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University Teachers' Leadership: Deconstruction of Connotation and Development Path

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Abstract: As higher education enters a new stage of high-quality, connotative development, teacher leadership has become a key mechanism for activating the internal driving forces of universities and overcoming the bottlenecks of traditional administrative governance. This issue is particularly salient for vocational colleges, which must simultaneously improve educational quality and highlight distinctive institutional characteristics. University teacher leadership differs fundamentally from conventional administrative leadership; it is an endogenous, egalitarian and constructive influence generated by teachers through professional authority, practical competence and other forms of professional power, complemented by non-power factors such as personal charisma, peer trust and shared values. Conceptually, teacher leadership encompasses three core dimensions: self-leadership, professional skills leadership and interpersonal relationship leadership. Drawing on domestic and international research on educational leadership, this paper deconstructs the connotation and structural system of university teacher leadership, and, in light of the operational realities of higher education institutions, proposes systematic cultivation paths. It further analyzes the practical value of teacher leadership in stimulating teachers' potential, shaping a shared organizational culture, optimizing faculty structures and promoting the transformation of university governance from administrative control to collaborative professionalism. The study argues that the development of teacher leadership is a complex, systemic project requiring coordinated efforts from government, universities, academic teams and individual teachers. Through conceptual innovation, capacity enhancement and ecological optimization, teacher leadership can be effectively activated to support the connotative, high-quality development of higher education.

Keywords: teacher leadership; university teachers; higher education governance; connotative development; vocational education; professional development; organizational culture

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1. Research Background and Core Connotation Definition

Teachers are central to implementing the fundamental task of fostering virtue, nurturing talent, and promoting the high-quality development of higher education. They fulfill multiple roles, including talent cultivation, scientific research, social services, and cultural inheritance and innovation. Their overall quality and professional abilities directly influence the quality of university education and the effectiveness of talent cultivation [1]. In the current era, university teachers have evolved from being mere transmitters of knowledge to becoming mentors for student growth, drivers of discipline development, and practitioners of innovative applications. As higher education transitions from extensive expansion to intensive improvement, the intrinsic motivation and comprehensive quality of teaching staff have become pivotal in enhancing universities' core competitiveness [2].

With the ongoing advancement of comprehensive higher education reform, the traditional hierarchical management model centered on administrative authority has revealed issues such as rigid governance, diminished recognition of teachers as primary contributors, and reduced team collaboration efficiency [3]. In vocational colleges,

challenges such as the disconnect between teaching and practice, limited initiative among teachers, and slow progress in improving educational quality are more pronounced [4]. In this context, internally-driven teacher leadership, independent of formal positions, has emerged as a key strategy for optimizing university governance structures, energizing teaching staff, and overcoming developmental barriers. University teacher leadership refers to the positive influence and appeal that educators exert within organizational domains such as teaching, research, education, and team collaboration [5, 6]. This influence is rooted in professional expertise, teaching and research capabilities, practical technical skills, and non-power factors such as moral integrity, emotional resonance, peer trust, and value-driven guidance.

University teacher leadership fundamentally differs from administrative leadership [7]. Administrative leadership relies on formal authority granted by position and rank, characterized by compulsion, hierarchy, and unidirectionality, achieving management objectives through directives. In contrast, teacher leadership operates independently of positional power, emphasizing equality, intrinsic motivation, role modeling, and bidirectionality. It fosters mutual support and peer guidance among educators, prioritizing team advancement through professional excellence and personal influence rather than administrative authority [8, 9]. This approach aligns more closely with the essence of education and the collaborative dynamics of academic teams. Presently, both undergraduate and vocational colleges face critical tasks of quality enhancement and innovation [10]. Systematic cultivation of teacher leadership and the establishment of a shared, progressive team culture hold significant theoretical and practical importance for addressing governance challenges, improving teaching staff quality, and advancing sustainable university development. Teacher leadership has become a vital resource that requires in-depth exploration and systematic cultivation in the context of university reform.

