



TEACHERS AS PEDAGOGICAL LEADERS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF
DISTRIBUTED AND COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

¹Fouzia Bashir

¹M Phil Education, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan
shezray.shiekh@yahoo.com

Abstract

This systematic review investigates the evolving role of teachers as pedagogical leaders within the frameworks of distributed and collaborative leadership. Drawing on 54 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2025, the review synthesizes how teacher leadership is conceptualized, enacted, and supported across diverse educational contexts. Using PRISMA 2020 guidelines and Tranfield’s structured review method, the study identifies five key thematic domains: conceptualizations of pedagogical leadership, practical leadership enactments, contextual enablers and constraints, theoretical models, and research gaps. The findings reveal a growing emphasis on co-planning, mentoring, professional learning communities, and shared decision-making as defining practices of teacher-led leadership. However, the review also uncovers limitations in current literature, including conceptual ambiguity, limited empirical work in Global South settings, and insufficient integration of digital leadership practices. Implications for policy, teacher training, and future research are discussed, with recommendations to embed leadership development into teacher preparation and to promote inclusive, context-responsive leadership frameworks. This review contributes to a deeper understanding of how empowering teachers as pedagogical leaders can enhance school improvement, equity, and instructional innovation.

Keywords: Teacher leadership; Pedagogical leadership; Distributed leadership; Collaborative leadership; Professional learning communities; Instructional leadership; Systematic literature review

Article Details:

Received on 16 Sept 2025
Accepted on 12 Oct 2025
Published on 14 Oct 2025

Corresponding Authors*:

INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical leadership has traditionally been associated with formal leadership roles, such as those of principals or head teachers. However, with the evolution of educational paradigms and increasing emphasis on collaborative professionalism, the role of teachers as pedagogical leaders has gained significant academic and policy attention (Lumpkin et al., 2014; Muijs & Harris, 2007). This shift marks a transition from hierarchical to distributed leadership models, where teachers are seen not only as instructional deliverers but also as influencers of school-wide teaching and learning practices. The distributed leadership model, as conceptualized by Spillane et al. (2001), redefines leadership as a shared, interactive process involving multiple agents rather than being confined to formal authority. Teachers are at the heart of this movement, engaging in curriculum planning, mentoring peers, leading professional learning communities, and shaping pedagogical norms (Harris, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Their proximity to the classroom gives them unique insight into learner needs, curriculum effectiveness, and teaching methodologies, making their leadership pedagogically grounded and contextually responsive (Rafiq et al., 2025).

Alongside distributed leadership, the emphasis on collaborative leadership has further redefined school culture, promoting shared responsibility, relational trust, and co-construction of knowledge among staff (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Teachers who lead collaboratively contribute to school improvement by fostering collegial relationships, joint problem-solving, and professional dialogue. This model counters the traditional view of teachers as passive recipients of policy or top-down reform and recognizes their agency in shaping school environments (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In today's complex educational settings, teachers as pedagogical leaders serve as linchpins between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Their involvement in leadership processes directly affects instructional quality, school climate, and professional learning. The increasing recognition of teacher agency in educational leadership reflects global educational reforms emphasizing school-based autonomy, capacity-building, and innovation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; OECD, 2013). However, despite growing discourse, there remains a need for coherent synthesis on how teacher leadership is enacted, facilitated, or constrained in diverse educational contexts.

Problem Statement

While the literature on teacher leadership has grown over the past two decades, there remains ambiguity around how teachers enact pedagogical leadership in practice (Muijs et al., 2013; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Different studies adopt varied definitions, frameworks, and terminologies, ranging from "teacher leadership," "distributed leadership," to "collaborative professionalism", without a consistent conceptual core. This lack of clarity affects how schools, researchers, and policymakers interpret and support the leadership role of teachers (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Moreover, existing research is fragmented across educational contexts, often focused on specific regions or school levels (e.g., primary or secondary), thereby limiting generalizability (Nguyen et al., 2021). Studies may emphasize structural conditions (e.g., decentralization) in one context, while focusing on interpersonal trust and collegiality in another, making it difficult to distill cross-cutting principles. Additionally, much of the teacher leadership literature is rooted in Western contexts, with limited exploration of how cultural, organizational, and systemic differences shape leadership dynamics globally (Nguyen et al., 2020). Further complicating the landscape is the blurring between instructional roles and leadership practices, especially in

schools without clearly defined leadership pathways for teachers. Many teachers lead informally or episodically without formal recognition or institutional support (Muijs & Harris, 2003). Consequently, the conditions, barriers, and enabling factors for effective teacher-led leadership remain under-theorized and under-documented, making it challenging for school leaders and policymakers to support or scale such practices effectively (Rafiq et al., 2025).

