Challenges of Teacher Leadership in Inclusive Education: A Qualitative Study of Malaysian Schools

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ABSTRACT

Teacher leadership is widely acknowledged as a critical enabler of inclusive education, particularly in classrooms that require close collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Harris, 2020). Despite policy support for inclusive education in Malaysia, teachers continue to encounter significant challenges when enacting leadership roles within inclusive classroom settings (Salleh & Woollard, 2019). This qualitative case study examines the challenges faced by teachers in practising leadership in inclusive education contexts in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. Guided by Katzenmeyer and Moller's Teacher Leadership Model, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving six experienced teachers from two public schools. Thematic analysis identified five interrelated categories of challenges: limited leadership preparation, role ambiguity and professional boundaries, constraints on autonomy, structural and time-related barriers, and communication and collaboration tensions. The findings reveal that teacher leadership in inclusive education is often constrained by systemic and cultural factors rather than a lack of commitment among teachers. The study contributes empirical insights into the complexities of teacher leadership in inclusive classrooms and highlights the need for targeted professional development, organisational support, and policy alignment to strengthen inclusive education practices.

Keywords: teacher leadership, inclusive education, challenges, collaborative teaching, qualitative research, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of educational reform worldwide, grounded in principles of equity, access, and social justice (UNESCO, 2020). In inclusive classrooms, students with diverse learning needs are educated alongside their peers, requiring teachers to adopt flexible pedagogical approaches and collaborate across professional roles (Florian, 2019). While inclusive education policies emphasise collaboration and shared responsibility, their successful implementation depends largely on teachers' capacity to lead instructional and professional practices within schools (Friend & Cook, 2016).

Teacher leadership has been identified as a key mechanism for sustaining inclusive education. Teachers often assume leadership roles informally by mentoring colleagues, coordinating collaborative teaching, and advocating for inclusive practices (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). However, practising leadership in inclusive education contexts is complex and frequently accompanied by significant challenges. These challenges may stem from organisational structures, professional cultures, or limited leadership preparation (Nguyen et al., 2019; Harris, 2020).

In Malaysia, inclusive education has been formally implemented since 2010 as part of national education reforms. Despite this policy commitment, studies indicate that inclusive education practices remain inconsistent across schools, particularly in relation to collaborative teaching and teacher leadership (Anuar & Rahim, 2016; Salleh & Woollard, 2019). Existing research has largely focused on administrative leadership or teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, with less attention given to the challenges teachers face when exercising leadership in inclusive classrooms. This study addresses this gap by examining the challenges encountered by teachers practising leadership in inclusive education settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher leadership is commonly conceptualised as teachers' influence on instructional practices, professional learning, and school improvement beyond formal leadership roles (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Research has consistently highlighted challenges that constrain teachers' leadership practices, including role ambiguity, limited time, lack of recognition, and insufficient organisational support (Nguyen et al., 2019; Harris, 2020). Without clear structures or recognition, teacher leadership may be perceived as informal or contested within school cultures (Flores, 2018; Lizana et al., 2020).

Within inclusive education contexts, these challenges become more pronounced due to the need for collaboration across professional boundaries. Teachers must negotiate shared responsibilities, manage diverse learner needs, and align pedagogical practices with inclusive values (Friend & Cook, 2016; Florian, 2019). Empirical studies identify insufficient training, unclear role expectations, and limited autonomy as persistent barriers to effective teacher leadership in inclusive settings (Husin & Hamdan, 2016; Sharma & Jacobs, 2021).

This study is guided by Katzenmeyer and Moller's Teacher Leadership Model, which conceptualises teacher leadership across seven dimensions: developmental focus, recognition, autonomy, collegiality, participation, open communication, and positive environment (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, 2009). The model provides a useful analytical lens for examining how deficiencies in organisational conditions may constrain teacher leadership in inclusive education contexts.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study approach was adopted to explore the challenges of teacher leadership in inclusive education settings, as it allows in-depth examination of lived experiences within authentic contexts (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, consistent with qualitative sampling principles (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews focused on teachers' experiences of leadership, collaboration, and challenges encountered in inclusive classrooms, while classroom observations were conducted to triangulate interview data and capture contextual dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Coding was conducted iteratively, combining inductive and deductive approaches aligned with the teacher leadership framework. Trustworthiness was ensured through data triangulation, prolonged engagement, and audit trails (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As a qualitative case study, this research was designed to generate in-depth insights rather than statistical generalisation. The study involved six teachers from two public secondary schools in Johor Bahru, an urban district within the Malaysian education system. Consequently, the findings are shaped by contextual factors such as local school cultures, administrative structures, and national inclusive education policies that characterise Malaysian public schools.

