

# CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN CHINESE SPECIAL EDUCATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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## ARTICLE HISTORY

**Received:** 9 July 2025

**Revised:** 17 July 2025

**Accepted:** 23 July 2025

## Abstract

This study explores the unique attributes of effective teacher leadership in special education schools in China. Throughout the research process, the researchers aimed to investigate the leadership of Chinese special education teachers via a systematic literature review. However, the findings indicated that this research method failed to address the core objectives of the study. Consequently, a critical literature review was employed to construct a framework that delves into the characteristics and challenges of teacher leadership within China's special education system. The study identified four core characteristics of effective teacher leadership: informal management grounded in professional authority, a collaboration mechanism that prioritizes student achievement, flexibility to accommodate diverse needs, and interdisciplinary influence. Additionally, the study proposed an innovative framework advocating for the development of a special education teacher leadership model that encompasses multiple dimensions, including teacher ethics, teaching practices, communication, self-development, and evaluation, all based on collaboration within the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team and the Chinese Special Education Teacher Standards (trial version). Ultimately, the study offers practical recommendations for policymakers, school administrators, and frontline workers aimed at enhancing teacher leadership.

**Keywords:** Teacher Leadership, Special Education , Individualized Education Program, Professional Development, Teacher Standards

**CITATION INFORMATION:** Jin, T., Siththada, T., & Boonphadung, S. (2025). Characteristics And Challenges of Teacher Leadership in Chinese Special Education: A Framework for Effective Development. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3 (7), 109.

## Introduction

With the rapid economic growth and social progress in China, special education has garnered unprecedented attention and importance. As of 2023, approximately 85.914 million individuals with disabilities reside in China, representing 6.34% of the total population. Notably, around 155,000 students are enrolled in various forms of special education nationwide (Ministry of Education of China, 2024). This demographic requires educators with exceptional teaching skills throughout their educational journey. Educators not only impart knowledge but also provide guidance and emotional support to students. Although the Chinese government has made significant strides at the policy level, including the protection and development of individuals with disabilities outlined in the '14th Five-Year Plan for the Protection and Development of People with Disabilities' (China Government Network, 2021) and the 'Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in Special Education Schools' (Ministry of Education of China, 2022), challenges remain. The issuance of these documents has established comprehensive development goals for special education in China, particularly in the areas of rehabilitation, education, culture, and sports. Moreover, they underscore the necessity of improving school governance and enhancing the construction of barrier-free infrastructure. This initiative not only safeguards the right of children with special needs to access education but also lays the institutional groundwork for a robust special education management system, thereby reflecting the Chinese government's steadfast commitment to implementing inclusive education for students with special needs. Nevertheless, despite favorable policies, the development of special education in China continues to face a significant challenge: the leadership of teachers in special education schools.

This study focuses on three core questions: (1) What are the unique characteristics of teacher leadership within the context of Chinese special education? (2) What systemic challenges exist in this field that hinder the effective development of teacher leadership? (3) How can existing theoretical frameworks be adapted to support the development of teacher leadership in China's special education system?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge theory and practice within a rapidly evolving educational environment. While international literature has extensively explored teacher leadership in mainstream education, the intersection of teacher leadership in special education remains less examined, particularly within the context of Chinese culture. This paper aims to construct a theoretically supported framework that is grounded in the Chinese cultural context, recognizing universal principles while accounting for the specificities of individual contexts.

## The evolution and theoretical basis of teacher leadership

The concept of teacher leadership first emerged in the United States during the 1950s and was formally introduced in "Teacher Leadership: Concepts and Practices," authored by Liberman et al. The systematic study of teacher leadership commenced with the American teacher professionalization movement in the 1980s (Wei, 2022). Eckert et al. (2016) identified four distinct stages in the development of teacher leadership: the first wave comprised teachers in formal management positions, such as department heads; the second wave included teacher leaders acting as curriculum leaders, professional development facilitators, and mentors; the third wave featured teacher leaders who reshaped school culture through distributed leadership within and beyond the classroom; and the fourth wave emphasized policy participation and the promotion of change. This wave of educational reform has prompted a reevaluation of the definition of teacher leadership roles. Teachers are no longer perceived merely as transmitters

of knowledge; instead, they are expected to assume a more proactive role in driving school change and fostering educational innovation.

