

Relational and Culturally Embedded Teacher Leadership in Philippine Public Schools

Mila A. Real

Head Teacher 1, Rosario V. Moras Memorial School, Tanjay City, Negros Oriental, Philippines

Abstract:

Although teacher leadership has gained increasing attention globally, the cultural and organizational dimensions specific to the Philippines remain under-explored. This qualitative case study investigates how Filipino in-service teachers perceive, enact, and negotiate leadership within the public school system. Moving beyond the quantitative validation of Western models, the study employs semi-structured interviews with ten teacher leaders across three urban public secondary schools and applies thematic analysis to explore their lived experiences. Findings indicate that teacher leadership in the Philippines is predominantly informal and relational, shaped by indigenous cultural values such as Bayanihan (communal unity) and the cultural emphasis on hierarchical respect. Leadership is enacted through collaborative problem-solving, peer mentoring, community engagement, and student-focused outreach, rather than through formal administrative authority. These practices underscore the culturally embedded and context-specific nature of teacher leadership, revealing that influence often occurs through trust-based networks and relational strategies. The study highlights the need for educational policies and professional development programs to support these informal leadership structures, emphasizing culturally responsive approaches that strengthen teachers' agency, community engagement, and school improvement efforts.

Keywords: Teacher leadership, informal leadership, relational leadership, community outreach, cultural context

Introduction:

The contemporary educational landscape in Southeast Asia is undergoing rapid transformation, requiring teachers to act as agents of change. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has increasingly emphasized the role of teachers not only in instructional improvement but also in community engagement.

Teacher leadership has emerged as a key strategy for school development, yet its conceptualization remains highly context-dependent (Poloyapoy et al., 2024). While Western frameworks such as the Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS) provide useful guidelines, they often fail to capture the socio-cultural nuances of the Global South, including indigenous values and relational norms that shape everyday school life (Miramon et al., 2024).

Research on teacher leadership in the Philippine context highlights both promise and complexity. Studies show that teachers often exercise influence informally, navigating hierarchical structures and cultural expectations such as pakikisama (getting along) and bayanihan (communal unity) to foster collaboration and school improvement (Santos, 2023; Estacio & Estacio, 2022). These findings suggest that leadership in Philippine schools is less about formal positions and more about relational and community-oriented practices. Understanding these culturally embedded practices is essential for designing policies and interventions that genuinely empower teachers.

Despite increasing attention, much of the literature relies on quantitative methods, which may overlook the subtleties of local experiences and values. Previous studies in other Asian contexts have focused on measuring teacher leadership outcomes, often through standardized instruments derived from Western models (Miramon et al., 2024). While informative, such approaches may fail to capture how Filipino teachers interpret and enact leadership within their unique school communities, where social cohesion and collective problem-solving are highly valued.

This study, therefore, adopts a qualitative approach to explore teacher leadership in Philippine public schools, emphasizing depth over breadth. It seeks to understand how Filipino teachers define leadership in their specific contexts and how cultural, institutional, and personal factors enable or constrain their influence. By examining lived

experiences and narratives, this research aims to reveal the informal yet impactful ways in which teachers contribute to school development and student success.

Insights from this study have implications for both policy and practice. Recognizing the culturally rooted, relational nature of teacher leadership can guide DepEd in supporting existing informal networks rather than solely focusing on formalized roles.

Moreover, understanding the enablers and barriers experienced by teachers can inform professional development programs, school improvement initiatives, and community engagement strategies (Poloyapoy et al., 2024; Santos, 2023). This approach ensures that leadership frameworks are not only evidence-based but also culturally responsive and contextually relevant.

Literature Review:

Over the past four decades, scholarship on teacher leadership has struggled to establish a unified definition. Teacher leadership is generally conceptualized as the process by which teachers influence colleagues and school communities to enhance student outcomes (Estacio & Estacio, 2022). However, much of the research has been criticized for lacking methodological transparency and for being heavily grounded in Western assumptions, often overlooking local cultural, social, and organizational contexts. This gap has led to debates over what constitutes effective teacher leadership, its indicators, and the balance between formal and informal influence within schools (Daing & Mustapha, 2023).

Despite extensive study, there is still no global consensus on the specific roles and practices that define teacher leadership. Some scholars emphasize instructional improvement and professional development, while others highlight broader responsibilities, including school-community engagement and mentoring. The diversity of conceptual frameworks complicates cross-context comparisons and raises concerns about the applicability of Western models, particularly in postcolonial or collectivist societies such as the Philippines (Mangulabnan, Dela Rosa, & Vargas, 2021).