While the sample size is appropriate for an interpretive qualitative inquiry, the findings should be understood within these contextual boundaries. Transferability is supported through rich description of participants, settings, and practices, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to comparable contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2021). However, the experiences reported may differ in rural settings, private schools, or education systems with different policy and organisational arrangements.

FINDINGS

Five major categories of challenges emerged from the data analysis.

1. Limited Leadership Preparation

Participants reported limited formal preparation for leadership roles in inclusive education. While teachers

received training related to inclusive pedagogy, leadership development was largely absent. One participant explained:

" We are expected to guide others in inclusive teaching, but no one really trains us to lead. You learn through experience, sometimes through mistakes. "

This finding reflects earlier research suggesting that teacher leadership often develops implicitly rather than through systematic capacity-building (Flores, 2018; Lizana et al., 2020).

2. Role Ambiguity and Professional Boundaries

Teachers experienced uncertainty regarding their leadership roles, particularly in collaborative teaching arrangements between mainstream and special education teachers. Ambiguity surrounding responsibilities and professional boundaries sometimes led to tension and reduced effectiveness in collaboration (Anuar & Rahim, 2016; Husin & Hamdan, 2016).

3. Constraints on Autonomy

Participants highlighted constraints on professional autonomy, particularly when decision-making authority remained centralised at the administrative level. One teacher noted that limited autonomy restricted timely instructional decisions needed to support diverse learners. Such constraints limited teachers' ability to implement inclusive strategies and respond flexibly to classroom needs (Nguyen et al., 2019; Harris, 2020).

4. Structural and Time-Related Barriers

Heavy workloads, time constraints, and rigid school schedules were identified as significant barriers to teacher leadership. Teachers struggled to balance instructional responsibilities with leadership activities, limiting opportunities for collaboration and reflection (Salleh & Woollard, 2019; Harris, 2020).

5. Communication and Collaboration Tensions

Although collaboration was encouraged, participants described challenges related to communication and interpersonal dynamics. Differences in teaching philosophies, experience levels, and expectations occasionally hindered effective collaboration and leadership (Friend & Cook, 2016; Husin & Hamdan, 2016).

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that challenges to teacher leadership in inclusive education are primarily systemic and contextual rather than individual. Limited leadership preparation and role ambiguity constrained teachers' capacity to lead inclusive practices effectively, consistent with previous research (Nguyen et al., 2019; Sharma & Jacobs, 2021).

Structural and time-related barriers further underscore the importance of organisational conditions that support teacher leadership. Without adequate time, autonomy, and recognition, leadership efforts risk becoming fragmented and unsustainable. These findings align with studies emphasising supportive school cultures and distributed leadership structures in inclusive education (Harris, 2020; Florian & Beaton, 2022).

Professional development programmes should integrate leadership training with inclusive pedagogy to equip teachers with the skills needed to lead collaborative practices effectively (Flores, 2018). Schools should also provide dedicated time and structural support to enable meaningful teacher leadership. At the policy level, inclusive education frameworks should explicitly recognise teacher leadership as a core implementation component (Nguyen et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by teachers practising leadership in inclusive education settings in Malaysia. By identifying systemic, organisational, and relational barriers, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of why teacher leadership remains difficult to sustain in inclusive classrooms. Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The focus on two public schools in Johor Bahru limits the breadth of contextual representation, and findings may not fully reflect experiences in other regions or school types. Additionally, as with all qualitative research, interpretations are shaped by participants' perspectives and the researchers' analytical lenses. Nevertheless, the provision of rich contextual detail and theoretical grounding allows the findings to inform future research, policy development, and professional practice in comparable inclusive education contexts.

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