

# The Influence of Chinese Rural Teacher Leadership on the Improvement of Chinese Rural Schools

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## Abstract

**The essay aims to find out the factors that influence empowering Chinese rural teachers' leadership from the perspective of school improvement. Therefore, the essay will firstly focus on the relationship between teacher leadership and school improvement and then pay attention to the influencing factors of rural teacher leadership in China. Additionally, the critical literature review will be used throughout the essay based on the specific context of rural China. The findings are as follows: firstly, teacher leadership is part of and can drive school improvement. Secondly, the factors influencing Chinese rural teachers' leadership can be divided into four aspects including policies, principals, teachers, and communities. The findings are useful to Chinese rural school practice as well as future research. In addition, a bigger scope of the influential factors is requested and is attached importance when focusing on Chinese rural teachers' curriculum leadership in the Chinese context, which can be seen as the originality of the essay.**

## Keywords

**Teacher leadership; School improvement; Chinese rural areas.**

## 1. Introduction

This essay is about finding out the influencing factors of teacher leadership in rural China and the effect of these factors on the improvement of rural schools. The aims of the study can be demonstrated by two aspects: First, to explore the importance of increasing Chinese rural teachers' leadership for school improvement. Second, to identify the factors that impact increasing Chinese rural teachers' leadership. Therefore, according to the aims, there are two research questions for this study: (1) In rural China, what is the significance of empowering rural teachers with leadership for school improvement? (2) What factors impact empowering the leadership of Chinese rural teachers? Related to the research questions, the importance and significance of this study can be shown as follows: (1) Through the literature review, the significance of empowering teachers with leadership to school improvement can be found, this provides theoretical support for the necessity of studying teacher leadership in rural China. (2) The study of factors influencing Chinese rural teachers' leadership has a theoretical reference and guiding role for the improvement of Chinese rural schools.

According to existing international studies on rural teacher leadership, the embodiment of rural teacher leadership can be summarized into two aspects, namely curriculum leadership and school management leadership (Cherkowski and Schnellert, 2017). Quite many teachers prefer to participate in decision-making at the curriculum level but are less willing to participate in the school management decision beyond the classroom (Handler, 2010). This essay has a default premise: pay attention to the embodiment of teacher leadership in the curriculum. Teacher curriculum leadership is the ability of teachers to cooperate with stakeholders in the curriculum field to better promote students' development and is closely related to students' achievements, so it is meaningful to focus the research on teacher leadership on curriculum

leadership (Wang et al., 2022). However, for the study of rural areas in China, the teacher curriculum leadership must solve an important problem before that is to attract teachers to rural schools and improve the retention rate of teachers. Therefore, this essay will study the factors affecting the improvement of rural teachers' leadership in China in a wider scope, rather than simply focusing on a few specific subjects.

## **2. The Relationship Between Rural Teacher Leadership and School Improvement in China**

Teacher development is an integral part of the school improvement process (Harris, 2013, 11, citing Hopkins et al., 1994), Cherkowski and Schnellert (2017) argued that teacher leadership and school improvement go hand in hand. Academics have not reached a commonly agreed-upon definition of the concept of teacher leadership (Beauchum and Dentith, 2004). However, there are many attempts to define teacher leadership, such as Fullan and Hargreaves (1996, 13) who argued that the concept of teacher leadership refers to a kind of teacher's ability and commitment which should be a contribution that goes beyond the boundaries of the classroom and the classroom. Handler (2010) critically summarized the views of scholars on teacher leadership from the early 20th century to the end of the 20th century, showing that 20th-century scholars have increasingly recognized and valued teacher leadership in curriculum development as the times have changed.

Empowering teachers with leadership is not only an aspect of school improvement but can drive school improvement. For example, Silva, Gimbert, and Nolan (2000) integrated the viewpoints of many scholars and put forward that teacher leadership is crucial for educational reform. Further, teacher leadership can be seen as a feature of educational reform (Smylie et al., 2002), and education reform is a driving force for school improvement (Tirozzi and Uro, 1997), therefore increasing teacher leadership can be considered a driving force for school improvement.

