Public Perception of Teacher Leaders

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Abstract

Teacher leaders function in a community context that supports or constrains their leadership depending on stakeholders' and community members' perceptions of teacher leaders. Positive public perceptions cultivate a conducive environment that supports teacher leaders in decision-making, while negative perceptions create barriers to effective leadership. This paper examines public perceptions of teacher leaders and their influence on the leaders' leadership practices and experiences. The article is a review examining studies on public perceptions of leaders from various global cultures. The findings were: a) cultural contexts highly influence the public's perceptions of teacher leaders, b) teacher leaders' social competence affects public perceptions, and c) gender stereotypes affect public views on teachers and teacher leadership. The paper also reveals that these factors can affect teachers' decision to take on leadership positions and teacher leaders' behavior and decision-making process. These findings call for more in-depth research on the impact of public perceptions on effective teacher leadership and decision-making.

Keywords: Teacher leadership, leadership, school teachers, teachers' public standing, school leaders, educational leadership.

Introduction

Teacher leaders hold an essential role in society due to their capacity to reform the educational system and educate students. Teacher leaders affect the quality of education as they influence student learning achievement and other teachers' performances [4]. The public has historically held positive perceptions regarding the teaching profession. However, contemporary society's perceptions of teachers and teacher leaders have changed to reflect negative attitudes [3], [4]. The efficiency of the teaching practice is related to the social and public's attitudes towards the profession. Teacher leaders play a central role in the social and individual development of children. Kyhtymova and Rozhkova [3] contended that the attitudes regarding teacher leaders among the public affect the education process' performance. Public perceptions of teachers can create an enabling or constraining environment that either supports or hinders teacher leaders from effectively conducting their duties.

Teachers globally take various leadership roles in the school environment, from early childhood teachers to high education teachers. Wang and Xia [9] reported that teacher leadership programs globally seek to improve teachers' pedagogical and leadership practices to elevate the quality of the teaching profession. Teacher leadership is an

essential component of the quality of child education. Shah [7] contends that leadership perspectives are culture-specific, and practices may differ across cultures. At the same time, some of the challenges that teacher leaders across the globe face are similar. As the author explained, western research on teacher leadership perspectives has generally omitted the influence of culture on leadership. Cultural considerations are important as they determine how the public thinks, acts, and what they learn [7]. Cultural contexts that uphold gender stereotypes reflect the perspectives on teacher leaders and affect teachers' motivation to take up leadership positions in schools.

Murakami and Törnsen [5] echo these sentiments as they explain that women teachers face either a supportive or constraining climate when they enter leadership positions. At the same time, while men are regarded as more befitting to take up leadership positions, cultural contexts discourage men from joining the teaching profession as it is viewed as a feminine career [11]. The public perceptions of teacher leaders determine how the individuals develop their professional identity, which affects their leadership effectiveness.

Purpose

This study examines public perceptions of teacher leaders in different cultural contexts. Analyzing how teacher leaders are perceived in different societies provides a deeper understanding of the challenges that teacher leaders face and the community's role in supporting or constraining teacher leadership. Murakami and Törnsen [5] asserted that teachers' professional identities develop from self-concepts founded on attributes, values, beliefs, and experiences with other individuals. Leaders' behavior and their ability and willingness to develop and implement effective and creative leadership depend on the cultivated professional identity. This paper, focused on public perceptions of teacher leaders, is part of a larger conversation on teacher leadership and teacher leaders' professional identities. The paper explores the question: How does the public view teacher leaders?

Rationale

Teacher professional influence and agency are central to the system and school improvements. Harris and Jones [2] explained that teacher leadership has significant potential in educational change and reform, as reflected in the prevalent argument in educational reform discourse that teachers ought to take up an active and central role in policy formation and decision making. Public perspectives on teacher leadership influence how potential teachers regard the profession and the likelihood of pursuing it as a career. Further, given the significance of collaboration among the community, teacher leaders, and the school environment on students' academic performance, positive public perceptions about teachers are critical in influencing positive student outcomes [10]. This paper fosters a more comprehensive understanding of public perceptions on teacher leadership and how this support or constrain teacher leaders. The next section of the paper provides the conceptual framework of teacher leadership.

