

EFFECTIVE TEACHER LEADERSHIP MODEL OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOLS IN ZHEJIANG PROVINCE*

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Abstract

This study aims to: 1) To construct a leadership model for special education teachers in special education schools within the jurisdiction of the Zhejiang Provincial Government, China. 2) To propose an effective leadership model for teachers in special education schools within the jurisdiction of the Zhejiang Provincial Government, China. 3) To investigate the current status of teacher leadership levels in special education schools within the jurisdiction of the Zhejiang Provincial Government, China. The qualitative component utilizes literature analysis and in-depth interviews with five key individuals to construct the model and conduct pilot testing. The quantitative component involves a survey of 600 teachers from 90 special education schools in Zhejiang Province, with 550 teachers effectively represented, to assess the leadership levels of special education teachers using a self-designed questionnaire that includes seven latent variables. Statistical analysis includes confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), reliability testing, and descriptive statistics.

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The research results indicate the following: 1. A leadership model for teachers in special education schools in Zhejiang Province was constructed through a comprehensive literature review and data collected from five teachers in these schools. 2. The proposed model demonstrated strong psychometric properties: all seven factors showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranging from 0.82 to 0.91), adequate convergent validity (AVE: 0.607-0.735), and composite reliability (CR: 0.854-0.931). The CFA results confirmed good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 3.45$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .061, SRMR = .052). This model incorporates seven key factors: 1. Ethical Leadership; 2. Instructional Leadership; 3. Collaborative Leadership; 4. Classroom Management; 5. Research Competence; 6. Assessment Practice; and 7. Participatory Decision-making. 3. Teacher leadership levels were rated as high across all seven dimensions (overall $M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.52$). Instructional leadership achieved the highest score ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.48$), followed by collaborative leadership ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.51$) and assessment practice ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.49$). Participatory decision-making recorded the lowest score ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.63$), significantly lower than other dimensions ($p < 0.001$). Finally, recommendations for schools, policymakers, and future research were made based on the findings of this study.

Keywords: special education schools, teacher leadership, effectiveness, model

Introduction

While China's special education system is developing rapidly, it faces unique structural challenges that limit the exercise of teacher leadership. Firstly, the highly centralized education management system concentrates school decision-making power primarily in the hands of principals and higher-level administrative departments, thereby restricting formal channels for teachers to engage in school governance (Mok, 2013). Secondly, the traditional hierarchical

management model emphasizes top-down command transmission, positioning teachers more as policy implementers than as decision-makers. Thirdly, the traditional Chinese cultural respect for authority and the concept of 'teacher's dignity' create a contradiction: although teachers enjoy high authority in the classroom, they are less likely to challenge administrative decisions or proactively assume leadership responsibilities at the organizational level (He et al, 2024). These issues are particularly pronounced in special education schools in Zhejiang Province; despite the region ranking among the top in the country for special education resource investment, the leading role of teachers in curriculum development, teaching innovation, and school improvement has not been fully realized. In recent years, the role of Special Education Teacher Leadership (SETL) in enhancing teaching quality and improving student learning outcomes has garnered increasing attention, particularly in the context of ongoing educational reforms. While earlier discussions on special education leadership predominantly highlighted the contributions of principals and school district administrators, a burgeoning body of academic research acknowledges that teachers themselves are vital agents of school improvement.

Billingsley (2007) argues that teacher leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of education and facilitating school reform. This form of leadership transcends formal titles or administrative responsibilities, encompassing a broader range of influences, including participation in school decision-making, professional development, and the induction training of new teachers. Special education teachers, in particular, often exercise leadership through collaboration: working alongside general education teachers to address challenges and conduct curriculum assessments, providing mentorship within professional development schools (PDS), engaging in curriculum innovation, and supporting new teachers in adapting to their instructional needs (Ramirez, 2024).

Scholars increasingly recognize that teacher leadership is a cornerstone of sustainable reform. Al-Zboon (2016) emphasized the significance of teacher leadership in enhancing teaching standards and improving learning outcomes. However, empirical research indicates that leadership opportunities for special education teachers remain constrained. Many educators view providing cognitive and emotional support to their colleagues as central to their leadership roles, while opportunities for participation in institutional governance, such as recruitment or formal committees, are often limited. In several countries, the concept of Special Education Teacher Leadership (SETL) has not been sufficiently articulated or systematically evaluated.

