

PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS IN GUANGDONG POLYTECHNIC

Jianliang LIU

Student of Master in Educational Administration, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University,
Thailand; s67561802138@ssru.ac.th

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the current status and improvement strategies of participatory leadership development for teachers in Guangdong Polytechnic. Using a mixed-method approach including questionnaire survey and in-depth interview, data were collected from 297 teachers and 5 core administrators at Guangdong Polytechnic. Results show that the overall level of participatory leadership is at a medium level (Mean=3.42), with collaborative practices (Mean=3.62) and shared responsibility (Mean=3.55) scoring highest, while decision-making participation (Mean=3.18) and communication transparency (Mean=3.29) are identified as the weakest links. Main problems include formalized decision-making channels, unclear cross-departmental responsibilities, unequal distribution of participation opportunities, insufficient two-way communication mechanisms, and lack of workload recognition for governance participation. Based on distributed leadership theory, organizational support theory and educational administration frameworks, five targeted improvement strategies are proposed. This study provides empirical references for optimizing participatory leadership development in vocational colleges in Guangdong Province.

Keywords: Participatory Leadership, Teacher Leadership Development, Decision-Making Participation, Collaborative Practices, Vocational Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

With the advancement of global educational reform, quality improvement, collaborative governance and professional competency enhancement have become core priorities of modern education systems. As education evolves to address the demands of the 21st century, teacher participation in institutional leadership has received increasing academic and practical attention. Participatory leadership, which emphasizes shared decision-making, collaborative practice and teacher involvement in organizational processes, has been widely recognized as an effective approach to enhancing teacher motivation, job satisfaction and overall school effectiveness. International empirical studies have consistently confirmed that participatory and distributed leadership models can strengthen teachers' organizational commitment and foster sustainable institutional improvement.

In China, vocational education has been elevated to a strategic priority in national development frameworks. The National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan has outlined comprehensive reforms to build a modern vocational education system featuring industry-education integration and teacher professional development. The Ministry of Education further emphasizes the need to empower teachers and reinforce their participation in institutional governance, providing a solid policy foundation for exploring participatory leadership practices in vocational colleges.

As a major province of vocational education in China, Guangdong Province has actively advanced vocational education reform in alignment with national strategies. The Guangdong Provincial Department of Education has promoted the construction of a vocational education ecosystem integrating industries, enterprises and educational institutions, and issued the Implementation Plan for the New Era Teacher Development System to enhance teacher competencies and participation in professional development. These policy initiatives create a favorable context for cultivating participatory leadership among vocational college teachers.

However, leadership practices in many Chinese vocational colleges remain predominantly administrator-centered, with limited opportunities for teachers to participate meaningfully in governance processes. In the context of Guangdong Polytechnic, although policy documents emphasize teacher participation and professional growth, there is a lack of systematic empirical data on teachers' actual participatory leadership levels and the specific factors supporting or hindering their leadership engagement. Existing domestic research mostly focuses on basic education or comprehensive universities, with few studies systematically examining participatory leadership in higher vocational colleges through a multi-dimensional analytical framework. This research gap highlights the necessity of conducting empirical investigation and proposing context-specific development guidelines.

Research Significance

Theoretically, this study constructs a five-dimensional analytical framework of “decision-making participation—teacher participation—collaborative practices—communication transparency—shared responsibility” for teacher participatory leadership in vocational colleges. It verifies the applicability of distributed leadership theory, transformational leadership theory and organizational support theory in the context of Chinese vocational higher education, and enriches theoretical research on participatory leadership in the field of vocational education.

Practically, this study takes Guangdong Polytechnic as a typical case, identifies key problems in the current leadership development system, and proposes operable improvement strategies. The

findings can provide replicable experience and path support for other vocational colleges in Guangdong Province to build and improve their teacher participatory leadership systems, help narrow inter-school differences, and improve the overall quality of institutional governance. Meanwhile, it can also provide reference for education administrative departments to formulate regional teacher leadership development policies.

Research Questions

What is the current status of participatory leadership development for teachers in Guangdong Polytechnic from the five dimensions of decision-making participation, teacher participation, collaborative practices, communication transparency and shared responsibility?

