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EXPLORING THE NEXUS OF TEACHER AUTONOMY AND TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN THE CHINESE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Teacher autonomy and teacher leadership are critical themes in the field of education. This paper aims to explore the impact of teacher autonomy on teacher leadership in early childhood education contexts through qualitative research, emphasizing the close relationship between the two and revealing how teacher autonomy fosters teacher leadership in teaching, innovation, and school reform. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 kindergarten teacher leaders in China. Analysis of the interview data demonstrates the significant role of teacher autonomy in developing teacher leadership. Teacher autonomy forms a solid foundation for teacher leadership when combined with motivation and initiative to improve teaching and learning. Teachers can exert leadership within and outside the school through autonomous decision-making, professional growth, and collaborative efforts, contributing to positive educational change. Therefore, advocating for teacher autonomy is well-suited to the Chinese early childhood education system. Establishing explicit connections between teacher autonomy and leadership can provide valuable insights for improving educational practices.

Keywords: Teacher Leadership, Early Childhood Education, Teacher Leader, Teacher Autonomy



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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of global education, educational institutions have undergone continuous transformation alongside societal changes. Simultaneously, expectations for teachers have evolved, with increasing emphasis on teacher autonomy and leadership as crucial concepts in educational fields (Eurydice, 2008; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Parcerisa et al., 2022). Teacher autonomy is recognized as a vital attribute for cultivating professional knowledge, enriching teaching methodologies, and enhancing educational quality (Parker, 2015). Raven (1993) asserts that one of the social foundations of leadership is possessing high levels of expertise. Granting teachers greater autonomy in their teaching, involvement in curriculum development, teaching methodologies, and school affairs management allows them to demonstrate their professional capabilities, thus significantly fostering teacher leadership (Ghamrawi, 2010). Moreover, empowering teachers with autonomy in school management enables them to contribute to organizational changes within the school (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Kara & Bozkurt, 2022). Teacher autonomy reflects the support and trust of the school organization towards its teachers, allowing teachers to exert influence within the organizational structure by showcasing their professional capabilities, thereby facilitating the development of teacher leadership.

Foundational to the future personal development of children, early childhood education entails the responsibility of knowledge transmission. It also entails the guidance of young learners in observing the world and cultivating appropriate personal values (Moss, 2014). Consequently, teachers require significant autonomy in determining learning methods, classroom activities, and curriculum arrangements, all of which notably impact the overall learning experience of young students (Chachkhiani, 2023; Winsler & Carlton, 2003). Over the past two decades in China, there has been a significant shift in the conceptualization of early childhood education. Following substantial reforms aimed at aligning with contemporary educational theories such as constructivism and dynamic student needs, the educational system has discarded uniform and rigid curricula (Wang et al., 2011; Zhu & Zhang, 2018). Teacher autonomy has emerged as a crucial factor in enhancing the quality of early childhood education.

Teacher autonomy refers to educators' independence and professional discretion in shaping teaching practices, curriculum design, and classroom management within educational contexts, encompassing how teachers autonomously construct educational methods considering their individuality, training, experience, and specific educational backgrounds (Hoyle & John, 1995). In early childhood education, teacher autonomy plays a pivotal role. It fosters a supportive atmosphere wherein educators can make informed decisions and assume responsibility (Ozdemir & Cakalci, 2022). This autonomy empowers teachers to tailor educational approaches to meet the evolving needs of young learners (Parker, 2015). Additionally, it enables early childhood educators to adjust their practices to address challenges while contributing to the social development of children (Xia et al., 2023).

The relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher leadership is intricately intertwined. Teacher autonomy pertains to the professional development and enhancement of teachers' qualities. It also serves as a prerequisite for teachers to demonstrate their leadership skills (Webb, 2002). Teacher leadership encompasses teachers' actions to promote positive changes in the educational environment. These extend beyond classroom instruction to initiatives such as curriculum development, guidance, and advocacy for educational policies (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2006). The degree of teacher autonomy significantly influences their ability and willingness to assume leadership roles (Jumani & Malik, 2017; Kara & Bozkurt, 2022). In early childhood education, teacher leadership involves the ability to organize teacher innovation, inspire, and effectively guide the thinking of young minds (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005). When teachers have autonomy in decision-making regarding teaching methods, this often translates into enhancing their professional capabilities and consequently developing teacher leadership.

In the backdrop of early childhood education in China, this association appears even more closely intertwined. The traditional Chinese education system emphasizes cooperation and discipline, often constraining teacher autonomy



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(Long, 2014). If teacher autonomy is fully granted in early childhood education, teachers can gain greater motivation for teaching innovation and professional development, as teachers' teaching abilities develop, they gain more confidence to engage in teaching decisions, naturally transitioning from teachers to teacher leaders (Lin, 2022).

Research on the relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher leadership in Chinese early childhood education is relatively scarce, resulting in a critical gap in the existing literature. This gap can be summarized as follows: Firstly, there is insufficient focus on the preschool education level. While teacher autonomy and leadership have been extensively studied in general educational contexts, there is still a lack of specific research on these concepts in the unique background of early childhood education (Zhu & Zhang, 2018). Secondly, there is limited cultural background. Much of the existing research primarily originates from Western educational backgrounds, raising questions about the applicability of research findings to the Chinese cultural and education context (Li et al., 2011). Thus, cultural differences and their impact on teacher autonomy and leadership in China represent a significant research gap. Lastly, there is potential to enhance educational practices. Establishing explicit connections between teacher autonomy and leadership can provide valuable insights for improving educational practices, particularly within the early childhood education system.

This study investigates how teacher autonomy influences the emergence of teacher leadership within the context of early childhood education in China. By examining the relationship between these two critical factors, we seek to uncover how leveraging teacher autonomy can enhance teachers' leadership qualities, ultimately benefiting the educational experiences of young learners in the Chinese early childhood education system.

