



Teacher Leadership Research in China (2020–2024): Trends, Gaps, and Future Directions in Educational Development

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Abstract

In 2020, China officially released the Recommendations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives for 2035, reaffirming the nation's commitment to building a high-quality education system. This policy marks a new phase in China's educational modernization, prompting deeper academic investigations into teacher leadership. However, despite its significance, research on teacher leadership in China still faces challenges regarding focus and implementation. This study aims to analyze the development of teacher leadership research in China from 2020 to 2024, a period characterized by the nation's transition toward high-quality education. Using a systematic literature review methodology, this study identifies a fluctuating yet declining trend in publications on teacher leadership. Existing research predominantly focuses on theoretical exploration, conceptual clarification, and constructing theoretical frameworks, while empirical studies investigating practical applications remain scarce. Findings also indicate that studies on teacher leadership in higher education institutions, particularly within the framework of high-quality development, remain significantly underdeveloped. To address this gap, future research should integrate contemporary educational policies, expand the scope of inquiry, and diversify research themes. Strengthening the synergy between teacher leadership theory and practice is essential to supporting the construction of a high-quality education system in China.

Keywords: *Education modernization, High-quality development, Systematic literature review, Teacher leadership.*

A. Introduction

Since the 21st century, education in developed countries has entered a phase centered on high-quality development. Developing and implementing national strategies for high-quality education has become vital for enhancing human resource development and promoting sustainable economic growth (Wu, 2022). Similarly, China's education system is undergoing profound strategic, systemic, and structural transformations, transitioning from a focus on scale expansion to a stage oriented toward high-quality development. Against this backdrop, high-quality educational development has become a central theme in China's educational reform in the new era. Building a modernized education system aligned with a strong educational nation's vision requires the system to achieve high-quality development. This is essential for responding effectively to the challenges and demands posed by global technological and industrial

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revolutions, constructing cultural and scientific systems, and cultivating high-level innovative talent (Xi, 2022).

The concept of teacher leadership emerged during the educational reforms in the United States in the 1980s and has evolved within the framework of distributed leadership theory, emphasizing the interactions among leaders, followers, and their environments (Li, 2022). Within China's drive toward high-quality educational development, teacher leadership remains a key factor in advancing school reform and promoting students' holistic development (Liu, 2023). As educational system reforms address new demands, school organizational structures are optimized, and teachers' roles and evaluation criteria are adjusted accordingly. The high-quality development of the teaching workforce is essential for building a strong educational nation and a crucial guarantee for advancing educational modernization (Liu, 2023). From the perspective of high-quality development, particularly within the assessment and evaluation systems framework, the significance of teacher leadership is increasingly evident. Educational development faces numerous challenges, with teachers' leadership roles becoming more critical. As China continues to advance along the path of high-quality educational development, understanding the evolving dynamics of teacher leadership is essential for creating effective educational environments and systems (Yan&Shang,2024).

High-quality development centers on meeting the public's demand for quality education, emphasizing the synergy between equity and excellence in education (Liu, 2023). Within this framework, teachers' roles have shifted from traditional knowledge transmitters to leaders of educational reform and guarantors of educational quality. Teacher leadership is a key indicator of teachers' professional development and has a direct and profound impact on students' growth, which is intrinsically linked to improvements in educational quality (Weng&Lu,2024). Although research on teacher leadership in China began relatively late, its significance has been widely recognized, gradually becoming a focal point in educational management studies.

Responding to the demands of high-quality development, this study examines relevant literature from 2020 to 2024 in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. It systematically reviews the current state of research on teacher leadership in China, analyzes existing gaps, and explores future directions. The goal is to provide theoretical support for educational policy-making and practical implementation.

B. Methods

1. Research Design

This study adopts a library research approach, combined with library-based data collection methods, to systematically review and analyze the current state of teacher leadership research in the context of high-quality education development in China. Compared to empirical research, library research allows for the exploration of a broader scope of content within a shorter timeframe. It also enables the synthesis of existing academic achievements, ensuring the study's scientific rigor, systematic approach, and reliability (Kuhlthau,2004).

