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Teacher Leadership in Indonesian Schools: Opportunities, Supports, and Barriers through the Driving Teacher Program

Duwi Wahdany[1], Dwi Esti Andriani[2]

[1] Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia; duwiwahdany.2022@student.uny.ac.id
[2] Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia; dwi_esti@uny.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Teacher leadership is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for school improvement and educational reform. In Indonesia, the Driving Teacher Program (*Program Guru Penggerak*) was launched to foster teacher leadership through structured professional development. However, empirical insights into how such leadership is enacted and supported remain limited. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of nine alumni from the 5th and 7th cohorts of the Driving Teacher Program in Yogyakarta. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings reveal three overarching themes: (1) Opportunities for leadership development include assuming formal roles, engaging in training, leading professional communities, sharing best practices, and participating in curriculum and research initiatives; (2) Key supports include principal encouragement, collegial collaboration, and a school culture conducive to innovation; and (3) Barriers include time constraints, communication challenges, peer resistance, workload, and seniority-based hierarchies. The study underscores the importance of systemic and contextual factors in shaping teacher leadership trajectories. It highlights the need for sustainable support structures, collaborative school cultures, and adaptive leadership roles. While the Driving Teacher Program provides a strong foundation, its impact depends on how leadership is interpreted and enacted at the school level.

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Corresponding Author:
Duwi Wahdany
Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia; duwiwahdany.2022@student.uny.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher leadership has been increasingly recognized as a key driver of school improvement, instructional quality, and collaborative school culture (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Within this context, the concept of teacher leadership has emerged as an essential paradigm for shaping school culture. This concept has gained traction across academic and practical domains due to its significant role in various professional aspects, such as teacher performance evaluations and professional development. Furthermore, teacher leadership is often discussed within the broader framework of educational reform (Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Empirical studies on teacher leadership have significantly expanded over the past two decades, with most research employing qualitative approaches to gain in-depth insights from diverse perspectives (Nguyen et al., 2020; Schott et al., 2020). While the majority of teacher leadership research originates from Western countries, there has been an increasing contribution from Asian contexts, notably from China (Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020). Despite its positive impact, gaps remain in understanding the broader outcomes and implications of teacher leadership (Nguyen et al., 2020). Research trends highlight the importance of developing teacher leadership at various levels, including policy and school development (Chen, 2022; Liang & Wang, 2019; Yue et al., 2021).

In Asian educational systems, teacher leadership often develops within institutional structures characterized by rigid hierarchies, limited autonomy, and strong seniority norms. Teachers are expected to lead pedagogical change, yet often face barriers related to unclear roles, resistance from peers, or a lack of distributed leadership culture(Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020). These tensions highlight the need to examine how top-down policy expectations are interpreted and enacted by teachers in school settings.

In Indonesia, teacher development has evolved through policies such as Continuous Professional Development (CPD), which primarily focuses on professional competencies without addressing teacher leadership explicitly. However, the "Merdeka Belajar" curriculum initiative by the Ministry of Education and the Driving Teacher Program *(Program Pendidikan Guru Penggerak)* seek to reframe the teacher's position as a proactive driver of educational change. Graduates of these programs are anticipated to take on key roles in guiding teaching practices and enhancing school development, with support from policies such as the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 26/2022.

Nevertheless, empirical evidence on how such leadership capacity is developed, enacted, and sustained through these programs remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of insight into how contextual and institutional factors influence the leadership trajectories of teachers in Indonesia, especially those participating in government-driven initiatives such as the Driving Teacher Program. Moreover, existing literature often overlooks the practical realities, support systems, and barriers encountered by teacher leaders in their professional contexts.

This study aims to explore how leadership capacity is developed among alumni of the Driving Teacher Program and how its development shapes their roles as teacher leaders. It seeks to generate in-depth insights into the processes, enabling conditions, and educational implications of teacher leadership within the Indonesian school context. To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What opportunities and supports enable the development of leadership capacity among Driving Teachers?
2. What challenges do Driving Teachers face in exercising and sustaining their leadership roles within schools?