In Asian educational settings, leadership is often filtered through local cultural and philosophical lenses, such as Confucianism, which prioritizes respect for hierarchy, collectivism, and relational harmony. In Vietnam, for example, teacher leadership is heavily influenced by collaborative culture and outreach initiatives, yet these are enacted differently than in Western systems, reflecting distinct societal norms and values (Oracion, Naidu, Ng, & Reyes, 2020).

In the Philippine context, teacher leadership is shaped by a complex blend of indigenous values and colonial administrative legacies. Cultural practices such as *Pakikisama* (getting along) and *Bayanihan* (communal unity) indicate that leadership may rely more on horizontal influence and mutual support than on vertical authority or formal titles (Sanchez et al., 2022). Filipino teachers often exercise leadership informally, influencing peers through relational trust, collaborative problem-solving, and community engagement rather than through bureaucratic authority.

Research has also examined how school leaders' styles influence teacher performance and the enactment of leadership. Transformational and instructional leadership approaches by principals have been shown to correlate positively with teacher efficacy and student outcomes (Mangulabnan et al., 2021; Daing & Mustapha, 2023). Similarly, school heads' educational leadership practices in rural or geographically isolated areas, such as the Division of Sulu, highlight how local contextual factors mediate the effectiveness of leadership interventions (Abdurahman & Omar, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of considering context-specific leadership practices rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model.

Despite these insights, Filipino teacher leaders face numerous challenges. Hierarchical structures, limited resources, and administrative pressures often constrain teachers from fully exercising leadership, particularly in formal school settings (Estacio & Estacio, 2022). At the same time, strong communal ties and cultural practices, such as informal collaboration during breaks and community outreach, serve as enablers for leadership. These relational and culturally embedded practices often compensate for structural limitations and help teachers achieve collective goals.

The literature suggests that formal leadership models, while useful, may need adaptation to the Philippine context. Policies that focus solely on positional authority risk overlooking informal networks of influence where teachers already exercise leadership effectively (Sanchez et al., 2022). Supporting these culturally rooted practices through professional development, mentorship programs, and community engagement strategies may yield more sustainable improvements in teacher performance and school outcomes.

The literature highlights that teacher leadership in the Philippines and other Asian contexts is highly context-dependent, relational, and culturally mediated. While global frameworks provide benchmarks, understanding the lived experiences, cultural values, and organizational realities of local teachers is critical for designing effective leadership policies and practices (Oracion et al., 2020; Abdurahman & Omar, 2021). This study builds on these insights by exploring how Filipino teachers define and enact leadership within their unique public school environments.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which is particularly suited for exploring phenomena within their real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. The case study approach allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of teacher leadership as it is perceived and enacted within Philippine public schools, emphasizing the complexity and nuance of localized experiences.

The research was conducted in three large public secondary schools in Manila, Philippines. Ten teacher leaders were purposively selected as participants, identified by their peers as influential despite not holding formal administrative titles. This approach focused on in-service teachers whose leadership emerged informally within their schools, prioritizing depth of insight over numerical breadth. The selection of multiple schools enabled the study to capture a range of experiences while situating findings within the urban public school context.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, allowing participants to share detailed accounts of their leadership experiences, challenges, and strategies. Field observations were also conducted to provide contextual understanding and triangulate interview data. The combination of interviews and observations enabled the researcher to capture both self-reported practices and observable behaviors, ensuring a rich and nuanced dataset.

The analysis followed the six-step framework of thematic analysis. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading interview transcripts and observation notes. Initial codes were then generated to identify recurring concepts and patterns. These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes, which were reviewed, refined, and defined to accurately reflect the participants' experiences. Finally, the findings were synthesized and presented in a cohesive report, highlighting the emergent patterns of teacher leadership within the Philippine public school context.

Findings and discussion:

Theme 1: Leadership as "Extended Service" (Serbisyon Totoo)

The thematic analysis of interviews and observations revealed four major patterns of teacher leadership within the Philippine public school context. The first theme, Leadership as "Extended Service" (Serbisyon Totoo), reflects the participants' perception of leadership not as a formal position but as a natural extension of their duty to the community. Filipino teachers emphasized that leadership is inseparable from their vocation, aligning with findings in Vietnam where instructional improvement is seen as an inherent responsibility rather than a discrete leadership role (Aquino, Afalla, & Fabelico, 2021). This conception frames leadership as a moral and ethical commitment to service, highlighting the deeply relational and value-driven nature of teaching in the Philippines.

