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Voices Unheard: The Paradox of Teacher Leaders in Educational Decision-Making

Diane E. Johnson
Lamar University, djohnson132@lamar.edu

Kelly Brown
Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi, kelly.brown@tamucc.edu

Voices Unheard: The Paradox of Teacher Leaders in Educational Decision-Making

Across decades of education reform, the absence of teacher leaders' (TLs) voices has been a persistent concern, particularly during major initiatives like the development of the Common Core State Standards (Mathis, 2010). Despite being at the heart of the classroom and responsible for daily instructional decisions, teachers have often been excluded from key policy conversations that shape their professional landscape (Sebastian et al., 2016; Gozali et al., 2017). This disconnect is striking; while TLs are expected to nurture, guide, and assess students, their expertise is frequently overlooked in the creation of standards, curricula, and assessment policies that govern their work (Greinke, 2017; Miller & Pinkerton, 2017). Teachers require leadership qualities to continually maintain best practices, yet policy makers and administrators from outside the classroom environment often drown out their leadership voices (Warren, 2016).

The consequences of sidelining teacher leader perspectives are significant. When TLs are not involved in decision-making, reforms risk lacking relevance and buy-in, which can undermine both their effectiveness and teacher morale (Khan, 2019). TLs possess invaluable insights into student needs and classroom realities, making their participation essential for crafting policies that are both practical and impactful (Law, 2015). Elevating TL voices not only leads to more responsive and equitable education systems but also enhances the attractiveness of the teaching profession itself, an urgent need as schools worldwide face increasing teacher shortages (Rose, 2017).

Recent movements and research highlight the benefits of incorporating teacher input: schools and systems that prioritize teacher voice see improved student outcomes, greater teacher satisfaction, and more sustainable reforms. As education continues to evolve, the call to amplify TL voices grows louder, emphasizing that meaningful progress depends on listening to those who know the classroom best.

The Vital Role of Teacher Leaders: Why Their Voices Matter More Than Ever

Teacher leaders (TLs) have a significant positive influence on schools. They engage as leaders regardless of their formal title, share expertise in content and educational practices, and often exceed traditional job expectations both inside and outside the classroom (Angelle, 2017). TLs are recognized for being student-centered, understanding school operations and curriculum, and shaping the working environment and change initiatives (Lovelace, 2019). Mowdy (2015) uncovered that their efforts drive student achievement by advocating for improvement, even when their roles are not strictly defined. Additionally, TLs contribute to the emotional well-being of colleagues and are especially effective as adaptable problem solvers during school crises (Cherkowski, 2018; Sawyer, et al., 2022). While administrators often must focus on state assessments and district-wide curricula, TLs prioritize changes that directly benefit students and colleagues, which positively affect student achievement and teacher retention (Mount, 2018).

Professional Capital Framework: A Shift in Understanding

While school leaders inherently understand the vital role teachers play in the school ecosystem, it helps to frame the role of teacher effectiveness. The professional capital framework developed by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) grounds this study and represents a shift in how leaders can understand teacher effectiveness and school improvement. The framework proposes that

professional capital consists of three interconnected components: individual human capital, social capital, and decisional capital. Teachers develop a set of knowledge, skills, and experiences while in the role, which supports their understanding of the reality of educating students (McAuliffe, 2020). Human capital refers to the development of teachers' knowledge, skills, and experiences to support the practical understanding and teaching of students. Social capital leverages collaborative relationships among teachers and other members of the school community to share knowledge and information, thereby enhancing educational outcomes. Decisional capital refers to the experience and reflection that teachers gain to make informed judgments about learning and instruction for their students. This holistic approach recognizes that sustainable change requires teachers and other school stakeholders to work collaboratively for the betterment of students.

The human capital component encompasses the traditional qualifications, skills, and knowledge that individual teachers bring to their practice. Social capital builds on this foundation by emphasizing collaborative learning, peer mentorship, and the collective wisdom that emerges when educators work together purposefully. While decisions in complex situations are made on numerous occasions with various problems, decisional capital represents the capacity to make increasingly informed and effective choices over time, guided by professional judgment backed by evidence (Grover, 2019). Together, these three forms of capital create a powerful synergy that transforms not just individual classrooms but entire educational systems, moving beyond quick fixes toward sustainable, long-term improvement grounded in professional expertise and collaborative practice.

