Beyond Compliance: Reimagining Professional Development and Leadership Pathways for Elementary Teachers

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Article Info	Abstract
	Teachers consistently describe the development of expertise as central to their instructional success and long-term commitment to the profession. However, professional development and leadership structures often limit their ability to grow, influence colleagues, or shape schoolwide decisions. This mixed-methods study investigates the impact of current systems of professional learning and leadership on the empowerment of elementary teachers in suburban Chicago. Survey responses from twenty-six teachers and follow-up interviews with four participants reveal a central tension. Teachers are expected to differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, yet they often receive standardized professional development that disregards their experience, expertise, and classroom context. Teachers value learning that supports instructional improvement, but they report barriers that include limited implementation time, administrative demands, initiative fatigue, and the minimal relevance of externally delivered sessions. Using Bass and Riggio's transformational leadership framework, the analysis highlights how current systems fall short of individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and shared influence. Teachers propose differentiated professional development, teacher-led learning, protected collaboration time, and career pathways that enable advancement within the classroom. The study concludes that effective systems must recognize teachers as knowledgeable professionals and design professional learning and leadership structures that support autonomy, collaboration, and instructional impact.

Introduction

According to the Illinois State Report Card, teacher retention in 2024 was 89.6%, with Provisional Licenses comprising 3.1% of the workforce and Novice teachers 6.7% of the total 137,212 educators (Illinois State Board of Education, 2025). While these data suggest relative stability, they obscure a deeper challenge: teachers often leave not solely due to burnout, but because systemic conditions diminish their professional autonomy and capacity for growth. As Kaczmarski noted, "The No. 1 cause of burnout is doing the same thing repeatedly and not seeing results" (cited in ASCD, 2024). Teachers enter the profession with expertise, commitment, and intrinsic motivation, yet many become disenfranchised when their knowledge is undervalued and their opportunities for influence restricted.

A central contradiction underlies this experience. Teachers are expected to differentiate instruction, personalize learning, and respond to the diverse needs of their students, yet the professional development they receive is often standardized, compliance-oriented, and disconnected from classroom realities. Similarly, leadership pathways typically force educators to choose between remaining in the classroom, where their instructional expertise is most valuable, or leaving teaching entirely to pursue administrative roles. This binary structure disregards teachers' desire for meaningful leadership that does not require abandoning students.

Teachers in this study articulated professional growth as an extension of their work with children. One survey participant emphasized the need for opportunities "that will not only impact their professional career but also have a significant impact on positive impacts on student learning and success." Their responses highlight that professional advancement is not solely about career mobility but about strengthening instructional practice and supporting colleagues. Yet, many teachers encounter initiative fatigue, limited time for implementation, administrative burdens, and professional development providers who lack recent classroom experience. These patterns reinforce what several participants described as a "double standard": systems expecting them to differentiate for students while failing to differentiate for teachers.

This study examines how professional development and leadership structures either empower or constrain the growth of elementary teachers. By examining teachers' lived experiences, the research addresses three guiding questions:

1. How do elementary teachers experience current professional development structures, and what changes would make professional learning more meaningful and impactful?
2. What leadership opportunities currently exist for elementary teachers, and how do these structures enable or constrain teacher empowerment?
3. What alternative models for professional development and teacher leadership might better support teacher growth and retention?

Bass and Riggio's (2006) transformational leadership framework offers a valuable lens for examining these issues. Their emphasis on individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation illuminates both the limitations of standardized professional development and the potential of teacher-

led learning and distributed leadership. When professional development fails to account for individual teacher needs or ignores teachers' professional judgment, it works against the principles of transformation. Conversely, when systems cultivate teacher leadership, mentor relationships, collaborative problem-solving, and context-specific learning, they reflect the transformational behaviors that strengthen organizational capacity.

Teacher empowerment is also shaped by the broader professional ecology. Teachers' beliefs, experiences, and opportunities for professional discourse influence their agency within the system (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). When professional learning is geared toward technical compliance rather than intellectual engagement, teachers struggle to locate their practice within a broader professional conversation. This misalignment contributes to the perception that professional development has little impact on improving instruction or recognizing teacher expertise.

The tension between teachers' instructional responsibilities and the structures intended to support them reflects broader systemic patterns. As Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, and Dutton (2023) argue, educational systems often prioritize administrative tasks, such as extensive assessment cycles and data entry, over reflective dialogue about teaching and learning. Teachers in this study echoed this concern, describing how time spent on accountability measures reduces opportunities for collaborative planning, implementation, and adaptation of instructional practices.

This article draws on a larger mixed-methods study on teacher empowerment, focusing specifically on two interconnected areas: professional growth and leadership development. Through surveys with twenty-six elementary teachers and follow-up interviews with four participants, this study investigates how teachers define empowerment, their experiences with current systems, and their visions for more meaningful alternatives. Their insights reveal both the limitations of current structures and the possibilities for reimagined professional development and leadership pathways that value teacher expertise and sustain teachers throughout their careers.

Literature Review

Professional Development in Elementary Education

Scholars consistently emphasize that professional development is essential for teacher growth, yet significant gaps remain between its intended outcomes and the realities teachers experience. Boylan, Adams, Perry, and Booth (2023) caution that professional development often appears transformative but ultimately reinforces conservative knowledge structures, limits agency, and promotes hierarchical relationships within schools. Their critique highlights a persistent problem: professional development often prioritizes compliance, efficiency, or external mandates rather than meaningful instructional improvement.

A more ambitious view of teacher development emerges from Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) concept of professional capital. They argue that educational systems should invest in the long-term development of teachers as highly skilled professionals. Teachers thrive when they are thoroughly prepared, continuously developed, well compensated, and able to exercise judgment informed by experience and collaboration. According to Hargreaves

and Fullan, teaching is technically sophisticated work that requires advanced preparation, collective responsibility, and ongoing refinement rather than scripted practices or narrow skill training.