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to systematically analyze the role of teachers as pedagogical leaders, with a particular focus on how they engage in distributed and collaborative leadership practices within schools. By conducting a comprehensive systematic literature review (SLR), this research seeks to synthesize existing knowledge, identify recurring patterns, and reveal underexplored areas in this evolving field.

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To identify how teachers are conceptualized and positioned as pedagogical leaders in existing literature.
2. To examine the practices and behaviors that characterize distributed and collaborative leadership among teachers.
3. To explore the conditions that enable or hinder teachers' leadership roles across various educational contexts.
4. To highlight gaps in current research and propose future directions for inquiry and practice.

By achieving these objectives, this review contributes to both scholarly understanding and practical discourse on teacher leadership. It aims to inform policy, guide school leadership development, and encourage the creation of supportive conditions for teachers to lead pedagogically.

Research Questions

Guided by the aims and objectives above, this systematic literature review is framed around the following research questions:

1. How are teachers conceptualized as pedagogical leaders in literature?
 - This question seeks to understand how different studies define or position teachers as leaders in pedagogical practices, and what theoretical lenses are most frequently used.
2. What practices define distributed and collaborative leadership by teachers?
 - Here, the focus is on identifying actual behaviors, roles, and responsibilities enacted by teachers in leading instructional improvement, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing.
3. What are the contextual factors influencing their leadership roles?
 - This question explores how organizational, cultural, policy, or interpersonal variables impact teachers' ability or willingness to lead.
4. What are the research gaps and implications for future study?
 - Based on the synthesis, this final question aims to surface areas needing further empirical attention, methodological improvement, or theoretical development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, integrating guidance from both PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) and Tranfield et al.'s (2003) structured approach to systematic reviews in the

management and social sciences. By doing so, the review ensures transparency, replicability, and rigor in identifying, selecting, and analyzing scholarly literature on teachers as pedagogical leaders within distributed and collaborative leadership frameworks.

Review Design

The methodological framework guiding this review is rooted in qualitative synthesis through thematic analysis, allowing for the integration and interpretation of findings across diverse contexts and conceptual lenses. Systematic literature reviews are particularly useful in fields with emergent or fragmented conceptualizations, such as pedagogical leadership (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2021). This design enables a comprehensive overview of current scholarship, identification of research trends, and detection of gaps in understanding the enactment of teacher leadership within collaborative models. Following the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021), this review documents each step in the article identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process. These steps are transparently reported using a PRISMA flow diagram, supporting methodological rigor and allowing future replication. In parallel, Tranfield et al. (2003) emphasize three key stages in systematic reviews: planning the review, conducting the review, and reporting/dissemination. These stages informed the construction of the review protocol, database selection, data extraction strategy, and synthesis of findings.

Search Strategy

To achieve comprehensive coverage of relevant literature, a systematic database search was conducted using a carefully developed set of search terms across five major databases:

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)
- Education Source (EBSCOhost)
- Google Scholar (supplementary)

The following search string was used (with Boolean operators):

("teacher leadership" OR "pedagogical leadership") AND ("distributed leadership" OR "collaborative leadership") AND ("school" OR "K-12") AND ("instructional leadership")

This string was adapted to the syntax of each database and refined iteratively to increase precision. Truncation and wildcards were used where appropriate (e.g., "lead*" to capture "leadership", "leaders", etc.).

Time Span Justification (2000–2025)

The review includes studies published between January 2000 and June 2025. This 25-year range captures the emergence and maturation of distributed leadership theories in education (Spillane et al., 2001), and the subsequent integration of teacher agency within leadership scholarship. The turn of the millennium marks a significant period of educational reform in many countries, emphasizing teacher professionalism, decentralization, and collaborative learning cultures.

Language Limitations

Only studies published in English were included due to feasibility constraints and the dominance of English in scholarly publishing. However, global literature indexed in English databases was considered, including studies from non-English-speaking regions.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure that the studies included were directly relevant and methodologically robust, a two-stage screening process was used: (1) abstract/title screening, and (2) full-text screening. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are outlined in Table 1.

