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The impact of school organizational flattening on teacher leadership: a qualitative study of primary and secondary school teachers

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Abstract: Organizational flattening constitutes a key direction for current educational governance reforms in primary and secondary schools. The extent of organizational restructuring profoundly shapes the space for the practice of teacher leadership. Qualitative research among primary and secondary school teachers reveals that the flattening-oriented reforms in schools are unevenly implemented and often remain superficial. Institutional constraints such as ambiguous boundaries of power and responsibility, inadequate supporting mechanisms, and lagging governance culture restrict teachers from exercising their leadership in curriculum development, peer-empowered teaching research, and campus public governance. By sorting out the practical conditions of flattening reforms and the status quo of teacher leadership development, this paper analyzes practical obstacles and their underlying causes. It further proposes countermeasures including establishing a moderately flattened organizational system suited to school realities and strengthening the development and support mechanisms for teacher leadership. This study aims to optimize the internal governance ecology of primary and secondary schools.

Keywords: flattened organizational structure; primary and secondary schools; teacher leadership

1 Introduction

The traditional bureaucratic structure features rigid hierarchical levels and prominent administrative barriers, which can no longer meet the reform demands for high-quality development of basic education and greatly limit teachers' independent professional development and effective exercise of leadership. Flattening reform has become a vital approach for primary and secondary schools to optimize internal governance and mobilize teachers' initiative. Nevertheless, the actual implementation of flattening varies greatly across schools. Incomplete reform and imperfect institutional supporting systems lead to evident divergence in the development of teacher leadership. Exploring the path for their interactive development carries important practical research value.

2 Current status of organizational flattening and teacher leadership in primary and secondary schools

2.1 Real-world progress of organizational flattening in primary and secondary schools

In the transformation of the basic education governance system, most domestic primary and secondary schools have taken initiatives to adjust the traditional bureaucratic management system. They streamline multi-level top-down administrative structures, reduce the number of on-campus administrative posts, and gradually devolve managerial

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authority to grade-level groups and teaching-research groups. There exists no universal implementation template for flattening reform. Schools of different scales demonstrate differences in hierarchical streamlining and scope of delegated power [1]. Small-scale schools find it easier to simplify organizational structures. Their chains of command are shorter, and internal information flows more efficiently. Restricted by student population and heavy daily affairs, large-scale schools mostly carry out superficial structural adjustments, while traditional bureaucratic logic still dominates campus management. Some schools merely rename posts without revising the power-allocation mechanism, resulting in formalistic reform with no substantive changes to internal power structures. The development of internal information channels serves as a core criterion for evaluating flattening outcomes. Removing information barriers directly shapes the foundation for collaborative work and teaching operations within schools.

2.2 Multidimensional manifestations of teacher leadership under flattened structures

Teacher leadership covers multiple dimensions including curriculum development, peer professional empowerment, and participation in campus public affairs. Organizational forms provide institutional support for various leadership practices. In schools with well-implemented flattening, administrative intervention is weakened. Teachers gain more autonomy in curriculum improvement and teaching-research planning, and their professional discourse is effectively expanded. Teachers can deeply participate in formulating school-based teaching-research plans and lead discussions on classroom teaching optimization, thereby putting their professional guiding value into practice. By contrast, in schools with inadequate flattening, administrative work occupies much of teachers' working hours. Teachers mainly focus on routine classroom teaching and seldom engage in team building or campus governance. Teacher leadership presents a stratified pattern: some teachers rely on teaching-research platforms to facilitate peer reflection and professional improvement, whereas most teachers only finish regular teaching tasks and possess limited professional influence. Role cognition is reshaped by power shifts brought arising from structural adjustment. Divergent role perceptions further widen gaps in leadership practice among teachers.

3 How organizational flattening shapes teacher leadership: problems and causes

3.1 Practical obstacles in the implementation of flattening reform

Uneven advancement of flattening gives rise to various on-campus governance conflicts. In poorly-reformed schools, multi-level approval procedures persist. Grassroots teaching teams have limited room for independent decision-making. Proposals for teaching improvement need repeated administrative reviews, lowering decision-making efficiency. Excessive streamlining of administrative layers also increases governance burdens: former administrative functions are distributed to ordinary teachers, whose time for professional research and peer guidance is therefore squeezed. Ambiguous definition of power and responsibility prevails in the reform. Supporting mechanisms for devolving power are absent. Grade-level groups and functional departments have blurred divisions of duties, leading to buck-passing and functional vacuum in cross-domain affairs. Teachers lack stable institutional support for professional leadership work. Defective information circulation systems amplify operational risks. Without standardized information transmission rules after hierarchical simplification, information distortion and omission frequently occur. Teachers cannot obtain complete and valid information for teamwork and teaching-research activities [2].