Activism

Educational policy is typically determined by government authorities and enforced by administrators, but teachers, who are most familiar with classroom realities, possess valuable insights into student growth (Huong, 2020). When curriculum becomes politicized instead of being based on content knowledge and teacher input, teacher voice diminishes, and the curriculum becomes vitiated (Kim, 2024). However, initiatives like Teach to Lead (2021) aim to empower TLs by providing resources and encouraging collaboration to amplify their impact. For effective policy implementation, TLs must be involved in identifying potential challenges and proposing solutions (Haas, 2017). Advocacy by TLs is most effective when they receive adequate preparation and professional development; otherwise, their contributions may be overlooked (Allen, 2016). Legislative efforts, such as the Teachers Are Leaders Act, support the integration of TLs into school leadership while allowing them to remain classroom-based (Congressional Research Act, 2019). TLs' perspectives are more effective advocates when their perspectives are included in policy discussions, and they gain trust from peers when championing school-wide initiatives (Wawro, 2015; Thomason, et al., 2023). Involving TLs in policy design bridges the gap between policymakers' intentions and teachers' interpretations (Gunnulfsen, 2017). However, their voices often gain recognition only when heard beyond the classroom setting (Cemaloglu & Duran, 2018). Sustainable and effective change requires empowering TLs to implement their own strategies rather than simply following directives from higher authorities (Miller & Pinkerton, 2017; Vrhovnik et al., 2018).

Collaborative Cultures

TLs play a crucial role in balancing risk-taking and support, both in their own classrooms and for their colleagues (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2017). When school leaders empower teacher leader voices, campuses embody equitable practices and enhance cross-curricular practices (Buchanan, et al., 2023). Rather than replacing administrators, collective leadership allows administrators to focus on administrative duties while capacitated TL voices address educational needs (Goksoy, 2015). Their vocal influence extends to digital transformation, as they introduce and expand the use of digital tools campus-wide (Ab, 2024). Schools centering on empowering TL voices tend to center around the improvement of teachers; however, schools moved beyond the early stages of collaborative leadership to collegial voices including TLs found TLs developed sounder solutions for student success bringing the focus back to students (Figueroa Moya, 2024).

Effective school cultures support TLs in modeling collaboration and developing future leaders, particularly when administrators provide opportunities for skill development and leadership training (Yuet et al., 2016). TLs often self-reflect before offering guidance, and this leads to peer observations promoting mutual growth (Sox, 2016; Tennett, 2019). TLs' self-reflections lead to further advocacy because their empowered voice leads to improved solutions assisting leadership and establishing improved cultures (Ordynans et al., 2023). TLs act as bridges between teachers and administrators, utilizing their voice to establish this collaborative culture (Hunzicker, 2017; Baker-Doyle, 2017; Bradley-Levine, 2022). Open dialogue about school culture and policy solutions can help bridge communication gaps between teachers and administrators (Ali, 2019). Even as far back as the early 2000s, Evans (2001) ascertained improved morale, culture, retention, and initiative when campuses had leadership willing to embolden TL voices.

Student Achievement

Research links student success to schools that foster collaborative cultures and support teacher growth (Ozgenel, 2020). With emboldened voices on campus, TLs create collaborative classrooms, reduce workplace stress, and increase job satisfaction, all of which contribute to higher student success (Allen, 2018; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018; Parlar & Cansoy, 2017). TLs' voices influence student achievement by strengthening student voice and self-esteem, leading to improved student outcomes (Prabahar et al., 2024). Student achievement directly correlates with TLs finding their voices and various forms of leadership styles, which models critical thinking, academic achievement, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, self-management, and study habits for students, enhancing student achievement (Shen & Abdullah, 2024). TLS with decision-making empowerment and voice proved to have a positive impact on overall student achievement (Woo, 2022). Furthermore, TLs vocally promote social justice and foster connections with students, which positively impacts learning outcomes (Allen, 2016; Saunders, 2018). Utilizing voice, TLs' content expertise, and classroom management skills leads to greater student engagement and fewer disciplinary issues (Calderone et al., 2018; Uredi & Gul, 2018).

