

Teacher Leadership and Student Engagement: A Systematic Review of Global Trends and Thematic Insights

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Abstract: *Teacher leadership has emerged as a critical factor in shaping positive educational outcomes, particularly in promoting active student participation. This systematic literature review (SLR) investigates the relationship between teacher leadership and student participation across diverse educational contexts. Utilizing the PRISMA framework, this study synthesizes empirical research from peer-reviewed articles indexed in Web of Science between 2000–2024. The findings are presented in two main dimensions: (1) general trends, including publication year, geographical distribution, methodological approaches, and research settings; and (2) thematic analysis, identifying key conceptual linkages, theoretical frameworks, and patterns of influence between teacher leadership practices and student participation. The review highlights a growing emphasis on distributed leadership, teacher agency, and collaborative pedagogies as enablers of student engagement. It also uncovers gaps in longitudinal studies, diverse cultural settings, and digital learning environments. The paper concludes by proposing a research agenda to guide future inquiry and enhance the understanding of teacher leadership's role in fostering meaningful student involvement in education.*

Keywords: Teacher Leadership, Student Participation, Systematic Literature Review (SLR), PRISMA Guidelines

1. Introduction

In an era of transformative shifts in education, the concept of teacher leadership has gained increasing prominence as a critical lever for advancing student engagement and educational quality (Li & Liu, 2022). Traditional top-down leadership models, once dominant in schools, have gradually given way to more distributed and collaborative frameworks that position teachers not merely as implementers of policy but as active leaders in instructional improvement, pedagogical innovation, and school decision-making (Holcombe et al., 2023). As classroom-level change agents, teacher leaders play a pivotal role in cultivating learning environments that foster student voice, participation, and meaningful engagement.

Student engagement, in turn, is widely acknowledged as a core determinant of educational success. Engagement encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, including students' willingness to participate in learning activities, their emotional investment in schooling, and their deep cognitive involvement in mastering academic content (Wong &

Liem, 2022). The extent to which students are actively engaged in their learning process is directly linked to academic achievement, retention, and holistic development. However, despite widespread recognition of its importance, student engagement remains a complex and context-dependent phenomenon, particularly in rapidly changing educational landscapes influenced by digital transformation, socio-cultural diversity, and evolving pedagogical expectations (Li & Xue, 2023).

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has begun to explore the relationship between teacher leadership and student engagement, suggesting that when teachers exercise leadership—both formally and informally—they create more inclusive, participatory, and dynamic learning environments (Warren, 2021). Teachers who lead within their schools often initiate student-centered innovations, promote collaborative learning, and model professional agency, which in turn can motivate students to become more engaged learners (Zhang et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this emerging literature remains fragmented, with studies differing significantly in definitions, scope, context, and theoretical framing. There is a lack of comprehensive synthesis that integrates these findings across regions, educational levels, and methodological approaches to provide a coherent understanding of the teacher leadership–student engagement nexus.

Several conceptual and empirical gaps also persist. First, the construct of teacher leadership is defined variably across studies—ranging from formal roles such as department heads to informal influence in pedagogy and peer mentoring—making it difficult to generalize findings. Second, the concept of student engagement, while widely studied, is operationalized differently across cultural and disciplinary contexts. Third, most existing studies are concentrated in Western or Anglophone countries, limiting the applicability of findings to global or culturally diverse educational systems. Additionally, many studies adopt cross-sectional designs that provide a snapshot in time but fall short of capturing the evolving nature of leadership and engagement practices over longer periods.

There is a pressing need for a systematic review that consolidates what is currently known about how teacher leadership influences student participation, particularly in diverse global settings. Such a review can help clarify conceptual linkages, identify effective leadership practices, map methodological trends, and uncover underexplored areas. It can also support the development of more nuanced educational leadership models that reflect the distributed, relational, and student-centered dynamics of 21st-century classrooms.