The concept of teacher leadership is undergoing significant evolution. According to Hunzicker (2017), the definition of teacher leadership is transitioning from a position-based understanding to a more informal and holistic perspective. Leadership is increasingly perceived as a stance, a mindset, and a way of being, rather than merely a collection of observable behaviors. Additionally, research indicates that the development of identity often precedes the practice of leadership, progressing through several stages, from classroom influence to broader organizational engagement.

These developments are particularly significant as inclusive education continues to expand globally. With an increasing number of students with disabilities integrated into mainstream classrooms, special education teachers are expected to ensure that schools effectively support diverse learners (Maggin et al., 2020). However, despite their expertise, their contributions are often restricted to their specific professional fields, limiting their opportunities for school-wide leadership. Recent research underscores the importance of initiative, knowledge sharing, and communication as essential qualities for teacher leaders, and it highlights the necessity for more robust mechanisms that empower teachers to transcend their daily responsibilities (Tejero Hughes et al., 2022).

Existing research reveals three significant gaps: First, teacher leadership models developed under Western decentralization are challenging to implement within China's centralized educational system. Second, the role of special education teachers in exercising leadership across disciplinary boundaries in special education contexts remains ambiguous. Third, there is a notable lack of localized empirical research tailored to specific regions. Zhejiang Province, recognized as a pioneer in educational reform, has established a robust special education infrastructure; however, its mechanisms for developing teacher leadership are still inadequate. Consequently, this study concentrates on special education schools in Zhejiang Province, aiming to address the following questions: How can an effective teacher leadership model be constructed within a centralized management system and traditional cultural context? What are the essential dimensions of this model? How can its validity be empirically validated? This research not only addresses the gaps in regional and cultural adaptation studies but also offers practical insights for analogous contexts.

Research Objectives

1) To construct a leadership model for special education teachers in special education schools within the jurisdiction of the Zhejiang Provincial Government, China.

2) To propose an effective leadership model for teachers in special education schools within the jurisdiction of the Zhejiang Provincial Government, China.

3) To investigate the current status of teacher leadership levels in special education schools within the jurisdiction of the Zhejiang Provincial Government, China.

Research Methods

This study aims to explore an effective teacher leadership model in special education schools in Zhejiang Province. The researchers employed a systematic approach to investigate the various dimensions of teacher leadership, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of its impact on educational outcomes.

Study Population and Sampling Design

The population of this study comprised 3,243 full-time teachers from 90 special education schools across 11 prefecture-level cities in Zhejiang Province. A stratified sampling method was employed, with stratification based on the size of the teaching staff, as this factor is significantly correlated with leadership dynamics. Schools with larger teacher populations (over 500 teachers) tend to exhibit more complex organizational structures, formal leadership mechanisms, and extensive collaborative networks, which directly influence teacher leadership practices (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). In contrast, teacher leadership in smaller schools is often characterized by informal influence and cross-functional collaboration. To ensure that the sample accurately reflects the characteristics of teacher leadership across various organizational contexts in Zhejiang Province, the study divided the 11 prefecture-level cities into two strata based on teacher size: 1) First stratum: Cities with more than 500 teachers (Hangzhou and Ningbo), including 26 schools and 277 teachers; 2) Second stratum: Cities with 500 or fewer teachers (the remaining nine cities), encompassing 64 schools and 323 teachers. The final sample size consisted of 600 teachers, representing 18.5% of the total population. This sample size was allocated proportionally across all levels to ensure the representativeness of schools of varying organizational sizes.

Data Collection Tools

Questionnaire Survey Based on a comprehensive literature review and a well-defined theoretical framework, the researchers developed a questionnaire comprising five demographic items and 141 measurement items. This questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale, where 5 indicates 'strongly agree', 4 signifies 'somewhat agree', 3 represents 'neutral', 2 denotes 'somewhat disagree', and 1 reflects 'strongly disagree'. The instrument encompassed seven latent variable dimensions.