This study aims to reveal the main research hotspots, methodologies, and core topics in teacher leadership through a systematic review and analysis of literature from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database spanning 2020 to 2024. It will further identify gaps in the current body of research. For instance, findings suggest that teacher leadership research in China has primarily focused on foundational theoretical discussions, conceptual definitions, and theoretical framework construction. Empirical research on practical applications remains scarce, particularly within the framework of high-quality education development, where studies on teacher leadership in higher education institutions are still underexplored.

Document analysis will be used for data collection and critical analysis to examine the retrieved literature (Morgan,2022). The data sources include journal articles, dissertations, academic monographs, conference papers, and newspapers. The search range spans from 2020 to 2024, with "teacher leadership" as the core keyword. A total of 186 relevant studies have been identified, as illustrated in Figure 1. This study seeks to provide a theoretical foundation for the future development of teacher leadership research through systematic synthesis and critical analysis. It aims to offer practical insights for advancing the construction of high-quality education systems.



Figure 1. Advanced Search Interface on CNKI for Teacher Leadership Studies (2020–2024)

2. Literature Collection and Screening

Using "teacher leadership" as the search theme, the CNKI database is the primary data source. The search timeframe is from January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2024, yielding 186 valid documents. These include journal articles, dissertations, books, conference papers, newspapers, and edited publications. A secondary search among the 186 valid documents uses "high-quality" as a keyword under a "fuzzy" matching condition. This process identifies five relevant documents, including journal articles and conference papers, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Advanced Search Results on CNKI for Teacher Leadership and High-Quality Development (2020–2024)

3. Rationale for Selecting the 2020–2024 Period

As outlined in the abstract, introducing policies in 2020 to build a high-quality education system marked the beginning of a new phase in China's educational development. These policies have been comprehensively implemented throughout the education system.

This study focuses on the period from 2020 to 2024 for three primary reasons. First, this phase represents a critical period for implementing national policies and advancing the modernization of education governance. The progressive construction of a high-quality education system has provided a new institutional environment for teacher leadership development. Second, it marks a pivotal stage in China's transition from "scale expansion" to "quality enhancement" in education. As education reform shifts toward a quality-driven trajectory, the roles of teachers in teaching, research, and education management have undergone significant transformations. Third, teacher leadership's adaptability and developmental trends have become focal points of academic attention during this period. Within the context of high-quality education development, the leadership role of teachers in educational innovation, school transformation, and talent cultivation has become increasingly prominent.

Analyzing the evolution of teacher leadership during this period will help deepen our understanding of educational transformation in the context of high-quality development. It will also provide theoretical support and practical guidance for future education policymaking and practices, further advancing the modernization of education in China.

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Analysis of Publication Time and Volume

Through a statistical analysis of publications on "teacher leadership" over the past five years (2020–2024), it was observed that research output in the field of teacher leadership in China has exhibited a fluctuating downward trend, as shown in Figure 3 (excluding two newspaper articles mentioned earlier, for a total of 184 papers).

From the data, 2020 saw 55 published articles, reflecting significant attention to the theme of teacher leadership. This surge may be linked to global educational changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted a reassessment of educational leadership and teachers' roles. However, the number of publications sharply declined to 29 in 2021, rebounded to 39 in 2022, and increased to 43 in 2023, nearing the 2020 level, indicating renewed interest in teacher leadership. By contrast, publications in 2024 fell dramatically to 18, likely due to limitations in the data collection period or a waning research interest in the field. Despite brief recoveries, the number of publications on teacher leadership over the past five years has shown a fluctuating downward trend. This pattern suggests that external factors, policy changes, or shifts in research priorities may influence the research focus in this field.