Research on teacher retention reinforces this perspective. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) found that few teachers cite salary as the primary factor in their decision to leave the profession. Loss of professional autonomy is far more influential. Professional development that restricts teacher judgment or positions teachers as passive recipients can therefore undermine retention even when compensation is adequate.

Boylan et al. (2023) also advocate for transformative professional learning characterized by clear purpose, collaborative relationships, activist professionalism, and critical inquiry into knowledge. Their framework stands in sharp contrast to standardized forms of professional development that prioritize efficiency or uniformity. Transformative professional learning requires contexts in which teachers engage with complex problems, examine inequities, and exercise professional agency.

Teacher agency is further shaped by the broader professional discourse within which teachers work. Apple's (1996) concept of democratic professionalism emphasizes the need for teachers to act as curriculum makers who critically consider the needs of historically underserved communities. Boylan et al. (2023) note that democratic professionalism depends on teacher voice, collaboration, and the ability to engage thoughtfully with educational inequities. Professional development that neglects these elements risks reinforcing the very systems it claims to improve.

Hollweck and Doucet (2022) highlight additional expectations that have become central in post-pandemic contexts, including trauma-informed practice, competency-based learning, student agency, and more relational and culturally responsive pedagogy. Their research indicates that teachers now require professional development that prepares them for increasingly complex instructional demands. Professional development structures that rely on one-size-fits-all content fail to support this level of instructional responsiveness.

Connections between professional learning and teacher retention also appear in Shirrell, Hopkins, and Spillane's (2018) work on educational infrastructure. They argue that professional learning environments influence teachers' beliefs and instructional practices in ways that shape their commitment to the profession. Supportive professional learning cultures therefore serve not only instructional goals but also retention and organizational stability.

Teacher Leadership Structures and Progression

Teacher leadership has received increasing scholarly attention, yet consistent challenges to leadership development persist. Carpenter and Munshower (2020) describe teacher leadership as a stance grounded in identity and orientation rather than a set of discrete behaviors. Their view reinforces the idea that leadership requires environments where teachers exercise professional judgment, collaborate with colleagues, and influence instructional practice.

Carpenter and Munshower also discuss the developmental progression from individual instructional expertise to broader schoolwide influence. Foundational pedagogical skill supports the capacity to lead colleagues, share knowledge, and build organizational capacity. Fairman and Mackenzie's (2012) work, summarized in Carpenter and Munshower's review, identifies nine forms of teacher leadership, including collaboration, problem-solving, professional sharing, and community engagement.

Despite the promise of teacher leadership, obstacles remain. Strictly centralized school cultures can restrict teacher judgment and limit the emergence of leadership. Conversely, extremely loose cultures can create confusion, unclear expectations, or inconsistent communication, resulting in stress and reduced effectiveness. Even in supportive environments, principals play a significant role in either enabling or obstructing leadership. Administrators who withhold decision-making authority, fail to provide support, or rely on favoritism can impede the progression of teacher leaders.

A further complication concerns recognition. Carpenter and Munshower (2020) observe that newer teachers are often motivated to lead, but more experienced teachers receive greater recognition from colleagues. This misalignment can limit opportunities for emerging leaders while failing to fully leverage the wisdom of veteran teachers. Teacher leadership can increase confidence, empowerment, and professional satisfaction; however, teachers also report heightened stress related to changing peer relationships and increased responsibilities.

Teacher leadership roles sometimes provide responsibility without authority, resources, or compensation. Teachers may become coordinators or committee members whose recommendations are rarely enacted. Those circumstances create symbolic rather than authentic leadership, weakening the potential of teacher-led improvement efforts. Although leadership can strengthen school culture and promote professional commitment, it must be intentionally supported to avoid becoming an additional burden that contributes to burnout.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Bass and Riggio's (2006) transformational leadership framework provides a useful lens through which to evaluate professional development and teacher leadership structures. Their model identifies four interconnected components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation.

Individualized consideration emphasizes the importance of supporting individual needs, goals, and contexts. Professional development structures often neglect this principle when they deliver standardized learning experiences to teachers with widely varying levels of expertise. When teachers with decades of experience participate in the same sessions as novices, systems disregard individualized needs and fail to capitalize on teacher expertise.

Intellectual stimulation involves encouraging critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. Professional development that prioritizes compliance, procedural fidelity, or scripted practices undermines intellectual

stimulation by limiting teachers' opportunities to examine complex instructional challenges. Teacher-led inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and action research align more closely with transformational principles because they position teachers as active contributors to knowledge.

Idealized influence centers on modeling ethical and professional conduct. Teacher leaders often serve as informal models for colleagues, demonstrating effective instruction, collegiality, and reflective practice. When schools do not recognize or support these informal leaders, they weaken a natural form of transformational influence within the organization.

Inspirational motivation requires communication of a shared and compelling vision. Professional development can inspire teachers when it clearly connects instructional improvement to student benefit and organizational growth. Sessions that focus on procedural requirements, isolated strategies, or non-contextual content rarely generate such motivation.

Bass and Riggio also argue that effective leadership draws on multiple forms of intelligence, including cognitive, social, emotional, and practical intelligence. Teacher leaders bring varied strengths in these areas, yet professional development structures often fail to nurture them. Leadership models that value mentoring, coaching, and shared responsibility align more closely with transformational leadership and with the professional identities teachers seek.

Teacher Agency and Professional Discourse

Biesta et al. (2015) explore how teacher beliefs shape agency within educational systems. Their research suggests that agency depends not only on teacher will or motivation but also on the professional ecologies in which teachers work. Systems that do not support critical discourse about teaching limit teachers' capacity to exercise judgment or challenge ineffective structures. Biesta et al. (2015) express concern that contemporary professional learning environments often prioritize technical proficiency over intellectual engagement. Teacher education and ongoing professional development may privilege procedural knowledge over opportunities to analyze social, cultural, or ethical dimensions of teaching. Limited exposure to robust professional discourse can confine teachers to the immediate beliefs circulating within their own contexts rather than connecting them to broader theoretical and research-based conversations. Professional development that centers on compliance tasks or procedural training exacerbates this problem. Teachers who rarely engage in reflective or inquiry-based professional conversations may struggle to develop the sense of agency needed to adapt instruction, challenge inequitable practices, or lead colleagues. Professional development grounded in collaborative inquiry and professional discourse, in contrast, supports greater teacher autonomy and growth.