Instrument Quality Verification

1) Content Validity: Five experts, comprising four specialists in special education and one expert in educational measurement, were invited to evaluate the Item Objective Conformity Index (IOC). The Rovinelli and Hambleton three-point rating scale was employed: +1 (compliant with the operational definition), 0 (uncertain), and -1 (non-compliant). Items with an IOC value of ≥ 0.5 were retained, those with an IOC value between 0.5 and 0.7 were retained after revision, while items with an IOC value of < 0.5 were excluded.

2) Reliability Verification: Cronbach's α coefficient was utilized to assess internal consistency. According to George & Mallery (1999), an α value of ≥ 0.70 is considered acceptable, and an α value of ≥ 0.80 is deemed good.

In-depth Interviews

Researchers developed a semi-structured interview outline and conducted in-depth interviews with five special education teachers with over 15 years of experience.

1) Interviewees: Purposeful sampling was used, with selection criteria including: (1) ≥ 15 years of teaching experience; (2) experience in formal or informal leadership roles; and (3) significant influence in school reform or professional development.

2) Interview Content: The interviews included exploratory follow-up questions on topics such as the practical context, influencing factors, and development paths of teacher leadership. Questions were flexibly developed based on the interviewees' responses. Interview durations ranged from 15 to 35 minutes, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3) Thematic Analysis Procedure: Following the six-step thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing oneself with the data; generating initial codes; identifying themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and writing a report. Through this procedure, latent variables were extracted from the interview data.

Model Validation

Five experts (four special education experts and one educational measurement expert) were invited to score and validate the effective teacher leadership model for special education schools in Zhejiang Province, and the expert fit index was used to evaluate the theoretical rationality and practical applicability of the model.

Ethical Considerations

With the approval of the Academic Ethics Committee of Suan Sunnah Rajabhat University, the quantitative data and model validation phases of this study will be conducted in Zhejiang Province from October to December 2025.

Results

1. Construction of a Leadership Model for Special Education School Teachers in Zhejiang Province

Based on in-depth interviews with five expert teachers in Zhejiang Province and a comprehensive literature review, this study developed a leadership model for special education school teachers in the region. The model consists of seven latent variables and 31 observed variables. The

interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Second, thematic coding was conducted, followed by the extraction and integration of key themes with the literature review results. This rigorous process led to the identification of the core dimensions of leadership among special education school teachers.

2. Research Findings on the Leadership Model for Special Education School Teachers in Zhejiang Province

Utilizing the insights gained from the interviews and the constructed leadership model, which includes seven latent variables and thirty-one observed variables, the researchers conducted a comprehensive review of relevant literature. This analysis facilitated the development of a questionnaire survey tool comprising 160 measurement items, aimed at assessing the practical applicability of these variables in real teaching environments.

1) IOC Goal Consistency Test

To ensure the effectiveness and rationality of the model, five education experts-four specializing in special education and one in general education-evaluated the proposed effective teacher leadership model for special education schools in Zhejiang Province using the Integrated Objectives (IOC) method. Items that received an average score of 0.6 or higher out of 160 total items were revised based on the experts' suggestions, while those with an average score below 0.6 were excluded from the model. Ultimately, after the IOC evaluation by the five experts, a refined effective teacher leadership model for special education schools in Zhejiang Province was established, comprising 141 measurement items. These items are categorized into 31 observed variables, which are further organized into 7 key factors at the upper level.

2) KMO and Bartlett's Test (Validity Analysis)

To evaluate the structural appropriateness of the measurement data, this study employed the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett's test of sphericity to examine the correlations among variables. The results indicated that the KMO value was 0.961, significantly exceeding the recommended threshold, which suggests a strong commonality and a robust correlation structure among the samples. Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded a significant result ($\chi^2 = 92380.600$, $df = 9870$, $p < .001$), thereby rejecting the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix. This finding confirms the presence of systematic correlations among the measurement items. Although the study design did not further extract the latent factor structure, the aforementioned statistical results substantiate the scale's solid structural foundation and its reasonable construction based on the data characteristics.

