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TEACHER LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE: A REVIEW OF KEY DIMENSIONS

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Abstract: *This narrative review synthesises evidence on teacher leadership and educational performance to clarify how leadership practices contribute to school improvement, teacher practice and student outcomes. The review focuses on instructional leadership, distributed leadership, teacher leadership, collective teacher efficacy and organisational routines as key dimensions in the leadership-performance relationship. Evidence from empirical studies, meta-analyses and programme evaluations suggests that teacher leadership rarely improves performance through isolated individual action. Instead, its influence is typically mediated by teacher collaboration, professional learning communities, shared instructional routines, collective efficacy, role clarity and principal support. Teacher leadership is most effective when school leaders protect collaborative time, distribute authority meaningfully, provide middle-leader support, and align teacher-led initiatives with school improvement priorities. However, the evidence also shows that effects on student achievement are conditional, context-sensitive and often delayed. Variations in school readiness, resources, governance, teacher capacity and leadership stability affect whether teacher leadership produces measurable educational gains. The review concludes that teacher leadership should be understood as a performance-oriented, collective and school-embedded practice rather than a symbolic role. Future research should employ validated leadership measures, longitudinal mediation models, multi-informant data and stronger programme evaluations to clarify causal pathways between teacher leadership and educational performance.*

Keywords: *teacher leadership, educational performance, school improvement, professional learning communities, teacher practice*

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Introduction

School systems increasingly require teachers to contribute beyond classroom delivery by leading instructional improvement, mentoring peers, facilitating professional learning communities, and participating in curriculum and assessment decisions. This development has made teacher leadership an important construct in educational performance research. Rather than viewing leadership only as the work of principals, recent scholarship treats leadership as a set of distributed practices enacted by principals, middle leaders and teachers across organisational routines (Spillane, 2015; Shen et al., 2019). This perspective is important because educational performance is rarely produced by a single leader or intervention. It emerges from the interaction between leadership focus, teacher capability, collaboration, school culture, governance, and instructional routines.

The review is guided by the title Teacher Leadership and Educational Performance: A Review of Key Dimensions and Future Research Directions. It aims to synthesise major leadership dimensions associated with educational performance and to identify how teacher leadership contributes to school effectiveness, teacher practice and student learning. The paper is intentionally narrative rather than meta-analytic because the evidence base is heterogeneous in design, setting, leadership measures and performance outcomes. Some studies focus on teacher practice and organisational improvement, whereas others examine student achievement, collective teacher efficacy or leadership development programmes (Ninković & Knežević Florić, 2024; Tan, Gao, & Shi, 2022).

The central argument is that teacher leadership has performance value when it is embedded in coherent school improvement systems. Teacher leadership is not merely a title or delegation of tasks. It becomes educationally meaningful when teachers are given authority, time, knowledge, collaborative structures and evidence-use routines to influence instruction beyond their own classrooms. Therefore, this review examines teacher leadership through five connected dimensions: instructional leadership, distributed leadership, teacher-led professional learning, collective teacher efficacy, and organisational readiness. These dimensions are then linked to performance outcomes and future research needs.

Review Method and Scope

This paper adopts a narrative review approach to synthesise empirical, meta-analytic and programme-evaluation literature on teacher leadership and educational performance. A narrative review is appropriate where the aim is to clarify concepts, organise evidence across diverse methods, and develop future research directions rather than calculate a pooled effect size. The review prioritises studies that examine leadership practices, mediating mechanisms and school outcomes, including instructional leadership, distributed leadership, collective leadership, professional learning communities, teacher collaboration, principal support and student achievement.

The review gives greater attention to studies that model indirect pathways between leadership and outcomes because leadership effects are often mediated by teacher motivation, collaboration, collective efficacy and instructional practice. Systematic evidence indicates that leadership-to-performance relationships are seldom direct; they are usually transmitted through school conditions and teacher-level processes (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Ninković & Knežević Florić, 2024; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011). Programme evaluations are also considered because they show how teacher leadership can be developed under real implementation conditions (Ma et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2023).