2. Literature Review and Connotation Decomposition of Leadership and Teacher Leadership

2.1. Review of Leadership Research at Home and Abroad

Systematic research on educational leadership originated in Europe and America. The United States has developed a comprehensive theoretical system encompassing trait theory, behavioral theory, contingency theory, shared leadership, and distributed leadership, gradually challenging the traditional notion that leadership is exclusive to managerial roles [8, 11]. These theoretical advancements have been widely applied in the governance of higher education [12]. Countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany have conducted localized studies on teachers' internal leadership, tailored to their respective education systems. These studies emphasize the non-positional influence of ordinary teachers and have established leadership frameworks suited to educational contexts, offering valuable references for global research in this field.

Research on educational leadership in China began relatively late. Early studies primarily focused on the leadership roles of administrative figures such as university managers and presidents. Over the past decade, with the emphasis on connotative development, academic attention has increasingly shifted toward ordinary teachers, exploring the meaning, components, and developmental pathways of teacher leadership [5]. However, existing research predominantly centers on regular undergraduate institutions, with limited focus on teacher leadership in vocational colleges [13]. Additionally, some studies exhibit a disconnect between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, and a fully localized cultivation system has yet to be established. From a management perspective, leadership fundamentally involves two-way influence, representing an individual's ability to integrate resources within an organizational context and coordinate team members to achieve shared objectives [14, 15]. Leadership is often defined by three core elements: leaders, followers, and leadership tasks. It emerges from

the dynamic interaction among these elements, and the absence of any one of them hinders the effective exercise of influence.

2.2. The Intrinsic Decomposition and Core Components of Leadership in University Teachers

Teacher leadership represents the practical application of leadership theory within the educational domain, characterized by educational, professional, and humanistic attributes [11]. It is distinct from leadership in corporate settings and administrative contexts. Teacher leadership embodies the positive influence cultivated by educators through their professional expertise, comprehensive abilities, emotional support, and value-driven guidance in teaching, research, team collaboration, and student management. The essence of teacher leadership is rooted in four dimensions: professional mission, professional competence, humanistic quality, and organizational collaboration ability, encompassing the entire scope of a teacher's career development. In alignment with the specific job characteristics and developmental needs of university educators, particularly those in vocational institutions, teacher leadership can be divided into three interrelated and unified core dimensions, forming a holistic competency framework:

First, self-leadership [6]. This concept refers to the self-management process through which individuals optimize their behavior and enhance performance via self-direction, self-motivation, and self-restraint [2]. It encompasses three practical strategies: focusing on behavior, stimulating intrinsic motivation, and shaping constructive thinking. Self-leadership serves as the foundation of teacher leadership, enabling educators to achieve self-motivation and self-improvement, which are essential for influencing others. Second, professional skills leadership. This dimension constitutes the core of teacher leadership, referring to the professional authority established by educators through their mastery of theoretical knowledge, teaching expertise, research proficiency, and practical techniques. Educators in vocational institutions require specialized skills such as practical teaching, technological research and development, and collaboration with industry partners. These competencies provide the confidence necessary for educators to excel in their roles and assume leadership positions. Third, interpersonal relationship leadership [2, 10]. Education is inherently an interactive process involving various stakeholders. This dimension emphasizes the management of relationships within universities, including interactions between administrators and staff, among educators, between educators and students, and between institutions and external organizations. Effective interpersonal relationship leadership is crucial for fostering teamwork, cultivating a harmonious organizational environment, and ensuring the successful implementation of leadership initiatives.

3. The Systematic Development Path of Teacher Leadership in Universities

In the digital age, the rapid advancement of knowledge and the transformation of educational models have imposed multifaceted demands on the comprehensive abilities of university teachers [14]. The development of teacher leadership should adhere to the principles of systematicness and practicality, emphasizing concept innovation, professional enhancement, self-cultivation, and interpersonal collaboration as core strategies. This approach aims to establish a comprehensive and stratified development path, avoiding superficial or fragmented cultivation methods, while aligning with the operational realities of universities and the developmental needs of educators.