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Driving Teachers (Teacher Leaders) in exercising and developing leadership in their respective schools after graduating from the Driving Teacher Program. The phenomenological approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal meaning and essence of participants' experiences. The research was conducted from June to August 2024 in six public senior high schools located in Yogyakarta City.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria that they had completed the Driving Teachers program and were actively engaged in leadership-related initiatives in their schools. Alumni from the 5th and 7th batches were selected because they had completed the full training cycle and had at least one year of post-experience. Additional data were collected from school principals to capture institutional perspectives and support systems. Their inclusion was based on their capacity to provide complementary insight into school-level leadership practices. The background of the participants is described below.

Table 1. Participant's Background

No	Participant	Age	Gender	Batch
1.	GP1	49	Female	5
2.	GP2	41	Female	7
3.	GP3	51	Male	7
4.	GP4	51	Male	7
5.	GP5	52	Female	7
6.	GP6	45	Female	7
7.	GP7	45	Female	7
8.	GP8	41	Female	7
9.	GP9	50	Female	7

(Source: Interview Data, 2024)

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing flexibility to explore participants' reflections, challenges, and strategies (Adams, 2015; Edwards & Holland, 2013). Interviews were conducted face-to-face and guided by a set of open-ended questions that ranged from leadership practices to institutional support and personal growth. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. Formal permission from schools and written informed consent from participants were obtained before data collection. This research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants, and any identifiable information was removed during transcription and reporting.

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, guided Braun & Clarke (2006) Six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In the initial stage, familiarization with the data by listening to the recorded interviews multiple times and transcribing them word for word. This was followed by open coding, where the researcher carefully read the transcripts and used colored highlights to mark meaningful segments. In the next stage, the researcher organized the codes into preliminary themes by clustering similar codes that represented shared concepts. These groupings were then reviewed to ensure they formed consistent patterns and meaningfully represented the data as a whole. After that, the themes were clearly defined and given descriptive names to capture their essence. Finally, the themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative, supported by direct quotes from participants. These quotes were selected to reflect a variety of experiences and perspectives. The final analysis resulted in three overarching themes: leadership development, enabling factors, and inhibiting factors, which serve as the foundation for presenting the study's results.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted several strategies based on qualitative research standards. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants were allowed to verify the accuracy of interview summaries and interpretations. Transferability was addressed by providing rich descriptions of participants' school contexts and professional backgrounds. Dependability was supported by maintaining detailed documentation of the research process, including field notes, coding decisions, and reflective memos. Finally, confirmability was ensured by engaging in reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to reduce researcher bias and enhance the transparency of data interpretation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings under three major themes: (1) Opportunities for Developing Teacher Leadership, (2) Supporting Aspects, and (3) Inhibiting Aspects.

Table 2. Research result

Research Focus	Research sub focus	Research Result
Teacher leadership development	Opportunities	Leadership roles
		Sharing best practices
		Participation in leadership development training
		Collaboration
		Curriculum development team
		Educational research
	Supporting Aspects	School principal
		Colleagues
		School culture
	Inhibiting Aspects	Time management
		Communication
		Resistance to change
		Workload
		Seniority and work experience

3.1. Opportunities for Developing Teacher Leadership

Driving Teachers engage in a variety of leadership activities that contribute to their professional development. The analysis identified six categories of opportunities that support the development of teacher leadership: formal leadership roles, involvement in professional communities, participation in training, public sharing of practices, collaboration, and engagement in curriculum and research initiatives. These are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Opportunities and Support Mechanisms for Driving Teachers