Table 1 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.961
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	92380.600
	df	9870
	Sig.	.000

3) Reliability Analysis

After confirming a robust correlation structure among the measurement items, the study proceeded with a reliability analysis of the scale to assess its internal consistency. The results indicated that the overall Cronbach's α coefficient for each latent variable (scale) exceeded 0.90 (specific value), surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.70. This finding suggests that the measurement tool demonstrates strong internal consistency and measurement stability. Additionally, the Cronbach's α coefficients for each observed variable

(dimension) also achieved acceptable levels, reflecting a consistent measurement direction among items within each dimension and affirming that the scale as a whole possesses high reliability.

Table 2 Construct's reliability

Observed Variable	Reliability Statistics	N of Items	latent variable	Reliability Statistics
Ethical leadership (EL)	.911	4	Ethical leadership (EL)	.937
Ethic of Care (EOC)	.854	4		
Ethic of Critique (EOCQ)	.924	4		
Instructional resource provider (IRP)	.900	5	Instructional Leadership (IL)	.967
Teacher Professional Development (TPD)	.928	5		
Monitor student progress (MSP)	.917	4		
Curriculum Implementer (CI)	.940	5		
Optimizing Teaching Support (OTS)	.921	5		
Collaborative Environment (CE)	.930	5	Collaborative leadership (CL)	.956
Shared Vision (SV)	.935	5		
Communication Trust (CT)	.928	5		
Rights Sharing (RS)	.941	5		
People Management (PM)	.924	4	Classroom Management (CM)	.977
Instructional Management (IM)	.927	4		
Behavior Management (BM)	.929	5		
Praise Students (PS)	.976	5		
Reward Students (RSD)	.961	4		
Conceptual Competency (CC)	.948	6	Research	.967

Methodological Competency (MC)	.946	5	Competence (RC)	
Data Analysis (DA)	.950	4		
Interpretation Competency (IC)	.967	5		
Writing Technical Competency (WTC)	.925	4		
Non-Achievement based grading (NABG)	.891	4	Assessment Practice (AP)	.968
Design Test (DT)	.937	5		
Management Assessment (MA)	.942	5		
Explanation Assessment (EA)	.940	5		
Evaluation Application (EAC)	.954	4		
Policy Affairs (PA)	.933	4	Participatory Decision Making (PDM)	.968
Administrative Affairs (AA)	.914	4		
Teaching Affairs (TA)	.928	4		
Class-level affairs (CLA)	.911	4		

3. Current Status of Leadership Level among Special Education School Teachers in Zhejiang Province

Based on the effective leadership model for special education school teachers in Zhejiang Province, which was constructed and validated through the aforementioned research process, the researchers conducted a questionnaire survey targeting special education teachers across 90 special education schools governed by the Zhejiang Provincial Government. Utilizing the “Wenjuanxing” electronic survey tool, the study revealed that the mean scores for all seven dimensions of teacher leadership were consistently high, indicating that respondents generally perceived a robust presence of leadership practices within their schools.

Instructional Leadership exhibited the highest mean value ($M = 4.062$, $SD = 0.751$), indicating that teachers demonstrated a considerable strength in guiding teaching and learning. This was closely followed by Collaborative Leadership ($M = 4.017$, $SD = 0.743$) and Assessment Practice ($M = 3.999$, $SD = 0.723$). In contrast, Participatory Decision Making presented the lowest mean score ($M = 3.549$, $SD = 0.794$). Although this score is still categorized as high, it may suggest that involvement in shared governance and collective decision-making processes is relatively less prominent compared to other aspects of leadership. Collectively, these results indicate a generally high endorsement of teacher leadership across various dimensions, with instructional functions appearing particularly salient.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Level
Ethical leadership (EL)	3.748	.877	high
Instructional Leadership (IL)	4.062	.751	high
Collaborative leadership (CL)	4.017	.743	high
Classroom Management (CM)	3.932	.877	high
Research Competence (RC)	3.797	.713	high
Assessment Practice (AP)	3.999	.723	high
Participatory Decision Making (PDM)	3.549	.794	high

4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Leadership Model for Teachers in Special Education Schools in Zhejiang Province