Consequently, our research questions are:

1. How do teacher leaders perceive teacher autonomy?
2. In what ways does teacher autonomy impact teacher leadership?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Autonomy

The term "autonomy" originates from the Greek words "autos" and "nomos," meaning self-governance. Autonomy denotes the freedom of action that is independent or not controlled externally, emphasizing self-sufficiency (Lather, 1991). However, scholars have raised questions because autonomy is not solely an individual matter; it also involves the influence of others (Hague, 2011; Raaen, 2011). Additionally, some perspectives suggest that autonomy represents the capacity for self-regulation within a larger community, including interaction with others (DeVries & Zan, 1994; Oosterhoff et al., 2020). Allwright (1990) posits that autonomy delicately balances between self-reliance and interdependence. Autonomy does not imply complete independence; it involves subtle interactions between internal and external recognition, where individual identity and self-expression play a central role (Raaen, 2011). Therefore, autonomy necessitates dynamic relations between self and others, shaped by the complex interplay of individual agency and external influences.

In education, contemplating and discussing the nature of teacher autonomy is crucial (Hoyle & John, 1995). However, teacher autonomy evolves continuously alongside societal and educational developments (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Hoyle & John (1995) define teacher autonomy as an active form of independence representing the freedom for teachers to construct individual teaching methods, which require a balance among personal traits, training, experience, and specific educational contexts. Pearson and Hall (1993) distinguish teacher autonomy into curriculum autonomy, which pertains to the discretion over what to teach, and general autonomy, which encompasses decision-making authority in teaching methods and classroom management. Ramos (2006) defines teacher autonomy as the capacity for educators to collaborate with stakeholders within their professional competency framework, making decisions and being accountable for them. Contrarily, Grenville-Cleave and Boniwell (2012) elevate it to a psychological need.



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To some extent, autonomy constitutes a fundamental element of teachers' work. Çolak and Altinkurt (2017) assert that teacher autonomy holds comprehensive significance, encompassing power, authority, decision-making, freedom, willingness, cooperation, responsibility, decision-making ability, and liberty related to the school, education, and students. This study defines teacher autonomy as the ability of educators to independently think, make decisions, and autonomously develop their teaching practices in the educational process based on their professional knowledge and skills and to effectively address challenges in teaching activities according to specific circumstances.

Building upon this definition, the mutual influence between teacher autonomy and the external work environment provides a critical research entry point. Implementing teacher autonomy relies on school leadership, as it necessitates internalizing norms and controls to enact compliant management strategies (Bashir & Alam, 2024; Menter et al., 1995). Supported by participatory autonomous models, teachers are encouraged to innovate and develop independently while maintaining a spirit of collaboration and valuing shared professional knowledge (Gabriel et al., 2011). However, influenced by the leadership style of school principals, teachers often feel compelled to negotiate or manipulate constraints on their autonomy (Benson, 2000). Berry (2012) evaluates the role of principals as "conductors," conveying government policies for their implementation, thereby limiting teachers' professional autonomy. Yet, teacher efficacy relies on their autonomy, possibly because effective teaching demands that educators possess a "strong sense of personal teaching responsibility" and maintain "continuous reflection and analysis" on cognitive and affective factors related to student learning (Little, 1995).

Research on teacher autonomy has been continuously explored by scholars from various perspectives. Friedman (1999) delineated four dimensions of autonomy: instructional and assessment, participation in decision-making, professional development, and curriculum autonomy. Lawson (2004) approached teacher autonomy liberation from critical education, reflective practitioner, and personal efficacy viewpoints. Can (2009) underscored the importance of teachers assuming responsibility in curriculum development based on school needs and students beyond predetermined curricula. Öztürk (2011) proposed dimensions of planning and implementing teaching, involvement in management processes, and professional development. Some studies emphasize the potential impact of specific environmental variables, prompting managers to reflect on how they coordinate their benefit plans. The findings may influence managers to adjust their management styles, potentially creating better work environments and enhancing student learning outcomes (Prichard & Moore, 2016). Çolak and Altinkurt (2017) summarized teaching, curriculum, professional development, and professional communication as four processes in their research. As such, it is evident that curriculum development and innovation, professional collaboration, decision-making involvement, and professional development are the focal points of scholars' discussions.

Research in China on teacher autonomy includes studies like Liu et al. (2021), which confirmed that teacher autonomy indirectly affects job satisfaction and suggested that a flat organizational model can enhance communication between school leaders and teachers, granting more autonomy. Yang (2024) found that teacher autonomy positively influences teaching innovation among college English teachers in China, proposing administrative support and tailored training to encourage such innovation. Wang (2024) conducted empirical research and developed a model confirming teacher autonomy as a significant factor affecting student engagement in classroom learning and its intrinsic link with school climate. Lin and Gao (2023) discovered that teacher autonomy is influenced by professionalism and the culture of individualism, not by the complexity of school teaching practices. Therefore, this study explores the influence of teacher autonomy and leadership from three perspectives: teacher capacity development, community collaboration, and fostering innovative change.

Teacher Leadership

While there are numerous definitions of teacher leadership, consensus on a singular definition is lacking due to the concept being viewed as unique within each school context (Muijs & Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Lambert (1998) characterizes teacher leadership in school capacity building as the broad and proficient engagement in leadership roles. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) defined teacher leaders as those who exhibit leadership inside and



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outside the classroom, identify and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders and influence others to improve educational practices. Ward and Parr (2006) regarded teacher leadership as the potential for all teachers to be leaders, extending beyond formal roles such as team leaders, expert teachers, or formal teacher leaders to encompass a broader phenomenon. York-Barr and Duke (2004) defined teacher leadership as establishing effective relationships within the school, removing barriers, and organizing resources to enhance students' educational experiences and outcomes. Harris (2005) noted that the teacher leadership movement is a method that significantly benefits schools, teachers, and students. The movement contributes to the formation of a professional work culture within schools due to teachers' leadership experiences and expertise. Danielson (2006) emphasized the skills that teacher leadership should entail, describing it as a set of skills enabling teachers to influence beyond the classroom, contributing to student learning and school success. Despite variations in the conceptualization of teacher leadership over time, scholars commonly conclude that focusing on the development of teachers' professional skills, implementing high-quality teaching practices in the classroom to improve student school outcomes, and promoting the realization of a school's vision through enhancing relationships and fostering a culture of collaboration among stakeholders are all vital aspects.