What are the main problems and restrictive factors existing in the operation of the teacher participatory leadership development system in Guangdong Polytechnic?

What targeted improvement strategies can be proposed to optimize the teacher participatory leadership development system in Guangdong Polytechnic combined with theoretical support and practical experience?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed research method combining quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative in-depth interview. Quantitative research can obtain large-scale data to reflect the overall status of participatory leadership development, while qualitative research can dig deep into the underlying reasons and practical problems. The combination of the two methods makes the research results more comprehensive, in-depth and credible through data triangulation.

Population and Sample

The research population of this study is 1,273 full-time teachers from Guangdong Polytechnic. According to the Krejcie & Morgan sampling method, 297 teachers were selected as the survey sample through simple random sampling, ensuring each teacher had an equal chance of being selected. The sample size is scientifically representative of the total population.

In terms of qualitative research, 5 core administrators were selected by purposive sampling for in-depth interviews, including the Party Secretary, Deputy Director, Deputy Secretary, Dean of Academic Affairs Department, and Head of Teaching and Research Department. All interviewees have more than 5 years of management experience in the college, are familiar with the teacher participatory leadership system, and have rich experience in institutional governance and teacher development, which can provide in-depth and effective interview information.

RESEARCH TOOLS

Questionnaire

The questionnaire is designed based on literature research and core research variables, with a total of 40 items divided into five dimensions: decision-making participation (8 items), teacher participation (8 items), collaborative practices (8 items), communication transparency (8 items), and shared responsibility (8 items). The questionnaire adopts a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 representing the highest level and 1 representing the lowest level.

Before the formal survey, the questionnaire was tested for content validity and reliability. The Item Objective Congruence (IOC) of all items is ≥ 0.67 after evaluation by 5 experts in educational administration and vocational education, which meets the validity standard. The Cronbach's α coefficient of the total scale is 0.921, and the Cronbach's α of each dimension ranges from 0.844 to 0.861, indicating that the questionnaire has high internal consistency and good reliability.

Semi-structured Interview Outline

The interview outline is designed around the five core dimensions of the research, focusing on the existing problems, root causes and improvement suggestions of the teacher participatory leadership development system. The interview content covers cross-departmental responsibility division, decision-making operation mechanisms, collaborative resource allocation, communication channel effectiveness and responsibility implementation effects.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed and collected through both online and offline channels, and 297 valid questionnaires were recovered with an effective recovery rate of 100%. The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face. Interviewees were informed of the research purpose and confidentiality principle in advance. The interview process was recorded with consent and sorted out in a timely manner.

Quantitative data were input into statistical software for analysis, mainly using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to reflect the current status level of each dimension and item. Qualitative data were analyzed by content analysis method. The researcher transcribed interview recordings, coded key statements, categorized core themes, and summarized systematic problems and improvement suggestions.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Among the 297 questionnaire respondents, male teachers accounted for 56.57% and female teachers accounted for 43.43%. In terms of age structure, teachers aged 30–39 accounted for the largest proportion at 37.71%, followed by those aged 40–49 at 24.58%, indicating that young and middle-aged backbone teachers are the main body of the teaching staff.

In terms of educational background, teachers with master's degrees accounted for 49.83%, those with bachelor's degrees accounted for 40.07%, and those with doctoral degrees accounted for 10.10%. The overall educational level is relatively high, providing a solid knowledge foundation for teachers to participate in institutional governance.

In terms of work experience, teachers with 11–15 years of experience accounted for 31.31%, those with 5–10 years of experience accounted for 29.97%, and those with more than 15 years of experience accounted for 20.54%. Teachers with 5–15 years of working experience account for more than 60% of the total, who are in the accumulation and maturity stage of career development and have both rich practical experience and strong participation willingness.

Overall Status of Participatory Leadership Development

The overall mean score of teacher participatory leadership development is 3.42 (S.D=0.70), which is at a medium level. The scores of each dimension from high to low are: collaborative practices (Mean=3.62, S.D=0.66), shared responsibility (Mean=3.55, S.D=0.69), teacher participation (Mean=3.44, S.D=0.68), communication transparency (Mean=3.29, S.D=0.74), and decision-making participation (Mean=3.18, S.D=0.71). The results show unbalanced development across the five dimensions: practical dimensions related to daily teaching perform well, while institutional dimensions related to governance and decision-making are relatively weak.