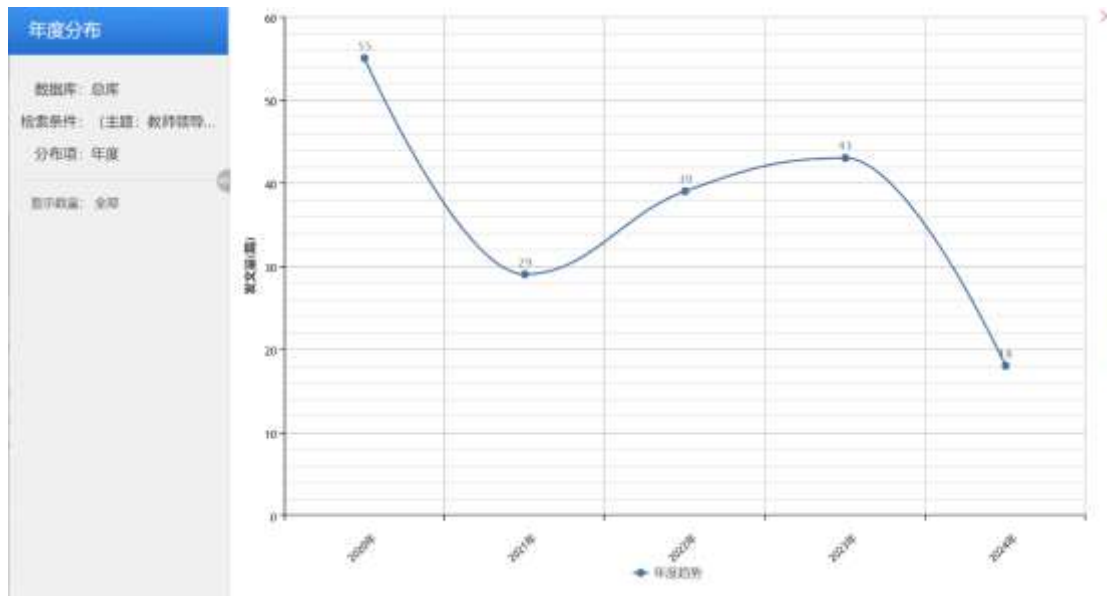


Figure 3. Annual Distribution of Publications on Teacher Leadership in CNKI (2020–2024)

2. Distribution of Research Themes

Keywords often reflect the focus of research themes. This study conducted keyword statistics and frequency analyses on the filtered literature, as shown in Figure 4. The findings reveal that significant attention has been given to developing and enhancing teacher leadership and strategies for its improvement (frequencies of 15, 13, 10, 7, 6, and 3, totaling 54 occurrences). Scholars have also explored teacher leadership in digitalization (with frequencies of 11 and 7, totaling 18 occurrences). In addition, some researchers have concentrated on teacher leadership at the elementary and secondary school levels, investigating its current state, influencing factors, and developmental pathways.

