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The Code Teacher Leadership Model of Public University in Guangdong Province

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Abstract

This research studies a teacher leadership model based on criteria for public universities in Guangdong Province. In the current context of Chinese higher education, the "double first-class honors" program has increased performance pressure, leading to a faculty well-being crisis and a phenomenon known as "decline." Current Western teacher leadership models are insufficient to address this high-pressure context. The objective of this research is to develop a teacher leadership model specifically tailored to public universities in Guangdong Province. Using stratified sampling, data was collected from 500 faculty members from 126 institutions using a 120-item questionnaire. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) revealed a multidimensional structure comprising key factors such as collegial relationships, academic supervision, faculty development, and capacity building. The research findings revealed that a concrete multidimensional coding model of teacher leadership, based on the principles of DFC (Diagnosis-Based Leadership Framework), confirms that in the DFC context, leadership refers not only to teaching expertise but also involves managing governance, ensuring mental well-being, and empowering colleagues to prevent systemic burnout.

Keywords: Teacher Leadership , Double First-Class , Guangdong Province

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Introduction

The global landscape of higher education is shifting toward distributed leadership; however, in China, institutional contexts are dominated by the 'Double First-Class' (DFC) initiative. Since 2015, this policy has driven massive investment but also created 'downward tiered pressure escalation,' transforming academic work into a high-stakes competition for rankings and resources (Ministry of Education of China, 2017).

A disconnect exists between these ambitions and the reality of faculty life. Reports indicate that 70% of university teachers identify research demands as their primary stressor, leading to widespread burnout and 'involution'—a state of intense but unproductive internal competition (Li et al., 2024). This environment stifles the very collaborative capacity that leadership requires.

The purpose of this study is to identify the latent dimensions of teacher leadership in this unique context and build an empirically grounded 'Code Teacher Leadership Model.' The study focuses on public universities in Guangdong Province, a region at the forefront of both economic reform and educational pressure.

This research contributes a context-specific model that differs from Western frameworks by integrating psychological capital and agency as core leadership enablers. It offers practical pathways for administrators to foster faculty resilience and institutional effectiveness.

The paper proceeds by reviewing the literature, detailing the EFA methodology, presenting the factor structure, and discussing the implications for governance and faculty development.

Research Objectives

To study the Code Teacher Leadership Model of Public Universities in Guangdong Province.

Literature Review

Mainstream teacher leadership models, such as the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011), often assume democratic, low-hierarchy environments where professional autonomy is high. These Western frameworks emphasize instructional coaching and curriculum design as distinct, voluntary roles.

However, this paradigm is misaligned with the Chinese context, which is characterized by high power distance and strong collectivist values (Hofstede, 2001). Importing Western models without adaptation fails to account for the 'supportive yet stifling' climate where hierarchy can limit individual initiative (Wang & Li, 2024).

Performance metrics in China have shifted drastically under the DFC. Academic research output has become the singular 'currency' for career progression ('publish or perish'), often marginalizing teaching and service contributions

Teaching and curriculum development are central to the definitions of teacher leadership, yet in this high-pressure environment, they compete with research demands. Effective leadership must therefore bridge this gap, elevating teaching status through 'high-level professional groups' (Guangdong 14th Five Year Plan).

Professional development in this context is not just about skill acquisition but survival. Faculty need 'Psychological Capital' (Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, Optimism) to navigate the 'involution' (Luthans et al., 2007). Leadership is thus reframe Research d as a resource for building this capital.

Procedural justice and governance are critical yet strained. Top-down 'signal-response mechanisms' often result in rigid compliance cultures. Teacher leadership must function to enable 'Academic Governance' that gives faculty a voice in decision-making.

Policy implementation in Guangdong adds another layer, with mandates for integrating vocational and academic streams. This requires leaders who can navigate complex administrative systems and align institutional goals with regional economic needs.

Student outcomes remain the ultimate goal, but accountability pressures can distort them. True leadership shifts the focus from mere test scores to holistic 'quality education' and student employability, aligning with the DFC's broader mission.

Prior research is fragmented, often focusing on K-12 or private colleges, leaving a gap in understanding leadership in high-tier public universities under DFC pressure. No empirical structure has validated how these diverse pressures—governance, burnout, development—cohere into a leadership model.

This study anticipates a multi-dimensional structure where 'soft' factors like Collegiality and Psychological Safety coexist with 'hard' factors like Academic Governance and Policy Alignment.

Conceptual Framework

This study focuses on developing the Code Teacher Leadership Model for public universities in Guangdong Province, China. The framework consists of seven key dimensions identified through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). These dimensions emphasize collaboration, academic governance, curriculum leadership, administrative management, faculty development, reflective improvement, and empowerment. The model aims to strengthen teacher leadership, promote faculty well-being, and improve university effectiveness as the figure 1 below.

