



Teacher Leadership Practices in the Context of High-Quality Development: A Qualitative Case Study of a Local University in Nanjing, China

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ABSTRACT: This study takes a local university in Nanjing as a case to examine the current practices of teacher leadership from the perspective of high-quality development (HQD). Adopting a qualitative methodology, the research is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with three teachers and the researcher's observational notes. The findings reveal that teacher leadership primarily manifests in three dimensions: first, at the teaching level, teachers enhance student learning quality through curriculum reform and classroom innovation; second, at the collaborative level, teachers actively participate in interdisciplinary cooperation and team governance, although their efforts are constrained by resource allocation and institutional restrictions; and third, at the cultural level, teachers exert invisible leadership through value guidance and informal interactions, subtly influencing colleagues and students. However, the development of teacher leadership is hindered by the predominance of performance indicators, centralized organizational authority, and time pressures, thus demonstrating a "positive-fragile" dual characteristic. The contribution of this study lies in uncovering the practical logic and real-world challenges of teacher leadership under the Chinese HQD agenda, offering practical implications for supporting teacher leadership in policy implementation and institutional governance in local universities.

KEYWORDS: Teacher Leadership, High-Quality Development, Qualitative Research

I. INTRODUCTON

As Chinese society enters the stage of High-Quality Development (HQD), higher education, as a strategic domain crucial to national progress and social development, is undergoing

profound structural adjustments and governance reforms. In this process, teachers are increasingly regarded as the "primary resource" of educational reform, not only bearing the dual responsibilities of talent cultivation and knowledge production but also playing vital roles in institutional governance and cultural construction. Particularly in local universities, how teachers demonstrate leadership within the dual constraints of policy directives and organizational environments has become an important issue in educational research and practice.

Teacher Leadership, as a core concept in contemporary international educational research, emphasizes that teachers are not merely classroom implementers but also drivers of curriculum reform, organizers of team collaboration, and shapers of school culture (Day & Harris, 2010; Harris, 2014). In Western contexts, studies have shown that teacher leadership enhances professional autonomy, promotes collaborative innovation, and improves overall school performance (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, compared with the extensive scholarship in primary and secondary education, research on teacher leadership in higher education remains relatively limited, especially within the concrete context of Chinese local universities, where systematic qualitative inquiry is scarce.

In recent years, Chinese scholarship has begun to address the nexus between teacher leadership and HQD. On one hand, policy pressures have compelled teachers to assume increasingly proactive roles in research, teaching, and social services; on the other hand, organizational structures and resource distribution within universities present complex challenges to the exercise of teacher leadership (Li & Yang, 2020). Previous studies have found that teacher leadership in Chinese universities is often constrained by "research-first" evaluation systems, administrative centralization, and unequal resource allocation, thereby limiting teachers' agency in teaching innovation and



collaborative work (Liu & Xu, 2021; Zhao & Hu, 2022). Against this backdrop, how teachers generate and practice leadership within complex institutional environments emerges as a pressing question.

Nevertheless, current scholarship still reveals notable gaps:

1. Scope of research objects – most studies remain concentrated at the basic education level, while teacher leadership in universities under HQD is underexplored;
2. Methodological limitations – the dominance of quantitative surveys leaves insufficient thick descriptions of teacher's lived experiences;
3. Contextual absence – within Chinese higher education reforms, particularly under HQD evaluation systems, the generative logic, practical challenges, and cultural characteristics of teacher leadership remain under-investigated.

To address these gaps, this study employs a qualitative case study of a local university in Nanjing, drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with three teachers of diverse backgrounds alongside observational data. It seeks to investigate the practical logic and real-world challenges of teacher leadership in the context of HQD. Specifically, the study is guided by three research objectives:

1. To describe teachers' concrete practices in curriculum reform, interdisciplinary collaboration, and value transmission, thereby revealing the multidimensional features of teacher leadership;
2. To analyse the tensions and constraints of teacher leadership under policy pressures, organizational structures, and individual development demands;
3. To summarize the practical logic and diagnostic challenges of teacher leadership, offering empirical insights for institutional design and faculty development in local universities.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the background of HQD, higher education reform, and the importance of teacher leadership, with contextual reference to the development trajectory of the case university. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, including the design, participants, data collection, and analytical procedures. Section 4 presents the findings on the dimensions of teacher leadership and the associated challenges.