3.1. Lead with Concept Innovation, Break the Shackles of Administrativeization, and Establish a Collaborative Governance Concept

The core prerequisite for the development of teacher leadership is the transformation of governance concepts [8]. Universities need to abandon the fixed notion that "leadership belongs exclusively to administrative managers" and establish a shared leadership concept that "everyone has leadership potential and can play a leading role." It should be clear that teachers are the core subjects of university governance, not merely executors of

administrative instructions [5, 14]. The management layer of universities should transform their governance thinking, appropriately delegate relevant authorities such as teaching reform, discipline construction, and team management, encourage teachers to deeply participate in the governance decisions of teaching and research rooms, secondary colleges, and the university as a whole, establish channels for teachers to express their demands and provide feedback, and guide teachers to deeply bind their personal career development with the overall development of the university, fostering a professional awareness of active participation, collaborative governance, and shared responsibility. At the same time, universities need to carry out specialized training on teacher leadership, through forms such as thematic discussions, off-campus study tours, and experience exchanges, to help teachers clarify the connotation, value, and practical path of leadership, and eliminate cognitive misunderstandings; weaken the administrative hierarchy barriers, create an organizational ecosystem that respects, trusts, and supports teachers, provide a relaxed environment for the exertion of teacher leadership, and promote the transformation of teachers from passive execution to active leadership.

3.2. With Professional Improvement as the Core, Consolidate the Foundation of Ability, and Enhance the Effectiveness of Professional Leadership

Professional quality is the core carrier of teacher leadership [7, 12]. Without solid professional ability, leadership becomes water without a source [13]. Universities need to deeply integrate teacher professional development with leadership cultivation, and build a full-cycle, stratified and classified professional development system [9]. For new teachers, improve the onboarding training and the "one-on-one" mentorship system, and have backbone teachers provide comprehensive guidance in aspects such as teaching norms, research entry, and practical operations, to help young teachers quickly complete role transitions and consolidate their professional foundation; for middle-aged and young backbone teachers, build platforms for academic exchanges, research breakthroughs, and school-enterprise cooperation, support teachers in delving into their professional fields, breaking through development bottlenecks, and cultivating subject leaders and core team members, and leverage professional advantages to exert peer leadership; for vocational college teachers, focus on strengthening practical skills and "dual-qualified" quality cultivation, promote teachers to practice in the front line of enterprises, improve technical skills and practical teaching levels, and enhance professional influence. At the same time, build a regular learning organization, establish a regular discussion mechanism for teaching and research groups and teaching teams, promote mutual learning and experience sharing among teachers, solve problems together, alleviate the dual pressure of teaching and research, stimulate the motivation for autonomous development, and consolidate the foundation of leadership with the comprehensive improvement of professional quality.

3.3. Based on Self-Leadership, Stimulate Internal Motivation, and Achieve Autonomous-Driven Growth

Self-leadership serves as the foundational element of teacher leadership. Universities should guide educators to first cultivate self-management and self-leadership skills, enabling them to influence others and lead teams effectively. Teachers should be supported in establishing clear short-term, medium-term, and long-term career development objectives aligned with job requirements and institutional development plans. These goals can serve as a framework for self-management and continuous improvement, reducing confusion in career development. Additionally, educators should be encouraged to implement core self-leadership strategies, such as focusing on behaviors to standardize teaching and research practices and developing efficient work habits. By stimulating intrinsic motivation, educators can strengthen their sense of mission in education and professional identity, transitioning from external assessment-driven models to a mindset of proactive engagement. Constructive thinking should also be

fostered to help educators manage work-related pressures and challenges, enabling them to reflect on areas for improvement and optimize their methods. Furthermore, teachers should be motivated to stay informed about advancements in their disciplines and industry trends, engage in autonomous learning, update their knowledge systems, and address skill gaps to achieve self-improvement [1]. Educators who develop mature self-leadership can attain self-driven growth and self-transcendence, positively influencing their colleagues through their professional qualities and work attitudes, thereby creating a ripple effect of motivation and excellence.

