

Teacher Leadership Strategies in Inclusive Education: A Qualitative Case Study in the Malaysian Context

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ABSTRACT

Teacher leadership has been increasingly recognised as a critical element in strengthening inclusive education practices, particularly in classrooms that involve collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Harris, 2003). Although inclusive education has been formally implemented in Malaysia since 2010, limited empirical research has examined how teachers enact leadership roles within inclusive classroom contexts (Anuar & Rahim, 2016; Salleh & Woollard, 2019). This qualitative case study explores the leadership strategies practised by teachers in inclusive education settings in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. 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. Thematic analysis revealed a range of leadership strategies organised across seven dimensions: developmental focus, recognition, autonomy, collegiality, participation, open communication, and positive environment. The findings indicate that teacher leadership in inclusive education is primarily enacted through informal, collaborative, and pedagogically driven practices rather than formal authority. This study contributes empirical insights into teacher leadership strategies in inclusive education and offers implications for professional development, school leadership practices, and inclusive education policy in Malaysia.

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

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a global educational priority, driven by international commitments to equity, social justice, and the right to education for all learners (UNESCO, 2009). Inclusive education aims to ensure that students with diverse learning needs, including those with disabilities, are provided meaningful access to quality education within mainstream school settings. The success of inclusive education, however, depends not only on policy directives but also on classroom-level practices shaped by teachers.

Teachers play a central role in translating inclusive education policies into practice. In inclusive classrooms, teachers are required to collaborate with colleagues, differentiate instruction, manage diverse learner needs, and foster supportive learning environments (Friend & Cook, 2016). These responsibilities extend beyond traditional instructional roles and require teachers to exercise leadership within their professional communities. Teacher leadership, therefore, has emerged as a crucial construct for understanding how inclusive education is enacted in practice (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Research consistently indicates that leadership is a key factor influencing school improvement and student outcomes, with teacher leadership recognised as second only to teaching itself in its impact on learning (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). In inclusive education contexts, teacher leadership becomes particularly significant as teachers often lead change informally through collaboration, professional influence, and pedagogical advocacy (Harris, 2003). Despite its importance, teacher leadership remains underexplored in inclusive education research, especially in non-Western contexts.

In Malaysia, inclusive education has been formally implemented since 2010 as part of broader educational reforms aimed at promoting equity and access (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). While policy

frameworks emphasise collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers, challenges persist in the practical implementation of inclusive education. One contributing factor is the limited empirical understanding of how teachers practise leadership in inclusive classroom settings. Existing Malaysian studies have tended to focus on school administrators or teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, leaving a gap in research on teacher leadership practices in inclusive education (Anuar & Rahim, 2016; Salleh & Woollard, 2019). This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the leadership strategies employed by teachers in inclusive education settings in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher leadership refers to the process by which teachers influence their colleagues, school practices, and learning environments to improve teaching and learning outcomes (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership models, teacher leadership is often informal, distributed, and grounded in professional expertise rather than positional authority (Harris, 2003). Teacher leaders may engage in mentoring, curriculum development, collaborative decision-making, and instructional improvement, contributing to school-wide change.

Previous research suggests that teacher leadership enhances professional collaboration, supports continuous professional learning, and fosters positive school cultures (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Teacher leadership has also been associated with improved instructional practices and increased teacher efficacy, particularly in contexts that require innovation and adaptability (Adams, 2018).

Inclusive education presents complex pedagogical and organisational challenges that demand strong teacher leadership. Teachers in inclusive classrooms must collaborate across professional boundaries, adapt curricula to diverse learner needs, and negotiate shared responsibilities between mainstream and special education teachers (Friend & Cook, 2016). Studies suggest that teacher leadership plays a vital role in facilitating collaborative teaching, supporting inclusive pedagogical practices, and fostering shared accountability for student learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Despite growing interest in inclusive education, empirical studies focusing specifically on teacher leadership strategies within inclusive classrooms remain limited. Many studies have examined teachers' attitudes, perceptions, or challenges related to inclusive education (Anuar & Rahim, 2016; Salleh & Woollard, 2019), while fewer have explored how teachers enact leadership in practice. There is a particular lack of qualitative research that captures teachers' lived experiences of leadership in inclusive education settings in Malaysia (Norashikin et al., 2015; Yusof et al., 2018).