Status of Each Dimension

1. Decision-Making Participation

The overall score of this dimension is the lowest among the five, with a mean of 3.18. The items with relatively higher scores are “teachers can be involved in the allocation of teaching resources”

(Mean=3.29) and “teachers have the opportunity to put forward policy suggestions for improving teaching” (Mean=3.25). The items with the lowest scores are “teachers’ participation in the formulation of the college’s development plan” (Mean=3.05) and “teachers believe that their participation in decision-making has a substantive impact” (Mean=3.06). It indicates that teachers have certain participation channels in daily operational affairs, but are largely excluded from major strategic decision-making, and there is an obvious phenomenon of formal participation without substantive influence.

2. Teacher Participation

The mean score of this dimension is 3.44, at a medium level. The items with higher scores are “teachers participate in discussions on improving teaching quality” (Mean=3.60) and “teachers participate in the planning and implementation of academic activities” (Mean=3.52), both approaching the high-level range. The items with lower scores are “teachers are invited to participate in strategic planning and policy formulation” (Mean=3.28) and “the college allocates sufficient time for teachers to participate in governance activities” (Mean=3.31). It reflects that teachers have high enthusiasm for participation in teaching-related affairs, but face obvious constraints in strategic participation opportunities and time guarantee.

3. Collaborative Practices

This dimension has the highest score, with a mean of 3.62, at a high level. The highest-scoring item is “collaborative work has improved the teaching quality of the college” (Mean=3.70), followed by “teachers collaborate with each other in curriculum design and teaching innovation” (Mean=3.68). The items with relatively lower scores are “collaborative results are archived and shared among various departments” (Mean=3.54) and “teachers have regular collaborative planning meetings” (Mean=3.55). It shows that intra-department teaching collaboration is relatively mature, but cross-departmental collaboration lacks institutionalization, and high-quality collaborative outcomes have not been transformed into institutional knowledge assets.

4. Communication Transparency

The mean score of this dimension is 3.29, at a medium level. The highest-scoring item is “teachers can easily access official documents and meeting minutes” (Mean=3.38). The items with the lowest scores are “teachers are aware of the basis for the important decisions made by the leadership” (Mean=3.19) and “teachers can freely express their concerns without any inhibitions” (Mean=3.22). The dimension presents an obvious characteristic of “strong one-way dissemination and weak two-way interaction”: one-way information release has a certain foundation, but decision-making transparency and feedback channel effectiveness need to be improved urgently.

5. Shared Responsibility

The mean score of this dimension is 3.55, at a high level. The highest-scoring items are “teachers bear a sense of responsibility for improving the quality of teaching” (Mean=3.72) and “teachers believe that the success of the college is the responsibility of all” (Mean=3.68). The items with lower scores are “teachers jointly assume the responsibility for supervising the practical training projects” (Mean=3.44) and “teachers share the common responsibility for the department-level performance targets” (Mean=3.48). It indicates that teachers have a strong cultural identity of shared responsibility for teaching quality, but the institutionalized implementation of cross-department governance responsibility is relatively insufficient.

Main Problems Summarized from Interviews

1. Institutional level: Decision-making participation channels operate in a formalized manner, and there is no closed-loop feedback mechanism for teachers’ opinions. The division of cross-departmental responsibilities is ambiguous, and the systematic effectiveness evaluation

mechanism is imperfect. Governance participation lacks rigid institutional guarantee and restraint.

2.Operational level: Time spent on governance participation is not included in official workload recognition, which increases teachers' additional burden. Cross-departmental collaboration lacks overall coordination mechanisms, with obvious information barriers and low resource integration efficiency. Communication mechanisms are mostly top-down one-way transmission, lacking normalized two-way interaction channels.