Systems Thinking and Professional Learning

Senge et al. (2023) contribute an important systems-level perspective. Their work suggests that schools often treat teaching as fragmented tasks rather than as part of a dynamic and interdependent system. Teachers, administrators,

and parents each hold knowledge that others lack. Effective systems create structures for knowledge-sharing and collaborative problem-solving rather than treating teachers as implementers of isolated directives. Senge et al. (2023) note that teacher time is frequently consumed by assessment administration, data entry, and accountability tasks that reduce opportunities for reflection. Teachers require time to engage in dialogue about instruction, analyze student learning, and coordinate their work. Excessive administrative requirements can displace these essential forms of professional learning. The authors also note that schools in low-income communities face pronounced pressures from standardized accountability systems. Teachers in such contexts often rely on scripted curricula with limited flexibility. Those conditions restrict professional growth, limit instructional creativity, and reduce the potential benefits of professional development.

Their systems thinking framework highlights the importance of shifting professional development structures from technical training to collaborative learning. Small, targeted shifts in professional learning structures can produce meaningful change when directed at systemic leverage points. For example, providing protected time for teacher collaboration, reorganizing meeting structures, and reducing redundant assessment tasks can increase the time teachers spend engaging in thoughtful discussion of practice.

Literature illustrates that teacher development, leadership progression, and professional agency are shaped by interconnected forces: the quality and purpose of professional learning, the structures that support or restrict teacher leadership, and the schoolwide systems in which teachers work. Research across these domains points to a shared conclusion that empowerment emerges when teachers engage in meaningful learning, exercise instructional influence, and work within environments that value judgment, collaboration, and intellectual inquiry. Figure 1 synthesizes these intersecting strands by mapping the major domains identified in the literature and highlighting how they collectively inform contemporary understandings of teacher development and leadership.

Professional Learning & Professional Capital
(teacher growth, autonomy, meaningful PD)

Teacher Leadership Capacities
(identity, influence, collaboration)

Transformational Leadership Principles
(individualized support, intellectual stimulation)

Agency Through Professional Discourse
(critical inquiry, reflective practice)

System Conditions That Enable or Restrict Growth
(time, collaboration, assessment load)

Figure 1. Interconnected Foundations of Teacher Learning and Leadership

Methodology

This article draws from a larger mixed-methods study that examined teacher empowerment in K–5 public schools. The broader study investigated four interrelated themes. These included collective support and silent solidarity, professional growth and instructional impact, professional trust and autonomy, and leadership development opportunities. The present article focuses on the strands related to professional growth and leadership development. The analysis uses Bass and Riggio's transformational leadership framework as an interpretive lens.

Participants and Context

Participants included 26 elementary teachers from suburban Chicago school districts who completed an online survey. Four teachers participated in follow-up interviews. Two interviews were conducted individually, and one was conducted with a pair of teachers. Participants represented a range of grade levels, career stages, and district contexts. Teaching experience ranged from 3 to 36 years, with an average of 18.8 years. Teachers worked across approximately 15 to 20 school districts. The diversity of experience provided wide-ranging insight into how professional development and leadership opportunities operate across different environments.

Data Collection
Survey Phase

The online survey gathered demographic information and invited teachers to describe their experiences with empowerment, professional development, and leadership opportunities. Likert-scale items were used to explore patterns across the sample. Open-ended questions allowed teachers to define empowerment, explain specific challenges, and propose solutions. The survey served as both a data collection tool and a foundation for identifying themes that would shape the interview questions. Survey response patterns that shaped the interview questions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey Themes and Representative Response Patterns

Theme Identified in Survey	Description	Example Survey Comment (Paraphrased)
Differentiation vs. Standardized PD	PD not adapted to experience	"We differentiate for students, but PD treats us as the same."
Time Constraints	Lack of time to implement or reflect	"New initiatives start before the last one ends."
Administrative Load	Testing & documentation burdens	"Weeks lost to assessment cycles."
Leadership Constraints	Limited authority or symbolic roles	"Committees ask for input but do not use it."

Interview Phase

Semi-structured interviews provided deeper insight into themes identified in the survey, allowing teachers to elaborate on experiences of empowerment and disempowerment. Questions focused on the relationship between professional development, leadership opportunities, and instructional improvement, as well as the alignment between professional development content and classroom realities. Each interview began with a brief summary of the survey findings, allowing participants to clarify or expand on their earlier responses. The format encouraged open dialogue, and teachers frequently connected their experiences to broader systemic conditions. The group interview offered an additional advantage, as teachers from different districts identified similar challenges and proposed comparable solutions.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis followed a systematic process using ATLAS.ti Web Educational to organize, code, and analyze interview transcripts. After verifying transcript accuracy, a coding framework based on survey themes and the literature review was developed and applied to identify recurring patterns and concepts. ATLAS.ti tools supported examination of code frequencies, relationships among codes, and emerging themes across districts.

Themes related to professional development, leadership, instructional impact, and system-level conditions were compared across participants. Survey responses served as an initial map of major ideas, and frequently occurring concepts informed the preliminary coding structure. Triangulation of survey data, interview narratives, and relevant literature strengthened the credibility of the findings. Table 2 presents the coding framework that guided the organization of survey and interview data during analysis.