As illustrated in Figure 1, the study identified eight components that constitute effective teacher leadership: EL, IL, CL, CM, RC, AP, and PDM. Among these components, RC exhibited the highest factor loading at 0.86, followed by IL at 0.69, CM at 0.79, CL at 0.66, AP at 0.70, EL at 0.58, and PDM at 0.53. In the

third-order confirmatory factor analysis, all second-order components were successfully associated with the higher-order construct of teacher leadership, although their standardized factor loadings varied. The findings demonstrated an acceptable overall model fit ($\chi^2/df = 3.45$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .061, SRMR = .052). The standardized factor loadings for each second-order component in relation to the higher-order teacher leadership construct ranged from 0.58 to 0.86, all of which were statistically significant ($p < .05$). The overall model fit remained acceptable, indicating that the third-order model displayed a satisfactory statistical fit.

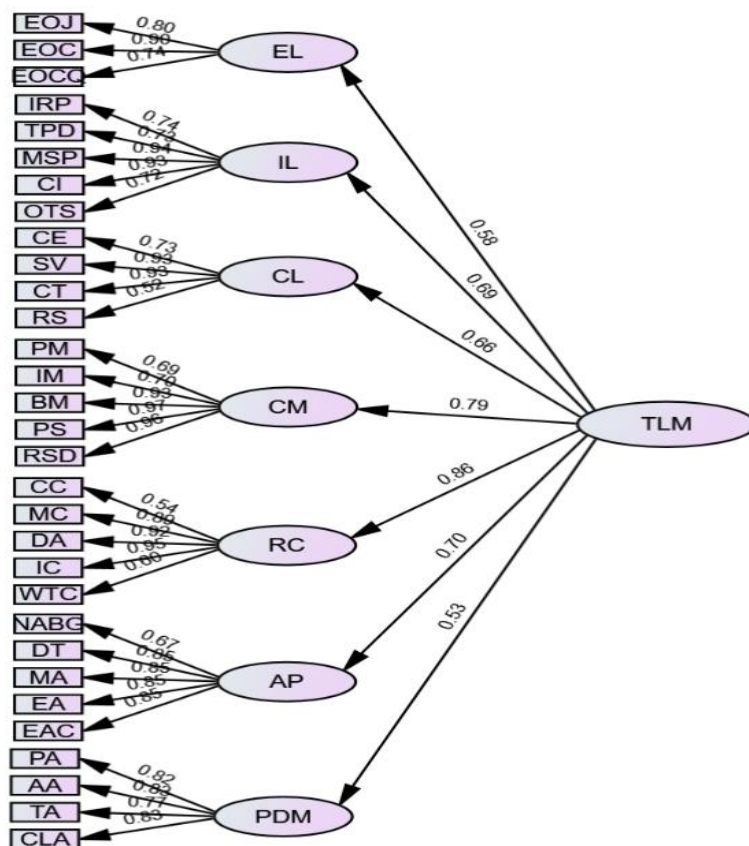


Figure1 Effective Teacher Leadership: Second-Order CFA Results

5 Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity

Confirmatory factor analysis of all latent leadership variables demonstrated robust convergent validity and internal consistency. As illustrated in Table 4, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all seven latent variables surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.60 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), with values ranging from 0.607 to 0.735. The composite reliability (CR) for all variables exceeded 0.85, with a range from 0.854 to 0.931, significantly surpassing the acceptable standard of 0.70. These findings affirm the measurement model's strong convergent and discriminant validity, suggesting that the seven dimensions effectively encapsulate the fundamental characteristics of teacher leadership and provide empirical support for understanding the core elements of teacher professional competence in special education contexts.