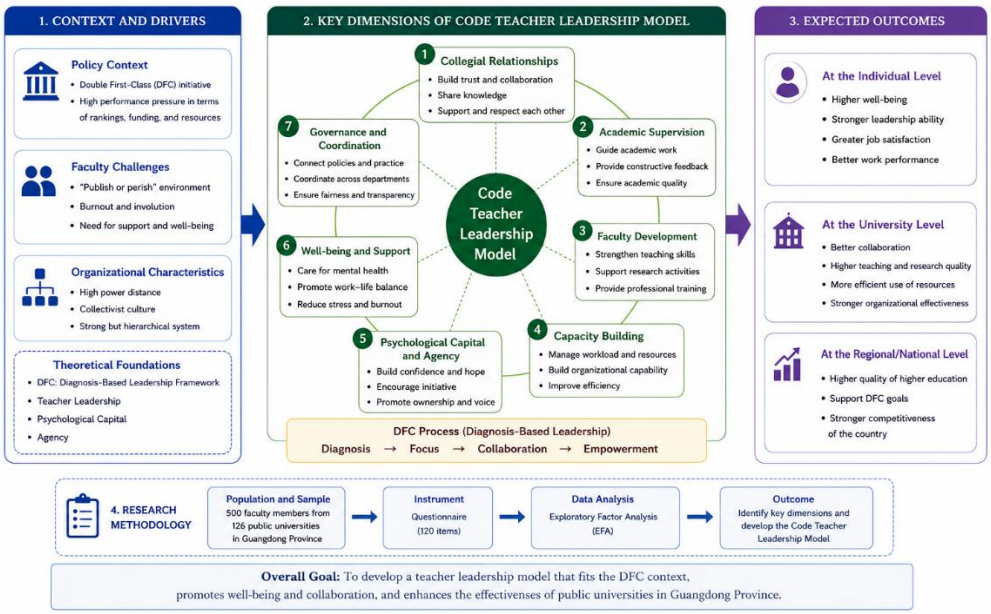


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework
Note. Created by ChatGPT (Google AI) based on a prompt provided by the author.

Research Methodology

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design utilizing Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to uncover the latent structure of teacher leadership. This was complemented by a qualitative phase (9 interviews) to inform item generation and interpretation.

Ethical approval was obtained, ensuring informed consent and anonymity for all participants, crucial given the sensitive nature of questions regarding institutional pressure and burnout.

Population, Sample, and Data Collection

The population comprised full-time faculty and academic leaders (N ≈ 140,500) in Guangdong's 126 public universities. A stratified random sampling method was used, stratifying by institutional tier (Double First-Class, General, Vocational).

A total sample of 500 respondents was targeted (450 faculty, 50 leaders), meeting Comrey and Lee's (1992) criterion for a 'very good' sample size for EFA. Valid responses were screened for completion and consistency.

Data collection utilized an online platform, distributed through university academic affairs offices to ensure high response rates and legitimacy.

Research Instrument

The 120-item survey instrument was developed based on literature review and expert validation. Items covered behaviors related to collegiality, governance, curriculum, and well-being support.

A 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) was used. Content validity was assessed by an expert panel (IOC indices), resulting in the refinement of items.

Reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha. The overall scale demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.98$), with subscales consistently exceeding the 0.70 threshold.

Appropriateness for EFA was confirmed with a KMO measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, both indicating robust factorability of the data.

Data Gathering

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Initial screening handled missing data (<5%) through mean imputation.

EFA was conducted using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation to maximize interpretability. Criteria for factor retention included eigenvalues > 1 and examination of the scree plot.

Items were retained if they had factor loadings ≥ 0.50 and no significant cross-loadings. Factors were named based on the semantic content of high-loading items.

The final structure was interpreted in relation to the initial theoretical domains, allowing for the emergence of indigenous constructs.

Results

The sample (N=500) was representative of the tiered system: 20% from DFC universities, 50% from general public universities, and 30% from vocational colleges. Gender and rank distributions reflected the broader population.

Descriptive Analysis of Scale Items

Overall item means ranged from moderate to high levels. Highest rated items related to 'Professional Ethics' and 'Classroom Responsibility', while lower ratings were observed for 'Participation in Governance' and 'Challenging Administrative Decisions'

Exploratory Factor Analysis (Core)

The KMO value was 0.96, and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < .001$). The analysis extracted 7 distinct factors explaining a high percentage of total variance (approx. 72%).

The extracted factors were: (1) Collegiality, Collaboration, and Psychological Safety; (2) Academic Governance and Policy Alignment; (3) Curriculum and Program Leadership; (4) Navigating Administrative Systems; (5) Mentoring and Faculty Development; (6) Reflective Improvement; and (7) Empowerment and Advocacy.

Factor 1 (Collegiality) explained the largest variance, highlighting the primacy of relationships. Factor 2 (Governance) and Factor 3 (Curriculum) validated the dual professional-administrative role of teacher leaders.

Reliability for all factors was high, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.76 to 0.81 (Table 4.8), confirming the internal consistency of the 'Code' model dimensions.

Summary of Empirical Findings

The results empirically validate a multi-dimensional 'Code Teacher Leadership Model'. It confirms that in the DFC context, leadership is not just about instructional expertise but involves navigating governance, building psychological safety, and empowering peers against systemic burnout

Discussion

The 'Code' model reveals that effective teacher leadership in Guangdong is a compensatory mechanism that balances institutional 'involution' pressure with collective professional resilience. It operates through five consolidated domains.

