

# Developing a Contextual Teacher Leadership Framework for Inclusive Education in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher leadership has been increasingly recognised as a critical driver of inclusive education, particularly in classrooms that require sustained collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Harris, 2020). While existing teacher leadership models provide valuable theoretical foundations, limited attention has been given to how these models operate within inclusive education contexts in non-Western settings. This study aims to develop a contextual teacher leadership framework for inclusive education in Malaysia by synthesising empirical evidence from a qualitative case study. Guided by Katzenmeyer and Moller's Teacher Leadership Model (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, 2009), data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving six experienced teachers from two public schools in Johor Bahru. Thematic analysis identified leadership strategies and challenges that informed the construction of a contextualised framework comprising seven leadership dimensions, enabling conditions, and implementation pathways. The proposed framework extends existing teacher leadership theory by integrating contextual constraints and practical strategies relevant to inclusive education. The study contributes a theoretically grounded and empirically informed framework that can guide professional development, school leadership practices, and inclusive education policy in Malaysia and similar contexts.

**Keywords:** teacher leadership framework, inclusive education, qualitative study, Malaysia, collaborative teaching

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a defining feature of contemporary education reform, underpinned by commitments to equity, social justice, and the right of all learners to access quality education (UNESCO, 2020). In inclusive classrooms, teachers are expected to collaborate across professional boundaries, adapt pedagogical practices, and respond to diverse student needs. These expectations position teachers not only as instructional practitioners but also as leaders who influence professional practices and school culture (Friend & Cook, 2016).

Teacher leadership has been widely acknowledged as a key contributor to school improvement and instructional quality (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). However, most teacher leadership models have been developed and tested in mainstream education contexts, with limited empirical attention to inclusive education settings. In inclusive classrooms, leadership is often enacted informally through collaboration, advocacy, and pedagogical decision-making rather than formal authority (Harris, 2003).

In Malaysia, inclusive education has been formally implemented since 2010 as part of national education reforms. Despite policy support, challenges persist in the practical enactment of inclusive education, particularly in relation to collaborative teaching and leadership capacity among teachers. Existing research has focused largely on administrative leadership or teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, leaving a gap in understanding how teacher leadership can be systematically developed and sustained in inclusive education contexts. This study addresses this gap by developing a contextual teacher leadership framework grounded in empirical evidence from Malaysian inclusive schools.

## 2. Literature Review

Teacher leadership has been conceptualised as teachers' capacity to influence teaching, learning, and school improvement beyond formal leadership roles (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Prominent frameworks emphasise distributed leadership, professional collaboration, and shared responsibility for instructional improvement (Harris, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Katzenmeyer and Moller's Teacher Leadership Model remains one of the most widely cited frameworks, identifying seven dimensions that support teacher leadership: developmental focus, recognition, autonomy, collegiality, participation, open communication, and positive environment (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, 2009). While this model provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation, it does not explicitly address contextual constraints such as inclusive education demands, professional boundary tensions, or systemic limitations.

Inclusive education introduces additional layers of complexity to teacher leadership. Teachers are required to collaborate across professional roles, negotiate shared responsibilities, and advocate for diverse learner needs (Friend & Cook, 2016). Research indicates that teacher leadership is essential for sustaining inclusive practices; however, challenges such as limited leadership preparation, role ambiguity, and structural constraints often hinder leadership enactment (Nguyen, Harris, & Ng, 2019; Florian & Beaton, 2022).

Recent studies call for context-sensitive leadership frameworks that integrate both enabling conditions and constraints within inclusive education settings (Harris, 2020; Sharma & Jacobs, 2021). Such frameworks are particularly needed in non-Western contexts where cultural, organisational, and policy factors shape leadership practices differently.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to develop a contextual teacher leadership framework for inclusive education. Qualitative methods were selected to capture teachers' lived experiences and contextualised leadership practices within inclusive classrooms (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Six experienced teachers from two public schools in Johor Bahru participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected based on their involvement in inclusive education and collaborative teaching practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews explored leadership practices, strategies, and challenges, while observations provided contextual insights into leadership enactment during teaching and collaboration. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes related to leadership strategies and challenges were mapped onto the seven dimensions of Katzenmeyer and Moller's model. An iterative synthesis process was then used to develop a contextual framework that integrates leadership dimensions, enabling conditions, and implementation pathways.

## 4. Findings: Basis for Framework Development

The findings revealed that teacher leadership in inclusive education is enacted through a combination of leadership strategies and contextual constraints. Teachers practised leadership across seven dimensions consistent with Katzenmeyer and Moller's model. Strategies included mentoring colleagues, acknowledging professional contributions, exercising pedagogical judgement, co-planning and shared teaching, involvement in decision-making, open dialogue, and fostering inclusive classroom climates (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, 2009). Five categories of challenges were identified: limited leadership preparation, role ambiguity, constrained autonomy, structural and time-related barriers, and communication tensions. These challenges shaped how leadership strategies were enacted and highlighted the need for supportive organisational conditions (Nguyen et al., 2019; Harris, 2020).