TABLE 1. INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g., blogs, opinion pieces)
Focus on K–12 schoolteachers as leaders	Studies exclusively focused on principals or administrators
Empirical or theoretical focus on teacher leadership, distributed leadership, or collaborative leadership	Studies focusing solely on higher education contexts
Studies published between 2000–2025	Publications outside this time frame
Articles published in English	Non-English articles
Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies	Purely anecdotal or descriptive reports without data
Studies that discussed teacher leadership only in terms of classroom instruction (without broader collaborative or distributed roles) were excluded. The focus remained on literature that engaged with school-wide leadership practices, such as mentoring, professional learning communities, or collaborative decision-making.	

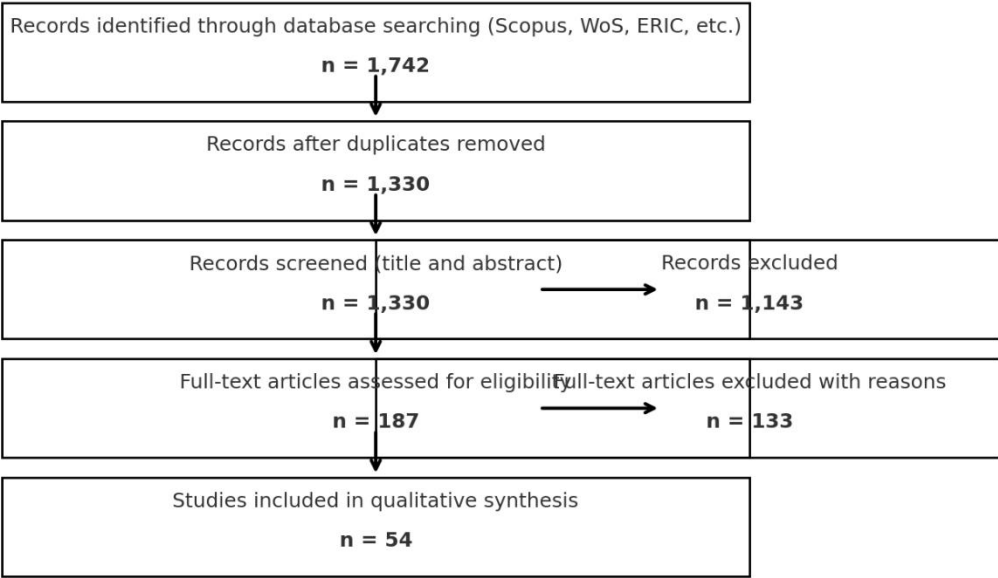


FIGURE 1: PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP

Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA flow diagram summarizing the process of identifying, screening, and selecting studies for inclusion in the qualitative synthesis on teacher pedagogical leadership. A total of 1,742 records were initially identified through database searches, including Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. After removing duplicates, 1,330 unique records remained for screening. During title and abstract screening, 1,143 records were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. The remaining 187 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which 133 were excluded with reasons such as irrelevance or insufficient methodological quality. Finally, 54 studies met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the qualitative synthesis. This systematic filtering ensured that only the

most relevant and rigorous research contributed to the analysis, enhancing the credibility and depth of the review findings.

Study Selection and Screening Process

The search yielded a total of 1,742 records. After removing duplicates ($n=412$), the remaining 1,330 records underwent abstract and title screening. Based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria, 187 articles were selected for full-text review. After thorough evaluation, a final set of 54 studies was included in the synthesis. Screening was conducted using Rayyan, an AI-powered screening tool for systematic reviews, which enabled independent screening by two reviewers and conflict resolution through discussion. All decisions were documented to ensure auditability. The PRISMA flow diagram will be included in Appendix A to illustrate the search and selection process.

Data Extraction and Coding Strategy

A data extraction form was developed to organize relevant information from the selected articles, including:

- Author(s), year, country
- Research aim and questions
- Methodology and sample
- Key findings on teacher leadership practices
- Theoretical frameworks used (e.g., distributed leadership, instructional leadership)
- Reported challenges and enablers
- Implications and limitations

Coding and thematic synthesis were conducted using NVivo 14, a qualitative analysis software, to organize the data into initial codes, categories, and overarching themes. Codes were both deductive (based on theoretical constructs) and inductive (emerging from data), enabling a rich synthesis that accounts for both expected and novel findings.

Quality Appraisal of Included Studies

All included articles were appraised for methodological quality using established tools:

- Qualitative studies were assessed using the CASP Checklist
- Quantitative studies used criteria adapted from the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT)

Criteria assessed included clarity of research design, sampling strategy, data collection rigor, transparency of analysis, and relevance of findings. Studies were not excluded based on quality but were weighed accordingly in the synthesis to avoid overemphasizing weaker studies.