Section 5 concludes with implications for practice. Finally, Section 6 addresses research limitations and future directions.

Through this investigation, the study aims to enrich theoretical and practical explorations of teacher leadership in higher education while responding to the practical needs of Chinese local universities under the HQD agenda.

II. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

2.1 High-Quality Development and Higher Education Reform

In the new era, China's development has shifted from "high-speed growth" to *High-Quality Development (HQD)*. Education, as a fundamental project of national development and an essential field of talent cultivation, has been explicitly required to pursue connotative growth rather than extensive expansion. The *China Education Modernization 2035* issued by the State Council in 2019 set the goal of achieving overall modernization of education by 2035 and building China into a leading educational power. Importantly, it emphasized the need to establish a high-quality, professional, and innovative teaching workforce (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). This reflects the close alignment between the strategic objectives of educational modernization and HQD.

At the higher education level, HQD entails not only expanding enrolment capacity but also improving educational quality and optimizing structural arrangements. For instance, the *Implementation Plan for the Construction of High-Level Universities in Jiangsu Province (2021–2025)* issued in 2021 proposed strengthening disciplinary development, optimizing resource allocation, and advancing governance reform to enhance the contribution of higher education to economic and social development (Jiangsu Provincial Government, 2021). Thus, HQD is not only a strategic guideline at the macro-policy level but also a concrete requirement to which local universities must actively respond.

Within international and domestic research on teacher leadership, Jiazhi and Batool (2024) identified, through grounded coding, several behavioural components of teacher leadership, including instructional orientation, self-development, peer collaboration, assisting leadership, and service to society—providing a structural understanding of teacher leadership from a behavioural perspective. Similarly, Wu and Shen (2024), drawing on the Chinese case of "open classes," demonstrated the leadership significance embedded in teaching design and reflective practice. These insights provide empirical support for the teaching leadership and



invisible leadership dimensions emphasized in the present study.

2.2 The Importance of Teacher Leadership

In advancing HQD, teachers are regarded as the “primary resource” and the central agents of reform. Teacher leadership is manifested not only in classroom teaching and curriculum reform, guiding student learning and growth, but also in teamwork, disciplinary development, and the shaping of campus culture (Day & Harris, 2010). Prior studies have indicated that teacher leadership facilitates professional development, promotes organizational change, and enhances overall educational quality (Harris, 2014; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

In the context of Chinese higher education, the importance of teacher leadership is further accentuated:

- On the one hand, policy directives require teachers to play stronger roles in research productivity, curriculum innovation, and talent cultivation;
- On the other hand, university governance increasingly emphasizes faculty participation in academic decision-making and quality assurance (Li & Yang, 2020).

Thus, teacher leadership functions not only as a driver of educational reform but also as a decisive factor in determining whether universities can genuinely achieve connotative development under the HQD agenda.

2.3 The Developmental Context of the Case University in Nanjing

As an important educational hub in eastern China, Nanjing hosts multiple provincial-level high-level universities and a variety of institutions specializing in the arts, teacher education, and science and engineering. These institutions collectively play a demonstrative role in educational reform and talent cultivation. The case university (anonymized for confidentiality) is a provincial-level institution known for its strengths in the arts and is also one of the key universities supported under Jiangsu’s HQD initiative.

In recent reforms, the university has demonstrated several distinctive features:

1. **Disciplinary strengths:** It enjoys strong national influence in the arts while actively promoting “arts + technology” and “arts + interdisciplinarity” pathways to strengthen cross-disciplinary integration.

2. **Organizational culture:** The university emphasizes project-driven and practice-oriented approaches, encouraging faculty to pursue curriculum reform and industry-education collaboration, though challenges remain with bureaucratic approval procedures and unequal resource allocation.

3. **Policy responsiveness:** As a key construction unit, the university places high importance on HQD assessments, with research output, talent cultivation, and social service set as critical performance indicators, thus imposing high demands on faculty.

Nevertheless, challenges persist. Some teachers report excessive workloads stemming from teaching and research responsibilities; others highlight relationship-based tendencies in resource allocation and limited channels for faculty participation in governance. These issues constrain the full exercise of teacher leadership and hinder the further advancement of HQD in the institution.