A systematic literature review (SLR) of peer-reviewed empirical research on the connection between teacher leadership and student participation or engagement that was published between 2000 and 2024 is presented in this article. To guarantee openness, scientific rigor, and reproducibility, the review complies with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology. The choice to concentrate on a 24-year period makes it possible to incorporate both recent research that reflects current changes in educational policy, pedagogy, and technology, as well as foundational studies.

The objectives of this review are fourfold:

- 1) To examine general publication trends, including publication years, geographic distribution, research methodologies, and educational settings of the included studies.
- 2) To identify and synthesize key themes and conceptual linkages that emerge from the literature regarding how teacher leadership contributes to or influences student engagement.

- 3) To identify research gaps and propose a future research agenda that addresses underrepresented contexts, emerging educational paradigms, and unresolved theoretical issues.

The findings are organized into two major sections. The first presents a descriptive overview of publication trends, including countries of origin, research designs, participant groups, and educational levels targeted. The second provides a thematic synthesis that highlights core patterns of influence.

By consolidating knowledge across contexts and disciplines, this review contributes to the growing discourse on teacher-led educational transformation. It also offers practical implications for school leaders, teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to promote equitable and engaging learning environments through teacher empowerment. As schools worldwide grapple with post-pandemic recovery, equity challenges, and technological disruptions, understanding how teachers lead and how such leadership can enhance student engagement is both timely and essential.

In doing so, this review positions teacher leadership not as a peripheral function, but as a core strategy for fostering participatory, inclusive, and future-ready learning environments. The article ultimately advocates for a more integrated approach to educational change—one in which teachers are seen not only as instructional facilitators but also as co-constructors of student success.

2. Methodology

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify, analyze, and synthesize empirical research that examines the relationship between teacher leadership and student engagement across global educational settings. The SLR approach is widely recognized for its methodological transparency, replicability, and comprehensive nature, especially when addressing complex educational constructs that span diverse contexts and research traditions. The study process closely followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria, which offer an organized framework for performing and reporting systematic reviews, in order to improve the validity and reliability of this review (Lame, 2019).

Research Design and Review Protocol

The research adopted a qualitative-dominant SLR design grounded in both descriptive and thematic synthesis approaches. The design aimed to achieve two primary objectives: (1) to explore general research trends and characteristics of published studies, and (2) to derive thematic insights into how teacher leadership influences student engagement. To ensure rigor, the review process followed five interrelated stages: (1) defining research questions, (2) identifying relevant literature, (3) applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, (4) extracting and coding data, and (5) analyzing and synthesizing findings.

The central research questions guiding the SLR were:

- 1) What are the publication trends and methodological characteristics of empirical studies on teacher leadership and student engagement published between 2000 and 2024?
- 2) What conceptual and thematic patterns emerge from the literature concerning the influence of teacher leadership on student engagement?
- 3) What are the dominant theoretical frameworks and underexplored areas within this field?

Identification

A comprehensive search was conducted using the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, which was chosen for its extensive coverage of high-impact, peer-reviewed academic journals in education and the social sciences. The database was searched for articles published from 2000 to 2024. The search strategy was developed using a combination of Boolean operators and targeted keyword phrases. The final search string used was: ("teacher leadership" OR "teacher-led" OR "teacher leader*" OR "distributed leadership") AND ("student engagement" OR "student involvement" OR "student participation" OR "learner engagement" OR "student motivation" OR "academic engagement"). There were 74 articles collected in this step.

Screening

The developed inclusion and exclusion criteria pertaining to the study language, context, time range, and field were used to screen 54 papers. 32 out of 54 articles were eliminated during the first round of refinement by quickly looking over the titles. Additionally, the writers looked through the included papers' references and discovered eight publications that satisfied the inclusion requirements. As a result, the screening process discovered 22 publications from databases and 8 articles from citations.

Eligibility

The full-text screening further eliminated 4 articles that did not sufficiently address the connection between teacher leadership and student engagement. As a result, a final sample of 26 empirical studies was retained for detailed analysis. The Figure 1 flow diagram detailing the search and screening process to ensure methodological transparency.