In the first stage, teacher leadership primarily manifests through formal administrative positions, characterized by a relatively traditional leadership style that reflects a top-down management model. In the second stage, teacher leadership transitions from a purely managerial role to one of professional leadership, emphasizing the influence of peers through the sharing of professional expertise and experiences. The third stage highlights the decentralization and democratization of leadership; teacher leadership is no longer confined to specific positions but instead exerts influence through everyday educational practices and professional interactions. In the fourth stage, teachers become active participants in policy-making, addressing the challenges faced by schools in the 21st century and taking on the roles of creators and implementers of educational policies. Teacher leadership extends beyond the confines of the school environment, actively engaging in the formulation and execution of national and local education policies, thus becoming a crucial catalyst for educational reform. As Anselmus Dami (2024) succinctly summarized in his research, "All teachers are teacher leaders; the teacher leadership role does not constitute a hierarchy, nor is it characterized by a top-down or master-servant relationship; teacher leadership is not defined by formal titles, positions, or authority."

In the context of Chinese education and culture, the development of teacher leadership presents both unique challenges and opportunities. Traditionally, the historical and cultural values that emphasize respect for teachers and the importance of education have facilitated the emergence of distributed leadership models; however, they have also introduced corresponding challenges. Chinese teacher leadership underscores inherent qualities and is viewed as the ability of educators to self-manage, lead, and influence others. This is reflected in a comprehensive quality encompassing control, creativity, action, and inspiration (Wan, 2024). Confucian educational thought underscores the importance of teachers as exemplars of morality and ethics, particularly highlighting the enhancement of their intrinsic motivation to advance their professional skills. While some researchers posit that the concept of 'backbone teachers' in China mirrors the existing framework of teacher leadership, this role often appears to be more of an 'administrative assignment' than a manifestation of the teacher's personal professional autonomy (Liang & Wang, 2019). The development of teacher leadership within the current educational system necessitates not only external incentives and support but also the internal self-motivation and professional identity of teachers. Currently, the professional growth of Chinese teachers tends to overly depend on external administrative directives and evaluative mechanisms, often neglecting the internal needs and motivations of individual educators.

## **Methodology**

This study employed the method proposed by Brocke et al. (2009) to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) aimed at addressing the research questions presented. The primary objective of this SLR is to identify relevant theories—specifically, terms that require definition—and to synthesize various definitions into a more precise, unified definition. During the SLR process, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) was searched using the keywords "teacher leadership" and "special education teacher leadership." A total of 203 documents related to teacher leadership were retrieved. Following a preliminary screening, no documents were selected that contained "special education" or "special education school" in the title. Subsequently, all 203 documents were downloaded for detailed reading and analysis,

with the remaining 0 papers serving as the main references for this SLR. To facilitate the smooth progression of the research, this study utilized a critical literature review method in conjunction with a conceptual framework to construct this paper.

### **Analysis of the lack of teacher leadership in China's special education**

#### **1) The uniqueness of teacher leadership in special education environment**

Special education is a tailored teaching approach designed to meet the specific needs of students with special requirements. This strategy may involve the use of specialized textbooks, teaching methods, equipment, or learning environments (Hallahan et al., 2013). It aims to address the challenges faced by students in regular educational settings due to physical, intellectual, emotional, or learning disabilities. As a fundamental component of education, special education utilizes both general and specially designed curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, and organizational forms to provide effective education for children with special needs, striving to achieve both general and specific educational goals (Pu, 2014).

In a specific educational context, teacher leadership exhibits unique attributes and increased complexity. Special education teachers typically fulfill both formal and informal leadership roles within schools, with extensive responsibilities for collaboration across disciplines and grade levels. It can be asserted that all special education teachers, to varying degrees, assume the responsibilities of teacher leaders. The leadership capabilities of special education teachers are manifested not only in classroom instruction but also across multiple dimensions, including curriculum planning, student assessment, teamwork, and communication with parents. They are often required to possess exceptional professional qualities and a comprehensive knowledge base to effectively address the diverse needs of their students.

#### **2) The lack of theoretical research**

While special education teachers demonstrate leadership skills in their daily work, a review of the Chinese Education Research Database (CNKI) reveals a limited number of studies specifically addressing teacher leadership in this context (As stated above: The number of articles included in the systematic literature review is 0). As noted by Zarate et al. (2023), the existing literature provides insufficient clarity regarding teacher leadership, especially within the realm of special education. Research focused on the leadership of special education teachers remains nascent both in China and internationally, lacking a systematic theoretical framework and comprehensive empirical studies. Thompson (2017) contends that current policy trends and recent developments suggest a pressing need for further in-depth research in the domain of special education leadership.

The absence of theoretical research directly results in a deficiency of effective guiding principles in practice. Consequently, teachers and school administrators frequently depend on experience and intuition to assess and cultivate teacher leadership, lacking scientific evaluation tools and developmental pathways. It has become an urgent issue in current research to further explore the connotation, characteristics, and influencing factors of special education teacher leadership, and to establish a corresponding evaluation system that can better guide practice.