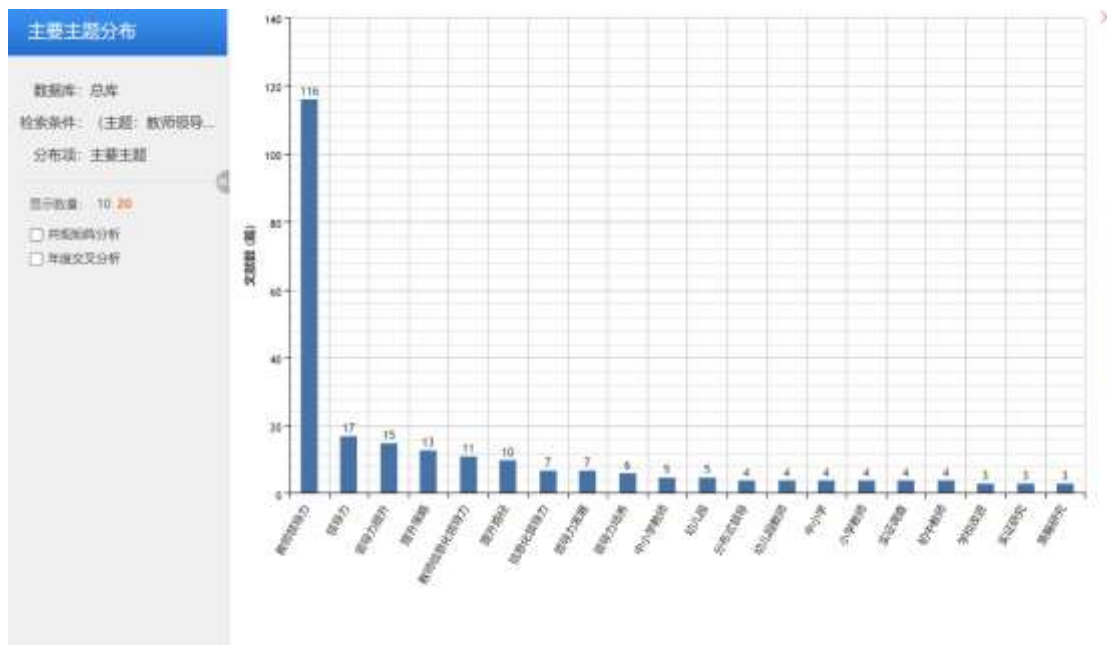


Figure 4. Distribution of Major Research Topics on Teacher Leadership in CNKI

3. Literature Review on Teacher Leadership from the Perspective of High-Quality Development

A review was conducted on five selected articles focusing on teacher leadership from the perspective of high-quality development. The findings are as follows:

Table 1. Pathways to Strengthen Teacher Leadership in the Era of Educational Modernization

1	Title	Strategies for Enhancing Primary School Teacher Leadership in the Context of High-Quality Educational Development
	Authors	Ding Sujie, Hao Chundong (2024)
	Method	Qualitative
	Sample	Literature
	Results	The study indicates that enhancing primary school teacher leadership is crucial for building a high-quality teaching workforce, promoting comprehensive student development, and facilitating smooth school operations. Current challenges include weak leadership awareness, insufficient subject-specific guidance, inadequate personal charisma, and limited opportunities for leadership. To address these issues, the study proposes the following strategies: optimizing teacher education leadership courses by drawing on international experiences; encouraging teachers to form learning communities to enhance subject-specific guidance; improving personal charisma through moral cultivation; and reforming leadership models to provide teachers with more opportunities to exercise leadership. These strategies emphasize the combination of intrinsic development and external support, empowering teachers through collaboration, capacity-building, and institutional innovation. This study provides theoretical and practical guidance for enhancing primary school teacher leadership, offering valuable insights for advancing high-quality basic education.
2	Title	Pathways to Enhance Teacher Leadership from the Perspective of Educational Modernization
	Authors	Wang Yujuan (2024)
	Method	Qualitative
	Sample	Literature
	Results	The study explores pathways to enhance teacher leadership within the framework of educational modernization, highlighting its critical role in advancing high-quality educational development. Teacher leadership is constructed across four dimensions: self-leadership, educational leadership, peer leadership, and advisory leadership. Self-leadership emphasizes professional identity and lifelong learning; educational leadership focuses on moral and instructional influence; peer leadership advocates collaboration and support among teachers; and advisory leadership reflects influence in school management, student development, and home-school collaboration. The study identifies challenges such as incomplete knowledge structures and insufficient proactive leadership awareness. To enhance teacher leadership, it is essential to foster a supportive school environment and systematically promote leadership development. This study provides theoretical and practical guidance for building a high-quality teaching workforce in the context of educational modernization.

