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Teacher leadership through an Arab lens: a contextual and culturally grounded reconceptualisation

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored teacher leadership as conceptualised through an Arab lens, drawing on perspectives of 17 non – teacher leaders from ten Arab countries. Using an interpretive approach grounded in situated praxis theory, semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed to reveal three intersecting conceptions: (1) contextual enactment rooted in spiritual consciousness, moral discernment, and alignment with communal values; (2) relational enactment expressed through trust-building, humility, and compassion; and (3) political mediation involving the negotiation of imposed reforms and affirmation of localised educational ethics. While findings affirm elements of existing relational and identity-based models, they also problematise the applicability of leadership frameworks predominantly developed within Western sociocultural contexts and often transferred to non-Western systems without sufficient cultural adaptation. The study foregrounds a spiritually attuned, ethically grounded, and socially legitimised conception of leadership, calling for a re-theorisation of teacher leadership that is ecologically responsive and epistemologically plural, offering an empirically derived definition centred on spiritual integrity, moral purpose, and collective trust.

KEYWORDS

Teacher leadership; Arab educational context; situated praxis; cultural relationality; ethical leadership; relational trust

Introduction

Teacher leadership conceptually derives from Western-based paradigms of transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership. Through a transformational lens, teacher leaders are viewed as inspiring colleagues toward shared vision and moral purpose (Bass 1985; Burns 1978; Harris 2003). From a distributed perspective, leadership is understood as a collective, relational process enacted through collaboration and shared decision-making (Grönn 2002; Harris and Lambert 2003; Spillane 2006). Meanwhile, the instructional

leadership tradition situates teacher leaders as catalysts for improving teaching and learning through mentoring, modelling, and pedagogical guidance (Fullan 1991;Hallinger 1985; Leithwood, Mascall, and Strauss 2009). Collectively, these perspectives – each emerging from Anglo-American educational thought – frame teacher leadership as both a moral and professional endeavour rooted in collaboration and instructional improvement.

Globally, teacher leadership has gained increasing visibility as a cornerstone of school transformation, often framed as a means of enhancing instructional quality, fostering collaboration, and ensuring sustained student achievement (Wenner and Campbell 2017). Catalysed by the professionalisation of teaching roles in the late twentieth century, education systems began to position teachers not merely as implementers of curriculum but as strategic actors in shaping school vision, influencing peer practice, and leading reform from within (Katzenmeyer and Moller 2009; York-Barr and Duke 2004). Yet, while these frameworks have been celebrated as empowering and progressive, their epistemological roots remain distinctly Western, reflecting leadership paradigms developed within individualistic, performative, and neoliberal educational cultures. Their global circulation has therefore been far from neutral, as they travel into non-Western contexts carrying embedded assumptions about power, professionalism, and reform (Litz and Blaik 2023), inviting scrutiny of how teacher leadership is interpreted, adapted, or resisted across diverse sociocultural and political landscapes.

In the Arab region, teacher leadership has been embedded into reform agendas through two distinct but ideologically converging pathways. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (e.g. Qatar and UAE), it emerged predominantly through the accreditation movement and the uptake of performance-based global policy instruments (Abu-Shawish, Romanowski, and Amatullah 2021; Barnawi 2017; Lightfoot 2014; Nasser 2019; Ridge, Kippels, and Bruce 2019; Romanowski 2017). By contrast, in Levantine (e.g. Lebanon and Jordan) and North African contexts (e.g. Egypt and Morocco) the discourse of teacher leadership entered through the agendas of donor organisations and international NGOs. These agencies, operating under the banner of educational development and quality enhancement, often introduced frameworks that implicitly promoted teacher leadership as a solution to systemic dysfunctions, including weak school governance and insufficient accountability (Jorman and Murray 2010; Karami-Akkary, 2014; Shuayb 2019). In both cases, these 'borrowed' reforms promoted teacher leadership as though Arab educational contexts mirrored those of the West, prescribing externally defined leadership roles without acknowledging the need for structural autonomy or cultural contextualisation.

Although some scholarship has emerged to examine how Arab educators perceive leadership (e.g. Sellami et al. 2022), the literature remains thin, scattered, and overly reliant on Western theoretical frameworks (Hallinger and Hammad 2019). Few studies have attempted to theorise teacher leadership as

it unfolds within Arab sociopolitical and cultural ecologies, or to challenge the global orthodoxy that frames teacher leadership as a universal good. Yet, as Angelle and DeHart (2011) suggest, any robust understanding of teacher leadership must account for how it is experienced and lived within the unique social world of each school, shaped by context-specific norms, histories, and power dynamics.

This study responds to that imperative. It seeks to reconceptualise teacher leadership through an Arabic ecological lens, one that acknowledges the sociocultural, institutional, and political specificities of Arab education systems. Rather than accepting global scripts at face value, it interrogates how teacher leadership is being understood, adapted, resisted, or reimagined within these contexts. In doing so, it aims to disrupt the normative assumptions embedded in international discourse and to contribute to a more grounded, pluralistic understanding of teacher leadership in the region. The research questions guiding this study were:

(1) How is teacher leadership conceptualised and enacted in Arab educational contexts?
(2) In what ways do teacher leadership enactments in Arab contexts disrupt or reinforce globally dominant leadership paradigms?

Literature review

The literature review provides an overview of the major developments in teacher leadership scholarship, tracing how the concept has evolved across global and regional contexts. It begins by examining the dominant paradigms that have shaped the field, followed by a discussion of how leadership, identity, and professional agency have been theorised within educational research. The review then highlights critical gaps in Arab scholarship, emphasising the need for culturally grounded perspectives. This discussion sets the stage for the subsequent section, which presents the theoretical framework guiding the study.