Therefore, using this university as a case enables the study to reveal the multiple tensions faced by teachers at the intersection of policy pressures, organizational structures, and individual development. Moreover, it provides empirical insights into potential pathways for strengthening teacher leadership in similar local universities.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, with case study as its primary approach. Case study research emphasizes in-depth analysis of the research subject within a specific context, thereby uncovering the underlying generative logic of complex social phenomena (Yin, 2018). Compared with large-sample surveys, a single-case *thick description* is more suitable for answering the present research question: *How is teacher leadership generated and practiced at the intersection of policy, organization, and individual factors in the context of High-Quality Development (HQD)?*

The selection of a local university in Nanjing as the research site is based on three considerations:

1. **Representativeness:** The university is a key construction unit in Jiangsu Province, with disciplinary structure, organizational culture, and policy responsiveness that are typical of provincial-level institutions.
2. **Uniqueness:** As an institution with strengths in the arts, its educational environment and teacher practices demonstrate distinctive disciplinary characteristics.
3. **Accessibility:** The researcher had practical



access to the site through work and research connections, ensuring both data sufficiency and authenticity.

3.2 Research Participants

This study focused on three teachers from the case university (hereafter referred to as H1, H2, and H3), each with different professional backgrounds. All three were engaged in undergraduate teaching and had practical experience in curriculum reform, interdisciplinary collaboration, or student development:

- **H1:** A senior professor with over 20 years of teaching experience, balancing both research and teaching responsibilities, and having led multiple university-level teaching reform projects.
- **H2:** An associate professor with about 10 years of teaching experience, extensively involved in interdisciplinary courses, emphasizing the integration of teaching and research.
- **H3:** A young lecturer with fewer than five years of service, mainly responsible for foundational courses, demonstrating active exploration in student development and curriculum innovation.

The rationale for selecting these three participants was as follows:

1. Diversity: Covering different age groups, academic degrees, and professional ranks, thereby reflecting the heterogeneity of teacher leadership.
2. Information richness: Each teacher had notable experience in curriculum reform or team collaboration, providing in-depth and illustrative cases.
3. Typicality: Their trajectories could represent the common features and challenges of teacher leadership in local Chinese universities.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews. To ensure depth and reliability, interviews were conducted in multiple phases. The interview questions covered the following aspects:

1. Teachers' practices in classroom teaching and curriculum reform;
2. Their roles and experiences in interdisciplinary collaboration and teamwork;
3. Perceptions of policy assessments and resource allocation;
4. Practices in cultural transmission and value guidance;

5. Teachers' self-perceptions of leadership and their developmental needs.

The interviews were arranged as follows:

- Time frame: March–June and September–December 2024, and March–June 2025;
- Venue: Conducted in the researcher's temporary office or soundproof meeting rooms on campus to ensure privacy and recording quality;
- Data scale: Approximately 60,000 words of verbatim transcripts generated from the three participants.

All interviews were conducted with informed consent, strictly adhering to research ethics, with all personal identifiers anonymized to protect participants' confidentiality.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted to analyse the interview data. The process involved five steps:

1. Open coding: Carefully reading transcripts to identify initial concepts and experience fragments related to teacher leadership;
2. Theme generation: Grouping similar codes into broader thematic categories;
3. Framework alignment: Mapping themes to the theoretical framework of the study, including instructional leadership, collaborative leadership, and cultural leadership;
4. Cross-case comparison: Conducting horizontal analysis across the three teachers to identify commonalities and divergences;
5. Interpretation and theorization: Integrating findings with contextual knowledge and literature to refine theoretical insights.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, several strategies were employed:

- Reflexive memoing: The researcher continuously documented reflective notes to mitigate positional bias.
- Data saturation checks: Ensuring that new comparisons no longer generated novel categories.
- Peer review: Two educational researchers were invited to review the coding scheme and thematic categories to improve reliability.

3.5 Limitations

Despite the richness of the interview data, this study has limitations.

1. Limited external validity: The findings primarily reflect the case university context and cannot be directly generalized to other types of institutions.



2. Single data source: The study relied mainly on interviews, lacking triangulation with classroom observations or policy documents.
3. Researcher positionality bias: The researcher's "insider" identity may have influenced the interpretation of data.

Nonetheless, these limitations do not undermine the exploratory value of the research. By providing *thick description* of three teachers' experiences, the study sheds light on how teacher leadership is enacted under HQD pressures and offers a valuable basis for future multi-case and longitudinal investigations.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Dimensions of Teacher Leadership Practice

Based on in-depth interviews with three teachers (H1, H2, H3) at the case university, this study found that teacher leadership in the context of High-Quality Development (HQD) is mainly manifested in three dimensions: instructional leadership, collaborative leadership, and cultural leadership. These dimensions are not independent, but rather interwoven in practice, together shaping the multidimensional landscape of teacher leadership.