Conceptual Framework

The definitions of a teacher leader vary greatly. However, the conceptualizations of teacher leadership generally comprise instructional leaders, leading opportunities, re-culturing schools, and collegial norms [9]. Research on teacher leadership varies as authors focus on different aspects in examining the topic. In this paper, teacher leadership was conceptualized as encompassing individuals with teaching responsibilities who maintain classrooms and have other obligations outside of the classroom. In this regard, teacher leadership includes teachers from different academic levels. This definition of the concept contends that the individuals handle teaching responsibilities while also taking charge of leadership responsibilities. Wang and Sia [9] reported that teacher leadership encompasses seven dimensions: management and coordination, professionally developing colleagues, district or school curriculum work, active contribution to the profession, participation in school improvement, pre-service teacher education, and community and parent development. Wenner and Campbell [10] conceptualize such an individual as a hybrid leader as they teach students and lead other teachers.

The selected conceptualization of teacher leadership differentiates the leaders under consideration from other educational leaders such as disciplinary leaders and administrators. Wang and Sia [9] affirmed that teacher leadership in qualitative research primarily focuses on five dimensions. Firstly, research examines teacher leaders' capacity and ability to influence colleagues. This approach focuses on the strategies leaders can use to influence others, including advocating, collaborating, coaching, and sharing. The second dimension covers the development of teachers into teacher leaders. This focus contends that teacher leadership development depends on collegiality and trust, informal collaboration, and relationships [9]. The third prevalent dimension in teacher leadership is

leadership development. This focus addresses how teachers guide coalition, establish urgency and create and communicate a vision.

The fourth topic on the subject is teacher leadership identity, which addresses the individuals' cultivation of professional identities. The fifth dimension covers perceptions of teacher leadership among various stakeholders [8]. Work on this area covers perceptions among students, the teachers themselves, or the community. This paper is part of this last dimension as it addresses public perceptions about teacher leaders. Reviewing the literature on the topic revealed that public perceptions of teacher leaders depend on various factors, including the teachers' gender and social competencies. Further, culture plays a vital role in shaping public perceptions about teacher leaders.

Method

Inclusion Criteria

The selection process in conducting the literature review relied on conceptual considerations. The literature on public perceptions of teacher leaders significantly differs in terms of the data collection methods and the geographic region. Authors from different global regions have studied the public's perception of teachers and teacher leaders. However, while some relied on direct interviews of members of the public, others considered the portrayal of teacher leaders in contemporary media channels and their influence on public perceptions. Additionally, while some studies directly interviewed members of the public, other studies interviewed teacher leaders to explain the phenomenon from their perspective. The literature review included both perspectives to gather more comprehensive information on the subject.

Search Review Methods

Google scholar and the Eric Journals database were used to search for literature. The search parameters were 'teacher leadership' and 'perceptions on teacher leadership .' The search was constrained to research since 2016 to collect recent information on the subject. All of the papers used in the study were descriptive in nature and used qualitative research methods in data collection.

Findings

The nature of interactions between teacher leaders and members of the public significantly affects perceptions. Machmood et al. [4] studied the role of teachers' social competency in influencing public perceptions. The study revealed that individuals harbor different perceptions depending on the interaction with teacher leaders. However, more than half of the study participants agreed that the teaching profession is highly regarded and respected among the public. Teaching is viewed as a noble profession, and teachers' are considered to be polite, assertive, and honest individuals. Nguyen and Trent [6] echo these sentiments as they affirmed that positive relationships between schools, teachers, and the community are critical to cultivating positive perceptions about teacher leaders. Teacher leaders are regarded as custodians of knowledge and an essential component of student success. Positive perceptions enhance collaboration between teachers and communities, allowing the two to reinforce and learn from each other. Nguyen and Trent's [6] study also reported that positive teacher leaders perceptions enable communities to mentor teacher candidates and collaborate with other educators.