#### **3) Challenges and constraints**

In the context of special education, the exercise of teacher leadership encounters numerous practical challenges. Foremost among these is the challenge of adaptability. Special education teachers must continuously learn and update their educational concepts and methodologies to meet the ever-evolving needs of their students. The complexity of special education scenarios necessitates that teacher leaders be highly adaptable and innovative. They must not only respond flexibly to a variety of special needs but also devise effective teaching strategies

despite limited resources. For instance, research indicates that special education teachers must address the diverse needs of students through ongoing reflective practice and professional development, which imposes greater demands on them (Billingsley, 2007).

The second challenge is the increased complexity of collaboration. Special education teachers must establish strong cooperative relationships with other educators, school administrators, rehabilitation therapists, psychological counselors, and parents to create optimal conditions for students' growth and development. This diverse collaborative environment necessitates that teachers possess enhanced communication and coordination skills, as well as inter-professional cooperation capabilities. Research indicates that effective inter-professional collaboration can significantly enhance the learning outcomes of special education students; however, this requires teachers to develop team leadership and conflict management skills (Borg & Drange, 2019).

The third urgent need is for professional development. The professionalism required in special education mandates that teachers not only possess general educational and teaching knowledge but also have specialized skills and expertise in special education. However, the existing teacher training and in-service training systems frequently fail to address the training needs of such multifaceted professionals. Research indicates that in-service training for special education teachers must be more targeted and continuous to effectively support their leadership development in complex educational contexts (Shepherd et al., 2016).

The lack of teacher leadership in China's special education is significantly constrained by the institutional environment. The traditional school management system prioritizes administrative management and hierarchical control, while neglecting teachers' professional autonomy and leadership potential (Shengnan & Hallinger, 2021). Additionally, the teacher evaluation system predominantly focuses on teaching performance and the completion of administrative tasks, failing to effectively assess teacher leadership behaviors and professional contributions (Li & Xin, 2022). The pathways for career development are relatively limited, often compelling teachers to pursue administrative roles for career advancement rather than enabling them to exert greater influence within their professional domains (Zhu et al, 2021). These interrelated deficiencies create a systematic obstacle that hampers the development of teacher leadership in China's special education, necessitating urgent solutions through theoretical innovation and practical reform.

### **Build the path of effective teacher leadership**

As a vital branch of pedagogy, special education employs both general and specially designed courses, teaching materials, methods, organizational forms, and equipment to educate children with special needs (youth and adolescents). Its primary objective is to achieve educational outcomes that align with both general educational goals and specific training objectives. The core ethos of special education emphasizes the recognition of individual differences among children, as well as between them, while focusing on the unique characteristics of specialized teaching content, methods, means, principles, and organizational forms.

In the development of special education, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) has assumed a pivotal role. The 'return to the mainstream' approach to individualized education in the United States serves as a significant reference point for the evolution of special education globally. In June 2020, the Ministry of Education of China issued the 'Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Inclusive Education for Children and Adolescents with Disabilities in Compulsory Education', which explicitly mandates that 'ordinary schools strive to provide appropriate education for each student'. Following the release of the 'Notice of the State

Council on Printing and Distributing the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Protection and Development of Persons with Disabilities', China has advocated for schools to develop individualized education and teaching plans tailored to the unique characteristics of students with disabilities. This initiative aims to implement the 'one person, one plan' policy, ensuring that individualized education plans are realized for all school-age children and adolescents with disabilities.

In the realm of special education, the intervention of collaborative teams such as the assistant team, case study team, or IEP team is often essential. These cooperative models have established a significant practical foundation for the advancement of special education and have provided vital insights for fostering effective teacher leadership. When delivering personalized support to students with special needs, special education teachers must not only possess professional teaching skills but also exhibit strong leadership abilities to coordinate interdisciplinary teams, promote home-school collaboration, and advocate for inclusive education. Leadership is recognized as a core competency within the standards for special education teachers, encompassing a broad spectrum of responsibilities ranging from the development of individualized education plans (IEPs) to the management of classroom resources and the guidance of team members (Fan et al., 2019).

According to Da Fonte and Boesch (2016), special education teachers must possess several competencies, including communication development and interpersonal skills, teamwork, collaborative practices, the role and function of alternative communication (AAC) systems, and strategies for evaluating and teaching with AAC systems. Consequently, special education teachers should be equipped to design and implement differentiated teaching strategies that cater to the unique learning needs of diverse students. This includes adapting traditional teaching methods and integrating emerging educational technologies.