3	Title	Research on Enhancing Teacher Leadership in Primary and Secondary Schools in the Context of High-Quality Education: An Empirical Investigation Based on 292 New Quality Schools in Chengdu
	Authors	Ma Li (2023)
	Method	Quantitative
	Sample	Teachers, Students
	Results	The study finds that the enhancement of teacher leadership is influenced by both intrinsic factors (e.g., leadership motivation, self-efficacy) and extrinsic factors (e.g., school incentive culture, organizational communication, collaborative learning). Leadership motivation and self-efficacy significantly positively impact teacher leadership, while school incentive culture, smooth organizational communication, and a collaborative learning atmosphere also play a significant role. The study proposes two pathways: "empowerment" and "capacity-building." Empowerment involves creating a culture of shared decision-making through school-based leadership development plans, while capacity-building focuses on establishing intra- and inter-school learning communities to promote self-directed learning and interdisciplinary reading. The study also emphasizes the importance of targeted teacher training to enhance practical capabilities. Overall, this research provides theoretical and practical guidance for improving teacher leadership, contributing to the advancement of high-quality basic education.
4	Title	Cultivating Teacher Leaders: The Mission and Responsibility of High-Level Normal Universities in Promoting Regional High-Quality Educational Development
	Authors	Lai Qing, Xu Jiao, Duan Suquan, Zuo Huang (2022)
	Method	Qualitative
	Sample	Literature
	Results	The literature highlights that as educational reforms deepen, high-level normal universities face challenges from comprehensive universities, leading to a decline in their traditional strengths in teacher training. Therefore, clarifying the goal of cultivating teacher leadership has become a key focus of the new normal education reform. Teacher leadership encompasses not only teaching abilities but also curriculum leadership, classroom management, research innovation, technological application, and reflective capabilities. Cultivating teacher leaders requires a clear political stance, cultural confidence, and moral responsibility, supported by comprehensive training in curriculum design, practical exercises, and evaluation systems. While teacher leadership research is well-established abroad, it remains underdeveloped in China, with rich practices but an incomplete theoretical framework. Challenges include limited opportunities for teacher participation in decision-making and insufficient leadership awareness. Future efforts should focus on optimizing teacher education systems to cultivate high-quality teacher leaders, thereby supporting regional high-quality educational development.
5	Title	A Three-Dimensional Model of Teacher Leadership: Conceptual Formation, Connotation, and Model Construction
	Authors	Sun Jie (2021)
	Method	Qualitative

	Sample	Literature
	Results	The study explores the conceptual formation, characteristics, and model construction of teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is not only the influence exerted by individual or collective teachers in school development but also a concept that transcends traditional teaching roles. The analysis reveals that the development of teacher leadership stems from national educational reform needs, with extensive research conducted in the U.S., U.K., and Canada, while China remains in a phase of practice preceding theory. The concept of teacher leadership challenges traditional school power structures, emphasizing the need for stronger organizational collaboration, decision-making, and coordination to promote high-quality school development. The study proposes a three-dimensional model of teacher leadership, encompassing classroom teaching, internal management, and external liaison. Classroom teaching leadership involves organizing and leading excellent teaching practices, emphasizing resource sharing and collaborative culture. Internal management focuses on teachers' participation in school decision-making and information dissemination. External liaison highlights teachers' roles in home-school collaboration, regional educational coordination, and resource integration. The study concludes that the core of teacher leadership lies in professional authority, collaborative sharing, and moral responsibility. Future research should refine leadership models for different subject areas to better advance the practice of teacher leadership.

A literature review has discovered that teacher leadership holds a significant position in the process of high-quality development and educational modernization, with a multidimensional construction. Teacher leadership is a crucial component of teacher professional development and a key factor in driving school reforms and improving education quality. Furthermore, a review of relevant literature over the past five years reveals that research on teacher leadership in higher education, viewed from the perspective of high-quality development, remains largely unexplored, with most studies focusing on primary and secondary school teachers. This opens up substantial opportunities for future research on teacher leadership in higher education institutions.