3.Personnel level: Participation opportunities are inclined to senior teachers, and young teachers as well as contract teachers have narrow participation channels. Teachers have psychological concerns about expressing real opinions, and the sense of psychological safety needs to be improved. There is a lack of hierarchical participation paths matching different career stages, which cannot meet the differentiated participation needs of teachers.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the Overall Status of the System

The overall medium level of teacher participatory leadership indicates that under the promotion of national vocational education reform and institutional development, Guangdong Polytechnic has formed a good cultural foundation for participatory leadership. Teachers generally recognize the value of collaboration and shared responsibility, and spontaneous participatory practices are relatively active at the teaching level. This is consistent with the development trend of distributed leadership in global vocational education, and also reflects the effective implementation of teacher empowerment policies at the grassroots level.

However, the unbalanced development of dimensions shows that the current participatory leadership construction is still in the stage of “culture first, system lag”. Informal collaborative practices at the grassroots level are rich, but the formal institutional system supporting deep participation is not perfect. This “strong culture, weak system” pattern is a common problem in the governance transformation of Chinese vocational colleges, which also means that the college is currently in a stage with the highest marginal benefit of improvement. Targeted institutional optimization can rapidly upgrade the overall level of participatory leadership.

Analysis of Dimension Differences and Causes

1.High performance in collaborative practices and shared responsibility

The high scores in these two dimensions benefit from the practical characteristics of vocational education. Teaching work in vocational colleges naturally requires team collaboration such as curriculum design, practical training guidance and skill competition coaching, which has fostered a mature intra-department collaborative culture. Meanwhile, teachers' professional identity and sense of belonging to the college drive their strong sense of responsibility for teaching quality and institutional development. However, this kind of collaboration and responsibility is mostly limited to the teaching scenario and has not been extended to the broader institutional governance level. The lack of institutional support prevents cultural advantages from being transformed into governance effectiveness.

2.Medium performance in teacher participation

The high participation enthusiasm in teaching-related affairs stems from the direct connection with teachers' own work, which matches their professional expertise and brings clear work value. The lack of strategic participation is rooted in two aspects: structurally, the traditional administrator-centered governance model determines that decision-making power is concentrated in the administrative layer, and teachers are positioned as policy implementers rather than co-

decision-makers; practically, heavy teaching workload and the lack of workload recognition for governance participation make teachers unable and unwilling to invest too much energy in governance affairs. The tilt of participation opportunities to senior teachers also conforms to the characteristics of hierarchical organizational culture, which restricts the growth of young teachers' leadership ability.

3. Weak performance in communication transparency and decision-making participation

These two dimensions are the core institutional bottlenecks, and their low scores are essentially the embodiment of traditional bureaucratic management logic. Under the top-down governance model, information transmission and decision-making are both administrative-led. One-way information release pursues execution efficiency but ignores teachers' right to know the decision-making basis. Formal participation channels create an illusion of inclusion but cannot bring substantive influence, which will in turn weaken teachers' trust in the governance system and willingness to participate. The mutual reinforcement of information opacity and ineffective participation forms a vicious circle, which restricts the deepening of participatory leadership.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study verifies the applicability of distributed leadership theory in the context of Chinese vocational colleges. It confirms that distributed leadership has been widely practiced at the informal teaching level, but its formal institutionalization still needs to be promoted, which supplements empirical evidence for the localized research of distributed leadership theory. It also supports the core viewpoint of organizational support theory: teachers' perceived institutional support (including time guarantee, participation channels and incentive mechanisms) is a key factor restricting their leadership engagement. The five-dimensional analytical framework constructed in this study also enriches the localized measurement system of participatory leadership in vocational education.

Practically, this study clarifies the priority of system optimization: in the short term, taking the institutionalization of decision-making participation and the improvement of communication transparency as key breakthroughs can exert a significant leverage effect, because the improvement of information transparency will provide a knowledge foundation for decision-making participation and enhance teachers' trust. In the medium term, strengthening substantive teacher participation and improving the shared responsibility mechanism can consolidate the construction achievements. In the long term, relying on the existing good collaborative cultural foundation to build professional learning communities can realize comprehensive upgrading. This implementation path provides a clear and operable reference for similar vocational colleges to promote teacher participatory leadership construction.