Evolving paradigms of teacher leadership

Over the past several decades, the notion of teacher leadership has evolved from a marginal idea in educational discourse to a central construct shaping reform narratives in both research and policy (Friesen and Brown 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020; Harris and Jones 2023). This evolution mirrors broader shifts in how the teaching profession is conceptualised, moving away from hierarchical, principal-centred models toward distributed and collaborative paradigms of professional agency (Boyaci and Oz 2017; Hargreaves 2025). Within these paradigms, teachers are increasingly viewed as catalysts for instructional improvement, organisational learning, and school innovation – particularly

when empowered to influence peers, contribute to collective decision-making, and lead pedagogical change (Anselmus Dami 2024; Ghamrawi et al., 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Shal et al. 2024, 2025).

Contemporary studies underscore that teacher leadership is not a fixed set of roles but an evolving professional practice rooted in collaboration, reflection, and shared responsibility. As Friesen and Brown (2022) demonstrate, teacher leaders foster collective responsibility and professional learning through design-based, inquiry-oriented approaches that reframe leadership as co-construction rather than delegation. Similarly, Hargreaves (2025) positions teacher leadership as vital in advancing inclusion, innovation, and collaboration – dimensions that respond to the increasing complexity of schooling in the twenty-first century.

Although the concept first gained traction within Anglo-American systems – where professional collaboration and site-based management were institutionalised – teacher leadership has since become a flexible and contested paradigm that takes shape differently across global contexts (Harris and Jones 2023; Law 2012). As education systems worldwide pursue decentralisation and school-based reform, the concept has become a vessel for multiple agendas, including democratisation, instructional improvement, and system-wide capacity building.

Recent bibliometric analyses reveal that while the field of teacher leadership has matured into a distinct sub-discipline, it remains heavily shaped by Anglophone epistemologies (Pan, Wiens, and Moyal 2023). These reviews identify emerging themes such as middle leadership, distributed influence, and identity formation, while also calling for greater inclusion of non-Western perspectives and more critical theoretical development. Without this diversification, the global field risks reproducing narrow assumptions about autonomy, accountability, and professionalism that may not translate across cultural or systemic boundaries.

In this light, teacher leadership is increasingly recognised as both a global and situated phenomenon – one that must be understood in dialogue with the social, moral, and cultural contexts in which it is enacted. The evolving scholarship calls for reimagining leadership not as a universal formula, but as a plural, adaptive practice that reflects the lived realities of teachers across diverse educational landscapes.

Leadership, identity, and role fluidity

As the field of teacher leadership continues to broaden, researchers have increasingly emphasised that leadership is not merely a set of responsibilities assigned to individuals, but a dynamic and identity-infused practice shaped by relational and institutional conditions (Bolat and Toytok 2023). Rather than existing as a static position, teacher leadership often emerges as teachers engage in meaningful professional relationships, respond to contextual needs, and negotiate evolving roles within their schools (Harris, Azorín, and

Jones 2023; Lieberman and Friedrich 2010). These enactments are not uniformly experienced; they are contingent on how teachers perceive themselves – as trusted experts, moral stewards, or collaborative change-makers – and on the degree to which their professional identity is recognised and legitimised by peers and school leaders (Ghamrawi, 2011).

This orientation challenges reductionist models that conceptualise leadership as a managerial add-on or administrative delegation. As Collay (2011) contends, when leadership roles are externally imposed without alignment to teachers' professional identities or intrinsic motivations, they risk diminishing rather than nurturing teacher agency. In contrast, meaningful teacher leadership emerges from a sense of coherence between teachers' evolving identities and their capacity to act purposefully within their own school contexts. The enactment of leadership, therefore, is fluid – often unfolding informally through mentoring, modelling, or mobilising collective action, rather than through formal titles or institutional mandates (Ghamrawi et al., 2024d).

Importantly, research suggests that teachers do not consistently inhabit leadership roles; rather, they step into and out of leadership spaces depending on their institutional positioning, workload, relationships with colleagues, and perceived value of their contributions (Margolis and Huggins 2012). This episodic nature of leadership highlights the need for conceptual models that account for its transient, negotiated, and socially mediated characteristics. As Pan, Wiens, and Moyal (2023) observe, the relational aspects of teacher identity are gaining traction within the field, signalling a move away from role-based taxonomies toward deeper understandings of how leadership is lived and sustained within professional ecologies. In this view, leadership is not a title one holds, but a practice one performs – anchored in identity, activated through relationships, and constrained or enabled by institutional culture.

Knowledge production, agency, and epistemic hierarchies

Much of the foundational literature on teacher leadership assumes Western epistemic starting points – individual autonomy, distributed decision-making, and liberal-democratic professionalism. However, as educational research increasingly globalises, scholars have begun to critique the uncritical export of these frameworks into settings where histories of colonisation, political centralisation, and epistemic exclusion shape professional life (Tikly 2011). This is especially relevant in teacher leadership studies, where conceptions of 'influence' and 'agency' are often divorced from teachers' actual conditions of work, including their voice in curriculum, assessment, and reform design (Bangs and Frost 2012; Frost 2008; Polatcan, Arslan, and Balci 2023).

Scholars like Rincón-Gallardo (2016) and Zeichner (2010) argue for a shift toward teacher-led knowledge production – where teachers are not just implementers of externally designed reforms, but knowledge creators who theorise their own practices. Such a shift requires not only methodological changes

but also a philosophical repositioning of teachers as epistemic agents within the research and policy ecosystem. Yet, mainstream teacher leadership studies rarely engage with these arguments, and even fewer explore how knowledge hierarchies function in settings where donor influence, language politics, and accreditation regimes filter what counts as valid expertise.