The Connotation and Multidimensional Construction of Teacher Leadership

A statistical analysis of literature over the past five years shows that the connotation of teacher leadership has been explained from multiple dimensions, with thematic research using this as a keyword reaching 116 occurrences (see Figure 4). The literature indicates that teacher leadership is not merely a traditional management capability but refers to teachers' comprehensive influence in education and teaching, school management, peer collaboration, and home-school cooperation. Self-leadership, educational leadership, peer leadership, and advisory leadership are the four dimensions that construct the connotation of teacher leadership, highlighting the multiple roles of teachers in self-development, student cultivation, team collaboration, and school management (Wang, 2024). Sun (2021) proposed a teacher leadership model with three dimensions: classroom teaching, internal management, and external communication, further refining the forms of teacher leadership. This model emphasizes teachers' organizational collaboration in classroom teaching, decision-making and advisory capabilities in school management, and planning and coordination in external communications. These multidimensional constructions demonstrate that teacher leadership extends beyond teaching abilities in the classroom to encompass a broad range of influences both within and outside the school.

The Current Status and Challenges of Teacher Leadership

Although the importance of teacher leadership has been widely recognized, its development still faces numerous challenges. First, there is a lack of awareness of teacher leadership, with some teachers' understanding still confined to traditional management and a lack of proactive leadership awareness. Ding and Hao (2024) pointed out that some primary school teachers lack leadership knowledge and subject expertise, making it difficult to play a leadership role within teams. Second, the space for teacher leadership is limited, as the hierarchical school management model restricts teachers' autonomy and participation in decision-making. Wang (2024) also mentioned that the vertical hierarchical model of education management in China has led to a lack of teacher leadership in professional communities and school development. Additionally, the time pressure and heavy teaching workloads teachers face further hinder their leadership, especially when dealing with complex educational environments, where teachers often struggle to balance teaching and leadership responsibilities.

Factors Affecting Teacher Leadership

The enhancement of teacher leadership is influenced by various factors, both internal to the individual teacher and external, such as the school environment. First, teachers' self-efficacy and willingness to lead are important internal factors affecting their leadership. Sun (2021) found that teachers' self-efficacy and willingness to lead significantly positively impact their leadership. The more confident teachers are and willing to engage in school management, the stronger their leadership performance becomes. Second, the school's environment and culture are key in developing teacher leadership. A supportive school culture, smooth organizational communication, and a collaborative learning atmosphere positively influence teacher leadership. For example, Ding and Hao (2024) emphasized that school administrators should reform leadership models, grant teachers more decision-making power, and create a supportive school culture to promote teacher leadership development.

Paths for Enhancing Teacher Leadership in the Context of High-Quality Development

Based on a systematic analysis of relevant literature, it is clear that enhancing teacher leadership requires a multi-level approach, especially in the context of high-quality development. The path to enhancing teacher leadership involves not only the individual teacher's self-development but also the support of the school's organizational culture and the optimization of the external environment. The following explores the paths for enhancing teacher leadership from three aspects: individual teachers, school organizations, and external collaboration, considering the context of high-quality development and educational modernization.

First, teachers should focus on cultivating self-leadership, adopting a lifelong learning mindset, and enhancing their professional competence and leadership abilities. Wang (2024) proposed that teachers should enhance their professional identity and learning capabilities through self-guidance and self-motivation, thereby improving their self-leadership. Specifically, teachers should engage in reflective practice, participate in professional development courses and academic research, and continuously enhance their teaching ability, research capabilities, and innovative thinking. Additionally, teachers should focus on cultivating their political identity and leadership in values, strengthening cultural confidence and moral leadership, and becoming role models for students' moral development and values.

Second, as the main arena for teacher leadership, schools must provide organizational cultural support and empowerment for teachers. Sun (2021) recommended that schools adopt a distributed leadership model to break down traditional hierarchical management, granting teachers more autonomy and opportunities for decision-making participation. Specifically, schools should create a supportive organizational culture that encourages teachers to participate in school management and decision-making, thus enhancing their leadership in classroom

teaching, internal management, and external communication. For example, schools can establish teacher leadership development committees, conduct leadership training programs for teachers, and set up leadership reward mechanisms to inspire teachers' leadership potential. Additionally, schools should focus on building an incentive culture, fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility among teachers through equal dialogue between principals and teachers, and a collaborative learning atmosphere among teachers.