In the Chinese context, China has made the promotion of rural teacher development a very important part of its educational policy reform process in the last decade, expecting to improve the quality of rural education through the development of rural teachers (Jian, 2020). Wang et al. (2022) further emphasized the importance of rural teacher leadership in promoting rural education development based on the idea that rural teacher development needs to be valued. Since school improvement is also part of educational development, this suggests that Chinese scholars have seen the importance of improving rural teacher leadership in China for school improvement in rural China and have focused an increasing amount of research on the study of rural teacher leadership in China. Thereby, the next part will focus on the factors that influence teacher leadership.

## **3. Factors Influencing Chinese Rural Teachers to Increase Their Leadership**

Chen et al. (2021) proposed that factors affecting teachers' curriculum leadership can be divided into personal factors and school factors. Based on this point of view and combined with the less quantity of rural teachers and low teachers retention rate in China, this part further divides these two factors into four factors: policy, principal, teacher, and community. Further, these factors involve the promotion system and salary system of teachers in China, the distribution of leadership by schools, the perception of leadership by teachers, and the implementation of leadership by teachers.

### 3.1. Problems in the Teacher Promotion System and Salary Level

The premise of improving the leadership of rural teachers in China is that there are teachers in rural schools, which involves the employment choice of teachers. In China, the policy is an important factor affecting teachers' employment choice, especially the promotion system and salary level. Karachiwalla (2010) believes that the promotion mechanism can motivate teachers and increase their efforts. However, according to the teacher promotion system in China, teachers must complete a period of service in several years and obtain a good evaluation within these years before obtaining the promotion qualification, which means that the promotion of Chinese teachers will increase the time cost. In addition, for teachers who have little possibility of promotion, the promotion mechanism has little influence on them (Karachiwalla and Park, 2017). High time costs and few promotion opportunities lead to the reluctance of Chinese teachers to work in rural schools. In addition, Xuehui (2018) believes that salary level has an impact on teachers' employment choices and job involvement. There is an income gap between urban and rural teachers in China, which is also one of the reasons why teachers are reluctant to choose rural schools.

### 3.2. Problems in the Distribution of Leadership in Rural Schools

The distribution of leadership in rural schools mainly involves two subjects: principals and teachers. Liu and Hallinger (2018) proposed the concept of social and cultural norms in schools, that is, there is a hierarchy between principals and teachers. This reflects the current situation in most schools in China. At the same time, Liu and Hallinger (2018) pointed out that compared with urban principals in China, rural principals in China showed significantly weaker leadership due to a lower level of teacher trust. Chen et al. (2021) seem to confirm this point of view, and they point out that teachers' unilateral obedience to the principal will inhibit teachers' autonomy and creativity. They believe that the principal should be good at discovering teachers with leadership ability and fully grant teachers the right to lead, including curriculum leadership. Furthermore, focusing on the distribution of leadership between principals and teachers, it can be learned from Anderson's (2008) case study of six schools, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Anderson's (2008) case study of six schools

Leadership models	Buffered	Contested	Distributive
Characteristic	Principals have leadership, teachers have no leadership, principals lead teachers	The relationship between principal and teacher is competitive decision-making	The relationship between principal and teachers is interactive and cooperative
Degree in teacher leadership	Low	Medium	High

Although Anderson's (2008) research is not aimed at the leadership of rural teachers in China, his research can provide guidance, that is, the principal should properly deal with the distribution of leadership between teachers.

### 3.3. Problems in the Rural Teachers' Perception of Leadership

It can be concluded from the above that the successful implementation of curriculum leadership of rural teachers needs to change the top-down management model of school staff, and the management mode should move from autocratic to democratic (Ho, 2010). However, the realization of curriculum leadership of rural teachers requires not only changes in management

mode but also improvement of rural teachers' perception of leadership, that is, whether rural teachers can realize that they have curriculum leadership and are willing to use curriculum leadership to promote the teaching improvement of schools. Hunzicker (2017) believes that teachers often lack self-recognition as leaders, and many teachers are unwilling or difficult to regard themselves as leaders, which may be related to the vague concept of teacher leadership and the deep-rooted traditional top-down leadership thinking in teachers' minds. In addition, teachers' personalities influence leadership positions, the leadership position influences leadership behavior, such as those who have the ambition to get teacher leadership will practice trying to put the ambition to become a reality, and those who did not get the vision of teacher leadership will have the satisfaction of only focus on the teaching practice, research has shown that the teacher refused to leadership opportunities may cause certain influence to the school system.