Opportunities	Description	Illustrative Quote
Formal Leadership Roles in School	Roles such as vice principal, coordinator, or supervisor that enhance management skills	"I serve as the vice principal for public relations." – GP5
Leadership in Professional Communities	Leading MGMP groups and coordinating peer development outside the school	"I serve as the head of the MGMP for physical education in Yogyakarta." – GP3
Participation in Professional Training	Engaging in workshops, PMM, and structured development activities	"In PMM, we design a personal development activity plan…" – GP4
Sharing Best Practices	Acting as speakers in seminars, media platforms, and school forums	"There are opportunities to become a speaker at BBGP radio." – GP9
Collaborative Activities	Mentoring peers and co-leading programs with fellow teachers	"We mentor each other through coaching…" – GP9
Curriculum and Research Engagement	Contributing to curriculum design and conducting educational research	"I conduct research for development… I publish the results of the research." – GP1

Participants commonly held formal school leadership roles, such as vice principal, program coordinator, and extracurricular advisor, within their schools. These positions allowed them to manage teams, lead decision-making processes, and apply leadership strategies within school settings.

Beyond their school, several Driving Teachers held positions in professional communities, particularly in city- or province-level subject teacher associations (MGMP), where they served as chairpersons or coordinators. These roles enabled them to build leadership capacity beyond their schools and contribute to wider educational development.

Participating in training programs also played a significant role in shaping their leadership competencies, such as those provided by the Platform Merdeka Mengajar (PMM) and provincial education offices. These programs helped them enhance skills related to instructional leadership, technology integration, and classroom management.

Publicly sharing best practices was another valuable opportunity. Many were invited through speaking engagements, educational media, and school-based learning forums. Serving as speakers not only allowed them to contribute to peer learning but also increased their confidence and recognition as teacher leaders.

Collaboration emerged as a critical element in their leadership development. Participants described engaging in mentoring activities, co-planning lessons, and organizing training sessions with other educators. These collaborative efforts fostered a sense of shared responsibility and strengthened leadership practice.

Lastly, Driving Teachers were actively involved in curriculum development and educational research. Several participants conducted classroom action research (PTK), contributed to school-level curriculum design, and collaborated with universities to improve instructional quality. These efforts not only enhanced their pedagogical innovation but also supported career advancement.

3.2. Supporting Aspects of Teacher Leadership Development

Three key factors were identified as essential for fostering the development of teacher leadership: school leadership support, peer support, and school culture. These supporting elements are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Supporting Aspects of Teacher Leadership Development

Supporting Aspects	Description	Illustrative Quote
School leadership support	Principals assign roles, initiate programs, and support teacher innovation	"The headmaster offered me a task in the form of an official letter." – GP2 "Our school is a Driving School (Sekolah Penggerak), which supports this program." – GP4 "The principal signed up and invited me and other teachers to join." – GP5
Peer Support	Colleagues collaborate and create shared ownership of initiatives	"My colleagues gave me the chance to present the real actions." – GP6 "This big family collaborates well, including in teaching programs." – GP7
School culture	Schools promote responsibility, support, and continuous improvement	"We help each other. If someone needs assistance, we're ready to help." – GP8

School leadership support was expressed through formal recognition, delegated responsibilities, and encouragement from principals. Participants noted that school leaders provided both structural support and informal encouragement to explore the leadership role. Peer support was equally influential for the leadership development.

Participants highlighted the importance of collegial collaboration, emotional encouragement, and a shared vision among teachers. This support fostered an environment where leadership could emerge through teamwork and mutual trust among teachers. School culture also played a crucial role. Driving

teachers are empowered to take initiative and feel confident in their roles within a culture that promotes innovation, shared responsibility, and professional development. A sense of collective identity within the school motivated teachers to lead and contribute meaningfully.