Table 2. Coding Framework Developed in ATLAS.ti

Code Category	Subcodes	Description	Source
PD Alignment	Differentiation, Contextual Relevance	Fit between PD content and classroom needs	Survey + Interview
Barriers to Growth	Time, Administrative Load	Factors restricting improvement	Interview
Leadership Conditions	Formal, Informal, Symbolic	Types and quality of leadership roles	Interview + Literature
Empowerment Indicators	Agency, Voice, Trust	What empowers teachers in their work	Survey + Interview + Literature

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the researcher's university. Participants were provided detailed information about the study and gave informed consent through the recruitment email, written

confirmation, and verbal agreement at the start of each interview. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, generalized descriptors, and altered district identifiers. Participants were invited to clarify or revise their statements during and after interviews. All transcripts were de-identified prior to analysis, and documentation of coding decisions and analytic procedures ensured transparency and dependability.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's background as a former teacher, school administrator, and current university professor informed the study. Twenty years of experience in K–5 education provided both contextual understanding and potential bias. A conscious effort was made to center the teacher's voice throughout data collection and analysis. Member checking, triangulation, and adherence to qualitative rigor supported balanced interpretation. The goal of the study was to understand teacher experiences from their own perspectives, rather than through administrative assumptions.

Results: Emergent Themes

Theme 1: Professional Growth and Impact

A central pattern that emerged across survey responses and interviews concerned how teachers experience professional growth within their schools. Their accounts revealed a clear relationship between opportunities for learning, the conditions that support or restrict growth, and the extent to which teachers feel empowered in their work. These insights formed the first major theme: the connection between professional development, instructional improvement, and teacher agency. Table 3 provides an overview of the major interview themes (Theme 1 subthemes) and representative teacher statements that shaped the detailed analysis in the sections that follow.

Table 3. Major Subthemes from Interviews with Descriptions and Representative Quotes

Subtheme	Description	Representative Teacher Quote
Professional Growth & Impact	PD as central to empowerment	"My growth helps my students. That is the entire point."
Leadership Opportunities	Instructional leadership valued, but time lacking	"I can lead, but not with a full load and zero time."
Symbolic vs. Authentic Leadership	Voice is solicited but not used	"We share ideas, but decisions are already made."
Informal Leadership	Unrecognized expertise	"Everyone comes to me for help, but it is never acknowledged."

Teachers consistently described empowerment as closely connected to meaningful professional growth and its influence on student learning. They viewed professional development not as isolated training but as a continuous process that refines instructional practice, strengthens pedagogical judgment, and supports colleagues. Growth

was understood as both a personal responsibility and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for students.

Teachers emphasized that experience deepens their instructional thinking and strengthens their ability to guide others. Familiarity with multiple curricula, technology tools, and communication systems enabled them to adapt instruction more effectively and mentor newer colleagues. They also highlighted the emotional steadiness gained over time, which contributes to more responsive classroom environments and supports collaborative problem-solving within grade-level teams. In this way, professional growth operated simultaneously at individual and relational levels, enriching both instructional practice and collegial relationships.

Despite this strong desire to develop professionally, teachers identified several barriers that restrict meaningful growth. The most frequently cited concern was the prevalence of one-size-fits-all professional development. Teachers noted the contradiction between being expected to differentiate instruction for students while receiving standardized training that disregards differences in experience, grade levels, or instructional contexts. They described broad topics presented without attention to the realities of classroom practice, such as diverse learners, large class sizes, multilingual students, or the absence of support staff.

Teachers also emphasized limited time for implementation and reflection. New initiatives are often introduced quickly, with little opportunity for teachers to apply strategies, receive feedback, or refine their practice. Many referenced initiative fatigue, noting that schools frequently shift priorities before earlier efforts can be meaningfully integrated. Administrative burdens and assessment demands further constrain professional growth. Several participants estimated that assessment cycles consume weeks of instructional time, displacing opportunities for collaboration, planning, and instructional reflection.

Another concern involved professional development facilitated by individuals without recent classroom experience. Teachers felt that such sessions often overlooked practical constraints and offered idealized strategies that did not account for their day-to-day realities. This disconnect reduced the relevance and perceived value of professional learning, reinforcing feelings of disempowerment.

Even within these constraints, teachers described how professional experience strengthens instructional decision-making and contributes to a broader systems-level understanding of curriculum, assessment, and student needs. Their insights often served as a form of institutional memory, supporting schoolwide implementation during periods of transition or change. Teachers noted that this systems thinking, cultivated over years of practice, enables them to anticipate challenges, evaluate new initiatives, and guide colleagues more effectively. However, they also expressed that professional development structures rarely recognize or leverage this expertise.

Across participants, professional growth was consistently linked to the impact on students. Teachers emphasized that meaningful development enhances their ability to respond to diverse learners and refine instructional choices. Collaboration, reflection, and deeper understanding of methodologies all contributed to improved student engagement and success. Teachers viewed professional growth not only as a personal benefit but as an ethical commitment to high-quality instruction.

Teachers' reflections on professional growth also pointed to a broader understanding of empowerment as extending beyond individual learning. Many participants explained that meaningful growth depends not only on access to relevant professional development but also on the opportunities they have to influence colleagues, shape instructional practices, and contribute to schoolwide decisions. Their comments suggested that the conditions surrounding leadership are closely connected to their experiences of growth and to their overall sense of agency. This connection leads to the second major theme, which examines how teachers perceive leadership opportunities within their schools.

Theme 2: Leadership Development Opportunities

In addition to describing their experiences with professional development, teachers also detailed how leadership opportunities shape their sense of influence and professional identity. Their reflections highlighted the structures that enable or constrain their ability to lead within their schools. These perspectives formed the second major theme, focusing on the nature of leadership roles available to teachers and the conditions that make leadership meaningful.

Teachers described leadership opportunities as an important dimension of empowerment, though the availability and quality of these opportunities varied widely across districts. Participants recognized that leadership can deepen professional growth, strengthen school culture, and contribute to instructional improvement. However, they also noted that many existing structures offer responsibility without influence, time, or support, which limits their effectiveness and can lead to frustration.

