respect and trust of colleagues and is conducive to the exercise of their teacher leadership influence.

5. Conclusion

The fundamental aspect of educational modernization is the modernization of individuals, including the modernization of their concepts and abilities, as well as the modernization of systems and culture that adapt to individual modernization.[7] Teacher leadership is the core connotation of the modernization of the education team, which, through the full exploration and realization of teacher leadership potential, energizes the vitality of the teacher team, enhances teachers' sense of professional identity, belonging, and happiness, improves teachers' professional abilities, team awareness, and the spirit of exploring excellence, and creates a high-quality, professional, and innovative teacher team to provide a rich talent pool for the high-quality development of basic education.

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