3.3. Inhibiting Aspects of Teacher Leadership Development

Despite the various supporting factors, participants reported several barriers that constrained their leadership development. These inhibiting aspects are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Inhibiting Aspects in Teacher Leadership Development

Inhibiting Aspects	Description	Illustrative Quote
Time Management	Difficulty balancing teaching responsibilities with leadership duties such as mentoring or training	"I must prioritize my students. Sometimes, it conflicts with Driving Teacher assignments." – GP10
Communication Challenges	Misunderstandings or lack of clarity in collaboration, hindering task execution	"Sometimes there are miscommunications, which become an obstacle" – GP11
Resistance to Change	Colleagues' reluctance to adopt new approaches or support Driving Teacher initiatives	"Some resist, especially when it relates to the Driving Teacher program or the Merdeka Curriculum." – GP12
Workload Demands	Overloaded schedules limit participation in development programs or initiatives	"Our teaching schedules are very packed. It's hard to find time for offline training." – GP13
Seniority Bias	Preference for assigning leadership roles to senior teachers, limiting chances for others	"Those with more experience are usually chosen for positions. Newer teachers are often left out." – GP14

The most frequently mentioned barrier was time management. Many driving teachers often struggle to balance instructional responsibilities with leadership tasks, such as program planning and mentoring. Communication barriers were also frequently mentioned, including misalignment in task distribution and unclear expectations among colleagues. Another recurring challenge was resistance to change from fellow teachers, particularly when implementing new approaches associated with the Driving Teacher Program. In addition, heavy workload demands constrained teachers' ability to engage in professional development, as tight teaching schedules limited participation in offline training sessions. Lastly, seniority bias was noted as a limiting factor in the allocation of leadership roles. In many larger schools, leadership responsibilities were frequently assigned to more senior staff, thereby reducing opportunities for younger or newer teachers to exercise and develop leadership capacity.

Discussion

Globally, attention to teacher leadership is reflected in numerous studies that emphasize its critical role (Barth, 2001; Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Hunzicker, 2012; Margolis & Deuel, 2009; Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). International initiatives such as the Math and Science Partnership (MSP) by the National Science Foundation (NSF) highlight the importance of equipping teachers to become exceptional teacher leaders, further supported by a growing body of research on teacher leadership's specific contributions (Howe & Stubbs, 2003; Lotter et al., 2014).

The recognition of teacher leadership as a driver of change and a critical element in curriculum reform underscores its strategic role in enhancing education quality (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Hunzicker, 2018; Larkin et al., 2009). This study contributes to this growing body of work by providing empirical insights into how teacher leadership is cultivated and enacted in the Indonesian context

through a government-driven initiative. The findings reveal that the development of teacher leadership is not only influenced by training and formal roles, but also by contextual variables such as principal support, peer collaboration, and school culture, factors that align with global literature (Jacobs et al., 2016; Lee & Ip, 2023; Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022; Pan & Chen, 2021). Moreover, the study reinforces the concept of distributed leadership, where leadership responsibilities are shared among various stakeholders (Harris, 2013). However, the findings also reveal that in the Indonesian school context, this distribution is shaped by hierarchical norms, unclear role definitions, and institutional constraints.

The findings indicate that teacher leadership development is deeply contextual, shaped by school dynamics, social relationships, and organisational structures that define the roles, norms, and expectations within the school environment. Through a phenomenological approach, teachers' subjective experiences provide valuable insights into how leadership is perceived, developed, and enacted in practice.

Driving Teachers play a pivotal role in the development of teacher leadership. Rather than restating their roles as listed in the findings, their leadership illustrates a shift toward distributed leadership practices, when responsibility is shared across multiple actors within the school. This supports Katzenmeyer & Moller (2009) argument that empowering teachers in leadership is essential for fostering a collaborative and sustainable learning culture. The emergence of Driving Teachers as mentors, curriculum developers, and peer influencers suggests an evolving leadership identity that is both formal and informal. These findings are consistent with Cheng & Szeto (2016), who emphasise teachers' potential to drive educational reform, and with Smylie & Eckert's (2018) view of teacher leadership as part of an interconnected school ecosystem.