Critical absences in Arab teacher leadership research

Oplatka and Arar's (2017) systematic review offers a critical overview of educational leadership and management research in the Arab world from the 1990s through the mid-2010s. Although the volume of scholarship has increased, the authors argue that the field remains predominantly atheoretical, contextually constrained, and methodologically limited. They call for future research that is not only more rigorous and conceptually robust but also critically attuned to the sociopolitical and cultural specificities of Arab educational systems. In a parallel review, Hallinger and Hammad (2019) similarly found that most studies conducted in the region are descriptive in nature, focused primarily on school-level phenomena, and largely devoid of theoretical depth or systemic analysis. Their review emphasises the need for scholarship that engages more meaningfully with the region's complex institutional and cultural dynamics. Consistent with these critiques, preliminary findings from a systematic review of teacher leadership studies in the Arab States, currently underway by the authors, reveal that although interest in the topic is increasing, the literature continues to be shaped – often uncritically – by Western conceptual models. Few studies explicitly interrogate the cultural or epistemological relevance of these frameworks, and even fewer attempt to theorise teacher leadership through locally grounded educational philosophies or traditions.

Moreover, teacher leadership studies in the Arab region have tended to rely on surveys and standardised inventories, many of which were developed in Western contexts. While useful for comparative purposes, these tools risk reproducing epistemic misalignments – normalising metrics that may not reflect how leadership is culturally expressed or socially sanctioned (Shah 2010). For example, leadership qualities like assertiveness, individualism, or proactive decision-making may be interpreted differently in collectivist societies where relational harmony, seniority, and institutional loyalty are valued (Hofstede 2001).

As explained in the introduction, much of the regional scholarship continues to draw conceptually on Western-imported theories and models of teacher leadership, particularly those grounded in transformational, distributed, and instructional leadership paradigms (Bass 1985; Burns 1978; Hallinger 1985; Harris and Lambert 2003; Spillane 2006). While these frameworks have provided influential analytical tools, their uncritical transfer into Arab educational contexts presumes universal applicability and risks obscuring the moral, spiritual, and communal dimensions that inform local enactments of leadership (Hallinger and Hammad 2019; Oplatka & Arar, 2017).

Consequently, regional research often perpetuates theoretical dependencies that privilege Western epistemic assumptions over indigenous understandings of influence, authority, and professional agency (Hallinger and Hammad 2019; Shah 2010). What remains notably missing, therefore, is a reflexive engagement with the ontology of teacher leadership – what it is, how it comes to be, and who gets to define it. Most studies stop short of interrogating the assumptions underlying the frameworks they employ, leaving unexplored the ways in which imported models may marginalise alternative conceptions rooted in Islamic, Arab, or community-based traditions of authority, cooperation, and moral leadership.

Theoretical framework

The global circulation of teacher leadership discourse has largely been framed through the lens of improvement, collaboration, and professional empowerment (Harris and Jones 2019). However, as this discourse travels, it often carries with it normative assumptions embedded in neoliberalism – most notably, individualism, performativity, and compliance with externally imposed standards (Litz and Blaik 2023; Romanowski 2017). Critics have raised concerns that teacher leadership, while seemingly progressive, often operates as a reform instrument that repositions teachers as middle managers within performance-based systems (Pan, Wiens, and Moyal 2023). Moreover, teacher leadership frameworks remain deeply rooted in Western epistemologies that prioritise autonomy, technical rationality, and standardisation (Law 2012; Zeichner 2010), making their application in non-Western settings epistemically fraught.

To challenge this orthodoxy, this study adopted a situated praxis framework, which conceptualises teacher leadership as a dynamic, contextually grounded, and politically engaged practice. Drawing from Freirean understandings of praxis as the iterative interplay of reflection and action (Freire [1970] 2005), this framework foregrounds the notion that leadership is always embedded in sociocultural, institutional, and political realities. Teacher leadership, therefore, is not a universally transferable role but a locally enacted and relationally negotiated process. It unfolds through what teachers do with and for others, within a web of institutional constraints, cultural traditions, and power asymmetries (Collay 2011; Ghamrawi, 2011).

The first dimension of the situated praxis framework emphasises *contextual enactment* – that is, how leadership is shaped, constrained, or reimagined within the cultural, religious, and institutional realities of a given setting. In Arab societies, leadership practices are profoundly influenced by Islamic values, collective responsibility, and deeply embedded hierarchical norms that often diverge from Anglo-American assumptions of leadership as individualistic, assertive, and performance-driven (Alazmi 2025). One culturally grounded alternative is *Rabbānī leadership*, an Islamic paradigm rooted in the Qur'anic notion of the 'Rabbānīyūn" – those deeply grounded in spiritual knowledge,

moral accountability, and communal stewardship (Ahmad and Salamun 2017; Harun et al. 2021). Rabbānī leadership reframes influence as stemming not from positional authority or assertiveness, but from ethical conduct, spiritual consciousness (taqwa), and a commitment to nurturing the ummah (community) through learning, service, and relational trust. In this view, a teacher leader may be recognised less for vocal advocacy or managerial initiative and more for embodying moral integrity and communal care. The situated praxis framework encourages inquiry into how Arab teachers interpret, adapt, or resist externally defined teacher leadership roles, and how they may enact leadership in ways more aligned with indigenous values.

The second dimension is *social negotiation*. Teacher leadership is not simply a set of competencies or hierarchical positions – it is performed relationally, often informally, and negotiated with peers, principals, students, and communities (Fairman and Mackenzie 2016; Lieberman and Friedrich 2010). In collectivist societies, where relational harmony and institutional loyalty may outweigh individual initiative, the performance of leadership takes unique forms (Hofstede 2001). This relational dimension sheds light on how leadership is legitimised within Arab schools – not necessarily through titles, but through roles like mentoring, modelling, or quietly facilitating pedagogical change (Ghamrawi et al., 2024a; Pan, Wiens, and Moyal 2023).