## 5. The Contextual Teacher Leadership Framework for Inclusive Education

### 5.1 Framework Overview

The proposed framework comprises three interconnected components:

1. Core leadership dimensions adapted from Katzenmeyer and Moller's model
2. Enabling conditions that support leadership enactment
3. Implementation pathways that translate leadership into inclusive classroom practices

## 5.2 Framework Description

The contextual teacher leadership framework conceptualises teacher leadership in inclusive education as a dynamic and relational process shaped by both individual agency and systemic conditions. At the core of the framework are seven leadership dimensions adapted from Katzenmeyer and Moller's Teacher Leadership Model: developmental focus, recognition, autonomy, collegiality, participation, open communication, and a positive professional environment. These dimensions represent the fundamental ways in which teachers exercise professional influence beyond formal leadership roles.

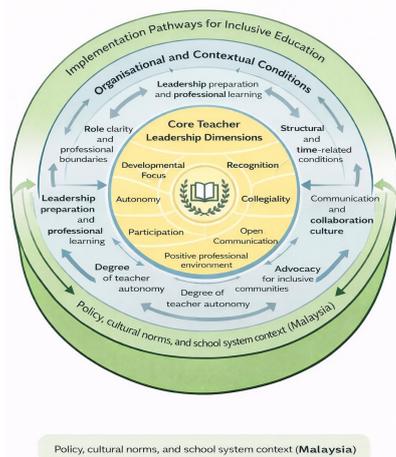
Surrounding the core leadership dimensions are organisational and contextual conditions that either enable or constrain leadership enactment. Empirical findings from this study indicate that leadership preparation, role clarity, professional autonomy, structural and time-related arrangements, and communication culture play a critical mediating role in shaping how teacher leadership is practised in inclusive classrooms. When these conditions are supportive, teacher leadership is more sustained, collaborative, and impactful; when they are weak or absent, leadership remains fragmented and informal.

The outer layer of the framework represents implementation pathways through which teacher leadership contributes to inclusive education practices. These pathways include collaborative teaching arrangements between mainstream and special education teachers, inclusive pedagogical decision-making, participation in professional learning communities, advocacy for diverse learners, and the creation of inclusive classroom climates. The framework highlights that effective inclusive education is not the result of isolated leadership actions but emerges from the interaction between leadership dimensions, organisational conditions, and context-sensitive implementation processes.

Unlike generic teacher leadership models, this framework explicitly integrates contextual constraints and enabling conditions associated with inclusive education. By foregrounding the interaction between leadership dimensions and systemic factors, the framework extends teacher leadership theory beyond individual competencies and highlights leadership as a situated practice shaped by organisational structures, professional cultures, and policy environments. The framework ( **Figure 1** ) illustrates how core teacher leadership dimensions operate within organisational and contextual conditions to shape implementation pathways for inclusive education. Leadership enactment is influenced by enabling and constraining factors related to professional preparation, autonomy, role clarity, structural conditions, and communication culture.

**Figure 1.** A Contextual Teacher Leadership Framework for Inclusive Education

A Contextual Teacher Leadership Framework for Inclusive Education



### 5.3 Theoretical Contributions

The framework extends existing teacher leadership theory by explicitly integrating contextual challenges and enabling conditions. Unlike generic leadership models, this framework accounts for the complexities of inclusive education and highlights the interplay between individual agency and systemic constraints (Spillane et al., 2004).

### 6. Discussion

The development of a contextual teacher leadership framework addresses calls for more practice-oriented and context-sensitive leadership models (Harris, 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). The findings demonstrate that teacher leadership in inclusive education cannot be understood solely through individual competencies; it is shaped by organisational structures, professional cultures, and policy environments. By integrating leadership strategies and challenges, the framework offers a holistic understanding of teacher leadership in inclusive education, aligning with distributed leadership perspectives that emphasise collective practice and shared responsibility (Spillane et al., 2004).

### 7. Implications

#### 7.1 Implications for Practice

The framework provides guidance for designing professional development programmes that integrate leadership training with inclusive pedagogy. Teachers can use the framework to reflect on their leadership practices and identify areas for growth.

#### 7.2 Implications for Policy

Policymakers can use the framework to inform inclusive education policies that recognise and support teacher leadership. Policy alignment is necessary to ensure that leadership expectations are matched with resources, time, and structural support (UNESCO, 2020).

### 8. Conclusion

This study presents a contextual teacher leadership framework for inclusive education grounded in empirical evidence from Malaysian schools. By integrating leadership dimensions, enabling conditions, and implementation pathways, the framework offers a comprehensive model for understanding and strengthening

teacher leadership in inclusive education contexts. Future research may test the framework across diverse educational settings or examine its applicability using mixed-methods approaches.

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