Ethical Considerations

Since this review did not involve primary data collection, ethical approval was not required. However, all sources were ethically cited, and the review complies with ethical standards for secondary research. Where datasets or gray literature were used, proper attribution and data use compliance were maintained.

Limitations of Methodology

Despite its rigor, this review is subject to limitations. The focus on English-language and peer-reviewed publications may exclude valuable insights from other languages or gray literature. Furthermore, while database coverage was extensive, publication bias and indexing limitations may have influenced the comprehensiveness of the sample. The synthesis is also constrained by the quality and reporting depth of included studies.



TABLE 2: DATA EXTRACTION TEACHERS AS PEDAGOGICAL LEADERS

Author(s)	Year	Country	Aim of Study	Methodology	Key Findings
Wenner & Campbell (2017)	2017	USA	To review theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership.	Systematic Literature Review	Teacher leadership contributes to school improvement and student outcomes.
Nguyen et al. (2021)	2021	Vietnam	To explore teacher leadership in Asian education systems.	Qualitative Case Study	Leadership is culturally embedded and shaped by policy environments.
York-Barr & Duke (2004)	2004	USA	To define teacher leadership and explore its dimensions.	Conceptual Review	Teacher leaders influence curriculum, instruction, and culture.
Salo et al. (2015)	2015	Finland	To examine distributed leadership in Finnish schools.	Mixed Methods	Distributed leadership enhances collaboration but requires trust.
Thornton (2010)	2010	New Zealand	To investigate pedagogical leadership in early childhood education.	Qualitative Interviews	Pedagogical leadership involves modeling, mentoring, and shared vision.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Conceptualizations of Teacher Pedagogical Leadership

This theme explores how teacher leadership is defined and positioned within the broader educational leadership discourse. Pedagogical leadership, often used interchangeably with instructional leadership, emphasizes a focus on learning, teaching quality, and curriculum improvement. Many studies highlight that while principals are traditionally seen as instructional leaders, teachers increasingly assume pedagogical roles, especially in collaborative settings. The literature reveals variations in how pedagogical leadership is conceptualized, from formal roles like department heads to informal roles such as peer mentors. The overlap with instructional leadership shows the evolving nature of school leadership, where classroom teachers influence pedagogical decisions beyond their own classrooms (Aldhilan et al., 2025). For instance, *York-Barr and Duke (2004)* emphasize the need for teacher leaders to impact both instructional practices and schoolwide improvement efforts. However, some studies argue that terminology remains ambiguous, and there's a need for clearer operational definitions of teacher-led pedagogy.

Theme 2: Practices of Distributed and Collaborative Leadership

This theme identifies how teachers enact leadership in a distributed framework. Practices include co-planning lessons, mentoring novice teachers, team-teaching, and leading professional learning communities (PLCs). The literature shows that teacher-led PLCs improve instructional consistency and foster peer accountability. *Wenner and Campbell (2017)* found that teachers often lead curriculum alignment sessions and serve as

instructional coaches, while *Salo et al. (2015)* emphasized their role in shaping school culture through collaborative routines. Peer observations, shared lesson development, and feedback loops emerge as strong examples of collaborative leadership in action. However, these practices thrive in schools where administrators promote autonomy and collegial relationships. The success of these practices is often tied to time availability, training, and a shared vision. Thus, collaboration is not merely about group work, it is a structured, intentional process led by teachers for sustainable school improvement.

Theme 3: Contextual Enablers and Constraints

The implementation of pedagogical leadership is deeply influenced by contextual factors such as school culture, hierarchical structures, national policies, and sociocultural norms. Studies from Finland (*Salo et al., 2015*) highlight how trust and flat hierarchies facilitate distributed leadership, while research from the U.S. and Asian contexts shows that rigid hierarchies can limit teacher agency. Gender, seniority, and access to professional development also impact leadership roles. For example, senior teachers are often preferred for leadership opportunities, sometimes sidelining younger yet innovative educators. Additionally, supportive principles, collaborative environments, and alignment with school improvement goals serve as key enablers. Conversely, overburdened teachers, lack of role clarity, and administrative resistance are major barriers. The policy environment, whether it fosters autonomy or compliance, can make or break teacher leadership. This theme underscores the importance of situating leadership practices within their sociopolitical and institutional context.