The third dimension is *political situatedness*. Teacher leadership in Arab contexts does not operate in a vacuum but is deeply entangled in histories of colonisation, centralisation, and dependency on international agendas (Al Haj Sleiman 2024; Samier 2018). In many cases, leadership roles have been introduced through performance-based accountability frameworks or development-driven interventions that marginalise indigenous knowledge systems and teacher voice (Rincón-Gallardo 2016).

By centring teachers' lived realities and culturally embedded practices, the framework resists universalising assumptions and instead supports the development of an ecologically grounded, critically informed theory of teacher leadership within the Arab region.

Method

This section outlines the methodological approach used to address the study's aims. It first details the research design and then describes the participants, recruitment, and setting. Subsequent subsections present the data collection procedures and the analytic strategy, including steps taken to enhance rigour.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design anchored in semi-structured interviews to explore how teacher leadership is conceptualised and enacted

within Arab educational contexts. In line with the study's aim to interrogate and challenge globally dominant paradigms, qualitative inquiry was chosen for its ability to foreground participants' viewpoints, cultural meanings, and situated agency (Tisdell, Merriam, and Stuckey-Peyrot 2025). The research design was interpretive in nature, emphasising depth rather than generalisability, and seeking to capture the dynamic interplay among contextual norms, institutional forces, and individual leadership trajectories. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, providing both the structure required to address the study's guiding questions and the flexibility to follow participants' own understandings, vocabularies, and reflections (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015).

Participants

Participants for this study were drawn from a global virtual learning network designed for Arabic-speaking teachers across the Arab States. The network, open and free of charge to all teachers in the region, operates through a dedicated online platform that facilitates professional development through live webinars, collaborative problem-solving sessions, asynchronous discussion forums, and a shared repository of instructional resources.

The genesis of this study originated from a discussion thread initiated by one of the researchers on the platform's forum titled 'Am I a teacher leader?' The post prompted extensive engagement, as teachers from a wide range of national and institutional backgrounds began reflecting on their professional identities and experiences with leadership in their respective contexts. These spontaneous and reflective exchanges provided an early indication of how teacher leadership was being interpreted within Arab educational environments.

Building on this emerging interest, the initiating researcher proposed a formal study to explore these themes in greater depth. Following institutional ethical approval, invitations to participate were extended to those teachers who had explicitly expressed that they did not consider themselves teacher leaders through the discussion thread. Seventeen teachers volunteered to participate and completed the consent process. All were practicing teachers who reflected on peers they regarded as teacher leaders, as described in the data collection section. Each participant came from a different school, ensuring diversity of context. The characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Finally, participants' countries included Egypt (2), Jordan (2), Kuwait (1), Lebanon (2), Oman (2), Qatar (2), Saudi Arabia (1), Syria (2), the United Arab Emirates (2), and Yemen (1).

Data collection

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore participants' perceptions of teacher leadership as exemplified by

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

Characteristic	Number
Gender	
Male	6
Female	11
Age (Years)	
25–35	8
36–45	8
Above 45	1
Education	
BA	12
MA	5
Teaching Experience (Years)	
5–10	6
More than 10	11

other teachers in their professional environments. All participants were non–teacher leaders who did not identify themselves as teacher leaders but had firsthand experience observing such practices within their schools. Rather than focusing on participants' own enactments of leadership, the interview schedule was structured to invite reflection on peers whom they regarded as teacher leaders and on the contextual factors that shaped such judgments. This approach was intended to reduce self-report bias (Patton 2015).

The interview schedule comprised broad, open-ended questions designed to prompt narrative responses and allow participants to describe real-world examples drawn from their school communities. The central guiding prompts included:

(1) Can you tell me about a teacher you consider a leader? What made you view them that way?
(2) What specific actions or behaviours did this teacher demonstrate that signalled leadership to you?
(3) How did colleagues or school leaders respond to this teacher's leadership?
(4) Were there any particular cultural or institutional norms that shaped how this teacher's leadership was understood or accepted?
(5) Do you think this teacher's influence was tied to formal recognition or more informal, community-based forms of respect and trust?

This structure enabled participants to reflect on how teacher leadership is identified and legitimised in their contexts. It also illuminated the relational, ethical, and cultural dimensions that inform leadership recognition within Arab schooling ecosystems.

Data analysis

Interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams and audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Each session lasted between 45 and 60 min and was transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 22 to facilitate systematic coding, data management, and theme development.

The analysis followed an interpretive thematic approach grounded in the study's situated praxis framework. Coding and theme generation were iterative and aimed at identifying how teacher leadership was recognised, embodied, and shaped by local values, institutional dynamics, and broader structural forces. Saldaña's (2021) approach to qualitative coding guided a two-cycle coding process. In the first cycle, descriptive and in vivo codes were generated to remain closely aligned with participants' language and lived meanings. In the second cycle, pattern coding was used to group related ideas and construct higher-order categories that reflected the sociocultural and epistemic dimensions of leadership within Arab school settings.

To ensure trustworthiness and analytical coherence, the process incorporated strategies such as reflexive memoing, iterative theme refinement, and peer debriefing among members of the research team (Nowell et al. 2017). Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis through ongoing reflection on positionality, interpretive assumptions, and the influence of contextual knowledge on meaning-making. Emerging interpretations were revisited continuously in light of the theoretical framework to ensure that the resulting themes were both empirically grounded and conceptually robust.