Data Extraction and Coding

To systematically organize the data, a structured data extraction form was developed. Each study was reviewed for key attributes, including author(s), publication year, country or region of study, research context and educational level, methodological approach, sample size and characteristics, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and key findings. This approach enabled the extraction of both quantitative data (e.g., geographic distribution, methodology) and qualitative information (e.g., emergent themes, theoretical models).

The analysis proceeded in two main phases. First, a descriptive synthesis was conducted to examine general trends across the selected studies. This included the frequency of publications by year, geographical distribution, types of research designs employed, and the levels of education investigated. This descriptive phase provided a macro-level overview of the current state of research in the field. Second, a thematic analysis was conducted to extract deeper insights into how teacher leadership practices influence student engagement. Thematic coding was guided by the principles articulated by Braun & Clarke (2006), involving familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, and refinement of those themes. This hybrid approach involved both inductive and deductive reasoning: codes were derived from the data while also being informed by prior theoretical understandings of teacher leadership and student engagement. Atlas.ti software was employed to manage qualitative data and ensure a rigorous and traceable coding process.

In summary, this methodology provided a robust and replicable framework for investigating how teacher leadership influences student engagement across global educational contexts. The use of PRISMA guidelines, rigorous screening and coding protocols, and a two-stage synthesis approach enabled a comprehensive and credible understanding of the research landscape.

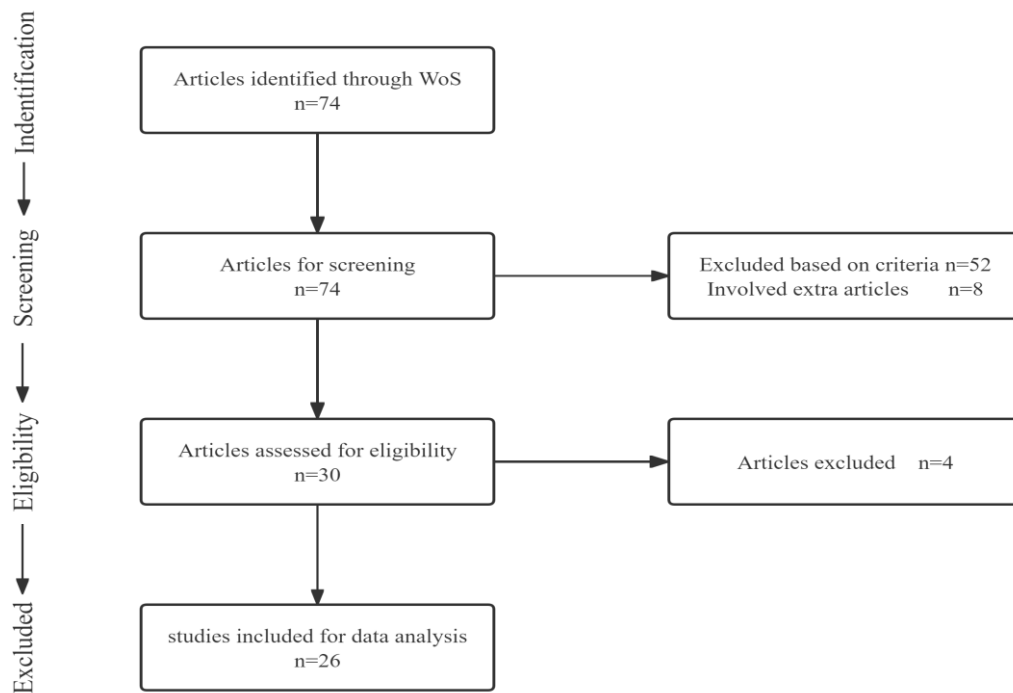


Figure 1: Flow Chart for Publication Selection

3. Findings and Discussions

General Trends

This section presents an overview of the general trends observed in the selected empirical studies. The analysis focused on publication year, geographical distribution, educational levels, methodological approaches, and research settings. Understanding these characteristics offers insight into the developmental trajectory and methodological orientation of research exploring the nexus between teacher leadership and student engagement.