Participants described their leadership activities as acts of care, mentoring, and instructional support that extend beyond classroom obligations. They often took initiative in helping colleagues improve teaching strategies or supporting students' learning outside official school programs. These findings resonate with studies showing that teachers' sense of responsibility and service is a primary motivator, even in challenging circumstances such as the

COVID-19 pandemic (Robosa et al., 2021; Jamon et al., 2021). Leadership, in this sense, is embedded in everyday professional practices rather than being defined by administrative titles or hierarchical authority.

The second theme, The Bayanihan Effect in Collaboration, illustrates how Filipino teacher leaders enact leadership through informal, culturally mediated cooperation. Teachers reported that collaboration often occurs during lunch breaks or casual discussions rather than structured meetings. This form of relational leadership relies on trust, mutual support, and shared responsibility, reflecting the cultural value of Bayanihan (Morales, 2022). Such informal networks allow teachers to address classroom challenges collectively, demonstrating that influence and leadership can operate horizontally rather than vertically within schools.

A third prominent theme is Outreach as a Primary Pillar. Teachers emphasized efforts to bridge the gap between schools and communities, particularly in supporting disadvantaged students. Activities included organizing learning support initiatives, liaising with parents, and sourcing resources to improve student retention and engagement. These actions confirm that leadership extends beyond internal school structures, highlighting the critical role of teacher leaders in community engagement and social advocacy (Gumarang, 2021). Outreach-oriented leadership strengthens both instructional outcomes and the school's connection to its wider social context.

The fourth theme, Respect for Hierarchy as a Barrier, reveals structural and cultural constraints to teacher leadership. Many participants expressed reluctance to voice opinions in formal settings due to fear of overstepping or appearing *bida-bida* (attention-seeking). This reflects a broader cultural pattern in Filipino schools, where respect for authority can inhibit open participation (Robosa et al., 2021). While teachers exercise considerable informal influence, hierarchical norms often limit their capacity to lead in formal decision-making processes, highlighting the tension between cultural values and institutional expectations.

Taken together, these findings suggest that teacher leadership in the Philippines is relational, service-oriented, and community-embedded. Unlike Western models that emphasize positional authority or data-driven decision-making, Filipino teacher leaders rely on trust, shared responsibility, and cultural values to guide their practice (Aquino et al., 2021; Morales, 2022). Leadership is enacted through daily interactions, collaborative problem-solving, and commitment to student welfare, rather than through formal administrative functions.

The study demonstrates that teacher leadership in Philippine public schools is deeply rooted in both cultural and moral frameworks. Practices such as *Serbisyong Totoo* and Bayanihan provide a distinct, contextually grounded model of leadership that prioritizes relational influence, community engagement, and collective responsibility.

These insights have important implications for policy and professional development, suggesting that formal leadership frameworks should support and enhance existing informal networks rather than impose top-down structures that may conflict with cultural norms (Gumarang, 2021; Jamon et al., 2021). Recognizing and nurturing these culturally embedded practices can strengthen teacher efficacy and school improvement in the Philippine educational landscape.

Theme 2: The Bayanihan Effect in Collaboration

The second major theme that emerged from the study is the Bayanihan effect, which highlights the deeply relational and cooperative nature of teacher leadership in Philippine public schools. Unlike formalized decision-making processes commonly emphasized in Western frameworks, collaboration among Filipino teachers often occurs organically and informally. Participants described how leadership frequently manifests in daily social interactions, particularly during casual gatherings or “informal huddles” during lunch breaks, where they share ideas, problem-solve classroom issues, and support one another (Kilag, Uy, Abendan, & Malbas, 2023). These informal practices reflect the cultural value of Bayanihan, or communal unity, in which collective responsibility and mutual assistance underpin daily school life.

Teachers reported that such collaboration is not merely procedural but relational in nature. It is guided by trust, shared experience, and mutual respect rather than formal authority. This relational leadership fosters a supportive environment where teachers feel empowered to contribute insights and solutions without fear of overstepping

hierarchical boundaries (Tarraya, 2023). In essence, leadership is embedded in the social fabric of the school community, blurring the lines between professional responsibilities and cultural practices.

The study found that the Bayanihan approach also enhances problem-solving capacity within schools. For instance, teachers often discuss instructional strategies, student behavior management, or resource-sharing during informal gatherings, creating opportunities for collaborative learning and collective innovation. These interactions allow teachers to act as peer mentors and informal leaders, demonstrating that influence does not require positional authority (Kilag & Sasan, 2023a). The natural flow of collaboration thus functions as both a support mechanism and a means of improving teaching effectiveness.

Participants emphasized that such informal collaboration often compensates for systemic constraints, such as high teacher workloads and limited administrative support. By pooling knowledge and resources, teachers collectively address challenges that might otherwise impede classroom performance or student learning (Tarraya, 2023). This adaptive strategy highlights the resilience of Filipino teachers and their ability to enact leadership in contexts where formal structures may be insufficient or overly rigid.