### **3.4. Problems in the Implementation of Leadership By Rural Teachers**

Whether teachers can successfully implement curriculum leadership depends not only on their leadership willingness but also on their leadership ability (Chen et al., 2021). Teachers with a high professional level will have a stronger prestige and are more likely to receive support and recognition from principals and colleagues when implementing leadership (Chen et al., 2021). In addition to attracting high-level teachers to rural schools, schools can also develop the professional skills of existing rural teachers through training them, which not only includes improving the professional knowledge and ability of teachers but also includes encouraging teachers to reflect on curriculum design, forming cooperation among teachers for curriculum, and creating new classroom teaching modes and methods (Cherkowski and Schnellert, 2017). Cherkowski and Schnellert (2017) have shown that the responsibilities of teachers should not be limited to classroom teaching, but should go beyond the classroom. In particular, the cooperation among teachers mentioned by them can remove a large part of the obstacles in the implementation of teachers' curriculum leadership, because teachers may be disrespected by principals due to the distribution of leadership when implementing curriculum leadership, or they may be resisted by other teachers when introducing innovative curriculum projects due to their different concepts and attitudes towards the curriculum (Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, in addition to the influence of principals and teachers themselves on rural teachers' curriculum leadership mentioned above, other teachers as colleagues are also an important influencing factor.

In addition, location-based education can improve students' learning interests, and also strengthen the connection between school and the local area (Autti and Bæck, 2021, Citing Gruenewald and Smith, 2008). Therefore, the interpretation of improving the professional level of rural teachers in China should not be limited to the grasp of the general curriculum outline and curriculum content but should pay attention to whether teachers have local knowledge and the ability to use local knowledge for curriculum design. If teachers lack local knowledge of their villages and cannot make use of it for curriculum design, they will have problems in the formulation and implementation of curriculum (Autti and Bæck, 2021), that is, problems in the implementation of curriculum leadership. Therefore, the local community is also one of the factors influencing teachers' implementation of curriculum leadership.

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

This essay first proves that improving teacher leadership can promote school improvement and then studies the different factors that affect teacher leadership, especially curriculum leadership. The research on the influencing factors provides some enlightenment for Chinese rural schools. Firstly, it is necessary to consider whether more high-quality teachers can be attracted to rural schools by improving the promotion system and salary system of rural

teachers in China from the perspective of policy. Secondly, in terms of curriculum leadership in Chinese rural schools, whether principals can reach a competitive, interactive, and cooperative decision-making relationship with teachers is the premise and key influencing factor for teachers to obtain and implement curriculum leadership, which should be paid attention to by principals in rural schools in China. Thirdly, the enlightenment for the leaders of rural schools in China is as follows: rural teachers should be encouraged to realize and fully use their leadership, and the leadership relationship between principals and teachers should be properly handled when teachers are willing to implement curriculum leadership. Fourthly, when implementing curriculum leadership, Chinese rural teachers should not only pay attention to improving their professional level as a teacher but also ensure that they can develop their professional level according to the local background.

From the perspective of positivity, this essay has certain guiding significance for the rural school improvement in China, which has been presented above. However, there are also some limitations. For example, this essay originally tried to focus on the curriculum leadership of rural teachers, however, from the perspective of school improvement in Chinese rural schools, research on how to keep teachers remain is the premise of the research on how to empower teachers with leadership, so the factors affecting rural teacher retention rate can also be regarded as part of the factors affecting curriculum leadership, thus these factors need to be paid attention to in a larger scope. Therefore, it is found that these factors have a lot in common with the factors affecting teachers' school management leadership, although they influence the two types of leadership in different ways. So from this point of view, since focusing on the impact factors on a larger scale, the research on curriculum leadership in this essay seems not well-targeted. Future research can focus more specifically on the curriculum leadership of rural teachers in a certain subject.

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