Domain 1: Collegiality, Collaboration, and Psychological Safety

This domain emerged as the strongest factor, encompassing trust-building and conflict management. In the high-pressure environment of the DFC initiative, these behaviors serve as a critical buffer, mediating the impact of systemic stress on individual faculty.

Theoretically, this aligns with the 'social support' dimension of Psychological Capital (PsyCap), suggesting that leaders act as emotional anchors in a turbulent system. Consequently, institutions are urged to formalize 'Team Building' not merely as social events, but as essential psychological safety infrastructure, such as funding distinct teaching teams that foster deep interpersonal bonds.

Domain 2: Academic Governance and Policy Alignment

This domain integrates the administrative skills required to navigate hierarchies and influence policy. It reflects the necessity of 'Teacher Agency' in translating broad national mandates into workable departmental practices.

Unlike Western models where governance is often explicitly democratic, leadership in this context involves 'Managing Face' and strategic compliance—finding opportunities for autonomy within rigid structures. To bridge the gap between policy and practice, it is recommended that universities create formal 'Faculty Advisory Boards.' These bodies would provide teacher leaders with a sanctioned channel to offer feedback on policy implementation, thereby reducing the friction often seen in top-down reforms.

Domain 3: Faculty Development and Reflective Innovation

Merging mentoring and reflection, this domain addresses the crisis of burnout directly. Leaders help colleagues develop 'Efficacy' by scaffolding research and teaching tasks, countering the 'sink or swim' culture prevalent in recent tenure-track reforms.

This emphasizes professional development as a collective responsibility rather than an arena for individual competition. Accordingly, evaluation systems should shift focus from purely individual appraisals to 'Team-Based Evaluation,' incentivizing senior faculty to engage in the often invisible but vital work of mentoring junior colleagues.

Domain 4: Empowerment and Distributed Leadership

This domain highlights the leader's role in delegating authority and creating opportunities for others, challenging the traditional centralization of power. By distributing leadership tasks, high-level leaders can alleviate their own burnout while simultaneously building a succession pipeline.

Fostering a sense of ownership among junior faculty is crucial for long-term institutional health. Institutions should therefore consider implementing 'Rotational Leadership' roles for projects or committees, normalizing distributed leadership experiences as a standard part of academic career development.

Domain 5: Advocacy for Colleagues

Uncovered as a distinct factor, advocacy involves speaking up for fairness and protecting peers, connecting deeply to Procedural Justice theories. In an era characterized by 'up-or-leave' contracts, advocacy serves as the moral compass of the model, building the trust necessary for other leadership domains to function.

To institutionalize this protective function, the establishment of 'Ombudsman' roles or transparent appeal committees is advised. These structures would empower teacher leaders to advocate effectively for fairness in performance reviews without fear of retribution.

Contextual Mechanisms (Synthesis)

The model operates within the specific context of Guangdong Province, characterized by resource abundance relative to other regions, yet driven by intense internal competition. The integration of vocational and academic goals further demands flexible leadership styles.

Leaders act as 'Boundary Spanners,' connecting the university to industry partners for vocational goals while aligning faculty efforts with national strategic imperatives. This suggests that policy support must be differentiated; research universities and vocational colleges require distinct definitions and metrics for successful teacher leadership.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes the 'Code Teacher Leadership Model', a validated indigenous framework for Chinese higher education. It bridges the gap between Western distributed leadership theories and Chinese hierarchical realities by placing Psychological Capital and Agency at the center of the leadership process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the research on "The Code Teacher Leadership Model of Public Universities in Guangdong Province," the findings indicate that, firstly, at the principle level, universities must shift their paradigm from 'management' to 'leadership.' Administrators must recognize that sustainable effectiveness stems from motivated and well-supported faculty, rather than solely from rigid performance indicators.

In terms of process improvement, streamlining administrative approval processes is crucial in reducing 'work-related stress' (Domain 4). Furthermore, establishing clear and systematic procedures for faculty involvement in governance (Domain 2) will enhance transparency and trust.

Regarding indicators, performance evaluations should be revised to specifically include a 'service and leadership' category. Assigning a significant weight (e.g., 20%) to this category, measurable by hours of mentoring or project leadership, would formally acknowledge a currently overlooked value.

Finally, improving the governance infrastructure is essential. Investing in advanced information systems can significantly reduce paperwork, freeing up faculty for reflective and collaborative work—core elements of this model.

Future Research Directions

The study is limited to public universities in Guangdong, limiting generalizability to private or inland institutions. The unique economic strength of the province may afford resources unavailable elsewhere.

The cross-sectional nature of the survey precludes causal inferences. Self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias, especially regarding sensitive leadership topics.

Methodologically, while EFA identified the structure, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is needed to validate fit indices. Future research should employ Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test relationships between these factors and outcomes.

Future studies should also explore longitudinal changes in leadership perception as the DFC initiative evolves and consider comparative studies between 'World Class' and local vocational colleges.

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