This study is grounded in Katzenmeyer and Moller's Teacher Leadership Model, which conceptualises teacher leadership across seven interrelated dimensions: developmental focus, recognition, autonomy, collegiality, participation, open communication, and positive environment (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, 2009). This framework has been widely applied in teacher leadership research and provides a comprehensive lens for examining leadership practices enacted by teachers in inclusive education contexts.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design was employed to explore teacher leadership strategies in inclusive education settings. Qualitative methods were deemed appropriate as they allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives, and contextualised practices (Creswell & Poth, 2021). The study involved six experienced teachers from two public schools in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. The 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. The interviews explored teachers' experiences of leadership, collaboration, and inclusive teaching practices. Classroom observations were conducted to corroborate interview data and to capture leadership practices as they occurred naturally in classroom settings (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Data were analysed using thematic analysis following an iterative

coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded inductively and deductively based on the seven dimensions of the teacher leadership framework. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, prolonged engagement, and detailed audit trails (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The findings revealed a set of leadership strategies enacted by teachers across the seven dimensions of Katzenmeyer and Moller's model.

Developmental Focus

Teachers demonstrated leadership by supporting the professional growth of their colleagues through sharing instructional strategies and modelling inclusive teaching practices, consistent with leadership development literature (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Yusof et al., 2018).

Recognition

Recognition emerged as an important leadership strategy in fostering collaboration. Teachers acknowledged colleagues' contributions and expertise, which helped strengthen professional relationships and promote mutual respect (Norashikin et al., 2015).

Autonomy

Teacher leadership was also reflected in the autonomy exercised in pedagogical decision-making. Teachers adapted instructional approaches to suit students' needs and advocated for inclusive practices based on their professional judgement (Harris, 2003; Adams, 2018).

Collegiality

Collegiality was a central feature of teacher leadership in inclusive education. Teachers engaged in co-planning, shared responsibilities, and peer support, particularly in collaborative teaching arrangements between mainstream and special education teachers (Friend & Cook, 2016; Husin & Hamdan, 2016).

Participation

Teachers actively participated in school-level discussions related to inclusive education. Their involvement in decision-making processes helped align classroom practices with broader school goals and reinforced the value of teacher voice in inclusive education initiatives (Yusof et al., 2018).

Open Communication

Open communication was identified as a key leadership strategy. Teachers facilitated dialogue among colleagues to discuss challenges, share insights, and resolve instructional issues, supporting trust and collaboration within inclusive teaching teams (Harris, 2003; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Positive Environment

Teachers contributed to creating positive and inclusive classroom environments by modelling supportive attitudes, encouraging student participation, and promoting acceptance of diversity, consistent with inclusive education principles (UNESCO, 2009).

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that teacher leadership in inclusive education is predominantly enacted through informal, relational, and pedagogical practices rather than formal leadership roles. Teachers led by influencing instructional practices, fostering collaboration, and advocating for inclusive values within their classrooms. This

aligns with previous research highlighting the distributed and practice-based nature of teacher leadership (Harris & Muijs, 2005; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). The prominence of collegiality and open communication underscores the importance of collaborative cultures in sustaining inclusive education. Teacher leadership strategies identified in this study demonstrate how teachers act as key agents in bridging policy intentions and classroom realities (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Professional development programmes should explicitly incorporate teacher leadership development, particularly in inclusive education contexts. Training should focus on collaborative skills, reflective practice, and shared leadership among teachers (Adams, 2018; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Educational policies should recognise and support informal teacher leadership roles by providing structures that encourage collaboration and shared decision-making in inclusive schools (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence on teacher leadership strategies in inclusive education settings in Malaysia. By examining how teachers practise leadership through collaboration, autonomy, and pedagogical advocacy, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of teacher-led inclusive practices. Strengthening teacher leadership is essential for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of inclusive education.

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