4.1.1 Instructional Leadership: Curriculum Reform and Classroom Innovation

All three teachers emphasized that teaching constitutes the core domain of teacher leadership, though their specific practices and focal points differed.

- H1 (Senior Professor): H1 repeatedly highlighted the importance of curriculum system construction. He remarked: "Real leadership is not only about managing a single course well, but also about driving the transformation of the entire curriculum direction." Under his leadership, a core course incorporated interdisciplinary modules, inviting colleagues from the School of Information Engineering to co-teach. He recalled: "One student told me it was the first time they felt that art and technology were no longer separate fields. That kind of feedback reinforced my determination to continue the reform."

However, H1 also pointed out a dilemma: "Such reforms require significant time investment, but current evaluation indicators still prioritize research outputs. Curriculum innovation benefits students, but it is hardly reflected in promotion or annual assessment." This highlights the tension

between instructional leadership and evaluation criteria.

- H2 (Mid-career Associate Professor): H2 focused more on innovating classroom pedagogy. She explained: "Students are not passive recipients, but co-participants in the classroom." She experimented with flipped classrooms and group-based cooperative learning, emphasizing active inquiry. She gave an example: "In one class, I asked students to analyze a piece of social news in groups and then present their perspectives through artistic expression. The engagement was remarkable—even normally quiet students were highly active."

Yet, she admitted: "Such innovations often encounter resistance. Some colleagues see them as an 'extra burden' rather than something rewarded in evaluations." This suggests that instructional leadership in pedagogical innovation is constrained by organizational culture and evaluation systems.

- H3 (Early-career Lecturer): H3 focused on the flexible use of teaching resources. He said: "I may not be the most senior teacher in the college, but I'm willing to try small-scale innovations." For example, he used digital learning platforms to collect student feedback and adjusted his lessons accordingly. He noted: "Students wrote that they appreciated a class that could respond to their questions in real time. That made me realize that leadership doesn't necessarily require an administrative title, but can be demonstrated through professional expertise."

At the same time, H3 revealed his concerns: "The research pressure on young faculty is immense. If I devote too much time to teaching reform, my publications may suffer. I often feel caught in a dilemma."

In sum, the three teachers' practices in instructional leadership indicate that leadership is enacted not only in classroom teaching but also in curriculum construction and institutional reform. However, their enthusiasm and sustainability are constrained by the "research-first" evaluation system, reflecting the Policy Temperature Gap.

4.1.2 Collaborative Leadership: Interdisciplinary Cooperation and Team Building

Collaboration is widely regarded as a vital component of teacher leadership. Yet, the three teachers' experiences revealed notable differences.

- H1 emphasized the value of cross-college projects: "Interdisciplinary courses allow students to see a different knowledge mosaic, but the difficulties are considerable. Budget



approval is complex, and departmental coordination is inefficient. Sometimes it feels like most of my energy goes into paperwork.” He recalled an interdisciplinary elective course: “We ran it for one semester, and it was very successful with strong student demand. But because funding approval failed, it could not continue the following year.”

- H2 leaned toward team governance within her department: “Our teaching group has a good atmosphere. In discussions on curriculum reform, I try to encourage younger colleagues to speak up. I believe leadership is not about overpowering others, but about helping consolidate different voices.” Under her guidance, the group implemented a practice of “internal peer review once every semester” to enhance collective teaching quality. However, she noted: “Even if we come up with a solid plan, whether it gets adopted still depends on the college leadership. That sometimes feels disempowering.”
- H3 assumed more of a learner’s role in collaboration: “I often seek advice from experienced teachers and join their course projects. Although I’m not yet a project leader, I learn how to manage a team. Occasionally, I contribute new ideas in group projects, and it feels rewarding when those ideas are recognized.”

Overall, collaborative leadership practices reveal a pattern of Constrained Distribution: teachers are formally included in participatory mechanisms but lack substantive decision-making power in resources or policy. As a result, many collaborative initiatives lack institutional guarantees and fail to sustain over time.