Teacher Retention

Schools that utilize TLs' voices generally experience higher teacher retention rates (Cosenza, 2015). Where TLs feel valued and engaged, TLs' voices significantly enhance teacher

well-being, commitment, and retention (Nguyen et al., 2024). Conversely, TLs may leave if they feel their contributions are not valued (Watson, 2018). Teacher attrition is often linked to a lack of autonomy and stressful work environments, but TLs whose voices are empowered to innovate and support peers help mitigate these issues (Adusei et al., 2016; Ponnock et al., 2018; Bagley & Margolis, 2018; Alsbury et al., 2018). TLs' voices inspire colleagues through their passion and commitment (Lovelace, 2019). TLs' provide practical, content-driven feedback and foster a culture of self-reflection and growth among teachers on campuses where their voices hold weight and delegation (Bradley-Levine, 2017; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Thomas, 2017). Positivity in TL voice addressing campus leadership predicts higher levels of retention (Perrone, 2022).

Methodology

This phenomenological study intended to establish a better understanding of TL perceptions of their voice in a suburban high school by asking the following research questions:

1. How do teacher leaders perceive their voices to be heard by administrators?
2. How do teacher leaders perceive the impact of their voices on campus?

In this study, the concept of "voice" is regarded not merely as data but as active participation in conversations that recognize the value of diverse perspectives in driving change (Gillett-Swan & Baroutsis, 2024). This approach aligns with recent scholarship that emphasizes the importance of honoring participants' voices as the source of meaning and knowledge, rather than reducing them to disembodied textual data. By foregrounding participant voice, the research aims to foster authentic engagement and ensure that the findings accurately reflect the lived realities and insights of the TLs involved. A hermeneutical phenomenological study was conducted to ensure a TL's personal experience was captured, leading to uncovered thematic connections (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The responses were analyzed to gain insight into the identified TLs from various grade levels and in varying leadership positions to understand the level of empowerment each felt their voice had (Creswell, 2013).

To establish the credibility and validity of the research, several strategies were employed. Creswell (2013) notes that validation in qualitative research encompasses the researcher's efforts to obtain the most accurate accounts and preserve the validity of responses. In this study, trustworthiness was ensured by member checking, a process recognized as a key technique for enhancing accuracy, credibility, and transferability in qualitative research.
Member checking was implemented at multiple stages:

- After initial analysis, participants were invited to review the researcher's interpretations and suppositions for accuracy.
- Participants were shown the emergent themes from their data, providing an opportunity to confirm that important points were neither missing nor misrepresented.
- This iterative process allowed participants to affirm or clarify the findings, thereby reducing the risk of misinterpretation and enhancing the authenticity of the results.

To further ensure rigor and minimize researcher bias, the study employed the phenomenological method of epoché, specifically through the practice of bracketing. Bracketing, or epoché, involves the researcher consciously setting aside personal preconceptions, assumptions, and prior experiences to approach the phenomenon as described by participants.

This method, rooted in the work of Moustakas and Husserl, is essential for achieving objectivity and confirmability in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher, who had prior experience as a teacher leader (TL), deliberately "bracketed" her own experiences throughout data collection and analysis. By focusing on the voices of the interviewed TLs, the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon from their perspectives, rather than imposing her own assumptions or interpretations (Englander, 2016). This process allowed for a more authentic and nuanced representation of participant realities, enhancing both the rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