The earliest study included in the review was published in 2002, though the majority of publications occurred after 2010. There was a noticeable increase in scholarly interest over the past decade, with publication activity peaking between 2015 and 2024. This rise reflects a growing awareness of teacher leadership as a catalyst for participatory and student-centered learning, particularly in the context of educational reforms, accountability pressures, and the integration of collaborative teaching models. Notably, over 60% of the reviewed studies were published between 2015 and 2024, suggesting that the intersection between teacher leadership and student engagement is a relatively recent and rapidly growing area of research. Figure 2 shows the distribution of publications by year.

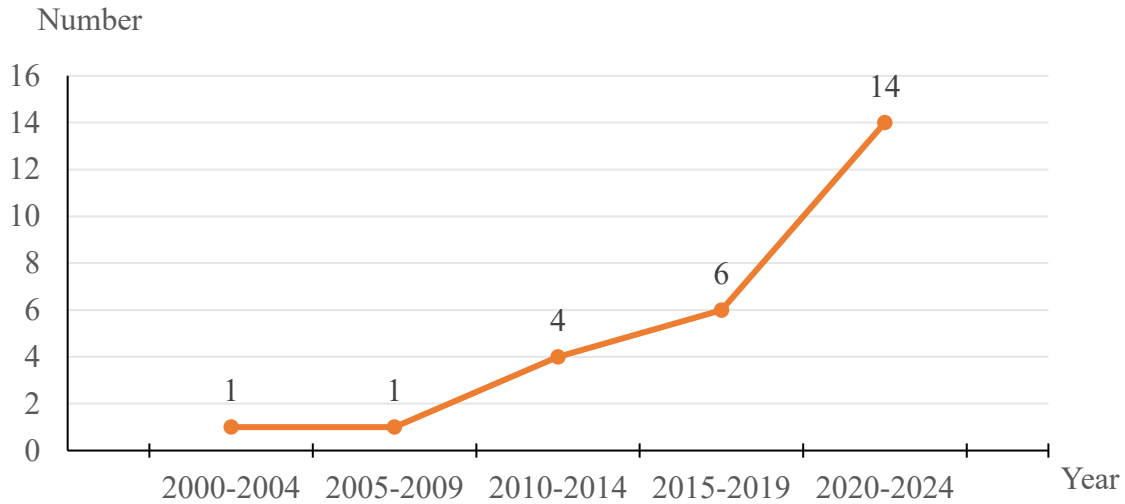


Figure 2: The Volume of Publication

The reviewed literature displayed a wide geographical spread, encompassing studies from 28 countries across six continents. However, research was disproportionately concentrated in Anglophone and high-income countries. The United States accounted for the highest number of publications (18%), followed by the United Kingdom (12%), Australia (10%), and Canada (8%). European nations such as the Netherlands, Finland, and Germany also contributed notable studies. In contrast, studies from Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia were significantly underrepresented, despite the increasing relevance of both teacher leadership and student engagement in global education discourse. This imbalance indicates a Western-centric focus in current research and underscores the need for more studies from underrepresented regions to diversify contextual understanding. Figure 3 shows the distribution of publications by country.