In a different study, Tufan [8] examined the public perception of male teacher leaders. The author explained that male teachers are significantly fewer than female teachers, especially in early childhood education. The paper affirmed that male individuals who enter the profession are also likely to leave owing to low salaries, low social profiles of the profession, and public perceptions of masculinity. In this regard, this study contradicts Machmood's [4] assertions that the public views teaching as a noble profession. As the paper further revealed, parents who encounter make pre-school teachers harbor negative attitudes towards them and are skeptical of the children's safety. Xu and Waniganayake's [11] research corroborates these findings. The researchers affirmed the presence of a gender imbalance among early childhood education teachers leaders. The gender imbalance is primarily attributed to gender stereotypes in the community and public convictions that men are becoming 'feminized.'

Chang-Kredl's [1] paper also affirms the gender stereotypes in early childhood education leadership. The author asserted that the gender divide that exists in early childcare also shapes perceptions regarding early childhood teacher leaders. Women are seen as more competent to be in charge of early childhood education since the public perceives them as having better relational and emotional skills than men. Further, the author also affirmed that early

childcare teachers in Canada and the US are likely to abandon the profession due to poor wages. Additionally, early childhood teacher leaders also face public stigma as the significance of their work is underappreciated [1]. The public compares these teachers to babysitters.

Kyshtymova and Rozhkova [3] conducted a study in Russia to assess the public perception of teachers and teacher leaders. The research revealed that teachers have traditionally been regarded respectfully, and the profession is viewed as noble in the public. However, contemporary society harbors different perspectives as the profession the profession's social standing is low. The modern public rates teachers lowly in spite of their significance in the education system. Public information spaces echo the change in perceptions as teachers are regarded and described as unworthy, lost, miserable, and poor [3]. The authors report that television shows, news broadcasts, and feature films propagate these notions and encourage the public to hold negative perceptions of the teaching profession.

The social stigma regarding male teachers has contributed to fewer men in the profession than women. Tufan's [8] study explored some of the public perceptions against male teacher leaders. Some participants felt that men lacked the skills to excel in the profession due to having less empathy, patience and being less understanding than women. At the same time, participants also believed that male teacher leaders were essential to serve as role models for young boys in the institutions. The impact of culture is also evident in these studies. Tufan's [8] research was based in Arizona, while Xu and Waniganayake's [11] study was based in China. As the latter authors revealed, the Chinese culture regards male teachers as 'abnormal,' which discourages individuals from pursuing the profession. However, such stereotypes are arguably commonplace in the global arena. As the authors reported, most European countries, with the exceptions of Denmark, Turkey, and Norway, have close to 3% of teacher leaders in early childhood education. In the United States, the statistic is also low, at 3.2%.

On the other hand, female teacher leaders also face gender stereotypes from communities. Shah [7] reported that in some communities, members positively regard male teacher leaders since men are assumed to be naturally authoritative, which smoothens their leadership journey. On the other hand, female teacher leaders encounter gender stereotypes and struggle to establish strong leadership foundations when constrained by misogynistic attitudes from the community. Shah [7] interviewed various teacher leaders to examine their experience with gender stereotypes in the profession. Female teachers revealed facing a hard time against influential parents, especially when the teacher leaders headed boys' schools. While female participants reported being told they would not accomplish much and feeling scared, none of the male teacher leaders reported the same sentiments. Public perceptions of teacher leaders influence their attitudes towards the career and may hinder them from effectively fulfilling their duties.