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) propose three primary aspects of teacher leadership: leading students or other teachers by serving as facilitators, coaches, mentors, trainers, curriculum experts, innovators, and leading learning groups; leading operational tasks by maintaining the organization of the school and progressing towards goals through roles like department heads, action researchers, and team members; and exerting leadership through decision-making or partnerships, fostering relationships with local educational institutions and parent-teacher associations through school improvement team members and committee members. Day and Harris (2003) identify four identifiable and discrete dimensions of teacher leadership roles: the first dimension involves translating principles of school improvement into individual classroom practices. This intermediary role remains at the core of a teacher's leadership responsibilities. The second dimension of teacher leadership focuses on participatory leadership, where all teachers feel they are part of change or development and have a sense of ownership. They work collaboratively with colleagues to enhance the school and take the lead in guiding teachers to achieve collective goals. The third dimension is the intermediary role. Teacher leaders serve as vital sources of professional knowledge and information. They are adept at utilizing additional resources and specialized knowledge and seeking external assistance when necessary. Finally, the fourth and perhaps most crucial aspect of teacher leadership roles is establishing relationships with individual teachers, facilitating mutual learning through these relationships. Beycioğlu and Aslan (2012) propose three dimensions of teacher leadership: institutional development, which involves changing the leadership responsibility structure primarily belonging to principals; the professional development dimension, where teacher leaders influence students and colleagues by demonstrating pioneering and exemplary behavior while focusing on their professional development; and the dimension of collaboration with colleagues, based on providing assistance and support to fellow teachers. From the research findings of these scholars, it can be concluded that professional competence, leadership skills, and the intermediary role of teacher leadership are crucial factors in the implementation and development of teacher leadership. It is also evident that the practice of teacher leadership not only requires teachers to possess key competencies but also necessitates external support to gain greater autonomy in implementing and developing their leadership abilities.

Shifting the focus to the broader educational context, in traditional school management systems, recognition of the official authority of school administrators assigns them leadership roles in school management, with teachers merely acknowledged in the educational process within classrooms. However, in today's educational systems, the right to educational management should not be exclusive to school administrators but should be shared to a greater extent by stakeholders in the school (Harris & Muijs, 2003). Therefore, the authority of teachers' leadership and autonomy in teaching should be included in the scope of redistribution (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Providing teachers with greater support and autonomy in decision-making regarding resources and instructional management can facilitate collaboration and support among teachers inside and outside the classroom. This empowerment enables teacher leaders to transform teaching practices, improving teaching quality and student academic performance.



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Teacher Autonomy and Teacher Leadership

Teachers, as stakeholders in schools, hold significant positions within school organizations. Particularly, emerging waves of educational reform and formal and informal teacher leadership have bestowed upon teachers new responsibilities and expectations outside the classroom (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Teachers are now not only required to fulfill classroom teaching duties but also expected to leverage their professional expertise to participate in curriculum design and decision-making within the school context, as well as engage in daily school management (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Additionally, Friedman (1999) categorizes teaching autonomy into autonomy in teaching and assessment, participatory decision-making, professional development autonomy, and curriculum autonomy, thus establishing a correlation between teacher autonomy and teacher leadership.

As such, leadership authority is not solely concentrated in the hands of school leaders but is distributed among a wide array of teachers (Harris & Muijs, 2003). Teacher leadership endeavors to focus on professional development, respect teachers' contributions to the organization, encourage collaboration and participatory decision-making, create a satisfying work environment, and provide opportunities for teachers to lead school improvements (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Based on this perspective, providing autonomy to teachers is considered one of the ways to enhance schools and facilitate change (Leithwood et al., 1996).

In tandem with this, sufficient teacher autonomy can support the development of teacher leadership (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Teacher leaders not only need significant authority in management to enhance teaching practices but also require more teachers to engage in classroom innovation and collaboration. Greater teacher autonomy can activate teachers' teaching innovations, liberating them from singular teaching models and infusing more vigor into teaching reforms and participation in teaching decisions (Jumani & Malik, 2017). Moreover, more teaching and management practice activities provide opportunities for developing teacher leadership. Araşkal and Kılınc (2019) argue that when school administrators grant more autonomy to teacher leaders, they have more opportunities to experiment with different teaching models and techniques. Furthermore, the professional knowledge and skills gained from professional development programs and training must be practiced with autonomy in teaching activities, including teacher leadership skills and knowledge. Hence, an intrinsic connection and influence exists between teacher autonomy and leadership.

Furthermore, providing teachers with opportunities for instructional autonomy facilitates the cultivation of professional relationships (Campbell et al., 2022). Teachers are afforded ample autonomy to engage in instructional development projects, enabling them to benefit from professional guidance and experience sharing. With the support of professional teaching teams, challenges encountered in the instructional leadership process can be effectively addressed through collaboration, thereby establishing personal authority (Poekert et al., 2016). The construction of interpersonal networks also aids teachers in accessing more teaching resources, enhancing their confidence in instructional leadership and consequently elevating their leadership prowess (Campbell et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

In China, early childhood education broadly refers to the care and education provided to children from birth to 6 years old. Early childhood education encompasses institutions operated by different service providers, including governmental and non-governmental organizations (Ho et al., 2019). The organizational structure of kindergartens in China is hierarchical (Li, 2006; Wang & Ho, 2020). Within the typical hierarchical organizational structure of kindergartens, significant decision-making responsibilities lie with the kindergarten principals, leaving little room for teachers to assume leadership roles or responsibilities (Liu, 2015).

However, as the field progresses over the past two decades, the landscape of early childhood education in China has been evolving continuously (Wang, 2018). Influenced by Western educational philosophies, the leadership style in Chinese early childhood education has shifted from centralized to decentralized (Ho et al., 2019). The emergence of



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teacher leadership in early childhood education is evident (Wang & Ho, 2020). Plus, cultivating a cadre of highly qualified teacher leaders can significantly drive school development (Demir, 2015). In fostering teacher leadership, the development of teachers' self-guidance and independent capabilities is essential for sustaining the professional development of teacher leaders (Ho et al., 2019).