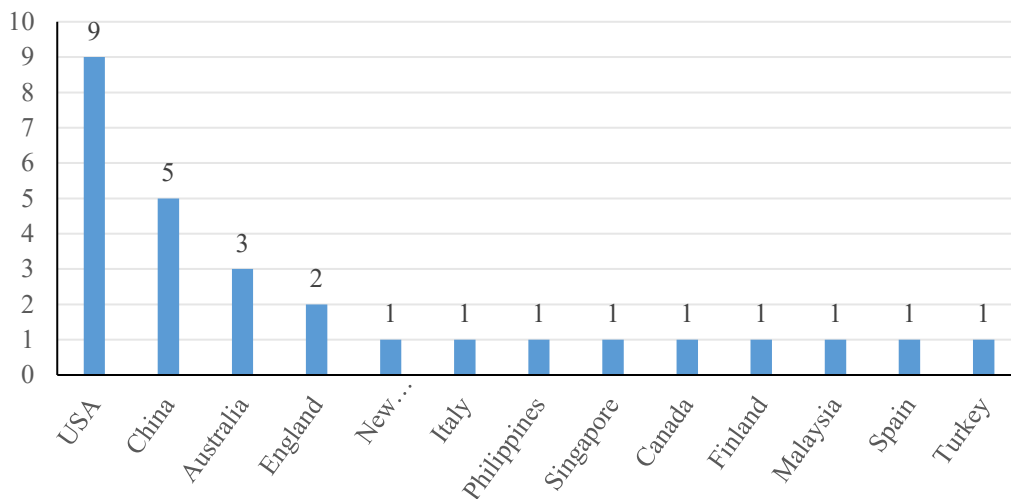


Figure 3: The Number of Studies by Country

The majority of the studies (60%) were conducted in secondary school settings, while 30% focused on primary schools and 10% on higher education institutions. This trend aligns with the increasing recognition of teacher leadership in middle and high school environments, where student engagement is often challenged by curricular demands and developmental transitions.

The prevalence of secondary school studies may also reflect greater institutional support for teacher-led initiatives at this level. Notably, very few studies explored early childhood education or technical and vocational education, pointing to an important gap in the literature. Additionally, most studies were conducted in public school settings, with only a small proportion focusing on private, international, or alternative school models. Figure 4 shows the distribution of publications by education setting.

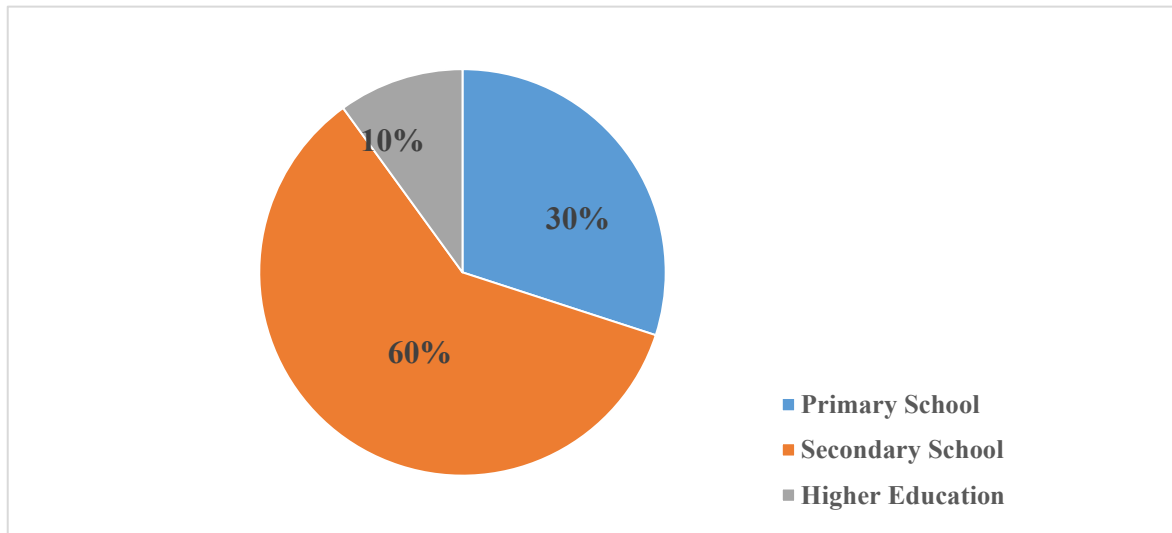


Figure 4: The Number of Studies by Education Setting

In terms of methodology, the review revealed a strong preference for qualitative research, which accounted for 56% of the selected studies. These studies often employed case study designs, ethnography, interviews, and classroom observations to explore the nuances of teacher leadership and its influence on student engagement. Quantitative studies made up 26% of the sample and typically used survey data or structural equation modeling to establish correlations between leadership practices and student outcomes. The remaining 18% employed mixed-methods designs, aiming to integrate the depth of qualitative insights with the generalizability of quantitative results. While the predominance of qualitative methods underscores the interpretive and contextual nature of the topic, the limited number of longitudinal or experimental designs suggests a methodological gap in evidence regarding causality and long-term effects. Figure 5 shows the distribution of publications by methodology.