Table 4 Convergent validity and Discriminant validity

Factor (Latent variable)	AVE	CR
Ethical leadership (EL)	0.662	0.854
Instructional Leadership (IL)	0.683	0.914
Collaborative leadership (CL)	0.636	0.870
Classroom Management (CM)	0.735	0.931
Research Competence (RC)	0.638	0.893
Assessment Practice (AP)	0.607	0.884
Participatory Decision Making (PDM)	0.673	0.891

Discussion

Based on the findings of the aforementioned research regarding an effective teacher leadership model in special education schools in Zhejiang

Province, the researchers provide further elaboration as follows

1. Proposal of the Effective Teacher Leadership Model

This study advances the contextualized understanding of teacher leadership by proposing a "Model of Effective Teacher Leadership in Special Education Schools." This model is not merely a replication of existing frameworks; rather, it is a theoretically integrated approach that thoroughly considers the institutional, cultural, and professional characteristics unique to special education. This perspective aligns with the assertion that "teacher leadership must be understood as a contextualized practice, not an abstract assignment of roles" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Additionally, it addresses calls for the development of models that reflect the interplay between professional knowledge and the organizational context (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). The model's seven domains collectively signify a transition in teacher leadership from individual authority to a distributed professional influence grounded in ethical commitment, pedagogical expertise, collaborative engagement, and organizational involvement. By situating leadership within everyday practice, the model enhances existing views that often overemphasize formal leadership roles while neglecting the informal yet vital contributions of teachers to school improvement (Harris & Muijs, 2004). Consequently, this model embodies not only a structural classification but also a contextualized reinterpretation of the implementation of leadership within specialized educational settings.

2. Empirical Validation of the Model

The empirical findings provide robust support for the structural integrity and applicability of the proposed model. The effective teacher leadership model in special education schools in Zhejiang Province demonstrates that its various domains operate synergistically, collectively capturing stable patterns in teacher leadership practices. These results indicate that the model possesses both statistical robustness and practical interpretability. The validated model presented in this study does not represent a definitive conclusion; rather, it

establishes a solid empirical foundation for subsequent refinement, cross-regional testing, and longitudinal research.

The empirical findings provide robust support for the structural integrity and applicability of the proposed model. A series of data analyses in this study demonstrate that the seven identified factors function as a coherent system rather than as a series of fragmented practices. This aligns with previous research that emphasizes the necessity of an empirical foundation for effective teacher leadership frameworks to transcend mere abstract theoretical advocacy (Muijs & Harris, 2007). Reliability results further indicate that these areas consistently capture stable patterns of professional behavior, reinforcing the view that leadership can be systematically developed and measured (Leithwood et al., 2020). Moreover, validation should be regarded as an ongoing process. In line with recent academic research advocating for the iterative refinement of leadership concepts across different contexts, these findings establish a foundation for future adjustments and comparative studies.

3. The Paradox of Teacher Leadership: "Leaders in the Classroom, Followers in the Office"

A critical tension emerges from the findings: teachers demonstrate high leadership capacity in instructional and collaborative domains ($M > 4.20$), yet score significantly lower in participatory decision-making ($M = 3.68$). This reveals a paradoxical pattern where special education teachers are empowered as "leaders in the classroom" but remain "followers in the office." This discrepancy is not merely statistical; it reflects a fundamental contradiction within China's centralized education system, where teachers' professional expertise is acknowledged, yet their institutional voice remains constrained.

This finding challenges Western assumptions embedded in inclusive leadership theories, which presuppose distributed authority and teacher agency in governance (Northouse, 2025; Ryan, 2006). In contrast, the context of Zhejiang

demonstrates that teacher leadership can coexist with hierarchical control: teachers exercise considerable autonomy in pedagogy and peer collaboration, yet formal decision-making remains concentrated at the administrative level. This suggests that effective teacher leadership in centralized systems may manifest differently, not through formal participation in governance structures, but rather through informal influence networks, professional communities, and pedagogical innovation. Recent scholarship on inclusive leadership in the 2020s emphasizes equity, voice, and shared decision-making as core principles (Bourke & Dillon, 2016; Shoreibah., 2020). However, applying this framework uncritically to the Chinese context risks overlooking the influence of cultural norms surrounding authority and collective harmony on leadership practices. The high scores in ethical and collaborative dimensions indicate that special education teachers in Zhejiang exemplify relational and morally grounded leadership-consistent with Confucian values-rather than the individualistic, power-challenging leadership celebrated in Western paradigms. Future research should critically examine whether 'participatory decision-making,' as currently understood, reflects a Western bias, and whether alternative forms of teacher empowerment-such as curricular autonomy or professional learning communities-might represent more culturally appropriate avenues for influence.