The ability for autonomy is a crucial prerequisite for sustaining the professional development of teacher leaders (Ho et al., 2019). However, doubts persist regarding the extent teachers in China can obtain power from principals (Xia et al., 2019). Rooted in Confucianism, China's traditional culture often accompanies authoritarianism and collectivism (Bush & Haiyan, 2000; Liu, 2021). Research indicates that kindergarten principals heavily rely on middle-level leaders to manage schools, sometimes even relying on themselves (Ho, 2011). In this scenario, teachers perceive themselves as followers with limited authority in instructional management, unable to assume leadership roles (Ho, 2011). Therefore, opportunities for teachers to engage in leadership practices require principals to delegate authority and grant legitimacy (Ho et al., 2019). Thus, it is necessary to study the autonomy and leadership of kindergarten teachers in the context of early childhood education in China.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with teacher leaders in kindergartens to gain rich and detailed descriptions of their perceptions of instructional autonomy and teacher leadership, aiming to uncover the potential relationship between instructional autonomy and teacher leadership. Purposive sampling is utilized, as it ensures participants possess relevant experience and characteristics, providing in-depth insights and enhancing the quality and credibility of research findings. (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Therefore, participants are selected based on the following criteria: (1) in-service teachers in kindergartens, (2) non-novice teachers with more than 5 years of teaching experience and (3) holding leadership positions within the school's teaching or management team. These criteria ensure that teachers with leadership experience in early childhood education provide profound insights into the potential influence of instructional autonomy on teacher leadership. After screening, 18 teachers met the selection criteria and agreed to participate in this study. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

In this study, qualitative research techniques were utilized to collect data through semi-structured interviews. The data outcomes were analyzed using NVivo 12, facilitating thematic coding and ensuring a rigorous and reliable qualitative analysis. The process included initial coding of interview texts to identify and tag key concepts and themes, merging similar codes into broader categories, and refining them into primary analytical themes. NVivo's memo function was utilized to record researchers' reflections, aiding in thematic development. Its querying tools were employed to delve into the data for specific patterns or themes.

Table 1: *Demographic Data*

Teacher Leaders' identities	Type of school	Position	Age (years)
Teacher Leader A	Rural	Principal	46
Teacher Leader B	Rural	Education Supervisor	36
Teacher Leader C	Rural	Vice Principal	48
Teacher Leader D	Rural	Grade Dean	42
Teacher Leader E	Rural	Vice Principal	36
Teacher Leader F	Rural	Principal	43
Teacher Leader G	Rural	Grade Dean	31
Teacher Leader H	Rural	Grade Dean	39
Teacher Leader I	Rural	Principal	46
Teacher Leader J	Rural	Service Chief	42
Teacher Leader K	Urban	Grade Dean	31



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Teacher Leader L	Urban	Grade Dean	29
Teacher Leader M	Urban	Service Chief	35
Teacher Leader N	Urban	Vice Principal	32
Teacher Leader O	Urban	Health officer	43
Teacher Leader P	Urban	Vice Principal	39
Teacher Leader Q	Urban	Office Director	43
Teacher Leader R	Urban	Grade Dean	41

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis will be conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their views more freely and enable themes to be compared, contrasted, and categorized based on participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2014). Participants will respond to questions regarding teacher leadership, instructional autonomy, and teaching background (see Appendix A for details). Prior to conducting the interview sessions, interview protocols were developed and adopted based on studies by Parker (2015) and Kara and Bozkurt (2022). Interviews will be audio-recorded with participants' consent and conducted entirely in Chinese, with the recordings transcribed into text afterwards. Portions of the interviews used in the paper will be translated into English, while the rest will remain in the original language for analysis, ensuring that the data accurately reflects its original meaning and avoids data loss.

The interview data was analyzed using NVivo 12 in this study, following the guidelines outlined by Creswell and Poth (2016). The following steps were taken: First, a preliminary reading of the transcripts was conducted to prepare for data coding. This initial step provides a general understanding of the participants' professional backgrounds and leadership roles. Second, a detailed reading of the transcripts was performed, and coding was applied using NVivo to identify and assign initial codes to textual information, facilitating data organization and identifying meaningful themes. Subsequently, manual identification of codes was conducted to consolidate repeated or consistent themes into the same code, resulting in the reduction of codes to 7 categories. In the third step, the identified codes were refined, and codes containing similar concepts were grouped into the same category. This process involved two researchers independently categorizing the initial 7 open codes into 3 categories, followed by comparison, discussion, and revision to ensure that they accurately represented the original intent of the interviewees' discussions.

Validity and Reliability

The study employed various triangulation strategies to enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings. First, data were collected from 18 diverse teacher leaders, allowing for comparison of perspectives and identification of consistent themes. Second, two researchers independently analyzed the data, followed by discussions and revisions to ensure the accuracy of the identified themes. Third, the interviews were conducted in Chinese, with only portions translated into English for reporting purposes, ensuring the original meaning was preserved during the analysis. Using the original Chinese transcripts in the analysis helped prevent data loss during translation, increasing the study's validity. Throughout this process, the guidelines of Creswell & Poth (2016) were rigorously followed. The initial classifications were compared and discussed by the researchers, and the codes were refined into three final categories. This process minimized researcher bias and ensured inter-rater reliability.

Ethics in Research

The research included data from 18 teachers, and ethical research procedures necessitate the protection of school and teacher identities. Therefore, school and teacher names will be replaced with codes, using 'Teacher Leader A' through 'Teacher Leader M' for representation. Additionally, teachers participated voluntarily in this study and were allowed to withdraw at any time.



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FINDINGS

In general, the findings are derived from the analysis of data obtained through interviews with kindergarten teacher leaders. They represent a synthesis of the experiences encountered by these teacher leaders in their teaching roles.

The Concept of Teacher Autonomy

Teacher leaders involved in the interviews perceive teacher autonomy in a multidimensional and multilevel manner, covering various aspects of teaching work in early childhood education. These include teachers' instructional decisions, self-management and inner drive, autonomous development, and community collaboration.

First, teachers' autonomy is manifested in their independent judgment and decision-making abilities in classroom teaching. They discern and assess the teaching environment based on their professional skills and knowledge while adhering to professional ethical standards, thus avoiding external interferences. When identifying educational issues, they can promptly and accurately adjust strategies to resolve them, teaching independence. These adjustments foster teaching innovation and enhances teaching efficiency. Furthermore, teachers strongly desire to demand more from their professional development, driven by the motivation for self-reflection and learning from others. They leverage the dynamic environment around them to acquire skills and knowledge from their peers while also engaging in self-reflection, professional reading, and writing to cultivate a sense of responsibility and dedication. Their cognition needs to be integrated into the external environment, engaging in effective interactions with it. This enables them to translate external demands into spontaneous actions while fulfilling their cognitive needs.