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

Establish Institutionalized and Structured Decision-Making Participation Mechanisms

Set up a permanent teacher advisory body for strategic planning, ensure teachers' front-end participation in major institutional decisions such as development planning and specialty adjustment, and incorporate teacher representatives into the whole process of decision-making research and demonstration. Build a closed-loop teacher proposal management system covering "proposal submission—deliberation and evaluation—result feedback", with standardized written reply procedures and clear handling time limits, so that teachers' opinions can be effectively responded to. Expand the proportion of teacher representatives in budget committees and resource allocation working groups, and enhance teachers' substantive decision-making power in teaching resource allocation and annual budget planning.

Strengthen Substantive Teacher Participation in Governance and Academic Planning

Include governance participation workload — such as serving on committees, participating in policy consultation working groups and engaging in academic review work — into the official workload recognition system, and clarify the conversion standard of governance work to teaching workload, so as to reduce the additional burden on teachers. Construct a stepped participation system matching teachers' career development stages: young teachers participate as observers in governance meetings, intermediate teachers serve as formal members of special working groups, and senior teachers take the lead in special research topics, to ensure equal and gradual participation opportunities for teachers of all levels. Incorporate governance participation performance into annual assessment, merit evaluation and professional title appraisal indicators, and establish supporting incentive mechanisms to recognize teachers' contributions to institutional governance.

Build Sustainable Professional Learning Communities for Teacher Collaboration

Build a school-level electronic archive and sharing platform for collaborative teaching achievements, collect and sort out high-quality cases of curriculum co-design, teaching innovation and practical training cooperation, and promote the transformation of individual and departmental experience into institutional knowledge assets. Set up a special incentive fund for cross-departmental teaching collaboration, provide financial and policy support for interdisciplinary teaching reform projects and industry-education integration cooperation teams, and encourage cross-departmental collaborative innovation. Incorporate the construction effectiveness of professional learning communities into the annual performance assessment of departments, and guide teaching and research offices to transform spontaneous collaboration into structured and normalized professional development activities.

Improve Communication Channels and Comprehensively Enhance Information Transparency

Release supporting background interpretation materials simultaneously when issuing official policies, explaining the policy formulation basis, expected goals and implementation rationale, so as to help teachers fully understand the decision-making logic and improve whole-process transparency. Hold regular special policy interpretation meetings, establish a face-to-face communication mechanism between the management and front-line teachers, and respond to teachers' concerns and questions on site. Launch an anonymous teacher feedback system on the campus digital platform, clarify the response time limit and handling process, protect teachers' right to speak while ensuring the openness of information processing, and enhance teachers' psychological safety of expression.

Improve the Shared Responsibility Mechanism and Accountability System

Revise the job responsibility descriptions of various committees and working groups, clearly define the responsibility scope, performance requirements and fulfillment period of governance participants, so as to avoid problems such as unclear responsibility boundaries and overlapping obligations. Establish performance evaluation indicators for governance participation, incorporate teachers' contributions to college governance into the annual comprehensive assessment, and form a closed-loop operation mechanism that unifies responsibility and incentive. Carry out shared responsibility culture construction activities, select and commend typical cases of collective dedication, and guide teachers to transform responsibility awareness from external constraints to internal driving force.

CONCLUSION

This study systematically investigates the current status of teacher participatory leadership development in Guangdong Polytechnic by using a mixed research method of questionnaire survey and in-depth interview. The research results show that the overall level of participatory leadership is at a medium level, with unbalanced development across dimensions. Collaborative practices and shared responsibility have formed a good cultural foundation at the high level, while decision-making participation and communication transparency are core weak links at the medium level. Main problems include formalized decision-making channels, insufficient time guarantee for participation, unequal distribution of participation opportunities, unsmooth two-way communication, and inadequate institutionalization of shared responsibility.

Based on distributed leadership theory, organizational support theory and educational administration frameworks, this study puts forward five targeted improvement strategies from the aspects of decision-making mechanism, participation guarantee, collaborative community, communication transparency and responsibility system. These strategies are closely combined with the characteristics of vocational education and the actual situation of Guangdong Polytechnic, with strong operability and practicality, which can provide an important reference for Guangdong Polytechnic and similar vocational colleges to optimize teacher participatory leadership development and improve institutional governance effectiveness.

This study contributes empirical evidence to the literature on participatory leadership in vocational higher education and provides practical guidance for institutional leadership development.

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