Theme 4: Models and Frameworks Used in Literature

Several theoretical frameworks underpin the literature on teacher pedagogical leadership. The most cited is *Spillane's Distributed Leadership Framework (2006)*, which views leadership as a shared, interactive practice embedded in daily tasks. Studies also reference *Teacher Leadership Standards* developed in countries like the U.S., Canada, and Australia to guide practice. *Harris (2003)* advocates for models that move beyond positional authority to recognize relational and influence-based leadership. Another frequent debate in the literature is the tension between collegial and hierarchical leadership models. In many schools, leadership is still top-down, which contradicts the essence of collaborative leadership. Some studies propose hybrid frameworks that combine leadership roles with team-based strategies. Overall, while multiple models exist, few are universally applied or empirically validated across diverse settings, pointing to a gap in model standardization and contextual adaptability.

Theme 5: Gaps and Future Research

Despite a growing body of literature, several gaps persist. A major gap is the lack of empirical research in non-Western and low-resource contexts, where teacher leadership might look different due to structural limitations. Another gap lies in digital leadership, very few studies examine how teachers lead pedagogical practices in digital and blended learning environments. There is also limited understanding of how leadership evolves over time; hence, longitudinal studies are recommended to track teacher leadership trajectories and their impact on student outcomes. *Nguyen et al. (2021)* emphasize the need for studies that link leadership practices with actual learning gains. Moreover, more research is needed on how leadership is negotiated in culturally diverse teams and how it intersects with identity, agency, and teacher motivation. Lastly, integrating teacher leadership into national educational policies remains an underexplored but essential area for systemic change.



TABLE 1: THEMATIC ANALYSIS TEACHERS AS PEDAGOGICAL LEADERS

Coding (6–7 words)	Sub-coding (4–5 words)	Theme
Instructional influence, Conceptual definitions, Theme 1: mentoring, curriculum design, leadership scope, role Conceptualizations of peer learning, teacher agency, role ambiguity, terminology Teacher Pedagogical clarity gaps Leadership		
Collaboration, team-teaching, Distributed practice, peer Theme 2: Practices of professional learning learning, feedback loops, Distributed and communities, mentoring, instructional coaching Collaborative Leadership curriculum alignment, shared responsibility		
Trust, school culture, policy Enablers and barriers, Theme 3: Contextual context, autonomy, hierarchy, sociocultural norms, Enablers and Constraints teacher agency leadership access, institutional support		
Distributed framework, collegial Theoretical underpinnings, Theme 4: Models and models, influence-based framework diversity, model Frameworks Used in leadership, hybrid models, validation, policy Literature relational leadership, teacher integration standards		
Digital leadership, cultural Research needs, Theme 5: Gaps and Future variation, empirical gaps, underexplored contexts, Research longitudinal study, motivation, future directions, systemic identity, agency change		

Table 1 presents a thematic analysis of literature on teachers as pedagogical leaders, identifying five core themes. The first theme, *Conceptualizations of Teacher Pedagogical Leadership*, shows that teacher leadership is linked to instructional influence, mentoring, and agency, though conceptual clarity remains limited due to role ambiguity and terminology gaps. The second theme, *Practices of Distributed and Collaborative Leadership*, emphasizes collaboration, team-teaching, and professional learning communities as key practices that promote shared responsibility and peer learning. The third theme, *Contextual Enablers and Constraints*, highlights factors such as trust, school culture, autonomy, and policy context that either support or restrict teachers’ leadership roles. The fourth theme, *Models and Frameworks Used in Literature*, reveals that various frameworks, including distributed and relational leadership models, are used to explain teacher influence, yet theoretical diversity leads to inconsistencies in application. Finally, the fifth theme, *Gaps and Future Research*, identifies underexplored areas such as digital leadership, cultural variations, and long-term empirical studies. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that teacher pedagogical leadership is multifaceted, context-dependent, and evolving, requiring clearer definitions and broader, evidence-based exploration in future research, as shown in Figure 2 below.