Additionally, teacher autonomy meets the developmental needs of educators, shaping their unique teaching styles and personality traits. Teachers are knowledge disseminators, creators of a conducive learning atmosphere and role models for young learners. Their characteristics are manifested throughout the teaching process, exerting an intangible influence on educational progress. Moreover, these inherent traits can stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning and enhance their learning abilities. Teacher autonomy empowers educators to conduct their teaching in distinctive ways, leveraging their unique approaches to foster student development. Lastly, teacher autonomy is also reflected in teachers' collaboration and interaction with various stakeholders such as children and parents. Teachers can decide on appropriate communication methods based on their professional knowledge and skills, establishing familiar systems to strengthen communication between teachers and parents. Building a strong teacher-parent cooperative community can provide a favorable external environment for children's growth.

In summary, this study defines teacher autonomy as the ability of teachers to think independently, make decisions and develop independently according to their professional knowledge and skills in the educational process. They are address challenges in teaching activities and community building according to the circumstances.

MAIN FINDINGS

From the data obtained from interviews with teacher leaders, three main themes emerged: Firstly, teacher autonomy helps teachers gain teaching leadership and decision-making authority, fostering leadership confidence and unique leadership qualities to promote teaching leadership development. Secondly, it plays a crucial role in fostering the development of professional communities among teachers, particularly in collaborative efforts with peer experts. Lastly, teacher autonomy enables teachers to innovate teaching methods, advocate for education reforms, drive schooling improvements, and enhance educational quality.

Fostering Leadership Development

Based on the analysis of interview data from teacher leaders, three main themes are associated with promoting the development of teacher leadership. These themes are (1) fostering teacher instructional development, (2) providing a platform for implementing teacher leadership and (3) forming individual leadership traits.



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1. Fostering Teacher Instructional Development

One theme derived from the interview data is that teacher autonomy empowers educators with the decision-making authority to adopt teaching models that align with their interests and meet the actual teaching needs of students. This enables teachers to draw inspiration from their teaching experiences, actively reflect on their actions and decisions, and learn from successes and failures, thus fostering their professional growth.

Teachers' personal development and growth are reflected in their educational practices, such as their ability to make judgments, employ personalized teaching methods, and autonomously adjust educational approaches to suit the needs of their students. Teacher autonomy implies that educators have the opportunity for enhanced personal development (Teacher Leader I).

During the teaching process, ample instructional autonomy enables teachers to maintain a positive mindset, engage in prolonged experimentation to continually enhance their knowledge and skills, and facilitate their rapid progression into domain-specific experts and leaders.

Teacher autonomy entails constant reflection on how to maximize learner autonomy and identify challenges or issues within teaching. This necessitates teachers possessing the capacity for career planning, independent acquisition of theoretical knowledge, and active reflection (Teacher Leader D).

Teachers bear the important responsibility of educating students, and they need to have strong autonomy. Only by giving full play to their autonomy can they promote their own continuous progress and development (Teacher Leader R).

2. Providing a Platform for Implementing Teacher Leadership

Generally, teachers perceive teacher autonomy as encouraging their involvement in school and instructional management decisions. These encouragements include teachers autonomously determining teaching modes, a process involving school instructional decisions.

Teachers, under the premise of adhering to kindergarten rules and regulations, are able to actively and freely arrange certain educational tasks, such as class work plans, teaching activity schedules, and environmental arrangements. They can actively participate in discussions and freely express their ideas regarding the planning of large-scale activities (Teacher Leader E).

Communication and collaboration among teaching peers also require teacher leadership. Additionally, teacher autonomy provides teachers with the opportunity to autonomously select partners and teams, allowing them time to establish leadership authority.

We established teaching research groups, where problems identified during research activities will be addressed through mutual observation and discussion among group leaders and members. This process helps identify strategies to resolve educational issues, offering assistance in knowledge and skills, and forming stable professional learning team leaders to address educational problems (Teacher Leader J).

Therefore, teacher autonomy serves as a crucial practical platform for the development of teacher leadership.

3. Forming Individual Leadership Traits

Teacher autonomy enables teachers to obtain decision-making power in teaching, allowing them to manifest individual traits and contribute to developing teacher leadership confidence and implementation in teaching. Teacher autonomy prompts educators to actively explore, learn, and delve into professional knowledge, with a greater willingness to apply acquired knowledge and skills to teaching activities, thereby establishing expertise within their field.



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Teacher autonomy fosters the formation of unique individual leadership traits based on teachers' styles. Through supported work, teachers continuously discover suitable teaching styles that align with their preferences and gain recognition from colleagues and parents. (Teacher Leader J).

I believe that teacher autonomy is the dynamic interaction between the teacher's self-awareness and the external environment. It means that individuals must have a strong sense of responsibility and passion to devote themselves to their work and improve their personal abilities (Teacher Leader N).

Teacher autonomy also fosters a positive attitude and behavior among educators to cultivate their sense of responsibility and ethical standards. These attitudes enable teachers to confidently exercise leadership roles across different levels and domains, not only demonstrating organizational leadership and communication coordination in classroom teaching but also serving as role models for leadership within teaching teams and communities.

In modern early childhood education, kindergarten teachers' leadership and management abilities are deemed crucial. A teacher at a higher level not only needs outstanding teaching skills but also effective leadership. Leadership entails not only instructing others but also inspiring and motivating teams to pursue common goals. A teacher at a higher level can establish good collaborative relationships with other teachers, jointly set curriculum objectives, and lead the team in efficiently executing plans. As frontline teachers in kindergarten, they not only possess higher professional competence but also effectively exercise leadership, guiding their classes and students towards realizing educational visions (Teacher Leader D).

Furthermore, teachers can autonomously practice leadership activities in their teaching work by integrating practical experiences. During the practice, they freely express their viewpoints, participate in decision-making and effectively utilize teaching resources, and organize teaching content. Through this process, they continuously refine their leadership qualities, forming more comprehensive leadership traits.

I believe that teachers with higher levels of autonomy are better positioned to exercise leadership effectively. This is because autonomous teachers are more innovative and adaptable, capable of flexibly adjusting teaching strategies based on the needs of children and changes in the environment. Moreover, teachers with strong autonomy are usually more motivated to engage in professional development activities, such as attending seminars and workshops. This continuous learning and professional growth contribute to teachers keeping their teaching skills and knowledge up-to-date, thereby enabling them to better exercise leadership in their work (Teacher Leader E).