Furthermore, enhancing teacher leadership relies on individual and school efforts and requires collaborative progress through peer collaboration and home-school cooperation. Ding and Hao (2024) emphasized that teachers should spontaneously form learning communities to improve their disciplinary leadership and teamwork through peer collaboration and resource sharing. Specifically, teachers can engage in collective lesson planning, teaching discussions, and research projects to explore educational issues with colleagues, sharing experiences and resources to create a collaborative, win-win teacher culture. In addition, teachers should enhance their educational leadership and advisory capabilities through home-school cooperation. For example, teachers can use parent meetings and home-school communication platforms to discuss students' growth with parents, fostering a collaborative environment for home-school cooperation in student development.

Enhancing teacher leadership requires a more systematic and holistic approach in the context of high-quality development and educational modernization. Lai et al. (2022) noted that the connotation of a leadership-oriented teacher goes beyond traditional teaching skills and emphasizes the teacher's comprehensive influence in education and teaching, school management, peer collaboration, and home-school cooperation. Key competencies include political identity and leadership in values, cultural confidence and moral leadership, teaching skills and curriculum leadership, classroom management and leadership, research competence and innovative leadership, technical competence and practical leadership, as well as evaluative competence and reflective leadership. Cultivating these key competencies requires the joint efforts of individual teachers, school organizations, and the external environment.

Wang (2024) particularly emphasized the systematic and holistic nature of enhancing teacher leadership in the context of educational modernization. The article suggests that enhancing teacher leadership requires not only the efforts of the individual teacher but also the cultivation and improvement of the school's humanistic environment. Specifically, teachers should enhance their self-leadership, strengthen their professional identity and learning capabilities, and become lifelong learning models. Meanwhile, schools should empower and motivate teachers, creating a supportive organizational culture that encourages teacher participation in school management and decision-making. Additionally, teachers should improve their educational leadership and advisory capabilities through peer collaboration and home-school cooperation, promoting the overall development of schools.

D. Conclusion

Based on the author's systematic review and analysis of relevant literature over the past five years, it has been found that research on teacher leadership in higher education from the perspective of high-quality development is still in its early stages in China. However, the study reveals the significant position of teacher leadership in the processes of high-quality development and educational modernization, along with its multidimensional construction. The research demonstrates that the connotation of teacher leadership has expanded beyond traditional management capabilities to encompass teachers' comprehensive influence in education and teaching, school management, peer collaboration, and home-school cooperation. Multidimensional constructions, such as self-leadership, educational leadership, peer leadership, and advisory leadership, as well as the three-dimensional model of classroom teaching, internal

management, and external communication, further refine the forms of teacher leadership, showing that it is not limited to teaching abilities within the classroom but also covers a broad range of influences both within and outside the school.

Nevertheless, the development of teacher leadership still faces numerous challenges, including weak awareness of leadership, limited opportunities for exercise, and constraints imposed by time pressures and heavy teaching workloads. The enhancement of teacher leadership is influenced by various factors, including individual teachers' self-efficacy and leadership willingness, as well as external factors such as the school's incentive culture, organizational communication effectiveness, and collaborative learning atmosphere. To effectively enhance teacher leadership, a systematic approach is required, involving individual self-development, the creation of a supportive school culture, and peer collaboration. Teachers should enhance their professional identity and learning capacity through self-guidance and self-motivation. Schools should adopt distributed leadership models, granting teachers greater autonomy and opportunities for decision-making participation. Collaborative learning among teachers is also a crucial pathway to enhancing leadership.

Furthermore, in the context of educational modernization and high-quality development, the enhancement of teacher leadership requires not only the individual efforts of teachers but also the cultivation and improvement of the school's humanistic environment. Teachers should enhance their self-leadership to become models of lifelong learning. Schools should empower and motivate teachers, creating a supportive organizational culture. Teachers should also improve their leadership through peer collaboration and home-school cooperation, promoting the overall development of the school. Future research could further explore how policy support and institutional innovations can provide broader space and more effective guarantees for teacher leadership development.

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