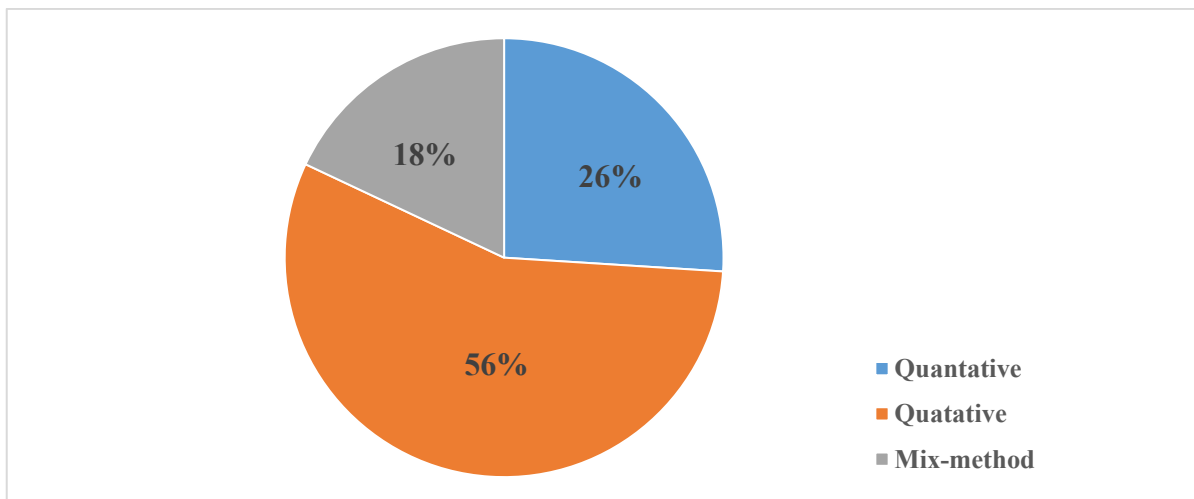


Figure 5: The Number of Studies by Methodology

Most studies were situated in mainstream classroom environments and involved general education teachers and students. Some focused specifically on subject-area contexts such as science, mathematics, or language arts, illustrating how teacher leadership can manifest differently depending on disciplinary cultures. A few studies examined special education, multicultural classrooms, or digital learning environments, but these remained exceptions. Teacher participants were typically selected based on their formal or informal leadership roles, including mentors, department heads, or instructional coaches. Student participants ranged from early adolescents to university-level learners, although most were from middle and high school populations. The variation in participant characteristics across studies highlighted the diverse conceptualizations of both teacher leadership and student engagement.

The general trends also revealed inconsistency in how key constructs were defined and measured. "Teacher leadership" was conceptualized along multiple dimensions, including instructional leadership, peer collaboration, curriculum development, and advocacy roles. Some studies adopted established models, such as Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2011) framework or the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2011) standards, while others developed context-specific interpretations. Similarly, "student engagement" was variably defined across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, with some studies focusing solely on classroom participation, and others addressing deeper aspects like student voice, motivation, or agency. This definitional diversity reflects the conceptual richness of the field but also complicates efforts at synthesis and comparison.

While most studies acknowledged the relevance of theory, only 38% explicitly employed a theoretical framework. Among those that did, common theories included distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), social constructivism (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018), and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Fewer studies used frameworks such as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), transformational leadership theory, or culturally responsive pedagogy. The absence of robust theoretical grounding in a significant portion of studies points to a critical gap in the field and suggests the need for more theory-driven research to enhance conceptual clarity and analytical rigor.