3.4. Supported by Interpersonal Collaboration, Consolidate Team Synergy, and Optimize the Ecological Environment for Leadership Exertion

Harmonious and smooth interpersonal relationships are an important guarantee for the exertion of teacher leadership [3]. Both education and management adhere to a human-oriented approach, with a core focus on the realization of individual value and the coordinated development of teams. Universities need to guide teachers to focus on the coordination of three core relationships and cultivate interpersonal relationship leadership: at the teacher-teacher relationship level, break down disciplinary barriers and the boundaries of teaching and research groups, abandon the traditional "single soldier" model, and promote teachers to collaborate in teaching reform, course construction, and research breakthroughs, achieving resource sharing and experience exchange; at the teacher-student relationship level, adhere to the student-centered education concept, strengthen communication and interaction between teachers and students, be good mentors and friends to students, and enhance the effectiveness of education through emotional care and personal charm [8]. At the level of the relationship between management and staff, the management should smooth communication channels, actively listen to the demands of teachers, and build a governance relationship based on equality and mutual trust. Meanwhile, platforms for collaboration such as teaching competitions, research salons, and team-building activities should be established to enhance trust and cooperation among teachers, resolve interpersonal barriers, and strengthen teachers' sense of belonging and the cohesion of the institution, thus creating a favorable organizational environment for the full play of teachers' leadership.

4. The Significance of Developing Teachers' Leadership in Higher Education Institutions

In the process of the connotative development of higher education, the value of developing teachers' leadership has become increasingly prominent [8, 15]. It has multiple irreplaceable practical significances for optimizing institutional governance, building a high-quality teaching staff, and improving the quality of talent cultivation [13]. It is the core endogenous driving force for promoting the high-quality development of higher education institutions [11].

4.1. Stimulating Teachers' Potential for Change and Activating the Endogenous Driving Force for Reform in Higher Education Institutions

The teaching staff holds considerable potential for leadership and innovation [4, 8]. Nevertheless, traditional administrative management approaches may suppress teachers' initiative, leading to a diminished drive for reform and reduced vitality within the teaching workforce. Systematic development of teachers' leadership capabilities can effectively unlock their potential for change, enabling them to transition from passive implementers of reform to active participants and leaders. Experienced educators and subject experts, through their professional practices and strong sense of responsibility, can serve as role models, motivating their peers to adopt new perspectives and take proactive steps [3, 9]. This creates a positive dynamic where leadership by example encourages collective progress. Collaborative interactions among educators foster the exchange of experiences, joint problem-solving, and cooperative innovation, positioning teachers'

leadership as a key driver for energizing reform efforts and addressing challenges such as rigid governance structures and limited developmental momentum in higher education institutions. This approach supports the comprehensive and sustained advancement of reforms within higher education institutions.

4.2. Shaping a Shared Organizational Culture and Consolidating the Foundation for the Development of Higher Education Institutions

Organizational culture serves as the essence of higher education institutions' development. A strong team culture is fundamental to enhancing institutional cohesion. Strengthening teachers' leadership can effectively foster an organizational culture centered on collaborative learning, resource sharing, and mutual advancement within higher education institutions [12]. The influential role of teacher leaders can extend positive impacts from grassroots teams to the entire institution, dismantling disciplinary barriers and departmental divisions while transforming a closed and conservative working atmosphere [2, 15]. This approach cultivates an academic and professional environment that encourages continuous learning, pragmatism, and cooperative efforts. As key agents of educational reform, teachers actively engage in institutional governance and embody the principles of collaboration during their leadership development, ensuring that the shared organizational culture becomes deeply ingrained rather than remaining superficial [5]. This process significantly enhances the institution's cohesion and unifying force, establishing a cultural foundation for the sustainable and high-quality development of higher education institutions.