4.1.3 Cultural Leadership: Value Orientation and Invisible Influence

Teachers are not only transmitters of knowledge but also shapers of culture and values. The three participants demonstrated cultural leadership in different ways.

- H1 emphasized academic norms and responsibility through public lectures and courses: “I often remind students that artistic creation is not just spontaneous inspiration, but a responsibility toward society.” After one lecture, a student

privately told him: “It was the first time I realized plagiarism is not just about grades, but about values.”

- H2 integrated value education into classroom activities: “I want my students to learn not just artistic skills, but also how to think critically about social issues.” For example, she designed an assignment where students created artworks on the theme of “environmental protection” and organized an exhibition for public sharing. She believed: “This integrates value orientation into professional learning.”
- H3 demonstrated cultural leadership mainly through Invisible Leadership. He admitted: “I’m not used to speaking up at meetings, but I know my classroom can set an example.” For instance, his cooperative learning model was later adopted by a colleague with positive results. “Although he never said he got the idea from me, I knew it was an indirect influence,” H3 added with a smile.

H3 further highlighted the importance of psychological empowerment: “If leadership makes me feel trusted, I’m more willing to try new designs. But if I feel it’s only about fulfilling assessment indicators, I hesitate.”

This shows that cultural leadership is exercised not only through explicit value transmission but also through invisible leadership and the sustaining power of psychological empowerment.

4.2 Practical Dilemmas of Teacher Leadership

Although H1–H3 demonstrated rich leadership practices in the domains of teaching, collaboration, and culture, their interviews repeatedly highlighted multiple practical dilemmas. These challenges mainly concentrated on four aspects: resource allocation, administrative intervention, evaluation systems, and the tension between time and energy. Together, they reveal the fragility and stage-specific nature of teacher leadership under the context of High-Quality Development (HQD).

4.2.1 Unequal Resource Allocation

- H1 stressed: “Many resources appear to be open, but in reality, they follow fixed channels. For example, some key projects are still inclined toward teachers who already have influence within the university. For younger staff without connections, opportunities are very limited.” He admitted that such “relationship-based allocation” marginalizes teachers with genuine innovative ideas.
- H2 voiced a similar concern: “I applied twice



for cross-college teaching reform projects, but both stalled at the funding approval stage. Someone even suggested I 'find an acquaintance to say a word,' but I felt that was unfair." She argued that unequal allocation not only dampens teachers' enthusiasm but also fosters internal competition, weakening the atmosphere of teamwork.

- H3 experienced this issue more directly: "Some teaching equipment is simply inaccessible to me, so I have to find my own solutions. For instance, I paid out of pocket for software licenses." He admitted helplessly: "Over time, it becomes hard to sustain motivation."

This dilemma reveals that unequal resource allocation is a key institutional barrier to teacher leadership, particularly pronounced in interdisciplinary projects.

4.2.2 Excessive Administrative Intervention

- H1 frequently mentioned: "The university often stresses 'uniformity,' but educational innovation requires flexibility. When every step must go through layers of approval, many good ideas are consumed by paperwork." He concluded bluntly: "Excessive administrative power gradually deprives teachers of creative space."
- H2 emphasized the loss of teaching autonomy: "For example, I designed a cross-disciplinary elective that students loved, but the college leadership decided to cancel it because it was not closely tied to performance indicators." She reflected: "It made me feel that teachers' passion and students' interests were not the primary concern."
- H3, as an early-career lecturer, was even more sensitive to bureaucratic constraints: "Sometimes I want to try new teaching formats, but the amount of paperwork discourages me. In the end, sticking to the old model is the easiest." He added with a wry smile: "Eventually, innovation itself becomes a burden."

Thus, "strong control" through administrative intervention not only undermines teacher autonomy but also invisibly constrains the emergence of teacher leadership.

4.2.3 One-Sided Evaluation System

- H1 pointed out: "The 'one-vote veto' of

research outputs still exists. No matter how innovative your teaching is, without sufficient publications, promotion is nearly impossible." He believed this evaluation orientation forces teachers to prioritize research at the expense of teaching reform.

- H2 was more concerned about students' learning outcomes: "I can clearly see students benefit from innovative teaching, but the university only evaluates exam results. This disconnect makes teachers feel their efforts are unrecognized."
- H3 expressed it most directly: "Young faculty all know that publishing is the only path to promotion. No matter how well you teach, nobody notices." He added: "So I only attempt small-scale teaching reforms after meeting my research requirements."