3.2 Underlying causes restricting the release of teacher leadership

Internal organizational culture falls behind structural transformation. Deep-rooted bureaucratic mindsets lead some administrators to regard teachers merely as task performers. They overlook teachers' value in autonomous professional guidance and fail to establish systematic mechanisms for cultivating teacher leadership. A mature collaborative culture has not taken root among teachers. Teaching work remains largely individual-oriented with weak campus professional

mutual-aid atmosphere. Teachers lack subjective willingness to take the lead in team-based teaching research and peer development. Supporting systems for teacher leadership are insufficient. Existing training focuses mostly on classroom teaching skills, with inadequate systematic courses covering team coordination, curriculum leadership and organizational communication. Many teachers hold biased perceptions of leadership: they equate leadership with administrative authority and ignore the value of professional influence and teaching-research guidance, showing low motivation for professional demonstration. Resource allocation fails to keep pace with flattening reform. Teaching and research funds and training resources are still distributed according to administrative hierarchy, restricting front-line teachers' autonomy in resource deployment for teaching-research innovation and professional guidance.

4 Practical paths to improve teacher leadership through organizational flattening

4.1 Building a moderately flattened organizational system matching school realities

Flattening construction should be dynamically planned in accordance with school scale, faculty allocation and development orientation. Schools should abandon simplistic evaluation based on hierarchical tiers and establish flexible internal organizational structures. The core goal of educational governance is to serve teaching. Neither excessive hierarchical reduction nor rigid adherence to traditional structures can satisfy the demands of modern school operation. Schools can identify bottlenecks in administrative management, teaching-research activities and student administration based on operational data. Management modules should be rationally divided according to staff expertise and workload so that structural adjustments adapt to real front-line teaching conditions. Schools need to clarify power-responsibility boundaries between administrators and teaching-research teams. Administrative departments should focus on resource guarantee, institutional development and service support rather than direct intervention in professional teaching affairs. A balanced power-delegation system should be established. Alongside delegating professional decision-making power to grade-level and teaching-research groups, complete procedures for process supervision and outcome feedback should be formulated. Information circulation should be optimized with standardized information-sharing channels to break information barriers between administrators and teachers and ensure efficient and complete information flow concerning teaching, research and governance. Organizational structures should remain dynamically adjustable. Hierarchies and power distribution can be fine-tuned with school development to continuously adapt flattening practices to actual governance demands.

4.2 Improving cultivation and guarantee mechanisms for teacher leadership in flattened contexts

Resource allocation rules should be optimized. Teaching-research funds, training resources and teaching equipment should be tilted toward front-line teaching-research teams. Teaching-research groups shall be granted rights to allocate resources independently to support teachers' curriculum development, school-based research and peer assistance. Teachers' professional development systems should be updated by adding special training modules covering curriculum construction, peer instructional guidance and team communication to strengthen teachers' comprehensive capacity for professional leadership.Targeted training programs should be designed for teachers of different teaching experience and posts, empowering novice teachers as well as improving leading capacity of backbone teachers. Governance culture should be reshaped by reducing top-down control-oriented administrative management and fostering an equal and collaborative professional culture. Schools should recognize the professional influence of ordinary teachers and encourage all teachers to participate in campus deliberation and governance optimization.

A diversified teacher evaluation framework should replace the single standard centered on academic performance. Indicators such as peer professional support, curriculum innovation and team teaching-research construction shall be incorporated into evaluation systems to motivate teachers to develop their leadership. Regular teaching-research exchange

platforms should be built to provide stable venues for professional sharing, instructional discussion and experience exchange, expanding practical scenarios for teacher leadership [3]. In turn, these sustained exchanges can stimulate teachers' intrinsic professional motivation, allowing teacher leadership to take root in daily teaching and campus governance instead of being restricted to sporadic research activities.

5 Conclusion

The implementation quality of organizational flattening in primary and secondary schools is closely associated with the exercise of teacher leadership. Mere hierarchical reduction or formalistic reform cannot achieve better governance. Optimizing school governance must proceed from school-specific realities to construct appropriately flattened organizational frameworks and remedy deficiencies in institutional arrangements, resource provision, and organizational culture. By improving supporting guarantee systems and removing institutional barriers, schools can fully unlock teachers' professional guiding capacity and advance the modernization of educational governance in primary and secondary schools.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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