Participants

This phenomenological study employed purposeful sampling to choose participants with direct experience related to the phenomenon being investigated. Purposeful sampling, as described by Creswell and Guetterman (2015), entails selecting individuals based on their relevance and connection to the research topic. In this research, teacher leaders (TLs) were identified through concept sampling, a method that focuses on selecting participants who represent key characteristics or roles critical to the research aim. The TL selection process utilized a two-tiered method involving both formal and informal TLs. Formal TLs consisted of recognized department heads on campus, chosen as primary participants. Informal TLs were selected based on recommendations from administrators, targeting teachers who displayed leadership qualities or engaged in leadership roles without having an official title (Creswell & Guetterman, 2015). To ensure a broad representation, TLs were chosen from various academic disciplines, including the four core subjects (mathematics, science, English, and history), arts and humanities, career and technology education, and foreign languages. Administrators were crucial in nominating teachers who demonstrated leadership abilities even without formal TL designations.

A minimum of ten participants is recommended for phenomenological studies to provide sufficient depth and breadth of data (Creswell, 2013). The study included 10 TLs who met the established criteria. The participants in this study represented a range of backgrounds and experiences, with participants' teaching experience ranging from 6 to 44 years. Nine out of ten participants were female. Nine participants identified as Caucasian, and one identified as Hispanic. Half of the participants were graduates of the same high school where they now teach.

All participants were invited to share their perceptions regarding the utilization of teacher leader (TL) voices on their campus in semi-structured, web-based, one-to-one interview protocol with open-ended questions developed by the researcher. Due to the flexibility of time and location, online interviews were employed (Creswell, 2013). All responses were recorded and transcribed. Identifying information, such as names and content-specific details, was removed to protect participant privacy. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in the reporting of findings (see Table 1).

Table 1
Teacher Leader Pseudonyms

Teacher Leader Identifier	Teacher Pseudonym
Teacher 1	Karen
Teacher 2	Suzanne
Teacher 3	Lauren
Teacher 4	Saige
Teacher 5	Chad
Teacher 6	Leann
Teacher 7	Priscilla
Teacher 8	Brittany
Teacher 9	Donna
Teacher 10	Rose

This approach ensured both the protection of participant identities and the integrity of the data collected. The research was conducted at a high school located in a suburban town in Southeast Texas. Key characteristics of the setting included grades 9th through 12th. Approximately 1,520 students attended the high school that received an "A" rating for state exemplary performance. The student population consisted of 55% white, 27% Hispanic, 10% African American, and 45% were economically disadvantaged. The campus held 113 teachers and eight administrators (including assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, and others). 22% of faculty held master's degrees and 1% held a doctorate at the time of the study.

The study examined perceptions of the teacher leader (TL) role and its potential for intentional growth (Davidson & Cosgrove, 2003). Interview responses were categorized and coded to identify recurring themes related to the perceived impact and future role of TLs. This process employed Creswell's (2013) "lean coding" approach, which facilitates theme identification while minimizing researcher bias. Findings inform administrators in two key areas: (1) TLs' self-perceived influence on campus, and (2) opportunities to enhance the TL role based on reported needs. To ensure validity, multiple administrators selected TL interviewees from each department based on performance and alignment with the defined TL role.

Findings

Echoes in the hallways: Are TLs truly heard?

The first research question explored how teacher leaders (TLs) perceive the extent to which their voices are heard by administrators. This inquiry specifically sought to understand TLs' experiences with different administrative levels, including on-campus principals, curriculum coordinators, and district-level administrators. The distinction between on-campus and district-level administrators was a central theme, as was the impact of this distinction on the perceived effectiveness and influence of teacher voice. On-campus administration consisted of a head principal, three assistant principals, and a curriculum coordinator, whose office was located within the high school. During the study, a transition occurred: the head principal was promoted, and the middle school principal became the high school principal. This change influenced participant responses, with many reflecting on experiences with both the outgoing and incoming principals.

The power of proximity. Most participants felt their voices were acknowledged by on-campus administrators, but often sensed their input was not acted upon. Suzanne observed that the administration "want to give the teachers a feeling that they have a voice, but it doesn't mean they're going to use it and take it." Lauren echoed this, describing "the principal would ask input on things," but "he was asking for verification on what his plan already was" as a formality to validate pre-existing plans rather than to influence decisions. Saige metaphorically likened the experience to "somebody is asking your opinions to buy a TV, and you give them your opinion on the best. And then, they go 'oh, okay' and go buy their own TV."