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Conceptualising Teacher Leadership and Educational Performance

Teacher leadership refers to teacher-initiated or teacher-enacted practices that influence school improvement beyond the individual classroom. These practices include peer mentoring, facilitation of professional learning communities, curriculum co-design, assessment leadership, peer observation, coaching, induction support and collaborative action research. Teacher leadership differs from ordinary teacher participation because it involves influence, instructional improvement and contribution to collective capacity. However, teacher leadership remains connected to principal leadership because principals often provide the conditions, legitimacy and resources that enable teachers to lead (Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer, & Lichon, 2015; Lynch et al., 2025).

Educational performance is also multidimensional. It includes student achievement, student learning outcomes, teaching effectiveness, school improvement, teacher commitment, organisational capacity and equity-related outcomes. This broader view is necessary because leadership may first change professional routines and teacher practice before measurable gains appear in standardised student outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that leadership effects vary by outcome type, with stronger and more immediate effects often found for teacher and organisational outcomes than for student achievement (Tan et al., 2022). Therefore, teacher leadership should be evaluated through both proximal outcomes such as collaboration, efficacy and instructional improvement, and distal outcomes such as achievement and school effectiveness.

Instructional leadership remains a central reference point in this field. It involves setting instructional goals, monitoring teaching and learning, supporting professional development and creating conditions for quality instruction. Historically, instructional leadership was associated with principal authority. Recent research, however, shows movement toward integrated models in which principals shape the instructional environment while teachers enact and lead improvement within classrooms and professional teams (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Gurr, Karakose, Tülübaş, & Polat, 2025). This shift provides the conceptual bridge between teacher leadership and educational performance.

Key Dimensions of Teacher Leadership

The first dimension is instructional focus. Teacher leadership is performance-oriented when it centres on improving teaching and learning rather than on administrative assistance alone. Teachers contribute to instructional improvement when they lead lesson study, analyse student work, share classroom strategies, and guide peers in curriculum and assessment practices. Evidence shows that leadership influences student learning through the improvement of the instructional environment, making the quality and consistency of teaching a central pathway (Heck & Hallinger, 2014).

The second dimension is distributed and collective leadership. Distributed leadership describes the enactment of leadership by multiple actors through roles, relationships and organisational routines. It does not mean simple delegation. Effective distribution requires role clarity, trust, shared goals and routines that coordinate the work of principals, middle leaders and teachers (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Hulsbos, van Langevelde, Evers, & Martens, 2025). Collective leadership extends this idea by treating leadership capacity as a school-level property. A validated collective leadership measure developed by Shen et al. (2019) shows the value of assessing principal and teacher contributions together rather than separating them artificially.

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The third dimension is professional collaboration. Teacher leadership is commonly enacted through professional learning communities, peer observation, mentoring and collaborative action research. Such activities deprivatise classroom practice and make teaching discussable, observable and improvable. Ketterlin-Geller et al. (2015) emphasise the role of administrators in advocating for teacher collaboration, while Lynch et al. (2025) show that action research communities can support whole-school teaching improvement when collaboration is linked to data-informed inquiry.

The fourth dimension is collective teacher efficacy. Collective teacher efficacy refers to teachers' shared belief that they can organise and execute actions that improve student outcomes. It is a critical mediator because teacher leadership depends not only on formal structures but also on teachers' shared confidence and commitment. A cross-cultural meta-analysis found a strong relationship between school leadership and collective teacher efficacy, with instructional leadership showing particularly important influence (Çoğaltay & Boz, 2023). Teacher leadership can therefore be understood as both a contributor to and a product of collective efficacy.

The fifth dimension is organisational readiness. Schools differ in their capacity to absorb and sustain teacher-led improvement. Readiness involves alignment with school goals, teacher capability, engagement, resource availability and supportive routines. Lynch et al. (2019) describe alignment, capability and engagement as key readiness factors in school improvement. Without such readiness, teacher leadership may become symbolic, overburden teachers or remain disconnected from performance improvement.