Findings

Table 2 summarises the thematic outcomes of the analysis, illustrating how participants described teacher leadership through three interrelated dimensions: contextual, relational, and political. These themes reflect distinct yet overlapping ways in which leadership is recognised and valued within Arab schooling contexts. The sub-themes capture the complex moral, social, and cultural meanings participants attached to teacher leadership, while the reported frequencies indicate the relative prominence of each idea across the dataset.

Contextual conception of teacher leadership enactment

The enactment of teacher leadership, as described by participants, was situated within deeply rooted cultural and spiritual value systems. Teachers shared their views and interpretations of what constitutes teacher leadership within their school contexts. Their perspectives revealed that leadership is not necessarily tied to formal roles or titles but is often recognised through ethical comportment and alignment with shared communal values.

A central sub-theme was the idea of *leadership grounded in religious ethics and spiritual consciousness*. Participants emphasised that effective teacher leadership is underpinned by an inner ethical orientation shaped by faith-based principles. Readers are reminded that the term *Arab* does not equate to *Muslim*. While the theme of leadership grounded in religious ethics and spiritual

Table 2. Thematic analysis.

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency
Contextual conception of teacher leadership enactment	Leadership grounded in religious ethics and spiritual consciousness	16
	Moral leadership expressed through humility, patience, and fairness	15
	Respect earned through consistent behaviour and service	13
	Influence tied to alignment with community values and traditions	12
	Ethics as a framework for daily pedagogical and leadership decisions	12
	Culturally preferred leadership through quiet presence rather than visibility	9
Relational enactment of teacher leadership	Teachers recognised for building trust among colleagues	17
	Mentorship through modelling behaviour rather than explicit instruction	15
	Relational leadership grounded in compassion and shared responsibility	14
	Teachers admired for protecting team harmony over individual recognition	12
	Leadership legitimacy shaped by how one supports others during crises	11
	Peer acknowledgment as informal validation of leadership	10
	Seniority as an implicit qualification for leadership legitimacy	15
	Sustained collaboration seen as leadership-in-action	9
Political mediation of teacher leadership	Teachers negotiating imposed accountability with localised adaptations	11
	Resistance to neoliberal definitions of leadership	10
	Religion invoked as a counter-narrative to imposed leadership scripts	9

consciousness emerged prominently in participants' perspectives, it is important to recognise the religious diversity within Arab societies. Arabs include Muslims, Christians, and followers of other faith traditions, and the participants' reflections on ethical leadership were shaped by shared cultural and spiritual values, not confined to any single religious identity. T4 observed, 'In everything a teacher does, intention matters – being sincere and wanting good for others is what makes someone a leader, especially when they act with humility and treat others with fairness.' T12 added, 'Those who are mindful of God, lead with responsibility, not with ego. That's what makes people trust them, because they show patience in decisions and humility in their actions.' From an explicitly Islamic perspective, T6 noted, 'The Prophet (peace be upon him) led through mercy and service – this is the example that when I see would consider as a leader and try to follow, for true leadership is about patience, justice, and compassion.' From a Christian standpoint, T9 shared,

> A teacher leader leads with love and humility because that's what Christ taught us – to serve, not to be served. In my opinion, this is what makes a teacher a leader for her colleagues and students, one who treats everyone with fairness and calmness even in difficulty.

These views underscore a conception of leadership rooted in moral purpose, spiritual awareness, and communal responsibility, rather than institutional authority.

Moreover, the notion of *moral leadership expressed through humility, patience, and fairness* was consistently emphasised in participants' accounts. Teachers described these traits as distinguishing features of those they viewed as true leaders within the school community. Leadership, as they understood it, was not tied to assertiveness or visibility, but to ethical comportment in interpersonal relations. It is important to note that many teachers used *ethical comportment* as an encompassing idea – one that integrates moral balance, calmness, and integrity into everyday professional interactions. It was described not as an abstract quality but as a visible mode of conduct. To illustrate, T1 noted,

> 'It is not the loudest voice in the room that leads, but the one who listens and treats others fairly – these are the colleagues we naturally look to for guidance, the ones who stay humble and keep their patience even when others lose it.'

Echoing this, T8 observed, 'Sometimes, those who lead are the ones who stay silent when tempers rise. Patience shows care, and care earns respect, and in that quietness, you see real humility and fairness.'

Closely linked to moral disposition was the idea of respect earned through *consistent behaviour and service*. Teachers consistently pointed to colleagues whose leadership presence was recognised not through titles but through sustained dedication and quiet reliability. As T7 remarked,

> It's the ones who stay after hours to help others, day after day, without asking for attention – those are the ones people come to rely on, because their humility and fairness never change, no matter how much is asked of them.

T15 affirmed this perception, stating, 'You recognise a leader in someone who is dependable, always present, and never treats others as beneath them. That's when their opinion starts to matter to everyone, because you trust their patience and sense of justice.'

Another frequently cited marker of teacher leadership was *influence tied to alignment with community values and traditions*. Participants emphasised that effective teacher leaders are those whose actions resonate with the broader moral and social fabric of the community. T10 shared, 'Colleagues who act in ways that reflect our shared values naturally gain influence. It's not about standing out – it's about belonging, about being patient, humble, and fair with everyone.' Similarly, T16 explained, 'In our school, teaching and leadership are not separate from who we are as a community. If someone's approach doesn't align with that, their leadership doesn't carry weight, especially if they lack humility and fairness in dealing with others.'

Participants also underscored that *ethics served as a framework for daily pedagogical and leadership decisions*, particularly when facing dilemmas or

pressures. Teachers recognised leadership in colleagues who exercised ethical discernment, even when this meant diverging from institutional expectations. As T2 described, 'When a colleague pauses and questions whether something is truly right for students – even if it's part of the curriculum – that's real leadership, because it shows patience, fairness, and moral courage.' T13 similarly remarked, 'You see leaders in those who choose what's ethically sound over what's convenient. That's what earns your trust, and it comes from humility, not from wanting control.'