Fostering Professional Community Development

Two primary themes contribute to fostering the development of teacher professional communities. These themes are (1) sharing professional knowledge and skills and (2) collaborating to address educational challenges.

1. Sharing Professional Knowledge and Skills

Teacher autonomy allows teachers to adjust their teaching according to their interests and enables teachers with similar teaching intentions to gather and form professional communities. Within these communities, teachers actively share new knowledge and skills, fostering closer team relationships. In contrast to passively joining professional development projects to develop individual skills, proactive sharing allows teachers to have greater enthusiasm for learning and quickly grasp new knowledge and skills.

Each teacher has their own strengths, and if each teacher autonomously explores and learns in their preferred areas and shares with others in the team, everyone is sure to absorb many innovative elements (Teacher Leader H).



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Different teachers will utilize the environment to present the children's learning processes in various ways. Each class has its own characteristics, allowing teachers to autonomously showcase and arrange. Forming stable and individualized teams enables mutual learning and borrowing, which positively contributes to promoting educational teaching (Teacher Leader C).

Furthermore, the cohesion within the group encourages teachers to actively approach outstanding teaching experts and continuously reflect on and improve their teaching levels, becoming both teaching experts and teaching leaders.

The traits of teacher autonomy are all forms of positive energy transmission, playing a role of mutual influence and infection within the collective. Moreover, kindergarten teaching teams will form a hierarchical management mechanism, where teachers with higher teaching levels will continue to be promoted and become the backbone and core force of the kindergarten. They will then become middle-level cadres, continuing to demonstrate leadership roles, driving each small team, forming a positive team consciousness. This virtuous cycle will surely establish stable professional learning teams to collectively solve educational problems, improving work efficiency and quality (Teacher Leader I).

In this process, through sharing experiences, discussing issues, and exploring practices, teachers' professional literacy be enhanced. Furthermore, excellent educational concepts and advanced teaching methods will be jointly nurtured, truly forming the educational literacy of teachers themselves.

Teachers with higher levels of autonomy demonstrate more initiative and exploratory spirit. They can establish a good atmosphere of teamwork. In teamwork, teachers can communicate, collaborate, and learn from each other, thereby improving their professional competence and moral standards (Teacher Leader Q).

Teachers are constantly thinking about how to maximize the autonomous learning of learners and how to identify difficulties or problems in teaching (Teacher Leader D).

2. Address Educational Challenges

Autonomy in teaching facilitates the formation of stable professional communities among teachers, providing assistance and guidance when educators encounter educational challenges. Given that teachers often face similar obstacles and challenges when making autonomous decisions about teaching methods, they may encounter difficulties and challenges similar to those experienced by other community members. Consequently, they can benefit from valuable guidance and solutions from other members.

Stable professional learning teams can address issues in education. Typically, we establish teaching research groups to identify problems during research activities. Leaders and members of these groups engage in mutual observation and discussions to identify strategies for addressing relevant issues in education, providing assistance in knowledge and skills. This is the essence of a stable professional learning team (Teacher Leader J).

For instance, during a thematic construction activity on "Sun Wenxi Riding Arcade Street," a young teacher encountered difficulties with preschoolers in constructing the iconic feature of the arcade, "upstairs and downstairs corridors." In response, the teacher collaborated with colleagues from several classes to discuss on-site the challenges encountered in construction and brainstormed methods to guide preschoolers in successful construction (Teacher Leader A).

Furthermore, encountering obstacles and challenges raised by other members can also prompt teachers to reflect, thus preventing issues and conflicts from arising and aiding in accumulating teaching leadership experience.

Throughout my professional journey, I have come to appreciate the following aspects: Firstly, teachers with



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higher levels of autonomy are more likely to actively seek collaboration with other educators to address challenges encountered in educational practice. They are willing to share their teaching experiences and knowledge and are open to learning from other teachers, thereby continuously enhancing their professional competence. Secondly, teachers with higher levels of autonomy are more likely to actively participate in various professional learning activities to continuously update their educational principles and teaching methods. (Teacher Leader R).

Communities provide an environment for mutual learning and offer emotional support when educators encounter setbacks in education. Teams formed by teachers with autonomy tend to foster a more inclusive atmosphere, instilling a sense of belonging among teachers and fostering cohesion to drive both team and individual growth.

A stable professional team is composed of educators with shared goals and visions. When teachers actively engage in team activities, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and responsibility toward the team, thus becoming more actively involved in its work. This genuine integration into the team occurs when teachers can fully immerse themselves in team activities. A stable team can provide ongoing material and emotional support, promoting the professional growth and development of its members (Teacher Leader P).

Driving Teaching Reform

Two themes are involved in driving teaching reform. These themes encompass (1) encouraging innovative teaching practices and (2) promoting school change.

1. Encouraging Innovative Teaching Practices

Teacher autonomy enables educators to make decisions and plans regarding teaching methods, instructional materials and curriculum settings. Moreover, it allows for timely adjustments to classroom management and instructional content, greatly catering to the diverse needs of students. Therefore, teacher autonomy becomes a potential condition for educational innovation and a cradle for driving educational innovation.

In our daily research activities, we encourage teachers to participate in curriculum planning and innovation, providing them with opportunities to be involved in decision-making and planning, thereby fostering their autonomy and sense of responsibility. Throughout the process, training and development opportunities are provided to support teachers in curriculum design. Finally, through sharing stories of curriculum experiences, teachers continuously refine their curriculum and construct leadership skills (Teacher Leader N).

Furthermore, teacher autonomy enables educators to have a range of teaching models to choose from and compare. Schools that permit teacher autonomy allow for the development of diverse educational models, fostering the emergence of effective teaching practices through comparison and reflection.

In curriculum design, exercising teacher autonomy entails the independent design of teaching plans and instructional resources based on subject standards and student needs. When crafting curricula, emphasis is placed on fostering student initiative and hands-on learning, thereby encouraging the development of students' creativity and critical thinking skills. In personalized instruction and assessment, teacher autonomy involves employing individualized coaching methods and assessment approaches tailored to each child's unique differences. By focusing on children's interests, abilities, and developmental needs, personalized guidance and support are provided to help them achieve their own growth and development (Teacher Leader R).