Leann highlighted the slow pace of change, noting that meaningful adjustments required navigating lengthy committee processes. She also felt administrators "are out of touch with the classroom, so it's a struggle to get them to understand." Brittany remarked that administrators listened selectively, while Karen attributed this to administrators' being "too afraid to change" due to fear of district-level leaders and parents, which she believed limited innovation and student opportunities.

The curriculum coordinator was consistently cited as more responsive and supportive. Karen appreciated "the curriculum instructor at least tries and researches our requests," even if not all were approved. Suzanne valued the coordinator, "gave time to play around and make sure [initiatives were] worth implementing." Leann noted that the coordinator actively "asks for feedback and how an initiative is working," though she felt this openness was not mirrored by other administrators.

Some participants, such as Chad and Priscilla, observed that on-campus administration had "evolved and allow[ed] us to do more on campus," allowing greater teacher involvement in decisions, including allowing "us to sit on the new AP (assistant principal) interviews." However, Priscilla also noted reluctance among administrators to "rock the boat by bringing it to the admin building 9upper administration." Donna shared that her technology leadership was recognized and encouraged by an assistant principal, while Brittany felt comfortable discussing

issues with on-campus administrators, attributing problems to external factors "because too much other activity is going on behind closed doors." Rose believed that when committees were formed, teacher leaders' input was genuinely considered due to "taking what the TLs have to say and maybe it's just because they don't have to stand on their own." TLs with strong voices aid in empowering leadership and adding credence to administrative decisions. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of open communication and ethical leadership in fostering teacher voice (Sagnak, 2017).

Hierarchy dilutes urgency and impact. Upper-level administrators were located in a separate building and had limited interaction with the secondary campus. This physical separation contributed to a sense of disconnect and lack of influence. Participants widely perceived district-level input mechanisms, such as surveys, as perfunctory. Karen described these as formalities with little real impact since "They do whatever they want, and they are not even the ones in the classroom." Leann and Brittany similarly felt that decisions were "already made, and it was a formality of input," and made them feel "a part of the conversation, even though they had no intention of using my opinion," with surveys serving only to create an illusion of participation.

Lauren noted that concerns were not "heard with the same emphasis as it goes from principal to the superintendent. And if it's not…then the concern can be taken more lightly than it is [by upper administration]." Suzanne felt "you want to be heard, and even though you might say it out loud, no one's listening." She also observed that long-tenured staff who "knew how to play the game" were more likely to be consulted.

Karen believed district administrators avoided seeking teacher input out of fear of parent reactions and a preference for maintaining long-standing practices describing upper administration's attitude as "if it has worked for 50 years, why do we have to change it?" Lauren agreed that administrators often had predetermined plans and, while not intentionally dismissive, "They just don't see beyond themselves." Saige described the process of voicing concerns as "running into walls and chasing our cannels from the top to the bottom," highlighting the lack of open channels from campus to district leadership. Rose, while not feeling intentionally ignored, recognized that administrators ultimately had the discretion to use or disregard teacher input.

Input to Impact

Research question two aimed to determine the extent to which TLs felt their input influenced campus changes. Two clear themes emerged from the data: instances where TL voices were heard and accepted, resulting in tangible impact, and instances where TL voices were unheard or dismissed, leading to frustration and limited influence**.**

Where teacher voices thrive. Participants also described situations where their voices were welcomed and led to meaningful change, particularly through committee participation and the presence of responsive administrators. Lauren and Priscilla praised the district and campus for establishing "committees for new policies and initiatives," especially to ensure TL voices

were heard during the commencement of newly required state mandates. Rose noted that these committees often welcomed any interested teacher, not just TLs, broadening the spectrum of voices considered. Leann observed, "I've been seeing a little bit more of holding off on the decision-making process until everyone has given feedback, then a decision has been made," reflecting a more participatory approach.