This indicates that the current evaluation system remains unbalanced between teaching and research, making it difficult for teacher leadership in instructional domains to gain formal institutional recognition.

4.2.4 Tensions of Time and Energy

- H1 confessed: "I juggle administrative duties, graduate supervision, and undergraduate teaching, leaving my schedule fragmented. It feels like I'm constantly rushing between tasks, and innovation is always pushed to the end."
- H2 shared the same sentiment: "Preparing courses, completing research tasks, and mentoring students already keep me overwhelmed. If I'm also expected to take on cultural development activities, it becomes impossible to balance."
- H3 expressed even stronger anxiety: "As a young lecturer, the publication pressure is especially high, with annual quotas for papers. Teaching reform consumes a lot of time, but research cannot be delayed. I'm often caught in a dilemma."

All three teachers agreed that under the pressure of HQD assessments, the overlap of multiple roles fragments their time and energy, directly limiting the sustainability of teacher leadership.

4.3 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that, under the context of High-Quality Development (HQD), teacher leadership in Chinese universities demonstrates a dual characteristic of being both *active* and *fragile*. On the one hand, teachers exhibit multidimensional



leadership practices through curriculum reform, classroom innovation, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and cultural value guidance. On the other hand, these practices are constrained by policy evaluations, organizational power structures, and individual resource limitations. The following section discusses these dynamics from four perspectives.

1. Policy Temperature Gap and the Tension of External Drive

Teachers widely reported a disconnection between policy objectives and actual implementation. While top-level designs emphasize curriculum reform and teaching innovation, research outputs remain the “one-vote veto” criterion in performance evaluations. The statements of H1 and H2 reveal teachers’ perception of a “say one thing, do another” gap, reflecting the Policy Temperature Gap in practice. Previous research has highlighted that policies often undergo “goal distortion” during hierarchical transmission (Matland, 1995; Zhao & Hu, 2022), ultimately leading frontline teachers to act more out of compliance with assessments rather than genuine educational ideals. This tension weakens teachers’ intrinsic motivation and constrains the long-term development of teacher leadership.

2. Constrained Distribution and the Dilemma of Organizational Empowerment

Although teachers gained opportunities to participate in teaching groups, curriculum design, and committees, substantive decision-making power remained concentrated in administrative levels. H3’s experience (“we can speak up, but we have no real authority”) illustrates a state of Constrained Distribution. Harris (2014) emphasized that distributed leadership is ineffective if teacher participation remains only symbolic, as it cannot foster organizational learning or collective improvement. This study confirms that organizational empowerment in practice is “semi-open, semi-closed,” leaving teacher leadership without institutionalized support. As a result, many collaborative projects remain at the pilot stage and fail to scale up.

3. Invisible Leadership and the Challenge of Cultural Value Recognition

Teachers demonstrated significant invisible influence at the cultural level. H2’s instructional designs were adopted by colleagues, and H3’s classroom practices subtly shifted team dynamics, showing that teacher leadership does not solely rely on formal authority but also manifests through Invisible Leadership and value

shaping (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, as H1 pointed out, such subtle influences often go unrecognized by institutional systems. Current evaluation mechanisms prioritize quantifiable research outputs while neglecting teachers’ contributions to cultural and value leadership. This institutional blind spot undermines the role of teacher leadership in shaping campus culture.

4. Psychological Empowerment and the Limits of Resilient Leadership

The sustainability of teacher leadership depends heavily on teachers’ sense of Psychological Empowerment. H3 stressed that “being trusted makes me more willing to invest effort,” whereas H2 lamented that her college often cared only about task completion, not about respecting teachers’ professional judgment. Spreitzer (1995) identified psychological empowerment as a key driver of agency. This study shows that in contexts of insufficient empowerment, teachers can only rely on Resilient Leadership to sustain reform efforts. The cases of H1 and H2—such as narrowing project scope or initiating small-scale pilots—illustrate how resilience helps maintain progress. However, overreliance on individual persistence easily leads to “consumptive cycles.” This echoes Liu and Xu’s (2021) conclusion that organizational inertia undermines teacher innovation, suggesting that the absence of institutional support makes individual leadership unsustainable.