Conclusion

After the above series of tests, the effective teacher leadership model for special education schools in Zhejiang Province, proposed based on new knowledge, not only reflects theoretical integration but is also grounded in the actual context of the special education environment. Furthermore, it possesses practical application value in enhancing the quality of special education teaching and promoting the organizational development of special education schools. This model conceptualizes teacher leadership as a multidimensional

structure anchored in seven interconnected domains: Ethical Leadership (EL), Instructional Leadership (IL), Collaborative Leadership (CL), Classroom Management (CM), Research Competence (RC), Assessment Practice (AP), and Participatory Decision Making (PDM). Grounded in leadership theory and the practical realities of special education, this model employs 31 observational variables to elucidate how teachers can impact student development, enhance professional practice, and foster school improvement. However, a validated model is not an endpoint; rather, it serves as a starting point for transformation. The pressing question now is: How will this model be mobilized to drive systemic change in Zhejiang's special education landscape?

We propose three strategic applications for the seven-domain framework. First, it should serve as a self-assessment and diagnostic tool. Schools are encouraged to adopt this framework to conduct annual leadership audits, thereby identifying specific areas where teacher capacity needs enhancement. The model's 31 observables provide actionable indicators, enabling administrators to move beyond impressionistic evaluations toward evidence-based professional development planning.

Second, the framework should be utilized as a structured training syllabus. Provincial education authorities ought to integrate this model into mandatory professional development curricula. For novice teachers, training should prioritize foundational domains such as Ethical Leadership and Classroom Management. In contrast, advanced modules for experienced teachers should focus on Research Competence and Participatory Decision Making, equipping them to transition from classroom practitioners to organizational change agents.

Third, as a criterion for promotion and recognition, the model should inform teacher evaluation and career advancement systems. Incorporating leadership competencies-particularly the underdeveloped PDM domain-into

promotion criteria signals that professional growth extends beyond instructional skill to encompass institutional influence and collaborative capacity. However, the model also reveals a troubling reality: the "classroom leader, office follower" paradox. Teachers in Zhejiang demonstrate strong instructional and collaborative leadership but remain marginalized in institutional decision-making. If we acknowledge teachers as leaders, we must grant them authority commensurate with their expertise. This necessitates structural reform: allocating formal governance roles to teachers, embedding Research Competence into licensing standards, and dismantling hierarchical barriers that confine teacher influence to classroom walls.

Recommendations

1. Recommendations for Schools

Special education schools are encouraged to adopt an "effective teacher leadership model" as a guiding framework for organizational development and leadership training. Specifically, schools should: (1) establish professional learning communities (PLCs) focused on "critical ethics" to review teaching practices; (2) allocate dedicated non-teaching time for teachers to engage in leadership activities, such as curriculum development and peer mentoring; and (3) create formal pathways for teachers to participate in school administration, ensuring that they are represented in decision-making bodies.

2. Recommendations for Policymakers

It is recommended that education authorities incorporate effective teacher leadership models into the evaluation and professional development standards for special education teachers. Specific policy measures should include: (1) allocating governance seats in special education schools to special education teachers to ensure their voices are represented in school governance; (2) promoting the establishment of regional teacher leadership training centers

to provide special education teachers with systematic courses in leadership skills development, supporting practical research projects related to teacher leadership in special education schools, and regularly organizing experience exchange meetings; (3) establishing economic incentives, such as leadership allowances, for teachers who assume formal or informal leadership roles. Furthermore, policies that empower teachers to participate in the decision-making process should be expanded to foster a more inclusive educational environment.

3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should concentrate on refining and validating the "Effective Teacher Leadership Model" specifically within special education schools in Zhejiang Province. A longitudinal study is essential to assess whether the implementation of this model genuinely enhances student learning outcomes, including academic performance, achievement of Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and the development of adaptive behaviors. This will help establish a direct causal relationship between teacher leadership and student success. Additionally, further research is recommended to investigate the applicability of this model across various regional and institutional contexts.

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