The Bayanihan effect also strengthens relational networks that extend beyond the immediate school environment. Teachers described collaborating with parents, local communities, and even other schools to improve student outcomes, reflecting a broader interpretation of leadership that integrates social, cultural, and educational responsibilities (Kilag & Sasan, 2023b). Leadership, therefore, is enacted not only within the classroom but also within the larger community ecosystem, emphasizing the outward-facing and socially embedded dimensions of teacher influence.

Importantly, this form of leadership demonstrates that cultural values significantly shape professional practices. While Western models of teacher leadership often emphasize structured teams, formal committees, and administrative accountability, the Philippine context illustrates that leadership can emerge naturally from trust-based networks, shared responsibility, and communal norms. Teachers' ability to lead collaboratively, informally, and relationally underscores the importance of understanding local cultural dynamics when developing leadership frameworks (Kilag, Uy, Abendan, & Malbas, 2023).

The Bayanihan effect reveals that teacher leadership in the Philippines is deeply intertwined with social and cultural practices. Informal collaboration, grounded in trust and collective responsibility, enables teachers to support one another, problem-solve challenges, and extend their influence beyond formal administrative boundaries.

Recognizing and fostering these culturally embedded practices can enhance teacher efficacy, professional development, and community engagement, suggesting that policies should prioritize the reinforcement of existing relational networks rather than imposing strictly formal leadership structures (Tarraya, 2023; Kilag & Sasan, 2023a, 2023b).

Theme 3: Outreach as a Primary Pillar

The third theme that emerged from the study highlights outreach as a central aspect of teacher leadership in Philippine public schools. Filipino teacher leaders consistently emphasized the importance of bridging the gap between the school and marginalized communities, particularly families experiencing economic hardship.

Leadership, in this context, extended beyond the classroom to include efforts that supported student welfare, community engagement, and access to educational resources (Cahapay, 2022). Teachers framed outreach as a core responsibility, reflecting a deeply relational and service-oriented understanding of leadership.

Participants described a variety of outreach activities aimed at ensuring student retention and success. These included facilitating learning support programs, securing donations or resources for students, coordinating with parents on attendance and performance issues, and mentoring students outside of regular class hours.

Such initiatives positioned teachers as “Advocates of Learning,” actively working to remove barriers to education and strengthen the school’s connection with its broader community (Gningue, Peach, Jarrah, & Wardat, 2022). These efforts reveal that leadership in the Philippine context is as much about social responsibility as it is about instructional guidance.

Outreach also functions as a mechanism for cultural responsiveness. Teachers reported tailoring programs and interventions to align with local values, community norms, and students’ lived realities. For instance, educators developed creative strategies to engage students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, integrating culturally relevant examples into lessons and adapting learning approaches to home contexts (Cordon & Polong, 2020). This culturally attuned approach underscores the relational and adaptive nature of teacher leadership in the Philippines.

Another dimension of outreach involved collaboration with external stakeholders, including parents, local government units, and non-governmental organizations. Teachers reported that maintaining open lines of communication and forging partnerships enabled schools to secure additional resources, support student learning, and address community-specific challenges. This external engagement demonstrates that teacher leadership is not confined to internal school processes but extends outward into the social and civic ecosystem surrounding the school (Torrato, Aguja, & Prudente, 2021).

Participants emphasized that outreach often required going beyond formal responsibilities. Teachers frequently volunteered their time to organize community events, provide tutoring, or coordinate health and nutrition initiatives. These practices highlight the moral and ethical dimensions of teacher leadership, showing that effective leaders often take initiative in addressing inequities and improving student outcomes, even when institutional support is limited (Cahapay, 2022).

The emphasis on outreach also reflects broader patterns observed in Asian educational contexts, where leadership is frequently enacted through relational networks and community-oriented practices rather than formal administrative authority. Filipino teachers’ focus on bridging gaps, fostering inclusion, and creating supportive learning environments aligns with these trends, demonstrating that teacher leadership is highly context-specific and culturally embedded (Gningue et al., 2022).

It suggests that outreach is a foundational pillar of teacher leadership in the Philippines. By engaging with communities, addressing inequities, and developing culturally responsive strategies, teachers expand their influence beyond classroom walls.

Recognizing and supporting these outreach-oriented leadership practices can enhance student learning, strengthen school-community relationships, and inform policy development that prioritizes relational and contextually grounded approaches to educational leadership (Cahapay, 2022; Torratio et al., 2021; Cordon & Polong, 2020).