Moreover, these educational innovations can be promoted and shared within the school, cultivating teacher leadership and enhancing their authority.

By joining teacher communities, educators can engage in exchanges and share experiences with colleagues,



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learning from each other and gaining inspiration. Participation in professional organizations and educational platforms, as well as involvement in educational projects and collaborative research, enables educators to collectively brainstorm and address educational issues, thereby expanding their professional influence (Teacher Leader R).

2. Promoting School Change

Teachers' active exploration through instructional autonomy in the classroom will prompt them to reflect more systematically on the factors influencing the overall teaching quality within the school environment. As teachers confront challenges in classroom teaching, they also become aware of systemic issues within the entire school system, thus gaining the courage to address the school's challenges and engage in educational policy and reform practices.

The development of teacher autonomy and self-management skills is not only the responsibility of the kindergarten but also a personal need for teachers' individual development. Teachers should proactively learn and enhance their autonomy and self-management skills, continually adapting to and embracing challenges. They can improve their abilities through reading, participating in training, and actively accumulating various work experiences, thereby driving the development of the entire school (Teacher Leader N).

Teacher autonomy enables teachers to enhance their leadership awareness, prompting them to demonstrate teacher leadership in educational policy and management practices. This demonstration, in turn, drives the transformation of schools and even regional educational systems, ultimately making teachers participants and advocates in policy formulation and reform.

In response to a series of change demands within the kindergarten, I actively organized discussions and experiments among teachers, encouraging everyone to put forward their ideas and suggestions. Through open and equal communication, we collectively determined the future direction and reform measures of the kindergarten (Teacher Leader P).

DISCUSSION

This study provides empirical evidence on the influence and ways in which teacher autonomy affects the development of teacher leadership among teacher leaders in early childhood education. It also defines the characteristics of teacher autonomy from the perspective of teacher leaders. The research further strengthens the theoretical foundation of leadership studies and expands the direction of teacher leadership development in early childhood education (Xia et al., 2023). Based on the teaching experiences of teacher leaders, this study constructs definitions of teacher autonomy from different perspectives, including teaching decision-making, self-management and intrinsic drive, autonomous development, and community co-construction. Teacher autonomy is defined as the ability of teachers to think independently, make decisions and develop independently according to their professional knowledge and skills in the educational process. They address challenges in teaching activities and community building according to the circumstances.

Building upon these findings, the participation of 18 teacher leaders in the study confirmed the positive impact of teacher autonomy on their development of teacher leadership, teaching capacity enhancement, and resolution of educational issues. These confirmations validate the close association between teacher leadership development in early childhood education and teacher autonomy, consistent with findings from relevant theoretical literature (Jumani & Malik, 2017; Xia et al., 2023). The study identified three aspects in which teacher autonomy manifests: individual leadership development, establishment of professional communities, and promotion of teaching innovation. The next step will involve a deeper discussion of the research findings and further connecting the empirical evidence with practical applications.



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Fostering Leadership Development

In this study, teacher leaders universally acknowledged the positive impact of teacher autonomy on teacher leadership. They believed that teacher autonomy can inspire teachers' enthusiasm for teaching, facilitate assessment and decision-making in teaching, and provide inspiration and motivation in the teaching process. Consequently, teacher autonomy influences teachers' decision-making and planning in teaching, leading them to play significant roles in teaching implementation and management. Therefore, teacher autonomy provides valuable evidence for the development of teacher leadership. This finding is corroborated by Araşkal and Kılınç (2019), who confirmed that when teacher leaders are granted more autonomy, they have more opportunities to experiment with different teaching methods and techniques and to practice leadership skills and knowledge in teaching activities.

Participants in the interviews provided feedback indicating that teachers can gain opportunities to exercise their leadership roles by autonomously selecting teaching models and participating in teaching decisions, including choosing teaching partners and teams. These opportunities facilitate the establishment of a practical platform for personal leadership. Teachers can assume leadership roles within teams under the corresponding professional domains and collaborative atmospheres, establishing their leadership authority. Similar findings were reported by Wenner and Campbell (2017), who observed that teacher leaders need to acquire more autonomy to enhance teaching and involve more teachers in classroom innovation and collaboration. Jumani and Malik (2017) also suggested that increased participation in teaching and management practices can provide opportunities for the teacher leadership development

Teacher autonomy is crucial in enhancing teacher leadership, especially in shaping leadership traits. This process is mutually reinforcing, as teacher autonomy creates favorable conditions for the development of leadership traits. Teachers can engage in leadership practices according to their preferences and strengths, facilitating the exploration and utilization of their latent leadership abilities, as well as fostering leadership confidence and accumulating leadership experience. Moreover, it is conducive to stimulating teacher autonomy, forming a virtuous cycle and mitigating the emergence of resistance. Ultimately, this process allows teachers' strengths to be showcased and cultivated, leading to the development of their leadership traits. Ramos (2006) also confirmed the critical importance of teacher autonomy for teacher leaders, particularly in shaping their traits and charisma, which can potentially impact students.

Fostering Professional Community Development

Teacher autonomy helps teachers establish more stable professional communities. Compared to passive collaboration, teachers are more willing to actively seek cooperation to share teaching skills and experiences, building more cohesive team relationships. This facilitates the formation of advanced educational concepts, the exchange of professional knowledge, and the sharing of management experiences among teachers. This finding is consistent with the views of Campbell et al. (2022), who found that teaching autonomy contributes to establishing stable professional communities, enabling interpersonal network creations for obtaining guidance from experts and sharing experiences.

Active participation in professional communities enables continuous improvement in solving practical educational problems. Teams can gather their members' collective wisdom and strength, allowing them to broaden their perspectives and leverage each member's strengths to address challenges innovatively. These collections foster the acquisition of management experience and the enhancement of leadership skills among team members. Additionally, the inclusive atmosphere within teams stimulates teachers' innovative spirit and desire for exploration, encouraging them to take on more significant roles in practicing leadership within the team. Teachers also benefit from other team members' material and emotional support, driving individual and collective progress. Poekert et al. (2016) assert that gaining support and cooperation from professional teams can help overcome challenges in instructional leadership. Campbell et al. (2022) also support this viewpoint, suggesting that professional networks provide more teaching resources while enhancing teachers' confidence in assuming leadership roles in instructional



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practices, thus improving their ability to solve real problems and lead practical activities.