TLs highlighted specific assistant principals (APs) and the curriculum coordinator as particularly responsive to departmental needs. Suzanne shared that the curriculum coordinator regularly sought teacher input on new initiatives. Lauren recounted, "When major conflicts occurred regarding schedule conflicts, the AP listened and stepped in to correct the problem." Saige felt "my voice is always heard with in the classroom" and even was once specifically asked for insight on a new initiative. Leann described a post-hurricane scenario where principals actively requested teacher feedback, noting, "I feel like there's genuine asking to get feedback from us." Brittany simply stated, "I've never felt dismissed." Rose explained that APs consistently asked for departmental needs and honored requests, taking "into consideration TL voices that will make a positive impact on campus."

The frustration of the unheard. A recurring theme among participants was the perception that their voices were often disregarded, especially regarding major decisions like the implementation of new procedures, policies, or initiatives. Suzanne described seeing colleagues "exhausted and screaming 'We need help,' and I don't think anyone's throwing out a life preserver for us." Lauren added that despite voicing concerns about managing both virtual and face-to-face instruction, administration required both, leading to overwhelming workloads, and she "checked into TRS [Teacher Retirement System] and retiring." Saige observed that teacher voices were often lost in efforts to appease parents rather than address staff or student needs, a problem exacerbated during the pandemic. As Kidson et al. (2020) noted, meaningful policy change requires the inclusion of TLs' voices.

Many TLs felt that input on new policies or initiatives was solicited only after decisions had been made. Karen stated, "I don't think our voice matters at all…we are just ignored." Suzanne agreed, saying, "they already have an idea what they want to do, and it kinda doesn't matter what any of us say." Karen cited "Flex Time" as an example of a policy implemented without meaningful teacher input, calling it a waste of valuable time. Lauren mentioned not being heard regarding initiatives like Lead4ward and project-based learning (PBLs), noting administration "ask for opinions on policies, but policy is typically already written and a sonde deal." Lauren pointed out "the school board hears only the superintendent's side of the story and not ours" which is problematic since they do not hear from those directly involved with students in the classroom. Saige added that decisions were made by the school board and upper administration "for what's going to make the least amount of people angry, and by people, I mean parents, and it seems that it's at the expense of the teachers." Brittany expressed concern that professional development was too generic and "needs to be more content and level specific," yet her feedback went unheeded. Donna was frustrated by repeated, mandatory training sessions without prior input from TLs. Rose reflected on the persistent lack of TL voice in policy

discussions and wondered, “if they even listen to what we are saying concerning policies.” Leann, though sometimes heard as a department head, still felt her voice was diluted in the chain of command. As Sagnak (2017) emphasized, ethical and effective schools require that TL voices are genuinely promoted and heard by leadership.

Discussion

The present study investigated teacher leaders' perceptions of administrative recognition of their voices and the extent to which their input influences school initiatives and policies. As educational expectations and demands continue to escalate, the teacher leader role evolves while many teacher leaders perceive their contributions as undervalued or overlooked. Participants provided suggestions for strengthening the teacher leader role and overcoming barriers to effectiveness.

Teacher leaders increasingly leave the profession due to heightened demands, insufficient compensation, lack of respect, heavy workloads, and limited campus support (Hilton, 2017). The documented need for more teacher leaders (Palmer, 2018) faces obstacles from inadequate support by current leadership and frequent misidentification or underutilization of teacher leaders (Gozali et al., 2017; Hunzicker, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the necessity of including teacher leader voices in school decision-making processes (Kidson et al., 2020).

Administrative Recognition of Teacher Leader Voices

Findings for the first research question revealed that teacher leaders generally felt their voices were acknowledged by on-campus administrators, particularly curriculum coordinators and assistant principals. Most participants, however, expressed uncertainty about whether their input led to meaningful change. District-level administrators infrequently heard teacher leaders' voices, with input often solicited only as a formality through surveys and similar mechanisms.

A significant disconnect exists between teacher leaders and those with power to enact change, resulting in limited influence over school-wide decisions. When teacher leaders lack input in initiatives impacting their classrooms, there is reduced fidelity and trust in the initiative, with more problems than solutions presented (Williams-Britton, 2021). Administrators with whom teacher leaders had regular, personal contact were more likely to listen and act on their input. District-level administrators, in contrast, remained distant and unresponsive.