Theme 4: The "Respect for Hierarchy" Barrier

The fourth theme identified in this study highlights how hierarchical structures in Philippine public schools serve as a barrier to teacher leadership. Participants reported a pervasive fear of “stepping on toes” or appearing *bida-bida* (attention-seeking) when expressing ideas in formal meetings or decision-making forums.

This hesitation often prevented teachers from sharing expertise or innovative solutions, even when their contributions could positively impact student learning or school programs. The findings suggest that leadership is frequently constrained by cultural and organizational norms that prioritize deference to authority over open dialogue (Arar, Sawalhi, & Yilmaz, 2022).

This hierarchical barrier mirrors patterns observed in other educational contexts. In Vietnam and parts of China, Confucian-influenced structures similarly restrict teachers from voicing opinions in formal settings, emphasizing respect for seniority and positional authority (Lu, 2020). Such cultural expectations shape the ways in which leadership is enacted, making informal, relational approaches—like mentoring and peer collaboration—more prominent than

formal authority-based leadership. Filipino teachers often rely on indirect strategies to influence school practices, demonstrating that leadership is exercised subtly rather than through overt decision-making.

Participants described how hierarchy affected professional interactions and limited opportunities for innovation. For example, some teachers reported that suggesting changes in instructional practices or resource allocation during faculty meetings could be perceived as overstepping, even if their recommendations were evidence-based.

This dynamic underscores the tension between individual expertise and institutional norms, suggesting that formal hierarchies can inadvertently stifle teacher initiative and professional growth (Sali & Marasigan, 2020). Despite these barriers, teachers found ways to exercise leadership through informal channels. Peer mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, and behind-the-scenes problem solving allowed educators to influence colleagues and school outcomes without directly challenging hierarchical authority. These informal networks provided spaces for leadership to emerge, aligning with the concept of relational leadership observed in other studies, where influence is built on trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility rather than formal titles (Pan & Chen, 2021).

The hierarchical barrier also intersects with structural and technological factors. In rural and resource-limited schools, the lack of digital communication tools or professional development opportunities further restricts teachers' ability to share ideas or lead initiatives formally (Tembrevilla, 2020). Teachers often compensate by relying on informal mentoring and localized solutions, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of Filipino educators in navigating institutional constraints.

This theme emphasizes that cultural and organizational hierarchies are not merely procedural but deeply embedded in the social fabric of Philippine schools. While respect for authority can foster order and coherence, it may also inhibit teacher agency, creativity, and engagement in school decision-making. Recognizing these constraints is critical for designing policies, professional development programs, and leadership frameworks that account for local norms while encouraging teacher participation and empowerment (Arar et al., 2022; Lu, 2020).

The "Respect for Hierarchy" barrier illustrates a fundamental tension in Philippine teacher leadership: while formal hierarchies maintain structure, they can simultaneously limit teachers' capacity to contribute fully to school improvement.

Effective leadership in this context often relies on relational influence, informal collaboration, and culturally sensitive strategies that respect authority while enabling teachers to exercise initiative. Addressing these barriers requires supportive policies, mentorship programs, and adaptive leadership practices that strengthen both formal and informal avenues for teacher influence (Sali & Marasigan, 2020; Pan & Chen, 2021; Tembrevilla, 2020).

Conclusion:

This study highlights that teacher leadership in the Philippines is a dynamic and culturally embedded practice, deeply influenced by local values such as Bayanihan (communal unity), Pakikisama (relational harmony), and a strong sense of vocational commitment.

Filipino teachers often exercise leadership informally, through relational networks, collaborative problem-solving, and community engagement, rather than relying solely on formal administrative positions. These findings suggest that leadership in Philippine public schools is relational, service-oriented, and contextually grounded, reflecting a model that is distinct from Western frameworks.

The implications for policy and practice are significant. The Department of Education (DepEd) may benefit from prioritizing support for existing informal leadership networks rather than imposing rigid formalized structures. Policies and professional development programs should aim to enhance teachers' capacity to lead collaboratively, mentor peers, and engage communities, while respecting cultural norms and local practices. Such an approach would recognize and reinforce the relational and community-focused ways in which Filipino teachers already enact leadership, potentially improving teacher efficacy, student outcomes, and school-community cohesion. Future research should build on these insights by examining teacher leadership in geographically isolated or rural "Last Mile

Schools,” where challenges such as limited resources, connectivity issues, and sparse administrative support may further shape leadership practices.

Furthermore, comparative studies across urban and rural contexts could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how environment, culture, and institutional structures interact to influence teacher leadership. Expanding qualitative inquiry in these settings will not only deepen knowledge of leadership practices but also inform policies that are culturally responsive and contextually appropriate.

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