Driving Teaching Reform

Teacher autonomy provides an open and inclusive environment to promote innovation in teaching. It allows teachers to think creatively and explore innovative teaching methods and approaches. With the freedom to combine teaching resources, teachers can create teaching atmospheres and scenarios tailored to students' interests and subject characteristics, facilitating experimentation with new teaching management models and strategies, thereby fostering teaching innovation. Moreover, teacher autonomy enables teachers to play a more significant role in teaching innovation, moving beyond passive acceptance of new knowledge and skills to actively explore new teaching models and methods, ultimately driving the renewal of teaching patterns and the enhancement of teaching quality. Araşkal and Kılınc (2019) also argue that when teachers have more autonomy, they have more opportunities to practice desired teaching models and techniques, providing natural opportunities to develop leadership skills and gain leadership experience. Pearson and Moomaw's (2005) study further suggests that increased teacher autonomy correlates with higher professional dedication and work engagement.

Teachers, while engaging in teaching innovation, strive to change school systems. Alongside their personal professional development, teachers require reasonable incentive mechanisms and policy support from schools. Drawing from their professional roles, teachers contemplate and advocate for school systems' improvements and enhancements. They urge schools to establish rational and diversified platforms for teaching innovation, provide opportunities for teacher leadership and showcasing of teaching reform achievements, reward and recognize innovative breakthroughs made by teachers, and establish positive incentive mechanisms. Teacher autonomy can drive teaching innovation and professional growth, enhancing teacher capacity not only to improve teaching quality but also to stimulate institutional and policy changes within schools, ultimately leading to outstanding student performance. Prichard and Moore's (2016) research findings corroborate this viewpoint, indicating that teacher autonomy is inherently linked to administrative coordination and collaboration, which ultimately impact school and student outcomes. Öztürk's (2011) study also suggests that teacher autonomy is closely associated not only with teacher education and training but also teaching environment and school management systems.

Implication of the Study

Since the 1990s, teacher autonomy has been widely discussed in the academic circles of Western education, with a predominant focus on the teaching perspective (Tran & Moskovsky, 2022; Webb, 2002). In recent years, scholars have begun recognizing that teacher autonomy may influence teacher leadership (Jumani & Malik, 2017), although research in this area has primarily been conducted within Western school contexts. This study explores the impact of teacher autonomy on teacher leadership within the context of Chinese early childhood education, emphasizing the connection between the two and revealing the promoting role of teacher autonomy in teaching, innovation, and school reform. Indeed, by expanding into an Eastern context, this research investigates how teacher autonomy affects teacher leadership from the perspectives of teaching ability and personal capacity, thus making a theoretical contribution. Teacher autonomy also encourages individuals to integrate into professional communities, which is closely associated with the collectivist culture in Eastern contexts. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on academic research in teacher leadership, particularly in early childhood education. It also offers policymakers and practitioners in schools methods and strategies for developing teacher leadership, thereby contributing to improving teaching quality and student achievement in schools.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the data were derived from interviews with a subset of teacher leaders, representing only the perspectives of this particular group of teachers at the time of the interviews. Therefore, it may not comprehensively represent the entire teacher population and provide the most accurate data for this research topic. Future research should aim to gather perspectives from a wider range of teachers and compare the stances of different teacher groups.



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Secondly, despite providing empirical evidence for this research topic, leadership process is notably unique to each individual (Poekert et al., 2016). Considering that teachers' stances and viewpoints on leadership are influenced by interpersonal relationships, educational environments, and work environments, it is advisable to adopt additional research methods, including observation, focus group discussions, and text analysis. These methods can enhance the rigor of the research data and reduce the subjectivity of the researchers.

CONCLUSION

Although teacher autonomy is considered a positive factor in teachers' professional growth (Long, 2014), this perspective remains underexplored in early childhood education, particularly concerning teacher leadership. This study takes the perspective of kindergarten leadership roles to analyze the impact of teacher autonomy on teachers in the early childhood education stage, especially teacher leaders' leadership abilities. It attempts to reveal how teacher autonomy influences teacher leadership development and its impact on teaching environment and educational innovation in schools.

The study indicates a close correlation between the growth of teacher leadership and teacher autonomy. Teacher leaders generally hold supportive views toward teacher autonomy, particularly regarding teachers' academic growth and the formation of leadership styles among teacher leaders. Summarizing teachers' perspectives on teacher autonomy, this study, based on the working experiences of teacher leaders, defines teacher autonomy as the ability of teachers to think independently, make decisions, and develop autonomously in the process of education and teaching, drawing on their professional knowledge and skills. Furthermore, teachers can address challenges in teaching activities and community building based on actual circumstances.

The data from this study indicates that teacher autonomy affects teacher leadership development, particularly in professional development. Moreover, teacher autonomy enables teachers to gain teaching leadership and decision-making authority, thus providing opportunities for leadership practice, which is beneficial for fostering leadership confidence and unique leadership qualities. Additionally, teacher autonomy contributes to the advancement of professional communities among teachers, especially by facilitating access to guidance and assistance from experts within the community. Lastly, teacher autonomy empowers teachers to innovate teaching methods, advocate for pedagogical changes, and drive school reforms to enhance educational quality. As highlighted in the research by Jumani and Malik (2017), to achieve instructional objectives and create conducive learning environments, teachers require the freedom to make decisions. Therefore, teachers should be granted autonomy to work in their ways and strive for teacher leadership.

This study has several limitations. First, the interviewees were limited to teacher leaders, failing to encompass the entire teacher population. Second, the research methodology was confined to semi-structured interviews, which may have implications for the rigor of the study data. Additional research methods should be employed to mitigate researcher subjectivity. Although this study explored the relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher leadership from the perspective of teacher leaders, it did not extend to the level of school leadership decision-making and policy implementation. Therefore, future research should delve deeper into the potential connection between teacher autonomy and teacher leadership from the perspectives of regional policies and school implementation strategies. Lastly, further exploration is needed to examine the impact on student achievement and improvement in teaching quality to create a comprehensive research framework.

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