Thematic Insights

This section presents an in-depth thematic synthesis of how teacher leadership contributes to student engagement across diverse educational contexts. Through an inductive and iterative coding process, four key themes emerged: (1) Distributed and Collaborative Leadership Practices; (2) Teacher Agency and Professional Identity; (3) Pedagogical Innovation and Student-Centered Practices; and (4) Enabling Conditions and Barriers to Impact. These themes illuminate the mechanisms through which teacher leadership fosters student engagement and also expose critical tensions and underexplored dimensions.

Distributed and Collaborative Leadership Practices

A prominent theme across the reviewed literature is the rise of distributed and collaborative leadership models. In contrast to traditional hierarchical structures, teacher leadership was often enacted through informal roles and collective efforts. Studies reported that teachers who engaged in shared decision-making, peer coaching, and professional learning communities were instrumental in fostering inclusive school cultures and democratic classroom environments. These practices reflected a shift from leadership as position to leadership as practice—one grounded in relationships, trust, and mutual responsibility (O'Shea, 2021; Patrick, 2022).

Such distributed leadership had notable indirect effects on student engagement. When teachers modeled participatory behaviors and exercised influence within collaborative structures, they created classroom environments that promoted student voice, autonomy, and involvement. These findings align with distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006), which conceptualizes leadership as stretched across individuals and embedded in interactions, not titles. Similarly, they resonate with social constructivist views (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018), suggesting that leadership, like learning, is co-constructed through social processes. In essence, schools that embraced distributed leadership saw ripple effects where empowered teachers created spaces for empowered students.

Teacher Agency and Professional Identity

Another prominent theme involved teacher agency and the evolving nature of professional identity. Studies consistently highlighted that teachers who saw themselves as leaders—regardless of official titles—were more likely to take initiative in redesigning instruction, advocating for student needs, and experimenting with new engagement strategies (Anselmus Dami, 2024). Teacher leadership was thus not merely a position but a stance—rooted in professional autonomy, reflective practice, and a strong sense of efficacy.

This sense of agency had a powerful impact on student engagement. Teachers who embraced leadership roles often modelled critical thinking, problem-solving, and enthusiasm for learning—qualities that were mirrored by their students (Kim, 2022). Moreover, when teachers acted as change agents, they cultivated classroom cultures of high expectations and mutual respect, creating a climate conducive to deep engagement. These findings suggest that strengthening teacher leadership requires nurturing a professional identity that values continuous growth, influence, and responsibility beyond classroom boundaries (Ghamrawi et al., 2024).

Pedagogical Innovation and Student-Centered Practices

The third key theme was the link between teacher leadership and pedagogical innovation. Numerous studies reported that teacher leaders frequently spearheaded initiatives to implement student-centered teaching strategies, including project-based learning, inquiry-based approaches, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the integration of digital technologies (Lin, 2022). These innovations often arose from teacher-led action research, curriculum development, or peer coaching initiatives.

Crucially, these pedagogical shifts had tangible effects on student engagement. Students taught by teacher leaders were more likely to report feeling intellectually challenged, emotionally connected to their learning, and motivated to participate (Warren, 2021). Importantly, engagement was not confined to behavioral compliance (e.g., attending class or completing homework), but extended to cognitive and emotional involvement—asking questions, proposing solutions, and engaging in collaborative learning. This theme highlights the catalytic role of teacher leadership in bridging professional learning and classroom innovation for the benefit of student experience.

Enabling Conditions and Barriers to Impact

While many studies identified the positive effects of teacher leadership, several also emphasized the conditions required for such leadership to flourish and translate into improved student outcomes (Warren, 2021). Key enabling factors included supportive school cultures, access to professional development, recognition from school leadership, and time for

collaboration. In contexts where these conditions were present, teacher leaders were more effective in mobilizing peers and engaging students.

Conversely, barriers such as rigid hierarchies, lack of administrative support, time constraints, and unclear role definitions frequently undermined the potential of teacher leadership. In such environments, leadership responsibilities became an added burden rather than an empowering opportunity (Brown et al., 2023). These findings suggest that teacher leadership is highly contextual and contingent—it thrives when embedded within a system that values distributed leadership and flounders when isolated or tokenized. Student engagement, in turn, is impacted not only by what teachers do individually but by the institutional ecosystem in which they operate.