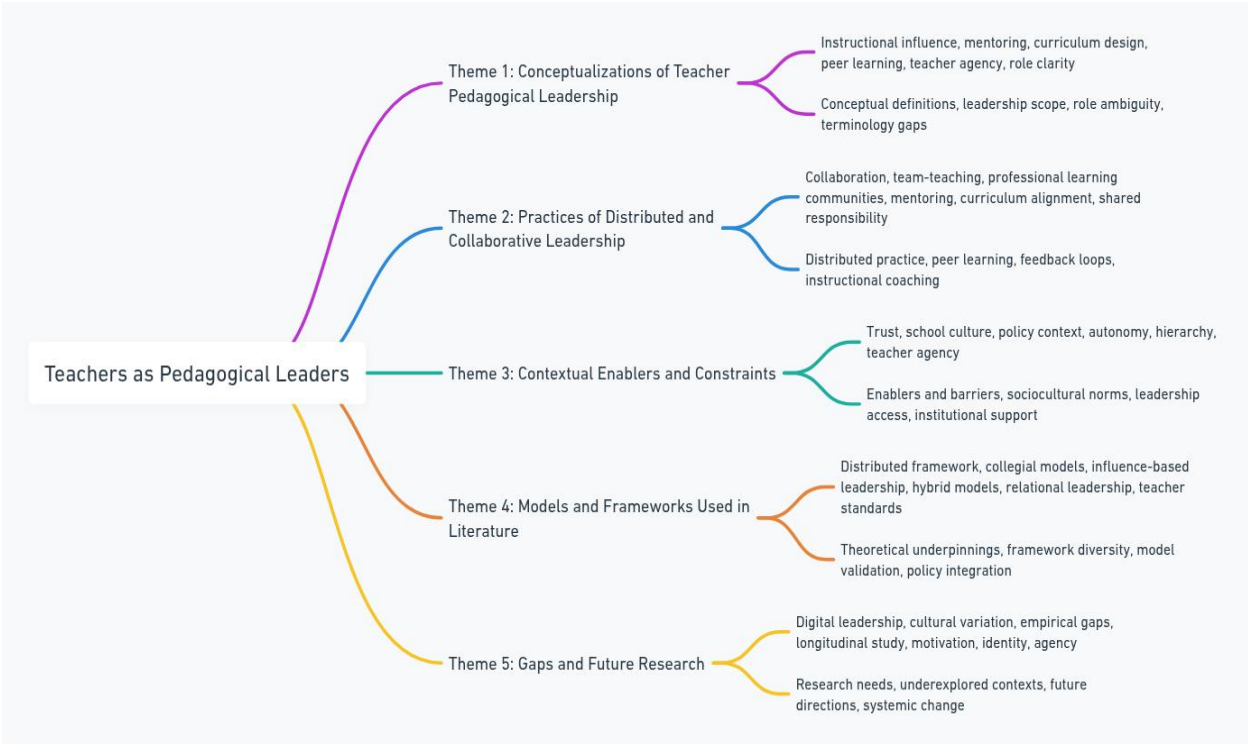


FIGURE 2: THEMATIC ANALYSIS MIND-MAP

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review illuminate how teacher leadership, particularly in its pedagogical and distributed forms, is becoming central to the reconfiguration of educational leadership in both policy and practice. Drawing on the themes synthesized from the literature, we interpret the role of teachers as pedagogical leaders in light of prevailing leadership theories, cross-regional trends, and implications for school improvement and equity.

Interpreting Findings Through Leadership Theories

The review affirms that traditional, hierarchical models of school leadership are increasingly being challenged by distributed and collaborative leadership paradigms (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2003). The core of *distributed leadership theory* lies in the assumption that leadership is not monopolized by the school principal but is enacted through multiple agents, teachers being primary among them. This theoretical lens aligns with findings from studies (e.g., Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) showing teachers actively shaping instructional improvement, mentoring peers, and influencing school culture. Additionally, *transformational leadership theory* also supports this shift. As teachers inspire change, build professional learning communities, and mentor colleagues, they embody key transformational roles (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Unlike positional leadership models, pedagogical leadership by teachers is rooted in expertise, trust, and collaborative influence, aligning more with *relational leadership models* that emphasize emotional intelligence, collaboration, and shared responsibility (Day & Sammons, 2016).

Teacher Leadership and the Transformation of Pedagogy

The analysis shows that when teachers lead pedagogically, they bring instructional leadership into direct proximity with classroom realities. This reshapes pedagogy from a top-down directive into a bottom-up, collaborative process. Teachers who lead curriculum design, facilitate professional learning, and coach peers help embed a culture of

continuous instructional improvement. In doing so, pedagogical leadership goes beyond mere classroom management, it becomes a driver of deep pedagogical transformation. Research included in the review (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2021; Salo et al., 2015) illustrates how teacher leadership enables schools to move from isolated teaching practices to collective pedagogical inquiry. This distributed model promotes coherence in instructional strategies, enhances reflective teaching, and cultivates a shared vision for student learning. In effect, pedagogical leadership aligns teacher autonomy with collective responsibility, two concepts often seen as being in tension.