Lastly, the theme of *culturally preferred leadership through quiet presence rather than visibility* emerged. Teachers described recognising leadership in colleagues who influenced others through calm authority and steady presence, rather than overt displays. T3 noted, 'The real leaders aren't always the ones up front. They're the ones who quietly support and make others feel capable, showing patience and humility that make people want to follow them.' T11 added, 'In our context, people don't follow those who seek attention. They follow those who are grounded and humble, who treat everyone with respect and fairness.'

Relational enactment of teacher leadership

Participants consistently described teacher leadership as a relational phenomenon – one that emerges through patterns of trust-building, shared responsibility, and ethical commitment to the collective well-being of the school community. Leadership, in this conception, is enacted not through position or authority, but through interpersonal credibility, emotional intelligence, and sustained collaborative engagement. Teachers' reflections centred on how they recognise leadership in colleagues, rather than how they enact it themselves.

A foundational sub-theme was the recognition of *teachers who build trust among colleagues*. Participants described trust as the cornerstone of leadership legitimacy, cultivated over time through consistency, honesty, and emotional presence. T5 noted, 'You always know who to go to when things are tense – it's the one who listens without judgment and keeps your confidence'. T14 added, 'We follow those we trust, not those in charge. Trust is what holds us together'. Across participants' accounts, trust was not only an emotional bond but a professional outcome that emerged through mentorship enacted by example. Colleagues who 'showed' rather than 'told' were those who earned deep trust, as their behaviour modelled reliability and integrity rather than authority. Related to this was the idea of mentorship through modelling behaviour rather than explicit instruction. Participants valued colleagues who led by quiet example rather than directive teaching. T3 reflected, 'The ones I learn the most from are not the ones who lecture – they just do things right, and you watch and grow'. T11 offered, 'Real mentors don't announce themselves. They teach by showing, not telling'. Taken together, these reflections

illustrate that mentoring-by-modelling functions as the primary mechanism through which trust is cultivated and sustained within teacher communities.

Moreover, the sub-theme of *relational leadership grounded in compassion and shared responsibility* was also prominent. Teachers admired those who prioritised emotional care and collective wellbeing, particularly in times of stress or transition. T9 stated, 'There are always people who carry more than their share – not for credit, but because they care about the team'. T17 similarly observed, 'Leadership means carrying others when they're tired. I've seen teachers do that without ever asking for anything in return'. Another marker of leadership was admiration for those who protect team harmony over personal recognition. Participants described how certain colleagues intentionally minimised their visibility to preserve unity. T6 shared, 'Some teachers will even step back from the spotlight so others feel seen. That's leadership to me'. T13 emphasised, 'You notice the leaders when something goes wrong – they're not blaming, they're calming everyone down'. This sub-theme reflects an enduring relational disposition – a continuous, compassionate engagement that underpins the moral fabric of teamwork and collective care.

By contrast, the next sub-theme – *supporting others during moments of crisis* – captures a situational enactment of that compassion. Supporting others during moments of crisis also emerged as a key trigger for teacher leadership recognition. Participants identified leadership in colleagues who acted decisively and compassionately in difficult times. T1 recalled, 'During the lockdown, there was one teacher who made sure everyone had what they needed – emails, calls, materials – without ever being asked'. T10 added, 'When people are overwhelmed, you remember who stepped up. That's how we knew who our real leaders were'. Whereas the previous sub-theme described an ongoing ethic of care, this one emphasises the enactment of relational leadership under pressure – how compassion transforms into decisive, stabilising action during collective challenge. A recurring mode of recognition was peer acknowledgment as informal validation of leadership. Rather than institutional titles or roles, teachers identified leaders through collective recognition and social trust. T8 explained, 'When teachers say 'go ask her' or 'she'll know what to do,' that's not by chance. It means she's earned their trust'. T16 similarly noted, 'Leadership doesn't have to be assigned. It happens when people consistently turn to someone for support'. These accounts show that leadership during crises consolidates social trust, transforming moral credibility into shared recognition.

Additionally, several participants highlighted *seniority as an implicit qualification for leadership legitimacy*. While not sufficient on its own, length of service was often perceived as a sign of wisdom and situational understanding. T2 commented, 'There's a natural respect for those who've been here longest. You see them as stable and knowledgeable'. T7 elaborated, 'Even if they're quiet, senior teachers often have a presence. People look to them, especially when new

changes happen'. This view was grounded in broader cultural norms that value age and life experience. As T5 explained, 'In Arab culture, we are taught to respect age. Elders are listened to more, not just because they know more, but because showing them respect is part of who we are'. T13 invoked a familiar expression to emphasise this cultural wisdom: 'As we say, 'If someone is older than you by a day, they are wiser than you by a year.' That's why people naturally turn to older teachers when things are unclear'. This recognition of seniority reflects not authority by position, but authority by accumulated relational trust – a culturally embedded form of legitimacy.

Lastly, participants pointed to *sustained collaboration as a form of leadership-in-action.* Those who consistently participated in and facilitated team efforts were seen as embodying leadership through contribution rather than command. T12 noted, 'She's always part of the planning, always giving feedback, always showing up – that's leadership in my opinion'. T15 concluded, 'It's the ones who keep showing up and keep others going that end up leading the whole group forward'. The recurrence of 'showing up' across participants' accounts underscores collaboration as an active, continuous process through which leadership is performed. Collaboration, in this sense, is not an episodic task but a sustained, enacted practice that makes leadership visible through shared effort and collective perseverance.