4.3. Optimizing the Structure of the Teaching Staff and Enhancing the Overall Quality of the Teaching Staff

The prolonged disregard for the leadership role of teachers can result in challenges such as talent attrition, professional exhaustion, and diminished vitality within the teaching staff, ultimately hindering the sustainable development of higher education institutions. A systematic approach to fostering teachers' leadership can overcome the constraints of administrative management, effectively affirm their central role, and provide them with a sense of accomplishment in their positions and a sense of belonging in their careers. This approach not only aids in retaining existing exceptional talents but also attracts highly skilled and younger professionals from external sources [6]. Additionally, by implementing strategies such as goal-driven incentives, participatory incentives, and developmental incentives, it fosters collaborative learning and collective growth among educators, accelerates the development of younger teachers, and continuously enhances the competencies of leading educators [13]. Such measures contribute to optimizing the age, professional, and skill composition of the teaching staff, ultimately cultivating a high-quality professional team characterized by strong ethical standards, exceptional expertise, and leadership capabilities [8].

4.4. Promoting the Transformation of University Governance and Achieving Connotative and Sustainable Development

The development of teacher leadership is a dynamic and practical process rather than a theoretical concept [7]. As the core agents of internal reform in colleges and universities, teachers' leadership acts as a crucial internal driving force for governance transformation [10]. By cultivating teacher leadership, colleges and universities can establish an internal reform mechanism centered on teachers, move beyond an overreliance on external policies and administrative directives to drive reform, and transition governance models from administrative and hierarchical structures to democratic and collaborative approaches, thereby enhancing governance efficiency.

Furthermore, teacher leadership can guide colleges and universities to operate in alignment with educational principles, student needs, and industrial development [8, 12]. This approach helps avoid uniform and superficial schooling practices, supports

vocational colleges in emphasizing practical education, and enables ordinary undergraduate universities to strengthen their focus on scientific research and innovation [14]. As a result, institutions can pursue a distinctive, high-quality, and sustainable path of development, effectively fulfilling the fundamental mission of fostering virtue through education [15].

5. Research Implications

As the foundation for talent cultivation, knowledge innovation, and cultural inheritance, the governance level and teaching staff quality of universities directly influence the effectiveness of education. In the context of regional economic development initiatives, local universities and vocational colleges must rely on high-quality, leadership-capable teaching staff to achieve distinctive growth and contribute to the local economy. Based on practical experiences in university operations and research findings, four core implications can be identified:

First, the essence of teacher leadership lies in self-leadership rather than managing others. Teachers should move away from the misconception that leadership equates to control, instead prioritizing self-management, self-improvement, and self-discipline. Leadership should emerge through professional competence and personal influence rather than external authority. This characteristic distinguishes teacher leadership from administrative leadership and underscores its relevance to the educational field. Second, the development of teacher leadership is a systematic endeavor requiring collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Policymakers should establish supportive frameworks for teacher development, society should foster an environment that values education and respects educators, universities should create platforms, refine systems, and optimize the institutional environment, and teachers should actively engage in self-improvement. These stakeholders must work together to establish a sustainable development mechanism, avoiding superficial efforts. Third, leadership development should be tailored to specific contexts, avoiding uniform approaches. Undergraduate institutions should emphasize leadership in research innovation and academic disciplines, while vocational colleges should focus on leadership in practical skills and industry collaboration. Differentiated strategies should align with institutional missions and job requirements to enhance the relevance of leadership cultivation. Fourth, fostering teacher leadership is a long-term process requiring sustained effort. Leadership development does not occur instantaneously but demands ongoing guidance, platform support, and practical training. Universities should integrate leadership cultivation into their overall teacher development plans, continuously advancing and persevering in these efforts.

Currently, the cultivation of teacher leadership in universities remains in an exploratory phase, with further research and practice needed, particularly in vocational colleges. Moving forward, universities must align leadership development initiatives with their operational realities and regional development needs. This involves refining systems for teacher leadership cultivation, promoting the integration of theoretical research with practical application, and ensuring that teacher leadership becomes a driving force for energizing teaching staff, enhancing university governance, and improving educational quality. Such efforts will contribute to the sustainable and high-quality development of higher education, ultimately producing more skilled and versatile professionals to meet societal demands.

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