Table 1: Key Dimensions of Teacher Leadership and Educational Performance

Dimension	Main Focus	Performance Pathway	Key Supporting Citations
Instructional focus	Goals, curriculum, pedagogy, feedback and monitoring of teaching and learning	Strengthens the instructional environment and consistency of classroom practice	Day et al. (2016); Heck and Hallinger (2014); Gurr et al. (2025)
Distributed and collective leadership	Leadership functions shared among principals, middle leaders and teachers	Builds organisational capacity and reduces dependence on a single formal leader	Spillane (2015); Harris and DeFlaminis (2016); Shen et al. (2019)
Teacher-led professional learning	PLCs, peer observation, mentoring, curriculum co-design and collaborative inquiry	Deprivatises practice and supports continuous improvement across classrooms	Ketterlin-Geller et al. (2015); Lynch et al. (2025); Roberts et al. (2023)
Collective teacher efficacy	Shared belief that teachers can influence student learning	Mediates leadership effects through commitment, collaboration and instructional confidence	Çoğaltay and Boz (2023); Hammad et al. (2024)

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Organisational readiness	Alignment, capability, engagement, routines and resource support	Moderates whether teacher leadership becomes sustainable and performance-oriented	Lynch et al. (2019); Hulsbos et al. (2025)

Source: Authors' Synthesis Based On The Reviewed Literature

Mechanisms Linking Teacher Leadership to Educational Performance

The literature suggests that teacher leadership affects educational performance mainly through indirect mechanisms (Shand & Goddard, 2025; Hammad et al.,2024; Heck & Hallinger, 2024; Spillane et al., 2011; Thoonen et al., 2011). The first mechanism is improvement of the instructional environment. Principals and teacher leaders influence performance by clarifying learning priorities, supporting consistent instructional routines and creating opportunities for teachers to improve practice. Longitudinal modelling by Heck and Hallinger (2014) indicates that leadership affects student learning through school-level instructional conditions, not only through direct leader action.

The second mechanism is teacher professional learning. Teacher leadership strengthens professional learning when teachers engage in collaborative inquiry, peer feedback, curriculum development and reflective practice. Thoonen et al. (2011) found that leadership practices affect teachers' professional learning and motivation, which then influence teaching practice. This supports the view that performance gains depend on whether leadership changes what teachers know, value and do in classrooms.

The third mechanism is collaboration and social capital. Teacher-led professional learning communities create relational and practical channels for sharing expertise. Shand and Goddard (2025) show that teacher collaboration is associated with changes in instructional practice, instructional climate and social relations. Collaboration is not automatically productive; it requires clear focus, data use, trust and disciplined routines. Nevertheless, when structured well, collaboration enables teacher leadership to spread expertise across classrooms rather than leaving improvement dependent on isolated individuals.

The fourth mechanism is data-informed organisational routines. Spillane, Parise, and Sherer (2011) argue that organisational routines can connect policy and administration to the technical core of teaching. Routines such as observation cycles, data meetings, peer review and progress monitoring help translate leadership intentions into classroom practice. Data use can support improvement when used formatively, although it may be misused if reduced to compliance or punitive accountability (Militello, Bass, Jackson, & Wang, 2013).

The fifth mechanism is teacher commitment and efficacy. Teacher leadership can strengthen teachers' sense of professional agency, while leadership support can increase collective capacity and commitment. Hammad, Polatcan, and Morad (2024) show that teacher leadership relates to collective efficacy and teacher commitment through mediated pathways. These findings suggest that teacher leadership improves performance when it activates motivational and collective professional resources.

Performance-Based Synthesis Framework

Based on the reviewed literature, teacher leadership can be synthesised as a performance system involving inputs, processes, mediators and outcomes. The main inputs are principal support, role clarity, teacher capability, collaborative time, middle-leader facilitation and district

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scaffolding. These inputs do not improve performance on their own; they become effective when translated into school-level processes such as professional learning communities, peer observation, mentoring, curriculum co-design and data-informed inquiry. This process orientation is consistent with studies showing that leadership must be embedded in routines and daily instructional practice to influence learning outcomes (Spillane et al., 2011; Thoonen et al., 2011).