The strategies used to nurture leadership capacity among Driving Teachers include continuous professional training, facilitating learning communities, collaborative knowledge sharing, and empowering teachers as mentors and resource persons. These practices reflect the dimensions of transformational leadership, particularly in how they promote individual growth, intellectual stimulation, and a shared vision (Leithwood, 2004). This reinforces Oppi & Eisenschmidt's (2022) conclusion that collaborative professional development fosters leadership growth. Furthermore, the findings reinforce York-Barr & Duke (2004) argument that effective teacher leadership depends on sustained opportunities for reflection, peer collaboration, and institutional support structures.

Support systems, particularly those involving school principals, peer collaboration, and a structured coaching framework, were found to be crucial in sustaining leadership development. Raharja et al. (2022) emphasize that collaboration between school leaders and teachers is essential for fostering a school climate that supports leadership development. These findings also reinforce Wenner & Campbell (2017) critique that without clear structures, emotional support, and shared ownership, teacher leadership may become tokenistic. This study confirms that such support enables teacher leaders to take initiative, influence school practices, and drive change. These results are consistent with Smylie & Eckert (2018) argument that school structures and cultures significantly shape the effectiveness of teacher leadership. Notably, the role of school culture, particularly in fostering openness to innovation and distributed authority, extends existing theory by showing how local values and norms in Indonesian schools influence the enactment of leadership.

However, the study also highlights several barriers encountered in the leadership development process. These include heavy administrative workloads, limited leadership experience, and resistance from some peers. Wenner & Campbell (2017) note that a key challenge in teacher leadership is the lack of structural and emotional support, which can hinder role enactment. Lieberman (2000) similarly argues that transitioning from teacher to leader is a complex and time-intensive process. This study confirms that while policy support, such as the Driving Teacher programme, is critical, sustained leadership development also requires schools to restructure workloads, establish clear communication lines, and foster inclusive leadership cultures.

This study contributes new empirical evidence on how teacher leadership develops within a government-mandated initiative in a non-Western context. In contrast to most literature rooted in

Western settings, this research highlights the unique ways in which national policy, school culture, and professional relationships interact in Indonesian schools. By centering on the Driving Teacher programme, the study reveals how top-down reforms are internalised and adapted at the school level, thereby bridging the gap between macro policy design and micro-level leadership practice.

Limitations of the study should also be acknowledged. The research was conducted only in public high schools in Yogyakarta, which may not represent the diverse school contexts across Indonesia. The relatively small sample size, although sufficient for phenomenological inquiry, limits generalisability. Moroiver, data were based on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by social desirability or selective recall. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, explore comparative contexts across regions, or incorporate classroom observations to deepen understanding.

Overall, this study reinforces existing literature on the importance of teacher leadership as a critical driver of school transformation. By contextualising the Driving Teacher programme within local school realities, it expands the discourse on how leadership emerges in policy-driven but culturally embedded environments. These findings carry practical implications for the design of professional development and coaching programmes while also contributing conceptually to the discourse on teacher leadership in non-Western educational contexts. Thus, formulating policies that ensure the sustainability of the Driving Teacher programme and cultivating adaptive, collaborative school ecosystems are essential to support the continued growth of teacher leaders as agents of educational change.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored teacher leadership development through the Driving Teacher program by examining the lived experiences of Driving Teachers within their school environments. The findings indicate that teacher leadership emerges through the interplay of school culture, collaborative practices, and structural support. Within this dynamic, Driving Teachers act as catalysts for school transformation by engaging in decision-making, mentoring peers, and leading instructional innovations.

Leadership development strategies, such as continuous training, learning communities, and teacher empowerment as mentors, were found to be effective in enhancing leadership capacity. However, several challenges remain, including administrative workload, peer resistance, and limited institutional support. These findings underscore the need for adaptive school ecosystems and policy interventions that sustain and strengthen teacher leadership over time.

Conceptually, the study contributes to the growing discourse on teacher leadership in non-Western contexts by positioning the Driving Teacher program as a structured and contextually grounded model of professional development. Future research should examine the long-term impact of Driving Teachers' leadership on instructional quality and student outcomes, as well as explore comparative perspectives across different school types and leadership pathways.

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