Teachers identified several formal leadership roles, such as union positions, committee membership, team leader responsibilities, and roles tied to school initiatives, but explained that these positions often hold limited decision-making authority. In many cases, teachers were asked to contribute feedback or develop recommendations, only to learn that key decisions had already been made. This dynamic led participants to describe some leadership roles as symbolic rather than substantive and reinforced perceptions that teacher voice is solicited more for procedural compliance than for genuine influence.

Participants emphasized that leadership grounded in instructional expertise was most meaningful. Opportunities to mentor colleagues, facilitate professional learning communities, or support curricular implementation were viewed as rewarding extensions of their professional identity. These roles encouraged teachers to engage deeply with research, refine their own practice, and strengthen collegial collaboration. Teachers explained that such leadership contributes positively to school culture by modeling reflective practice, supporting newer colleagues, and promoting shared expectations across grade levels.

Despite the benefits of instructional leadership, teachers repeatedly mentioned time as a major obstacle. Leadership responsibilities were typically layered on top of full teaching loads, requiring work during personal time. Without protected time for planning, collaboration, or follow-through, leadership often became unsustainable. Teachers expressed that effective leadership requires structured time within the school day, clear

expectations, and administrative support that aligns responsibilities with instructional priorities.

A significant concern involved limited career pathways that allow teachers to advance while remaining in the classroom. Many participants expressed a desire for increased influence without assuming administrative positions, which they felt often did not match their strengths or interests. Teachers noted that colleagues who moved into administration sometimes did so reluctantly, primarily because leadership opportunities for classroom teachers were scarce. Participants described this binary career structure as restrictive and misaligned with their professional goals.

Teachers also highlighted the importance of informal leadership within schools. Colleagues frequently rely on individuals recognized for their instructional skill, composure, and experience, even when these teachers do not hold formal titles. Informal leaders often guide grade-level practices, support implementation during new initiatives, and provide reassurance or problem-solving during challenging moments. However, teachers noted that these contributions are rarely acknowledged or supported. Informal leaders may assume significant responsibilities without recognition, resources, or relief from other duties, which can lead to burnout and diminish the benefits they bring to the professional culture.

Across interviews, teachers proposed several solutions to strengthen leadership development. They recommended formalizing opportunities for teacher-led decision-making, ensuring that administrators respond transparently to committee recommendations, and creating structures that clearly communicate which decisions involve teacher input. Teachers also advocated for protected time for leadership functions, recognition of informal leaders, and the creation of master teacher roles, hybrid positions, and specialist pathways that maintain a connection to classroom teaching. Such structures, they explained, would not only support teacher empowerment but also improve retention by allowing accomplished educators to grow professionally without leaving the students they serve.
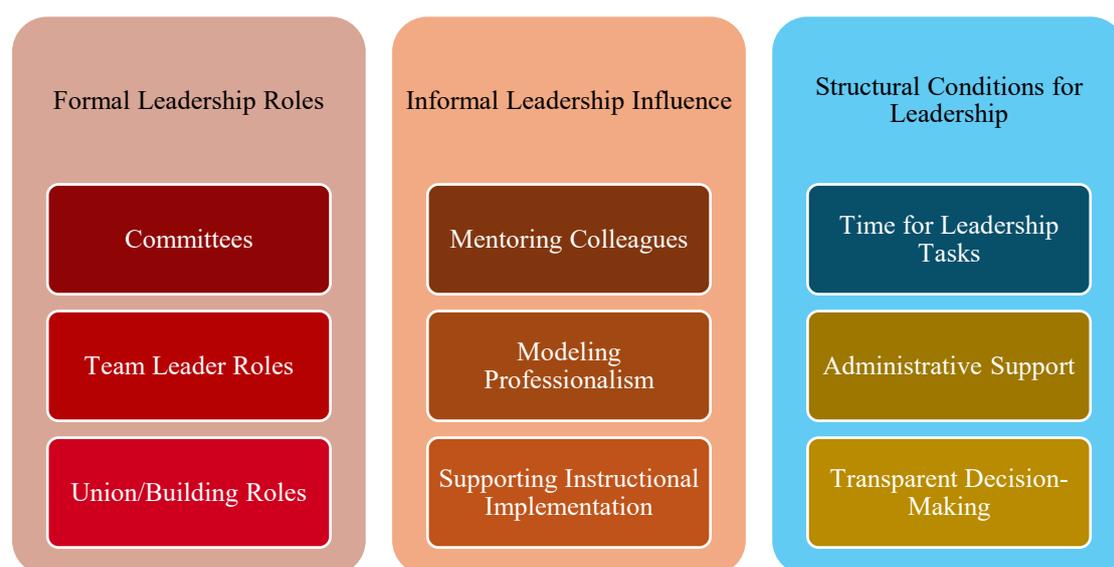

Figure 2. Three Interconnected Dimensions

To clarify how these findings collectively illuminate the nature of teacher leadership, Figure 2 organizes the core elements described by participants into three interconnected dimensions: the formal roles teachers are appointed to, the informal influence they exercise through expertise and collegial support, and the structural conditions that determine whether leadership can be sustained. This visual summary highlights the contrast between symbolic responsibilities and the meaningful instructional leadership teachers enact daily, while also underscoring the systemic supports required for empowerment.

Discussion

The findings reveal clear tensions between the expectations placed on teachers and the structures in place to support their professional development and leadership. The teachers in the study demonstrated a strong professional commitment and consistently linked their learning to the needs of their students. They viewed growth as an ethical responsibility tied to instructional improvement, reflective practice, and collegial influence. However, the professional development and leadership systems in which they worked often limited their ability to apply their expertise, pursue meaningful advancement, or influence schoolwide decisions. The discussion examines these tensions in relation to existing scholarship, with a focus on teacher agency, professional capital, and transformational leadership. Table 4 contrasts current professional development and leadership structures with the alternatives teachers recommended, offering a concise framework for interpreting the discussion that follows.