The mediating layer of the framework is especially important. Teacher leadership appears to influence educational performance through collaboration, professional learning, collective teacher efficacy, teacher commitment and instructional coherence. These mediators explain why some leadership interventions improve teacher practice before achievement gains become visible. The framework therefore cautions against judging teacher leadership only through short-term examination outcomes. Early indicators such as stronger collaborative routines, greater teacher confidence, improved instructional feedback and more systematic use of student data may be necessary precursors to later performance improvement (Çoğaltay & Boz, 2023; Ninković & Knežević Florić, 2024).

The outcome layer should include both teacher-level and student-level results. Teacher-level outcomes include improved teaching practice, professional commitment, innovation, peer learning and leadership capacity. Student-level outcomes include academic achievement, learning engagement, equity of participation and school effectiveness. This layered view is important because research indicates that leadership effects are often stronger for teacher and organisational outcomes than for student outcomes, particularly in the short term (Tan et al., 2022).

The framework also recognizes moderators. School socioeconomic context, resources, teacher experience, leadership stability, policy autonomy and organisational readiness influence whether teacher leadership produces meaningful performance gains. For example, instructional leadership may be especially important in disadvantaged or under-resourced contexts, but only when schools have the capability and engagement to enact improvement (Lynch et al., 2019; Tan, 2018).

In practical terms, a performance-based teacher leadership framework should ask four questions: what instructional problem is being addressed; who is leading the improvement work; what routines and evidence are used to monitor progress; and which teacher and student outcomes are expected. These questions help prevent teacher leadership from becoming symbolic or administrative and keep it connected to educational performance.

Implementation Conditions and Contextual Moderators

Teacher leadership is highly context-sensitive. The same leadership practice may produce different outcomes depending on school culture, resource availability, governance arrangements, teacher experience and student background. Research on instructional leadership suggests that leadership may have compensatory effects in disadvantaged or resource-constrained schools when it strengthens teacher morale, autonomy and instructional management (Tan, 2018; Tan, Liu, & Wong, 2020). However, such effects are not automatic. They depend on how leadership interacts with local constraints and capacities.

Principal support is one of the most consistent implementation conditions. Principals enable teacher leadership by providing role clarity, protected collaborative time, trust, access to data,

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and authority to lead instructional work. When principals fail to protect time or distribute authority meaningfully, teacher leadership may increase workload without improving instruction. Eckert (2019) shows that collective leadership development depends on principal support, relational trust and teacher capacity. Similarly, Hulsbos et al. (2025) argue that different manifestations of distributed leadership require different leader behaviours, from structural coordination to relational facilitation.

Middle leaders also play a bridging role. Heads of department, subject coordinators and assistant principals translate school priorities into teacher support, professional learning and classroom routines. Role ambiguity, however, reduces their effectiveness. Lipscombe, Grice, Tindall-Ford, and De-Nobile (2020) show that middle leadership requires clearer professional standards, position design and targeted development. Without such support, middle leaders may be caught between managerial tasks and instructional leadership responsibilities.

District and system leadership are also important. District offices can support teacher leadership by providing training, facilitating professional learning networks and aligning accountability with school improvement. Voelkel, Johnson, and Nadeem (2023) found that district office leadership affects the implementation of site-level teacher collaborative teams. At policy level, centralised accountability may constrain teacher agency if it narrows curriculum and professional discretion, while well-designed decentralisation can support networks and distributed improvement (Bush, 2016; Greany, 2015).

Leadership stability is another moderator. Principal turnover disrupts instructional coherence and can increase teacher attrition. Miller (2013) found that student achievement declines after principal turnover before recovering over time, while DeMatthews, Knight, and Shin (2022) show that principal turnover is linked to teacher attrition. These findings imply that teacher leadership strategies need stable leadership conditions and succession planning to sustain performance gains.

Practical Implications

For school leaders, the review suggests that teacher leadership should be designed as part of the school's performance improvement strategy. It should not be added as an informal expectation without time, authority and resources. Leaders should identify priority instructional problems, create teacher leadership roles aligned with those priorities, protect collaboration time and use data to guide inquiry. Professional learning communities should focus on specific evidence of student learning rather than general discussion.