Comparative Perspectives: Global North vs. Global South

While much of the literature on distributed leadership originates in the Global North, emerging research from the Global South brings critical nuances. Studies from countries like Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2021) and New Zealand (Thornton, 2010) show that contextual constraints, such as centralized policy control, hierarchical norms, and limited professional development, shape how teacher leadership is enacted. In Global North contexts (e.g., Finland, USA, UK), teacher leadership is often embedded in school structures through PLCs, coaching roles, and peer evaluation systems. These settings benefit from strong support structures and relatively flat hierarchies, enabling distributed leadership to flourish. In contrast, studies from the Global South reflect struggles with rigid top-down structures, role ambiguity, and insufficient institutional support for teacher agency. Nonetheless, there is growing interest in adapting distributed models to diverse cultural and political contexts. Some studies suggest hybrid leadership approaches, combining formal hierarchies with grassroots teacher influence, may offer a more culturally responsive framework in non-Western settings.

Distributed Leadership, School Improvement, and Equity

A key insight from the review is the link between distributed teacher leadership and school improvement. Studies consistently find that when teachers take on leadership roles, particularly in pedagogy, there are measurable benefits to student achievement, instructional coherence, and staff morale (Harris & Jones, 2019; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). More importantly, pedagogical leadership has implications for educational equity. By decentralizing decision-making and promoting collaborative cultures, distributed leadership empowers more voices, particularly those of women, early-career teachers, and staff in marginalized communities. This democratization of leadership contributes to equity not only among staff but also in addressing diverse student learning needs. However, for this potential to be realized, distributed leadership must be intentionally designed, supported by clear role expectations, professional development, and inclusive school cultures. Without these, teacher leadership can become tokenistic or concentrated among a few individuals, undermining its democratic promise.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this systematic review carry significant implications across practice, policy, and research domains. As education systems evolve to meet the demands of 21st-century learning, recognizing and supporting the leadership roles of teachers, particularly in pedagogical and distributed forms, becomes critical to school improvement, innovation, and equity.

Implications for Practice

One of the most salient takeaways from literature is the urgent need to empower teachers as co-leaders of learning. Schools should move beyond viewing leadership as a hierarchical function centered around principals and instead embrace models where teachers are

legitimate, active agents in shaping instruction and curriculum. This requires a shift in professional culture, from one of individualism and compliance to one of shared responsibility and collective inquiry.

Additionally, redefining teacher performance frameworks is essential. Current teacher appraisal systems in many countries focus primarily on classroom outcomes and instructional delivery, overlooking contributions to peer mentorship, curriculum design, and professional learning facilitation. Performance evaluation systems should be expanded to recognize and reward pedagogical leadership, whether through formal roles (e.g., department chairs, mentors) or informal practices (e.g., leading PLCs, peer coaching). Schools must also create time and space in teachers' schedules to lead and collaborate; shared leadership cannot thrive when teachers are overburdened with instructional load alone.

Implications for Policy

At the policy level, ministries of education and school authorities should reconsider teacher evaluation, leadership development, and autonomy. In many centralized systems, teacher leadership remains constrained by rigid hierarchies and top-down mandates. This review highlights the importance of policy frameworks that explicitly promote distributed leadership cultures where principals are not gatekeepers but enablers of teacher-led initiatives. Further, teacher leadership standards should be integrated into professional development and career progression policies. Just as there are standards for principal leadership, there is a need for national or institutional benchmarks that define and assess pedagogical leadership by teachers. These should cover domains such as collaboration, innovation, reflective practice, and community engagement. Policies should also promote collaborative school cultures by embedding leadership responsibilities within job descriptions, supporting team-based structures, and incentivizing peer-led innovation. Investing in leadership capacity-building for all teachers, not just a selected few, can accelerate the shift toward more equitable and sustainable school improvement.

Implications for Research

Despite growing interest in teacher pedagogical leadership, the review identified critical gaps in methodology and context. Much of the literature remains conceptual or anecdotal, with relatively few empirical studies that systematically examine teacher leadership practices across diverse settings. Future research should prioritize rigorous, mixed-methods designs that link teacher leadership activities to measurable outcomes, such as student learning gains, teacher efficacy, or school innovation.