Table 4. Current PD/Leadership Structures vs. Teacher-Recommended Alternatives

Current System Practice	Problems Identified by Teachers	Teacher-Recommended Alternative
Standardized PD	Disregards expertise	Differentiated, teacher-led PD pathways
Externally delivered PD	Lacks relevance	Facilitators with recent classroom experience
Symbolic leadership roles	No decision-making power	Leadership with real influence and transparency
Administrative career-only pathways	Removes experts from classrooms	Master teacher, hybrid, and specialist roles
Limited collaboration time	Fragmented implementation	Protected time in schedules

Instructional Expertise and the Contradiction of Differentiation

Teachers described a persistent contradiction between expectations for differentiated instruction and the standardized professional development they were required to attend. Professional development delivered identically to educators with three years and thirty years of experience disregards Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) emphasis on professional capital and the importance of cultivating teachers' accumulated knowledge. Teachers

recognized that their instructional judgment improves with experience, yet professional development structures often treat teachers as interchangeable. Boylan, Adams, Perry, and Booth (2023) argue that such structures reinforce hierarchical knowledge systems and limit teacher agency. The current findings support this claim: teachers reported that standardized workshops rarely acknowledged their expertise or provided opportunities to extend their practice.

The expectation that teachers differentiate for students while receiving undifferentiated professional development undermines professional trust. Teachers reported that these inconsistencies diminish respect for professional learning and reduce motivation to engage with presented material. Shirrell, Hopkins, and Spillane (2018) emphasize that school infrastructure influences teacher beliefs and long-term commitment. Professional development structures that disregard expertise weaken the instructional culture on which improvement depends.

Professional Development, Time, and the Knowledge Ecology

Teachers identified time as one of the most significant barriers to professional growth. Professional development rarely allows time for implementation, revision, or reflection, and district initiatives are often abandoned prematurely. Brookfield's (1987) cycle of critical thinking requires deliberate experimentation, evaluation, and refinement. Teachers in this study described how administrative burdens, assessment cycles, and data-entry requirements displace this developmental process. These findings align with Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, and Dutton's (2023) systems thinking framework, which emphasizes the importance of collaborative inquiry and reflective dialogue. Teachers consistently expressed that time allocated to testing reduces opportunities for the conversations necessary to improve instruction.

Professional development facilitated by individuals without recent classroom experience further restricts the knowledge ecology. Teachers emphasized that strategies presented by external providers often lack contextual relevance and do not reflect the complexities of actual instructional practice. Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) argue that teacher agency depends on access to meaningful professional discourse. Professional development that is disconnected from classroom realities limits opportunities for teachers to engage critically with ideas or adapt them to local contexts. Teachers' concerns regarding practicality highlight the need for professional learning delivered by individuals who understand instructional demands.

Leadership Roles and the Challenge of Symbolic Participation

Teachers acknowledged that leadership can strengthen instruction, deepen collaboration, and contribute to professional identity. However, many leadership roles offered limited authority and involved tasks performed without adequate time or administrative support. Teachers described committee structures in which their recommendations were solicited but rarely implemented. Several participants reported feeling discouraged when leadership roles appeared symbolic rather than substantive.

Carpenter and Munshower (2020) describe teacher leadership as a developmental stance that strengthens

professional confidence and collaboration. Fairman and Mackenzie's (2012) categories of leadership, as summarized in Carpenter and Munshower's analysis, include collaboration, problem-solving, and professional sharing. Teachers in the present study identified these activities as forms of leadership they valued, yet they noted that formal structures often did not support them. Leadership opportunities that lack decision-making authority fall short of Carpenter and Munshower's conceptualization of leadership as an authentic extension of instructional expertise.

Teachers also expressed concern that leadership selection sometimes reflected personal preference rather than expertise. This practice can weaken trust and contribute to staff divisions, which ultimately undermine school culture. Teachers described how ineffective selection processes prevented the emergence of leaders whose instructional knowledge could strengthen improvement efforts. These findings reinforce Boylan et al.'s (2023) observation that power relations within schools influence the shape of professional learning.

Informal Leadership and the Unrecognized Expertise of Teachers

Informal leadership emerged as a significant source of influence across schools. Teachers frequently rely on colleagues whose experience, composure, or instructional skill makes them valuable mentors. These individuals often guide curricular decisions, support new teachers, and model effective problem-solving. Their contributions illustrate Senge et al.'s (2023) argument that organizations benefit from distributed expertise.

Teachers expressed that informal leaders frequently assume responsibilities without recognition or time for leadership tasks. Informal leadership is often expected rather than formally acknowledged, and teachers observed that administrators rely on these individuals without providing support. A lack of recognition reduces morale and contributes to burnout, especially for teachers who simultaneously manage full teaching loads and informal leadership responsibilities.

Recognition of informal leadership could strengthen professional culture by affirming the value of accumulated expertise. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) describe professional capital as multifaceted, including human, social, and decisional capital. Informal leaders demonstrate all three, yet their contributions often remain invisible within formal structures. Schools that identify, support, and develop informal leaders may sustain more stable and responsive instructional cultures.

The Limits of Administrative Career Pathways

Teachers frequently expressed the desire to advance professionally without leaving the classroom. Many participants did not wish to become administrators but wanted opportunities to lead instructional work, mentor colleagues, or contribute to school improvement. The absence of such pathways reinforces what teachers described as a binary career structure. Teachers noted that colleagues who pursued administration often left teaching reluctantly, and their departure removed expertise from the classroom.

The literature supports the need for alternative career pathways. Boylan et al. (2023) describe activist professionalism as a model in which teachers lead through inquiry and collaboration rather than administrative authority. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) emphasize the importance of decision-making capital, which experienced teachers develop through years of instructional practice. Schools that rely exclusively on administrative advancement to define leadership risk losing the instructional strengths of their most accomplished educators.

Teachers recommended master teacher roles, hybrid teaching-coaching positions, curriculum specialist roles, and extended-year contracts as pathways that allow advanced responsibilities while maintaining classroom commitments. These possibilities align with transformational leadership principles, particularly individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Teachers experienced leadership most positively when administrators supported growth tailored to their expertise and encouraged them to pursue instructional inquiry.