For teachers, the findings highlight the importance of collaborative professionalism. Teacher leadership requires teachers to share practice, mentor peers, lead inquiry and engage with evidence. However, teachers also need support to develop facilitation, coaching and data literacy skills. Teacher leaders should not be selected only because of seniority or examination results. They require preparation in adult learning, communication, peer feedback and school improvement processes.

For policymakers and district leaders, teacher leadership should be supported through clear career pathways, role descriptions, middle-leader development and school-level professional learning infrastructure. Accountability systems should reward collaborative improvement and capacity building, not only final examination outcomes. System leaders should also monitor

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principal workload and wellbeing because leadership stress and turnover may weaken the conditions needed for teacher-led improvement.

Future Research Directions

First, future research should strengthen measurement. The field requires validated instruments that distinguish teacher leadership, distributed leadership, instructional leadership and collective leadership while still allowing analysis of their interaction. Shen et al. (2019) provide a useful direction through a validated collective leadership instrument, but wider cross-cultural use and adaptation are needed.

Second, stronger longitudinal designs are required. Many studies use cross-sectional survey designs, making it difficult to determine whether leadership causes improvement or whether higher-performing schools simply report stronger leadership. Future studies should measure leader actions, teacher collaboration, instructional practice and student outcomes at separate time points. Time-lagged mediation models would help clarify how leadership effects develop over time (Ninković & Knežević Florić, 2024).

Third, more programme evaluations are needed. Teacher leadership interventions should be tested with clear implementation data, fidelity monitoring, comparison groups and follow-up periods long enough to detect delayed student outcomes. Evaluations such as Ma et al. (2024) and Roberts et al. (2023) show that programme effects can be measured, but more studies are required across different school systems and contexts.

Fourth, future work should examine equity and context. Teacher leadership may operate differently in high-resource and low-resource schools, rural and urban settings, and centralised and decentralised systems. Research should identify which teacher leadership practices are transferable and which must be locally adapted. This is especially important for systems seeking to use teacher leadership to reduce achievement gaps and improve inclusive education.

Finally, future research should integrate leadership wellbeing and retention. The effectiveness of teacher leadership depends partly on stable and supportive school leadership. Studies on principal stress, turnover and teacher attrition suggest that leadership sustainability is a performance issue, not merely a human resource concern (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Kraft, Marinell, & Shen-Wei Yee, 2016).

Research Priority	Recommended Approach	Expected Contribution
Measurement validity	Use validated multi-informant instruments that measure principal, teacher and collective leadership.	Improves comparability across studies and reduces construct confusion.
Longitudinal mechanisms	Measure leader actions, teacher collaboration, classroom practice and student outcomes across several waves.	Clarifies how and when teacher leadership affects performance.
Programme evaluation	Apply quasi-experimental or cluster-randomised designs with fidelity monitoring and follow-up.	Strengthens causal claims about teacher-leadership interventions.

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Context and equity	Compare leadership effects across school type, resources, socioeconomic context and governance systems.	Identifies which practices are transferable and which require local adaptation.
Leadership sustainability	Integrate principal wellbeing, turnover and teacher attrition into leadership-performance models.	Connects leadership stability with long-term school improvement.

Source: Authors' Synthesis Based On Methodological Gaps In The Reviewed Literature.

Conclusion

This review shows that teacher leadership is a key dimension of educational performance when it is understood as a collective, instructional and school-embedded practice. Its contribution lies not only in assigning teachers to leadership roles but in enabling teachers to influence instructional improvement through collaboration, professional learning, data use and collective efficacy. The evidence indicates that leadership effects are usually indirect, mediated by teacher practice and organisational conditions, and moderated by context, resources and governance.

The strongest implication is that teacher leadership should be treated as part of a coherent performance system. Principals, middle leaders, teachers and districts must work together to create the time, trust, routines and capability needed for teacher-led improvement. When these conditions are present, teacher leadership can strengthen teaching quality, school improvement and, over time, student outcomes. Future studies should use stronger measurement, longitudinal designs and implementation evidence to clarify how teacher leadership can be developed and sustained across diverse educational contexts.

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