Moreover, the geographical imbalance in current research must be addressed. Most studies originate in Western, high-resource contexts, leaving a blind spot regarding how pedagogical leadership operates in under-researched regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, or the Middle East. Cross-cultural comparative studies would enrich our understanding of how contextual factors mediate teacher leadership. Longitudinal research is also warranted. Few studies trace the sustained impact of teacher-led initiatives over time. Understanding how pedagogical leadership evolves and is institutionalized can inform leadership development pathways and system-wide reform. Finally, researchers should explore the intersection of digital leadership and pedagogical leadership, particularly in the post-pandemic era where technology-mediated instruction has become integral.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review explored the evolving role of teachers as pedagogical leaders within the frameworks of distributed and collaborative leadership. Synthesizing evidence from global literature, the review reveals that teacher leadership is no longer peripheral, it is central to advancing instructional quality, fostering collective responsibility, and building resilient school communities. Teachers are actively engaging in co-planning, peer mentoring, leading professional learning communities, and shaping curriculum decisions, thereby expanding the traditional boundaries of leadership in schools. A key finding is that the enactment of teacher leadership is highly context-dependent. While schools in high-autonomy systems support broader leadership roles for teachers, those in more centralized or hierarchical environments face structural barriers. The review also highlights how models such as Spillane's Distributed Leadership Framework provide useful lenses to understand how leadership is stretched across multiple actors and levels within a school.

From a policy standpoint, the findings underscore the need to rethink how leadership is structured and supported in schools. Educational policymakers must invest in leadership development pathways that are inclusive of teachers and aligned with instructional priorities. Teacher appraisal systems should be redesigned to reward leadership contributions, not just classroom performance. Institutions must also create time, training, and cultural conditions for shared leadership to flourish. For teacher training programs, the implications are clear: leadership preparation should not be reserved solely for future principals. All educators should be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead from within the classroom. Embedding leadership development into pre-service and in-service programs will foster a generation of teachers who see themselves as agents of change.

Finally, the review identifies substantial research gaps, especially in non-Western contexts and digital learning environments, that warrant further inquiry. Mixed-methods and longitudinal studies are essential to evaluate the sustained impact of teacher leadership on student outcomes, school innovation, and equity. As education systems face increasing complexity and change, investing in teacher-led leadership offers a promising pathway toward more collaborative, adaptive, and learner-centered schools.

REFERENCES

- Aldhilan, D., Rafiq, S., & Afzal, A. (2025). Saudi Arabian preschool teachers' perceptions, positive and negative experiences of play-based robotics activities. *Cogent Education*, 12(1), 2516375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2516375>
- Harris, A. (2004). Distributed leadership and school improvement. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 32(1), 11–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143204039297>
- Harris, A., & Spillane, J. (2008). Distributed leadership through the looking glass. *Management in Education*, 22(1), 31–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020607085623>
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organizational conditions and student engagement. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(2), 112–129. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230010320064>
- Lieberman, A., & Miller, L. (2004). *Teacher leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Lumpkin, A., Claxton, H., & Wilson, A. (2014). Key characteristics of teacher leaders in schools. *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice, and Research*, 4(2), 59–67. <https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.5>

- Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., Altman, D. G., & PRISMA Group. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA statement. *PLOS Medicine*, 6(7), e1000097. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000097>
- Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2003). Teacher leadership, Improvement through empowerment? *Educational Management & Administration*, 31(4), 437-448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263211X030314007>
- Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2007). Teacher leadership in (in)action. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 35(1), 111-134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143207071387>
- Muijs, D., Harris, A., Lumby, J., Morrison, M., & Sood, K. (2013). *Effective distributed leadership in schools*. National College for Leadership.
- Nguyen, D., Harris, J., & Ng, D. (2020). Rethinking teacher leadership in Asia: A review of research evidence. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 74, 102161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2019.102161>
- Nguyen, D., Harris, J., & Ng, D. (2021). Rethinking teacher leadership in Asia: A review of research evidence. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 82, 102371. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102371>
- Nguyen, D., Walker, A., & Nguyen, T. (2021). The evolution of teacher leadership as a concept: A bibliometric review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(1), 52-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220909687>
- OECD. (2013). *Teachers for the 21st Century: Using Evaluation to Improve Teaching*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264193864-en>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., ... & Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Rafiq, S., Afzal, A. & Ain, Q. (2025). Bridging the Divide: Exploring Policy Gaps and Cultural Barriers to Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Muslim-Majority Countries. *Sexuality & Culture*, 29 (5), 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-025-10448-8>
- Rafiq, S., Afzal, A., & Gul, F. (2025). Between Promise and Peril: Ethical and Pedagogical Challenges of ChatGPT Use in Classrooms. *Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)*, 21(3), 419-435. <https://doi.org/10.13187/me.2025.3.419>
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 23-28. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X030003023>
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 23-28. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X030003023>
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British Journal of Management*, 14(3), 207-222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.00375>
- Wenner, J. A., & Campbell, T. (2017). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(1), 134-171. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316653478>
- Wenner, J. A., & Campbell, T. (2017). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(1), 134-171. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316653478>
- York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255-316. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074003255>