Professional Learning and Transformational Leadership

Teachers' experiences align closely with Bass and Riggio's (2006) transformational leadership framework, which emphasizes individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation. The findings revealed that professional development rarely reflects individualized consideration, as teachers with extensive experience often participate in sessions designed for novices, which are frequently focused on procedural compliance rather than inquiry that stimulates intellectual engagement. Idealized influence emerged in teachers' descriptions of informal leaders who modeled professionalism, composure, and adaptability; however, inspirational motivation was limited because professional development tended to emphasize administrative expectations over shared visions for instructional growth. Teachers sought leadership that affirms their expertise, encourages reflective inquiry, and positions them as knowledgeable professionals capable of shaping schoolwide practice. Schools that incorporate transformational principles may cultivate professional cultures that strengthen teacher agency and reduce attrition.

Professional Culture and Teacher Empowerment

Teacher empowerment was closely tied to professional culture, which teachers described as requiring respect for expertise, collaboration grounded in shared responsibility, and systems that support authentic leadership. Empowerment strengthened professional identity, improved instructional decision-making, and contributed to school improvement, while disempowerment stemmed from structures that limited teachers' ability to influence decisions, apply knowledge, or engage in meaningful professional discourse. Administrative burdens and assessment obligations reduced opportunities for collaboration, and symbolic leadership roles diminished trust when teacher input had little effect on outcomes. Professional development that lacked differentiation or contextual relevance reinforced perceptions that system-level practices do not reflect the realities of teaching. Teachers recommended differentiated professional development, protected collaboration time, recognition of informal leaders, and alternative career pathways, reflecting principles of professional capital, activist professionalism, and transformational leadership.

Leadership for Schools and Districts

Findings from the study indicate that schools and districts should differentiate professional development to align with teachers' expertise, grade levels, and student populations, and should reduce administrative burdens that limit time for collaboration, reflection, and instructional planning. Leadership structures require genuine decision-making authority, transparent selection processes, and recognition for informal leaders who make significant contributions to schoolwide practices. Districts are encouraged to create career pathways that allow accomplished educators to remain in classroom-focused roles, such as master teacher positions, instructional leadership roles, or hybrid teacher-coach appointments. Leaders should also revisit meeting structures, schedules, and expectations to ensure protected time for collaborative work. Schools that cultivate cultures grounded in trust, professional inquiry, and shared responsibility are more likely to attract and retain skilled teachers, underscoring the importance of aligning professional development and leadership systems with the values and expertise teachers bring to their work.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings have several implications for schools, districts, and policymakers who aim to strengthen teacher empowerment, enhance instructional quality, and support long-term teacher retention. Teachers demonstrated deep professional knowledge and a desire to grow, yet many systems limited their opportunities to apply expertise, lead colleagues, or influence decision-making. The implications and recommendations reflect the need for structural redesign grounded in professional capital, teacher agency, and transformational leadership. Table 5 summarizes the key implications across school, district, and policy levels.

Table 5. Implications and Recommended Actions

Level	Key Implication	Recommended Action
School	Empowerment tied to PD differentiation	Create tiered PD pathways and grade-band learning groups
School	Need for collaboration time	Redesign schedules to embed protected planning time
District	Leadership roles limited	Develop hybrid teaching-coaching roles and master teacher pathways
District	PD disconnected from classrooms	Use current teacher-leaders as facilitators
Policy	Overreliance on administrative pathways	Fund multi-tiered teaching careers
Policy	Administrative burden harms growth	Balance accountability with instructional time

Implications for Professional Development

Professional development systems must acknowledge the differentiated needs of teachers. Teachers repeatedly described experiences in which standardized sessions disregarded their expertise and did not address the

complexities of classroom instruction. Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) professional capital framework emphasizes that effective professional learning honors experience, encourages collegial inquiry, and supports context-specific problem-solving. Systems that treat teachers as uniform participants risk diminishing motivation and lowering the potential impact of professional development.

Teachers' concerns regarding lack of implementation time and excessive administrative demands indicate that professional development cannot be separated from broader structural influences. Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, and Dutton (2023) note that reflective dialogue and collaborative inquiry are essential to improvement. Schools that allocate disproportionate time to assessment cycles and documentation limit teachers' opportunities to engage in the conversations necessary to advance instructional practice. Educational leaders must therefore consider the relationship between workload, time, and conditions that support sustained professional growth.

Professional development must also reflect meaningful professional discourse. Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) argue that agency depends on environments that allow teachers to engage critically with ideas and adapt them to context. Teachers in the study expressed that professional development facilitated by individuals without recent classroom experience weakened the relevance of the presented material. Districts and schools should therefore include presenters with current instructional knowledge or embed teacher-led professional development to ground learning in lived practice.

Implications for Leadership Development

Teachers expressed a strong interest in leadership roles that support instruction without requiring them to depart from the classroom. Current career structures rarely offer such pathways, which reinforces a limited definition of advancement. The findings suggest that schools risk losing accomplished teachers when leadership is equated exclusively with administrative positions. Teachers identified the absence of authentic decision-making authority, limited time, and inconsistent support as central barriers to effective leadership.

Carpenter and Munshower (2020) and Fairman and Mackenzie (2012) describe teacher leadership as grounded in collaboration, professional sharing, and instructional influence. Teachers in the study valued leadership functions that allowed them to mentor colleagues or guide improvement efforts. However, symbolic leadership roles or inconsistent administrative follow-through diminished enthusiasm and trust. Leadership development must therefore include clearly defined responsibilities, transparent selection processes, and structural support for teachers who assume leadership functions.

Informal leadership represents a crucial yet underappreciated source of professional expertise. Teachers often rely on colleagues whose experience and composure make them trusted guides. Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) concept of decisional capital highlights the knowledge gained through years of instructional judgment. Schools should identify and support informal leaders by providing them with recognition, resources, and opportunities to engage with colleagues. Failure to acknowledge informal leadership can contribute to burnout and limit

instructional improvement.