Political mediation of teacher leadership

The final theme captured how participants perceived teacher leadership as being shaped – and often constrained – by broader political and policy forces. Within this dynamic, teachers were seen as engaging in subtle forms of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance, particularly in response to externally imposed accountability mechanisms and imported leadership paradigms. Participants recognised teacher leaders not for their conformity to these systems, but for their capacity to navigate, reinterpret, or subvert them in ways that aligned with local educational values and cultural norms.

A central sub-theme was the recognition of *teachers who negotiated imposed accountability through localised adaptations*. These were often seen as individuals who balanced policy demands with contextual realities, finding ways to protect both their students and their professional integrity. T8 explained, 'Some colleagues manage to satisfy the system without compromising their values. They know how to do just enough without harming what really matters in the classroom'. T11 added, 'The leaders we respect are the ones who can translate these rigid requirements into something that still feels human and relevant to our students'.

Participants also identified *resistance to neoliberal definitions of leadership* as a marker of authenticity and courage. Leadership models that emphasised data-driven performance, competition, and managerialism were viewed as

disconnected from the ethical and communal foundations of teaching. T3 remarked, 'We know when someone is leading because they care, not because they're chasing Key Performance Indicators or trying to look good for external reviewers'. T14 echoed this critique: 'There are teachers who quietly resist these imported ideas. They keep the focus on relationships and learning, not on metrics and reports. That's why we see them as real leaders'.

Lastly, several participants described how *religion was invoked as a counter-narrative to imposed leadership scripts*, particularly those perceived as foreign or misaligned with local values. These teachers were respected for grounding their leadership in ethical and spiritual principles that stood in contrast to externally mandated frameworks. T6 noted, 'In our culture, leadership isn't just about outcomes. It's about responsibility, sincerity, and standing for what's right – even if that doesn't show up in a spreadsheet or boxed standards imported from a Western country'. T12 explained, 'Some teachers use faith as a compass when policies become too rigid. They remind us that leadership should serve people, not systems'.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how teacher leadership is conceptualised and recognised by Arab teachers across diverse educational settings, with particular attention to the sociocultural, relational, and political dimensions of its enactment. Grounded in a situated praxis framework, the findings reveal that teacher leadership in the Arab region is not primarily associated with formal authority or performative leadership behaviours, but is deeply rooted in ethical integrity, relational trust, cultural continuity, and strategic navigation of externally imposed pressures.

Three overarching themes emerged from the data. First, teacher leadership was contextually anchored in religious ethics and moral responsibility, with teachers recognised for embodying humility, patience, and service in alignment with community values. Second, leadership was relationally enacted, most often through trust-building, compassion, seniority, and collaborative presence – rather than assertiveness or institutional recognition. Third, teacher leadership was politically mediated, as teachers engaged in subtle forms of resistance and adaptation to externally imposed policies, often invoking faith or cultural norms to counter neoliberal leadership models.

These findings suggest that in Arab educational contexts, teacher leadership is less about leading from the front and more about leading from within – through culturally resonant practices that affirm moral purpose, social cohesion, and institutional loyalty. Teacher leaders are those who embody shared ethical norms, serve as emotional anchors in times of difficulty, and act as cultural brokers when navigating reforms. This understanding disrupts dominant global paradigms that equate leadership with measurable performance,

charismatic assertiveness, or role-based authority. Instead, leadership is situated, quiet, and contextually negotiated.

The findings of this study both affirm and problematise prevailing conceptions of teacher leadership in the global literature. On the one hand, the study resonates with relational and identity-based frameworks (Bolat and Toytok 2023; Ghamrawi, 2011; Lieberman and Friedrich 2010; Pan, Wiens, and Moyal 2023), who conceptualise teacher leadership as a socially embedded, informally enacted practice that arises within the affective and professional contours of daily school life. In line with this literature, this study suggests that, through an Arab lens, teacher leadership is not confined to formal roles or managerial responsibilities, but emerges through teachers' capacity to cultivate trust, demonstrate pedagogical integrity, and influence their peers through moral and relational credibility. Participants in this study echoed these patterns, consistently identifying leadership in colleagues who modelled ethical discernment, prioritised the collective good, and earned the respect of their peers through emotional steadiness, humility, and presence.

However, the findings also surface critical tensions with dominant conceptualisations typified by Wenner and Campbell (2017) and Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009), which tend to universalise teacher leadership as a functional tool for instructional improvement, distributed decision-making, and school reform. These frameworks often presuppose educational ecologies characterised by professional autonomy, performance-based evaluation, and flattened hierarchies – conditions not uniformly available or desirable in Arab schooling contexts. In contrast, the enactments observed in this study suggest that teacher leadership in the Arab world is often negotiated rather than assigned, relationally validated rather than institutionally endorsed, and infused with ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions that resist abstraction and instrumentalisation (Collay 2011; Harun et al. 2021).

By overlooking these semantic and cultural inflections, globalised leadership frameworks risk more than mere conceptual misalignment; they risk erasing the epistemological foundations upon which non-Western practices of leadership are built (Hallinger and Hammad 2019; Sellami et al. 2022; Shah 2010). This erasure not only distorts how leadership is enacted and experienced in local contexts but also reinforces a form of epistemic imperialism, wherein theories developed in the Global North are positioned as normatively superior or universally valid (Pan, Wiens, and Moyal 2023; Rincón-Gallardo 2016; Romanowski 2017). Such dynamics perpetuate knowledge hierarchies that marginalise alternative ways of knowing and leading, and which fail to recognise the intellectual legitimacy of leadership models rooted in indigenous traditions, relational ethics, or religious worldviews (Abu-Shawish, Romanowski, and Amatullah 2021; Ahmad and Salamun 2017; Alazmi 2025). In this regard, the study calls for a more reflexive and pluralistic approach to teacher leadership – one that resists epistemic standardisation and remains attuned to the moral, cultural,

and political textures that shape how leadership is meaningfully constructed across diverse settings.