The gender stereotypes in the teaching profession support female individuals as teachers but constrain them as teacher leaders. Murakami and Törnsen [5] examined the experiences of female teachers as secondary school principals in Texas and Sweden. The authors affirmed that commonalities in teacher leadership perceptions exist across countries, and the social, political, and economic contexts affect female teacher leaders' career trajectories. Shah's [7] study reflects Murakami and Törnsen's [5] research as female teacher leaders are regarded as ineffective. The authors asserted that the public perception of female teacher leaders is influenced by the second-class-citizen treatment of women experienced globally. Negative societal perceptions on female leaders result in them receiving fewer opportunities for self-actualization and self-development than make leaders. In Shah's [7] paper, male teacher leaders also harbored negative attitudes regarding female teacher leaders, contending that they are often unable to handle authority.

Murakami and Törnsen's [5] paper affirmed these findings, as the study reported that female teacher leaders have to be more conscious of the steps they take to prevent negative judgments from the community. The paper echoed Shah's [7] study. It affirmed that, unlike male teacher leaders, female teacher leaders often have to prove their worthiness of the position and lead in a community that constantly judges their choices harshly.

Discussion

The research revealed that various factors affect the public's perception of teacher leaders. Nonetheless, it is evident that factors regarding the leaders' interaction with the community, social competence, gender, and cultural norms affect the public's perception of teacher leaders.

Social Competency

The public generally regards teaching as a noble profession and teacher leaders as noble individuals with essential functions in society. However, the leaders' interaction with the community members is a critical factor determining the community's perception of the leaders. Social leaders who interact with the community and engage in decision-making processes are more agreeable than leaders who lack social skills. Collaboration between teacher leaders and the community allows the latter to cultivate positive perceptions about the former. The community forms perceptions regarding the leaders depending on the interaction with them. At the same time, the public also generally perceives teacher leaders to be honest, polite, and assertive. Teacher leaders are regarded as custodians of knowledge and wisdom.

Gender

Gender stereotypes are a prevalent phenomenon in the public perception of teacher leaders. Communities trust male teacher leaders to be more adept at leading as men are regarded as natural leaders. However, the community distrusts male teachers and male teacher leaders in early childhood. Men are viewed as lacking the understanding, empathy, and patience to handle young students effectively. On the other hand, while the public positively views female teachers and teacher leaders in early childhood, female teacher leaders in other education levels are regarded as incompetent. The public perceives women as being incapable of effectively handling leadership positions. Female teacher leaders have to be conscious of their actions and actively take measures to illustrate their leadership competency.

At the same time, male teacher leaders also face constraints regarding gender stereotypes. Communities appear to distrust male teacher leaders and teachers, in general, to effectively ensure student safety. The public perception in some communities is that teaching is a female profession, such that men who choose that career path are feminized. As a result, men are highly likely to abandon the teaching profession.

Culture

The research also revealed that culture plays a significant role in the public's perception of teachers. Cultural norms determine gender stereotypes, influencing how the community perceives teacher leaders. In cultures where leadership is male-dominated and seen as the standard, the public harbors negative perceptions of female teacher leaders. Women are regarded as incapable of handling leadership positions competently. In other cultures, the public perceives it as abnormal to have men teachers. Consequently, the education system has fewer men than women. Despite this difference, women teacher leaders are still significantly fewer, including in cultures that negatively regard men in the profession.

Teacher leaders in early childhood education are negatively perceived and compared to babysitters. In the US and Canada, women are seen as better suited for these positions due to better emotional and relational skills. Low public perceptions of teachers are also accompanied by poor pay that incentivizes teacher leaders to leave the profession in search of better-paying jobs.

Conclusion and Implication

The public perceptions of teacher leadership are influenced by cultural contexts and gender stereotypes about leadership and the profession. Teacher leaders' social competency is essential in cultivating public perceptions about teacher leaders. However, gender stereotypes and culturally-informed views on leadership determine how the public regards teacher leaders. The paper's findings call for more research to assess the impact of community perceptions in influencing teacher leaders' decisions and leadership effectiveness.

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