5. The Generative Logic of Teacher Leadership

Synthesizing the findings, the generative logic of teacher leadership in the HQD context can be summarized as a dynamic chain:

- Policy Drive provides external pressure and incentives, but produces a Policy Temperature Gap during transmission;
- Organizational Empowerment offers partial institutional space, but with limited power decentralization;
- Individual Practice emerges through explicit actions (curriculum reform, collaborative projects) and invisible leadership (value guidance, peer influence), yet depends on psychological empowerment;
- Adaptive Responses rely on resilient leadership to sustain reform, but the absence of effective feedback mechanisms prevents virtuous cycles.

This logic represents a pattern of “external drive—internal adaptation—feedback deficiency”, whereby teacher leadership can be activated in the short term but remains fragile in the long run. This finding not only contributes to the dialogue between



distributed leadership and policy implementation theory but also uncovers the dynamic generative characteristics of teacher leadership under the Chinese HQD context.

Concluding Discussion

In conclusion, this study reveals the practice logic and inherent tensions of teacher leadership under HQD: teachers are activated by policy drives, constrained by organizational empowerment, demonstrate agency in individual practice, yet often fall into dilemmas due to feedback deficiencies. This suggests that teacher leadership is not a static attribute but a dynamic process of continuous adjustment between policy, organization, and individual agency.

Theoretically, this study enriches the application of distributed leadership and policy implementation theory in Chinese higher education by proposing an explanatory framework of “Policy Temperature Gap—Constrained Distribution—Invisible Leadership—Psychological Empowerment—Resilient Leadership,” highlighting the fragile balance between external drive and internal adaptation.

Practically, this study reminds higher education managers and policymakers to avoid overreliance on quantitative evaluation and administrative centralization. Instead, they should optimize evaluation systems, expand teachers’ substantive participation, and strengthen institutionalized trust and tolerance mechanisms. Only through these measures can universities foster a sustainable environment for teacher leadership to thrive within the HQD agenda.

V. Conclusion and Implications

Based on in-depth interviews with three teachers at a local university in Nanjing, this study reveals the multidimensional logic of teacher leadership under the context of High-Quality Development (HQD). The findings show that teachers demonstrate instructional leadership through curriculum reform and classroom innovation, collaborative leadership in cross-disciplinary cooperation and team governance, and cultural leadership in value transmission and cultural construction. Moreover, teacher leadership extends beyond explicit institutionalized practices, encompassing invisible leadership and psychological empowerment as informal dimensions. Some teachers also displayed resilient leadership, which enabled them to sustain reform momentum under policy pressures and resource constraints.

However, the development of teacher leadership is constrained by multiple factors, including policy-driven evaluation indicators, limited distribution of organizational empowerment, and the conflict between teachers’ professional commitments and personal time and energy. These tensions jointly shape teacher leadership as both *active* and *fragile*.

Based on these findings, several implications can be drawn. Universities should place greater emphasis on optimizing evaluation systems, ensuring transparency in resource allocation, and institutionalizing organizational trust and tolerance mechanisms. At the same time, individual teachers need to enhance their sustainability and adaptability in leadership through cross-disciplinary collaboration, data-driven teaching reflection, and self-empowerment strategies.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study draws primarily on in-depth interviews with three teachers from a local university in Nanjing, thereby uncovering the practice logic and practical challenges of teacher leadership under the HQD agenda. Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the data source is relatively narrow, relying mainly on interview materials without triangulation from classroom observations, meeting minutes, or policy documents. This limitation constrains the comprehensiveness and objectivity of the findings.

Second, the sample size is small, focusing only on three individual cases. The results are therefore more reflective of individualized experiences, with limited external validity. They cannot fully represent different types of universities or diverse disciplinary contexts.

Third, the time span of data collection—covering phased interviews between 2024 and 2025—captures leadership practices within a specific timeframe but does not sufficiently reveal their long-term trajectories.

Future research could extend along three directions:

1. Broader sampling: Include comprehensive universities, science and engineering institutions, and local undergraduate colleges for comparative analysis, in order to enhance the generalizability of findings.
2. Diverse data sources: Integrate classroom observations, student feedback, and policy text analysis to achieve triangulation and strengthen the robustness of conclusions.
3. Longitudinal or action research: Adopt longitudinal tracking or action research



approaches to explore the dynamic generation of teacher leadership under policy pressure and organizational change, while also testing the sustainability of enhancement strategies.

Through these efforts, future studies can deepen the understanding of teacher leadership within the context of HQD and provide more empirically grounded references for university governance and teacher development.

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