In this way, the study contributes to the growing call to provincialise educational leadership theory (Pan, Wiens, and Moyal 2023), specifically by foregrounding the culturally situated nature of *teacher leadership*. It invites scholars to resist the epistemic temptation to universalise leadership constructs across contexts without engaging in rigorous, context-sensitive analysis of ecological fit. Rather than framing teacher leadership as a fixed set of competencies or behaviours, the findings underscore its manifestation as a socially constructed, relationally mediated phenomenon that draws meaning from locally embedded moral imaginaries and historical legacies. The study thus advocates for a more pluri-versal approach to theorising teacher leadership – one that simultaneously affirms shared human commitments to ethical stewardship, relational trust, and collective uplift, while also attending to the diverse sociocultural scripts through which these commitments are practiced, interpreted, and legitimised in different contexts.

A notable strength of this study lies in its methodological orientation, which deliberately foregrounded how teachers *perceive leadership in others* rather than soliciting accounts of their own leadership practices. This approach mitigates the common limitations of self-report bias and allows for a richer excavation of the cultural logics and relational norms through which leadership is socially constructed and recognised in Arab educational settings. The inclusion of participants from diverse Arab national contexts further strengthens the *transferability* of the findings, offering a nuanced cross-cultural lens that foregrounds regional heterogeneity while highlighting shared epistemic patterns.

Nonetheless, several limitations warrant consideration. The study drew exclusively on semi-structured interviews, excluding complementary methods such as classroom observations or documentary analysis that could have offered deeper insights into how leadership is enacted in situ. Moreover, the participant pool was composed of teachers engaged in a voluntary professional development initiative – potentially skewing the sample toward individuals who are more reflective, professionally active, or predisposed to leadership discourse. As such, the study does not capture the perspectives of school leaders, policymakers, or more marginal actors within school systems whose views might diverge from those of the engaged teaching cohort represented here. These constraints, while not undermining the study's contributions, suggest avenues for further inquiry and triangulation.

Furthermore, findings carry several implications. For researchers, the study affirms the need for more contextually grounded, culturally sensitive studies of teacher leadership in the Global South. Western-derived models must not be uncritically applied but instead interrogated and adapted. For policymakers, recognising the informal, ethical, and relational nature of teacher leadership in Arab contexts may support the design of leadership development initiatives

that align with local values and norms. For practitioners, the study legitimises forms of leadership that are quiet, relational, and morally anchored – encouraging teachers to see influence not as a function of role, but of trust, consistency, and service.

Future studies could triangulate interviews with observations and institutional data to further unpack how teacher leadership is enacted on the ground. Comparative research across Arab subregions (e.g. Gulf vs. Levant) may also yield insights into how leadership configurations shift according to institutional logics and sociopolitical environments. Additionally, investigating the intersections of gender, religion, and linguistic capital within teacher leadership recognition would add depth to the current analysis.

Conclusion

This study reconceptualises teacher leadership by situating it within the moral ecologies, relational dynamics, and spiritual imaginaries that shape Arab educational contexts. While global scholarship has illuminated important dimensions of teacher leadership – such as peer influence, professional trust, and informal authority – this study adds cultural and spiritual specificity often underrepresented in mainstream models. It foregrounds a form of leadership rooted in ethical comportment, spiritual consciousness, and communal legitimacy. In these contexts, leadership is not solely conferred through positional authority or institutional designation, but emerges organically through quiet moral consistency, relational depth, and alignment with faith-informed and culturally embedded values.

This reconceptualisation builds directly upon the theoretical framework's situated praxis lens, advancing a re-reading of teacher leadership as a dynamic, contextually grounded, and morally engaged practice. By reframing teacher leadership through an Arab lens, this study moves from conceptualisation to reconceptualisation – challenging the dominance of Western-derived paradigms and rearticulating leadership as a moral, relational, and spiritual endeavour. In doing so, it highlights teacher leadership as an evolving construct that must be understood through the moral, spiritual, and communal grammars of the societies in which it is enacted.

Rather than positioning Arab educators in binary opposition to Western constructs, the findings illustrate how teacher leadership is both locally anchored and resonant with broader human commitments to integrity, service, and care. Arab teachers demonstrate epistemic agency not by rejecting global frameworks outright, but by reinterpreting and re-grounding them within their own sociocultural realities. This process of reinterpretation affirms the plurality of teacher leadership as a living practice that evolves across epistemic boundaries, reinforcing the need for theoretical elasticity and cultural inclusivity within leadership scholarship.

In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to diversify the epistemologies of educational leadership by advancing a pluriverse lens – one that affirms ontological multiplicity, cultural legitimacy, and the moral sovereignty of localised leadership practices. Hence, this work does not simply conceptualise teacher leadership in an Arab context; it reconceptualises it as an ecologically grounded, spiritually infused, and ethically sustained practice that broadens the global discourse.

We conclude this study by advancing an empirically grounded definition of teacher leadership, derived from the situated perspectives and experiences of Arab educators across diverse contexts. This definition is not merely conceptual but emerges inductively from the data, offering a culturally and spiritually resonant articulation of how teacher leadership is recognised, enacted, and legitimated within Arab schooling ecologies:

> Teacher leadership, as reconceptualized through an Arab lens, is a morally anchored, relationally mediated, and spiritually infused practice. It is recognized not through formal designation or institutional visibility, but through ethical comportment, communal trust, and consistent service to others. Rooted in shared cultural and religious values, teacher leadership manifests in quiet presence, emotional stewardship, and collegial influence – affirmed through social recognition and aligned with the collective well-being of the school community.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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