4. Conclusion

This systematic literature review has synthesized the current understanding of teacher leadership and its relationship with student engagement across diverse educational contexts. The findings suggest that teacher leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering student participation, both directly and indirectly. By reviewing global trends and thematic insights, this study has provided a clearer understanding of how teacher leadership practices contribute to the engagement of students in the educational process. The review not only highlighted the benefits of teacher leadership but also exposed significant gaps in the existing literature, particularly in underrepresented regions and methodological approaches.

The implications for educational practice are significant. For school leaders and policymakers, the review highlights the importance of intentionally fostering teacher leadership within schools. This involves not only assigning leadership roles to teachers but also creating a supportive environment where teacher agency can thrive. Professional development programs should focus on enhancing teachers' leadership skills and empowering them to take an active role in school-wide decision-making. Furthermore, schools should provide teachers with the time, resources, and institutional support necessary to engage in leadership activities that promote student engagement.

One of the key takeaways is the need for schools to recognize and support teacher leaders in ways that go beyond formal leadership positions. Teacher leadership should be viewed as a dynamic process that can take many forms—whether it is through mentoring colleagues, leading curriculum development, or engaging in collaborative teaching practices. This approach would ensure that teacher leadership is not confined to a few individuals but is spread across the entire school community, benefiting both teachers and students.

Several avenues for future research emerge from the findings of this review. First, there is a pressing need for longitudinal and experimental studies that explore the long-term effects of teacher leadership on student engagement. Most studies in the field have been cross-sectional or qualitative, providing valuable insights into the immediate impact of teacher leadership but not fully capturing its sustained effects over time. Future research should aim to establish causal links between teacher leadership practices and student engagement outcomes, especially through experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

Additionally, the review identified a significant gap in research from non-Western, low-income, and marginalized educational contexts. Most studies focused on high-income countries, particularly those in the Global North, and therefore may not reflect the diverse

challenges and opportunities present in different cultural and institutional settings. It is crucial for future research to explore how teacher leadership is enacted in these diverse contexts and to investigate how cultural, social, and economic factors influence the relationship between teacher leadership and student engagement.

Moreover, with the increasing prevalence of digital learning environments, future research should explore how teacher leadership operates in online or hybrid settings. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift towards digital and hybrid learning, and it is essential to understand how teacher leadership can be leveraged to enhance student engagement in these new contexts. Investigating the use of technology and digital tools in fostering student engagement through teacher leadership would be an important area for future inquiry.

Another important direction for future research is the development of integrated theoretical models that bridge teacher leadership and student engagement. While the review highlighted various theoretical frameworks such as distributed leadership and self-determination theory, few studies explicitly connected these theories to both teacher leadership and student engagement. Future research could work towards creating comprehensive frameworks that map the interactions between leadership practices, student agency, and learning outcomes. This would contribute to the theoretical development of the field and offer clearer guidance for educators and school leaders.

Finally, it would be valuable to explore the role of teacher leadership in specific educational settings beyond the traditional K-12 classroom, including higher education, adult learning environments, and informal education. These settings present unique challenges and opportunities for teacher leadership and student engagement, and research in these areas could further enrich the field by providing diverse perspectives and insights.

In conclusion, teacher leadership plays an essential role in shaping student engagement by creating learning environments that encourage student autonomy, collaboration, and intellectual challenge. Teacher leaders contribute to enhancing student participation by adopting innovative pedagogical practices and fostering a culture of engagement. However, for teacher leadership to have a lasting and meaningful impact on student engagement, it must be supported by institutional structures, professional development, and a school culture that values collaboration and teacher agency. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, especially in the context of digital learning and global challenges, teacher leadership will become an even more critical factor in promoting active student involvement in education. By addressing the gaps identified in this review and taking a more inclusive, context-sensitive approach to research, future studies can help further elucidate the ways in which teacher leadership can enhance student engagement and contribute to positive educational outcomes.

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