Implications for School Culture

School culture strongly influences teacher empowerment. Teachers described empowerment as a function of trust, respect, and meaningful professional relationships. When professional development and leadership structures do not reflect teacher knowledge, empowerment declines. Teachers also explained that symbolic or performative leadership structures weaken morale and reduce willingness to participate in schoolwide initiatives.

Schools that cultivate cultures grounded in shared responsibility and collaborative inquiry create an environment that fosters professional growth. Shirrell, Hopkins, and Spillane (2018) emphasize that school infrastructure shapes beliefs and commitment. The findings suggest that teacher empowerment depends on organizational routines that support collegial dialogue, reduce administrative burdens, and align responsibilities with instructional goals.

Recommendations for Schools
Differentiated Professional Development

Schools should design professional development that aligns with teachers' experience, grade levels, and instructional needs. Differentiation may include tiered sessions, teacher-selected learning pathways, or grade-band groups. Experienced educators should receive opportunities to pursue advanced content, engage in research-informed inquiry, or lead collaborative learning.

Protected Time for Collaboration and Reflection

Schools should reexamine schedules to provide protected collaboration time. Structures may include redesigned faculty meetings, common planning periods, or embedded coaching cycles. Teachers emphasized that time for reflection and implementation is essential for sustained improvement.

Recognition of Informal Leadership

Schools should identify informal leaders and acknowledge their contributions through professional recognition, invitations to shape initiatives, or reduced non-instructional duties. Recognition strengthens professional culture and affirms that teacher expertise is valued.

Recommendations for Districts
Development of Alternative Leadership Pathways

Districts should establish leadership roles that allow teachers to maintain classroom responsibilities. Potential pathways include master teacher roles, hybrid positions that combine coaching with teaching, curriculum

specialist appointments, or extended contracts for instructional leadership. Such pathways support retention and preserve instructional expertise within schools.

Alignment of Professional Development with Classroom Realities

Professional development should be informed by teachers' knowledge and grounded in contemporary classroom experience. Districts may build professional development programs facilitated by current teachers, instructional coaches, or educators with recent classroom backgrounds. Teachers should be involved in planning and evaluating professional development to ensure alignment with practice.

Reduction of Administrative Burdens

Districts should review assessment demands, documentation requirements, and non-instructional tasks to ensure that teachers have adequate time for collaboration and instructional planning. Teachers consistently reported that administrative obligations displace professional learning and impede instructional refinement.

Recommendations for Policymakers
Support for Multi-Tiered Teaching Careers

Policymakers should create structures that encourage career advancement within the classroom. Teacher leadership pathways can reduce attrition and maintain instructional expertise in schools. Funding models could support teacher-leader stipends, hybrid roles, or extended contracts focused on instructional improvement.

Investment in Professional Learning Systems

Policy decisions should prioritize professional development that reflects evidence-based practices, differentiated learning, and teacher-led inquiry. Investments in collaborative professional learning communities, instructional coaching, and peer mentoring all contribute to long-term improvements in instructional quality.

Evaluation and Accountability Systems

Policymakers should ensure that evaluation systems strike a balance between accountability and professional growth. Teachers expressed that excessive assessment requirements and data collection reduce instructional time. Evaluation systems should recognize teacher expertise, support reflection, and promote improvement rather than compliance alone.

Conclusion

The study shows that teacher empowerment is closely tied to the quality of professional development, the nature of leadership opportunities, and the culture that shapes instructional practice. Teachers expressed a strong desire

to grow professionally and strengthen their impact on students, yet the systems designed to support them often lacked differentiation, contextual relevance, or the time necessary for meaningful implementation. Standardized professional development that treated all teachers the same weakened trust, reduced motivation, and conflicted with the expectation that teachers differentiate instruction for students.

Leadership emerged as an additional pathway for empowerment, particularly when roles involved collaboration, mentoring, and instructional support. Teachers valued opportunities to guide grade-level practices or assist colleagues; however, leadership positions without decision-making authority or administrative backing often led to frustration and perceptions of symbolic participation rather than authentic influence. Informal leadership played a significant role in sustaining school culture, as experienced teachers often supported colleagues during instructional and organizational transitions. However, this form of leadership was rarely acknowledged or supported, increasing the risk of burnout when these responsibilities accumulated without recognition or relief.

Participants emphasized the need for leadership pathways that allow educators to advance while remaining in the classroom. Many teachers sought increased responsibility but not administrative roles, noting that the current reliance on administrative advancement removes instructional expertise from classrooms. Suggested alternatives included master teacher roles, hybrid teaching and coaching positions, and specialist roles focused on curriculum or mentoring. Teachers also identified time as a central factor in empowerment, explaining that assessment demands, documentation requirements, and meeting structures reduce opportunities for collaboration and instructional refinement.

Taken together, the findings suggest that empowerment grows when systems recognize teacher expertise, differentiate professional learning opportunities, and provide genuine opportunities for influence. Empowerment is supported by cultures grounded in trust, inquiry, and shared purpose, where structures align with teachers' professional identities and the complexity of instructional work. Teachers responded positively when their knowledge was valued and when collaborative problem-solving and reflection were integral to school routines.

Educational leaders have an opportunity to redesign professional development and leadership systems in ways that strengthen teacher agency. Differentiated professional learning, recognition of informal leaders, protected time for collaboration, and expanded leadership pathways represent concrete steps toward more supportive environments. Districts and policymakers can reinforce these efforts by reducing administrative burdens, connecting professional development to current classroom realities, and investing in multi-tiered teaching careers.

Empowering teachers is not aspirational. It is essential for maintaining instructional quality, improving student learning, and retaining skilled educators. When systems honor teachers' expertise and create conditions that nurture growth, schools are better positioned to meet the needs of their students and communities.

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