The Ministry of Education of China has formulated the "Professional Standards for Special Education Teachers (Trial)" (Ministry of Education of China, 2022) in accordance with current Chinese legal provisions. This initiative is grounded in the principles of prioritizing teacher ethics, adopting a student-centered approach, emphasizing ability-oriented education, and promoting lifelong learning. The objective is to enhance the professional development of special education teachers and to establish a high-quality team of educators in this field. The standards are structured around three primary domains: professional concepts and teacher ethics, professional knowledge, and professional abilities. These domains are further delineated into 14 specific criteria, which encompass key dimensions such as professional understanding and recognition, attitudes and behaviors towards students, attitudes and behaviors towards education and teaching, personal cultivation and conduct, knowledge of student development, subject-specific knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, general knowledge, the creation and utilization of educational environments, design and implementation of education and teaching, motivation and assessment, communication and collaboration, as well as reflection and professional development. This standard establishes the essential qualities that qualified special education teachers should possess. It serves as a foundation and a set of requirements for the training of professionals in special education programs at colleges and universities. Furthermore, it represents the minimum standard for the preparation of specialists in the field of special education (Ning & Wang, 2019; Hu, 2023).

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) (2020) published the Standards for the Professional Preparation of Special Educators for Initial Practice (Initial K-12 Standards), which delineate the essential knowledge and skills candidates must acquire to commence their

teaching careers. The 2020 revision updates the 2012 Initial K-12 Standards, which emphasize the preparation of educators for students ranging from kindergarten to grade 12. The standards are as follows: Standard 1 emphasizes learning and practicing within the ethical code; Standard 2 focuses on understanding and addressing the developmental and learning needs of each individual; Standard 3 requires demonstrating knowledge of subject matter and professional curriculum; Standard 4 involves understanding learners through assessment and utilizing the learning environment for data-driven decision-making; Standard 5 advocates for supporting learning through effective instructional strategies; Standard 6 promotes the support of social, emotional, and behavioral growth; and Standard 7 encourages collaboration with team members.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Standards for Advanced Special Education Preparation are predicated on the premise that special educators continuously advance in their teaching careers. Many educators pursue opportunities to deepen their skills and broaden their knowledge base through advanced studies, whether in the classroom or within their specific specialties (Standards for Advanced Special Education Preparation, 2023). The standards encompass the following areas: Standard 1 focuses on Assessment; Standard 2 addresses Curriculum Content Knowledge; Standard 3 pertains to Programs, Services, and Outcomes; Standard 4 emphasizes Research and Inquiry; Standard 5 highlights Leadership and Policy; Standard 6 covers Professional and Ethical Practice; and Standard 7 underscores Collaboration. Building effective teacher leaders based on the IEP and special education teacher standards necessitates a focus on enhancing several key capabilities. These include the practice of teacher ethics and professional standards, which involves leading by example in ethical conduct and demonstrating adherence to established teacher ethics standards. Furthermore, it encompasses teaching practice, professional knowledge, subject expertise, and curriculum knowledge, all of which are crucial for guiding others in the educational field. Communication and collaboration skills are equally important, as they enable teachers to coordinate and lead effectively within teams. Additionally, independent development—through reflection, research, and exploration—plays a vital role in fostering professional growth and innovation. Finally, the areas of incentives and evaluation, including decision-making and evaluation standards, highlight the necessity of a professional leadership role in data-driven assessments and evaluations. The aforementioned elements encapsulate the fundamental characteristics of "special education teacher leadership," which include the ability to influence others, facilitate change, and assume responsibility. These aspects collectively underscore the pivotal role that special education teachers play as leaders, exemplars, coordinators, and promoters within their respective domains.

### **The realization path of effective teacher leadership**

The causes of building effective teacher leadership in IEPs and special education teacher standards differ slightly from those in the general education system; however, the core concept remains similar: both emphasize the developmental needs of students and leverage the professional leadership role of teachers. In a special education environment, educators must possess a profound understanding of students' unique needs and develop more detailed and IEPs. As a critical tool in special education, IEPs not only require teachers to have a solid foundation of professional knowledge but also necessitate a high sense of responsibility and leadership to ensure the effective implementation of the plan. Furthermore, special education teacher standards provide clear directions for professional development and evaluation criteria, serving as the foundation for enhancing teachers' professional quality and leadership

capabilities. Therefore, clarifying and improving the teacher leadership model in special education schools is particularly important in the process of fostering effective teacher leadership.