Campus Impact of Teacher Leader Voices

The second research question addressed teacher leaders' perceptions of their voices' impact on campus operations. Participants felt particularly unheard regarding protocols and major policy or initiative changes. Decisions were often made without meaningful teacher input, creating frustration and powerlessness. Teacher leaders reported that their voices made a

difference through participation in committees or collaborative groups, especially those led by on-campus administrators.

Such collaborative settings fostered trust, allowed for genuine feedback, and sometimes resulted in policy or procedural adjustments. Teacher leaders often felt their input was not utilized to improve policies or practices despite being heard. On-campus administrators' lack of hierarchical power limited the implementation of teacher leader suggestions, while upper-level administrators remained largely inaccessible.

Innovation and Technology Leadership

Increasing curriculum and technological demands position teacher leaders as innovative pioneers in incorporating best practices and technology trends. Collaborative ownership of school curriculum by teacher leaders creates increased program longevity and teacher retention (Ainin, et al., 2025). Leadership must establish environments of low stress and high experimentation to provide teacher leaders forums for implementing and increasing curriculum and digital resource use for success (Olaniyan & Uzorka, 2024).

Teacher leaders empowering students to utilize advanced digital resources have observed increased student productivity, warranting further study (Macdonald, 2015). Teacher leaders actively choose to see the benefits of using artificial intelligence as a digital tool to enhance administrative tasks and student learning, modeling its academic usage for others on campus (Ghamrawi et al., 2023). This modeling of proper, innovative AI use leads to new teachers growing as leaders and potential teacher leaders in the future (Li & Shan, 2025). Teacher leaders' enhancement of curriculum and digital applications creates cyclical growth of teacher leaders, further impacting student achievement and teacher growth.

From Hierarchy to Partnership: Building Collaborative Leadership Structures

TLs expressed a strong desire not only to be heard but to see their classroom-based insights drive meaningful change. Participants advocated for a shift from hierarchical to collaborative leadership structures, emphasizing the need for shared decision-making and distributed leadership. Many TLs noted that effective leadership often comes from teachers without formal titles, highlighting the importance of recognizing and supporting informal leaders. TLs acknowledged the need for ongoing training and mentorship to prepare future leaders, suggesting that leadership development should be an intentional, district-wide effort.

This study concentrates on a high-performing suburban high school, yet its findings align with national teacher leadership trends. For example, urban schools with limited resources may face more pronounced disparities in teacher leadership influence stemming from top-down accountability systems (Rodriguez et al., 2023). In contrast, rural districts that foster close-knit staff relationships could utilize informal teacher leadership roles more successfully (Follette &

Washburn, 2022). Future research needs to examine these dynamics across different settings to uncover context-specific obstacles to teacher leadership empowerment.

Conclusion

In this study, TLs felt that although their input was often recognized, it did not significantly affect the development of school policies and practices. On-campus leaders were more willing to listen and work together, but they lacked the power to make substantial changes. Conversely, district-level administrators were viewed as removed and unresponsive, further limiting the influence of TLs. The results indicate that cultivating a more collaborative and inclusive leadership culture, along with granting TLs genuine opportunities to impact decision-making, could improve school initiatives and benefit the professional development of teacher leaders. Gillett-Swan and Baroutsis (2024) suggest extending TL involvement beyond advisory roles towards more participatory engagement.

Schools and districts should create more structured opportunities for TL input, particularly in policy development and implementation. Empowering both formal and informal TLs through shared leadership models can improve school culture and student outcomes. Further studies should explore effective models for integrating TL voices at all administrative levels, examine the long-term impact of collaborative leadership, and investigate strategies for supporting informal teacher leaders.

This study highlights the critical, yet often underutilized, role of teacher leaders in shaping educational practice. Addressing the barriers to TL influence and fostering a culture of genuine collaboration are essential steps toward building more responsive and effective schools.

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