The leadership model for special education teachers should encompass multiple dimensions, including teacher ethics, pedagogy, communication, self-development, and evaluation, to ensure that teachers can enhance their leadership capabilities comprehensively and systematically. This model must not only reflect the professional characteristics of special education teachers but also integrate the formulation and implementation of IEP, as well as the assessment of special education teacher standards. Through ongoing professional development, collaboration, and reflective practice, special education teachers can continually enhance their leadership skills, better address the individual needs of students, and promote meaningful changes within the special education environment. Concurrently, special education schools should provide teachers with the essential resources and support necessary to foster the effective exercise and enhancement of teacher leadership.

### **Conclusion**

This study identifies research gaps through a systematic literature review analysis of teacher leadership in special education settings. It employs a critical literature review approach to highlight key issues in the current development of special education teacher leadership and proposes implementation strategies to establish effective teacher leadership. The study identifies that the lack of teacher leadership in China's special education is primarily evident in three areas: insufficient theoretical research, practical challenges, and constraints imposed by the institutional environment. At the theoretical level, research on special education teacher leadership lacks a systematic theoretical framework and empirical support, leading to a deficiency in scientifically-based guiding principles for practice. At the practical level, special education teachers encounter real difficulties such as adaptive challenges, increased complexity in collaboration, and urgent needs for professional development. At the institutional level, the traditional school management system, a singular teacher evaluation system, and limited career development opportunities all hinder the realization of teacher leadership potential.

The study further reveals that the IEP and the Special Education Teacher Standards serve as significant frameworks for fostering effective teacher leadership. The IEP emphasizes the creation of tailored teaching plans that address the unique needs of students. This necessitates that educators possess not only professional expertise but also the capacity to be adaptable and to lead a collaborative team in coordinating resources from various stakeholders to ensure the successful implementation of the educational plan. Concurrently, the Special Education Teacher Standards delineate the essential professional attributes, teaching competencies, and leadership responsibilities of educators, thereby providing a clear direction and foundation for enhancing the leadership capabilities of special education teachers. The application of these standards and plans is instrumental in advancing the leadership of special education teachers and facilitating the ongoing development of special education programs.

Based on these findings, this study concludes that the leadership model for special education teachers should encompass multiple dimensions, including teacher ethics, teaching methodologies, communication skills, self-development, and evaluation practices. This model illustrates that special education teachers share the same identity and responsibilities as their general education counterparts, while also embodying the unique professional characteristics inherent to special education. It integrates the formulation and implementation of



individualized education plans alongside the evaluation of special education teacher standards. The proposal of this model not only addresses the theoretical gaps in teacher leadership research within the field of special education but also provides robust support for the ongoing advancement of special education and the professional development of its educators.

The theoretical contributions of this study are primarily reflected in two aspects: first, it enriches the theory of teacher leadership within the realm of special education, addressing a notable gap in research concerning teacher leadership in the context of China's special education environment; second, it establishes a teacher leadership framework grounded in the IEP teamwork model and the design and development of special education teacher standards, thereby offering a novel perspective for the theoretical discourse on special education teacher leadership.

### Suggestions

**For policymakers:** Policymakers should be dedicated to enhancing the policy framework for the professional development of special education teachers and establishing a robust institutional mechanism to support teacher leadership training. Specifically, within the existing policy structure, it is essential to develop targeted policies aimed at fostering the leadership of special education teachers. This includes delineating the responsibilities, competency requirements, and career pathways for teacher leadership, ensuring that special education teachers can effectively fulfill their leadership roles in educational practice. Concurrently, it is imperative to increase leadership training for special education teachers, providing them with opportunities for professional development to enhance their leadership skills. Encouraging special education teachers to actively engage in school management and educational reform will further promote the sustainable development of special education.

**For school administrators:** School administrators in educational institutions should endeavor to cultivate an organizational environment and cultural atmosphere that fosters the development of teacher leadership. Administrators in special education schools should move away from traditional hierarchical management concepts and instead establish a flat organizational structure. This approach allows teachers to engage more actively in the decision-making process and assume their leadership roles. Furthermore, appropriate incentive mechanisms and resource allocation systems must be implemented to ensure comprehensive support and guarantees for teacher leadership activities.

**For special education teachers:** Special education teachers should actively cultivate their leadership awareness and enhance their professional quality and leadership skills through continuous professional training and reflective practice. In daily teaching activities, they must assume a leading role and leverage their professional influence to foster the development of special education. Concurrently, they should seek communication and collaboration with peers, experts, and parents to collectively explore leadership practices and innovative strategies in special education. This collaborative effort aims to establish a multi-party leadership community that jointly promotes the enhancement of special education quality.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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